

# Marina Tsvetaeva

## A Life in Poems

Nobody loves her,  
Some hate her with a vengeance,  
Only a few truly like her  
or have ever read  
her poetry.

Yet Marina Tsvetaeva is, among her contemporaries Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Blok, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Boris Pasternak, arguably the most prolific and possibly the greatest Russian poet of 20th-century.

I encountered Tsvetaeva on one of my sojourns in Moscow in the 1980s. A physicist colleague in a choked voice recited “Мне нравится, что вы больны не мной,... - I like that you're not mad about me,...” [Poems, May 1915]. It was the time of Tsvetaeva's belated rehabilitation in the Soviet Union, and everyone seemed to have heard and seen Alla Pugacheva in the film *Ирония судьбы, или С лёгким паром!* “Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath”, (1975). Curious, because I had not heard of Tsvetaeva (I never saw the film!), I asked a Russian-German friend. She sent me a bilingual anthology of Tsvetaeva's poems, in which I found the following poem to Boris Pasternak:

### *To B. Pasternak*

Dis-stances: versts, miles...  
They have dis-joined us, dis-mantled,  
So that we would be quiet,  
At the world's farthest ends.

Dis-stances: versts, spaces. . .  
We, unstuck, unsoldered  
With two arms spread, crucified,  
They did not know, how that fuses

Inspirations and sinews,  
Did not quarrel—dispersed,  
Divided....by wall and moat.  
They displaced us like eagles—

Conspirators: miles, expanses. . .  
Not deranged—lost.  
Into the slums on this vast earth  
They disarranged us like orphans.

Which, oh, well when – March?!  
They shuffled us - like a deck of cards!

24 March 1925

Reading in Russian by A. Antokolsky:

<http://web.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Demo/texts/distances.html>

Fascinated by Tsvetaeva's reductive use of Russian, I spent several weeks translating the above stanzas, discussing every word with my friend by mail. - The above English version is the result of this co-operative exercise. This was in 1994. Professional and personal events interfered, and only now am I able to return to a close examination of Tsvetaeva's poetry – and life.

Early on I learned that one cannot understand her poetry separate from her biography: Tsvetaeva wrote from her full “Быть и Бытие - Life and Being”, baring her soul and emotions without restraint. A biographical essay woven around her poems appeared indispensable: Describing the often tragic events in her life, it takes up the larger part of this essay.

Born 1892 into an highly educated, bourgeois family, she loses her mother to tuberculosis when she was 14, publishes her first book of poems three years later, marries Sergey Efron at 20, and gives birth to their first child, Alya in 1913. The first World War passes almost unnoticed, but then history begins to accelerate and rapidly overtakes her. Sergey disappears during the Revolution. She and Alya barely survive the Famine Years. A second daughter dies from starvation. In 1921 her husband resurfaces in Prague. Marina escapes with Alya to Berlin. Supported by a Czech grant they spend 3 years in Czechoslovakia. Restlessness and the hope of making a living from her writing persuade them to move to Paris, the center of Russian émigré life. There she gets caught in the internecine fighting and intrigues between the pro- and anti-Soviet factions – and Sergey Efron turns into a willing pawn of the NKVD. When in 1937 the French police takes notice, he is spirited away to the Soviet Union. Alya had already left for Moscow. Marina with their third child, Murg follows Sergey and returns to the “Motherland” in 1938, during the worst Stalin years. Alya and Sergey are arrested in 1939. In desperation Marina hangs herself in 1941. Efron is executed in the same year, Mur dies in the second World War – only Alya is released alive from the Gulag and “rehabilitated” after Stalin's death.

A cruel fate, however, not that different from what many Russian emigrants suffered, but Tsvetaeva lived her life to the last bitter truths in her poetry... Nothing drives her

poetic power like distress and - love. One "affair" follows the other, with women as well as with uncounted men, poets, actors, writers, famous and infamous, worthy and unworthy. Sergey watches quietly from the wings, knowing that after every crash she will return to him. Her "immorality" and her self-centredness seem to be two of the reasons why certain people hate her. - Tsvetaeva has never denied or replied to any of the often abusive attacks on her [VS p.268-273]. They were below her level.

The severe criticism of her personal conduct is in part based on a misunderstanding. Only two or three of her "affairs" were consummated. Despite her search for new loves in her exalted poems, sex is not the object of her dreams. - Imminently Russian, she longs for an Empyrean that will transport her out of the misery of daily existence, that might conjure-up a kindred soul with whom she can share her spiritual loneliness. She is not religious in the conventional sense, "I never obeyed the commandments and never went to confession..." - Yet the beauty of her imaginary, transcendental "Other World" recalls the golden domes of the churches that rise equally other-worldly from the drab Russian landscape.

Tsvetaeva's morality - in the conventional sense - and her ideological position between the two Russian emigrant camps is best explained by Russians. An enlightening conversation on the subject has been recorded by Solomon Volkov in his "*Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey Through the 20th Century, 2002*" [VB p.40-47]. It pits young Volkov's summary dislike of her against Brodsky's superior understanding of the moral (ideological) dilemma of Tsvetaeva. An excerpt of this interview is available online through Google Books.

Late in Tsvetaeva's torrential life Boris Pasternak befriended her. The only man who did not run scared from the on-surges of her emotions. Together they lived through the summer of 1926 and the stellar meeting with Rilke - all by letter! Prevented by fate and mutual reluctance, the two would not meet until 1940 in Moscow. During Marina's most difficult émigré years she turned him into the last god of her imaginary world, her first equal love. Notwithstanding, that she disjoins herself from Pasternak in an attack of jealousy and haughty disdain, when he divorced his wife and married a mutual friend of theirs. He remains spiritually faithful to her beyond her death. - The above poem was written at the height of their relationship.

A detailed knowledge of the circumstances associated with her poems may help in understanding, but is of little use in translating them. Her verses are inherently difficult to translate, especially into English. The grammatical structure of Russian - five cases, a complex system of inflections of the verb, and the lack of articles and personal pronouns - poses nearly unsurmountable difficulties. To make things worse, Tsvetaeva has a way of making-up or using archaic words, which are not found in dictionaries. The poem to Pasternak is an example of that.

However, the lexicographic hurdles are but one obstacle to the appreciation of Tsvetaeva's poetry. The beauty of her verses, especially her late poems, lies in their *sound* when recited in Russian. Her musical rhythms cannot be reproduced in another language. Her poems need to be *heard - in Russian*. To this effect I included the Russian texts in my selection of her poems and added a number of links to audio readings in an appendix. Antokolsky's reading of the Pasternak poem is attached above. Listen to it, its resounding

alliterations are the bones of her stanzas.

The other, even more fundamental observation is that her poems lack the visual imagery we are used to depend on in reading poetry. In her essay on Natalya Gontsharova Tsvetaeva says, "I am no painter, may others speak about that... What for? Painting is of no meaningful importance to me." For the sake of its rhythm she plays a disturbingly cerebral game with the language, deconstructing (her word) Russian like few others – a quality of her poetry which intrigued this foreigner. Tsvetaeva's has a highly developed sense for music and rhythm, beyond that she is blind. This might be the reason why her poems taken out of context often leave a dull impression with the non-Russian reader.

Nevertheless, to ease my translation dilemma, I decided to dispense with all attempts to reproduce her rhyme and rhythm in favor of a more modest, literal reading of her words and their meanings. Some readers may not recognize "their" Tsvetaeva in my translations. I ask for their indulgence: This is an attempt to elucidate Tsvetaeva's poetry to *uninitiated* English readers, as well as to some Russians. I do not endeavor to present new superior English renditions of her poems or to compete with existing critical examinations of her life and writings.

I would be grateful for corrections and all *constructive* criticism.  
Send mail to: rolf357@gmail.com

Pacific Palisades, June 2010

# Childhood

Moscow

8 Tryokhprudny Pereulok – Three Ponds Lane

1892 – 1912



The Tsvetaevs in the yard at Three-Ponds Lane: Augusta the governess, Valeria, Marina, her mother Maria with Asya in her lap, Andrey, standing, Nadya and her father Ivan, 1901

You, who are still able to dream,  
Whose movements are quiet,  
Come to narrow Tryokhprudny lane,  
If you love my poetry...

It will soon be a ruined world  
Look at it in secrecy  
While the poplar has not been cut down  
And our house has not been sold...

This world is irrevocably - wonderful.  
While you can still find it, hurry!  
In narrow Tryokhprudny lane,  
In this soul of my soul.

1913

The house in the very center of Moscow where Marina Tsvetaeva was born on 26 October 1882, and where she spend the first twenty years of her childhood, is gone, but Tryokhprudny pereulok, Three-Ponds Lane still exists and has retained its name. Valeria Tsvetaeva, her half-sister from the first marriage of her father, described the *grand bourgeois* property:

The house has eleven rooms. Behind it is a grassy yard with poplars and acacias, an outbuilding with seven rooms, a coach house, two cellars, and a shed for horses and the cow. Besides the poplars and the acacias there was a white lilac bush by the outbuilding and a snowball-tree by the back door. The best rooms in the house were the large, high-ceiling, white hall with five large windows and a large drawing room painted dark red.

The outbuilding was rented to a family with a shop on Tverskaya Street. They kept a cow. Their Tartar herdsman blew his horn every morning when he drove the cow to Petrovsky Park. There was a hundred-year old silver poplar by the gate, its heavy branches hung out over the streetV [VS p.20]



Mother Maria Alexandrovna  
Meyn, 1903



Father Ivan Vladimirovich  
Tsvetaev, 1895

Marina's mother, Maria Alexandrovna Meyn, the second wife of Ivan Tsvetaev, had sacrificed her ambition of becoming a pianist to her marriage. A stern and serious woman of Baltic-German extraction, she was the opposite of her husband's cheerful first wife. With iron will power she fought her recurring attacks of tuberculosis. There were few joys in her house, little laughter, no festivities, a spartan regimen. She never won the love of her step

children. In "Mother and Music", Marina would many years later write, "Mother, as it were, projected her hopes and dreams into her children." She made Marina practice the piano several hours a day. Marina obliged dutifully, but sought escape in poetry, which, from very early on, she considered her true vocation.

Ivan Vladimirovich Tsvetaev, an intellectual recluse, was the director of a large private endowment, which was to establish the first fine arts museum in Moscow: the "Emperor Alexander III Museum of Fine Arts", which would in 1937 be incongruously renamed "Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts." A generous and enlightened man he was consummately dedicated to this work and took only marginal interest in his children, whose general upbringing he left to the custody of Maria Alexandrovna and their Baltic-Germann governess Augusta. Yet he spared no money or effort in their education, tutors, travels to Europe, and several years of schooling in Switzerland, Germany, and France. Marina inherited her intelligence and irreverent skepticism from him. A precociously gifted, strong-willed *and* sensual child she was often driven to despair, which the adults saw as obstinacy. Marina, oppressed by this home, felt that her mother spent too little tangible affection on her. The lament, "I am alone - an orphan in this world..." runs through her poems like a river. At this point in her life this was obviously a product of her highly sensitive imagination, but she seems to have had no friends with a similar intelligence and disposition. Her imagination soon helped her construct an imaginary world that was early on populated by devils and monsters and later became a highly transcendental fantasy haven of her very own.



Asya (11) and Marina (13), 1905

To Mama

When you played an old Strauss waltz,  
we, for the first time, heard your quiet, distressed call,  
Since then we have been aliens among living beings  
And only enjoyed the quick passing of the hours.

We, like you, welcomed sunsets,  
Hypnotized by the proximity of your end.  
On better evenings you made us feel enriched,  
As you fought for our hearts

You served our childhood dreams tirelessly  
(Without you, we only look at the months!)  
You guided your girls through your  
Bitter life of sufferings and pains.

In our early years you were close to us, you who was sad,  
A joyless and alien home remains in our blood ...  
Our ship was set assail at a bad moment  
And founders at the whim of every wind!

Ever paler grows the blue island – of our childhood,  
We stand alone on deck.  
We see the sadness in the inheritance  
You, O mother, left to your girls!

1907

They returned to the big house on Three Ponds Lane, which now seemed empty. Their father buried his grief in his work. A theft from the museum roused Ivan's enemies and the envy of the imperial administration. Their accusations hurt him deeply and aged him. Over his desk he had hung a photo of Maria in her coffin, which fascinated and frightened the girls. There is a poem by Marina (1913) which seems to reflect this photo.

None of their relatives offered to take in the two orphans. They were considered too difficult. Marina was sent to a private boarding school (Vonderwies) in Moscow. She only came home on weekends. Ivan finally hired Varvara, an old teacher of his daughters from their Yalta days, to be their companion and run the household. Varvara did not succeed to regain Asya's and Marina's affection. Asya asks herself why: "This is one guilt that weighs on me, and that I cannot explain." The wounds were too deep. After a few months, Varvara quit her job and returned to the Crimean.

Marina hated school, it bored her. She attached herself to a group of long-haired co-students who considered themselves "revolutionaries". At the end of the year the school expelled her. She never mentioned this experience. "Anger was Marina's element. Her other was shyness. She could barely control the torments caused by embarrassment," writes Asya. "She would blush to the roots of her hair. If this happened before the prying eyes of a poetry-reading, she would hauntingly walk to her execution, livid with disdain. Had she raised her cast down green eyes, she would have appeared like Medusa." - At



seventeen Marina began to smoke, a habit that never left her.

In 1909 her father allowed Marina (17) to enroll in a summer course at the Sorbonne, her dearest wish. For the first time she went alone abroad. During the past year she had translated Edmond Rostrand's verse drama *L'Aiglon*. Now she saw the aging Sarah Bernhard in the main role of the Duke of Reichstadt and fell in love with her, Reichstadt, and Napoleon II, his father. These infatuations became her precious treasures, all consuming, she kept them from everyone. - Until she placed a picture of Napoleon II in the icon corner in her room. "Father became very angry when he noticed this sacrilege by accident, demanding the removal of Napoleon's picture. Marina in blind anger, grasped a heavy candle holder and was about to smash the arrangement - when father turned around and left her room wordlessly."

Part of the summer 1910 they spent in Tarusa, which repaired the fractured relationship between the sisters. Afterward Marina and Asya were sent to a new school. A close friend of the family offered to take care of the house, if Ivan Tsvetaev would marry her. The wider families raised a howl, and Ivan had to abandon this hope. When not in school the girls did as they pleased.

Marina had her poems published by small Mamontov Press. She paid for the printing herself, carefully selecting the paper and the dark-green binding. "*Evening Album*" became an unexpected success. Soon she was asked to read her poems to the "Circle for Literature and Art" in a private house. Mayakovsky and Maximilian Voloshin were among her audience. Bryusov presided.

To control her shyness she had persuaded Asya to come along for support. Together as one voice the two recited several poems. "The applause was thunderous," reports Asya, "an absolute no-no in this honorable circle." Gumilev reviewed *Evening Album* as a new voice of great independence, even Bryusov found some kind words. She was given the first and only poetry prize in her life.



Marina (18) reading her poetry, 1910

I'm just a girl. My duty  
Before the wedding altar is  
Not to forget, everywhere are – wolfs  
And to remember: I am - a sheep.

Dreaming about golden castles  
Shake, turn, jump  
At first a doll, and later  
No longer a doll, but nearly one.

In my hand there is no sword  
No singing string.  
I'm just a girl - silent.  
Oh, if I were only

Looking at the stars that I know are there  
And I star-lit  
And my eyes all smile,  
I would not lower my eye!  
1910

She didn't realize how close she was to finding the love she was craving for.

...Listen! - Would someone love me -  
For that I would die.  
1912

Her new, faithful friend would become Maximilian Voloshin. Asya described his first visit to Three Ponds Lane: "I had never seen a man like him. I observed him carefully. He was not tall but huge. A non-human head on broad shoulders. Father Zeus in Papa's study. A mountain of curls. The beard flowing from the crater of his head like hot lava. His hair chestnut brown with traces of red. His eyes scrutinized me, reached deep into my soul..." Marina read her poems to him.

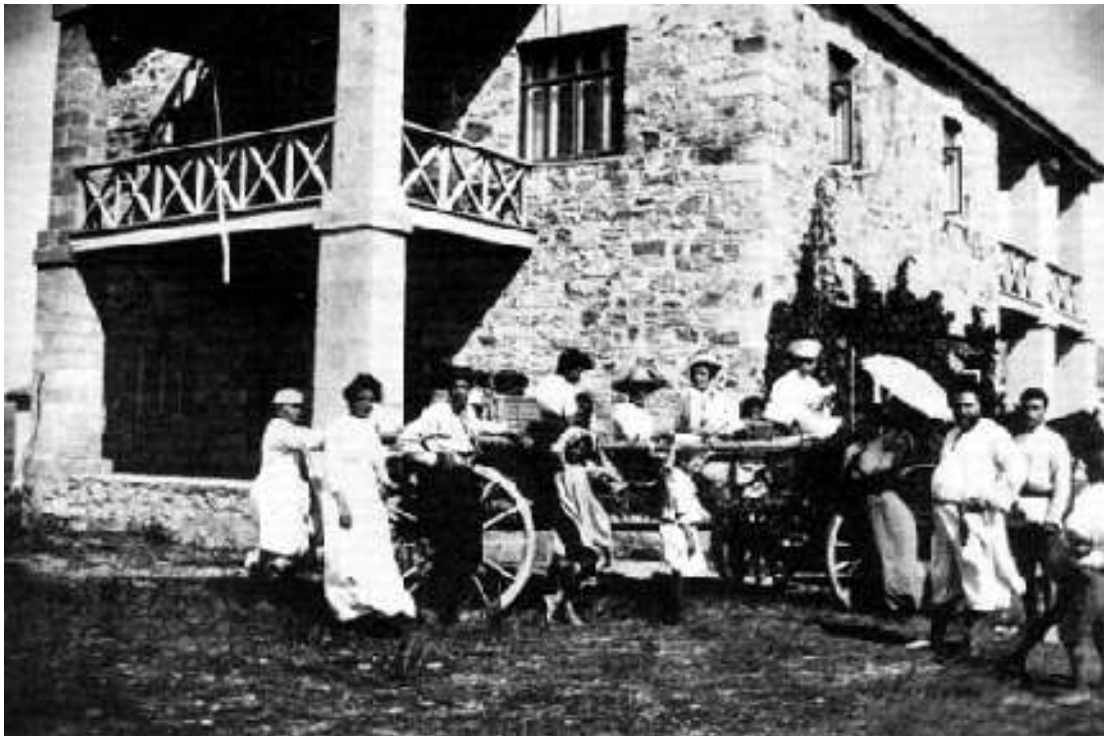
Voloshin was the only person who took the childish and the poetic side of Tsvetaeva equally seriously. With a warm, understanding smile, he talked about his house in Koktebel - and invited them for the summer of 1911. Their friendship would last unbroken until his death in 1932.

# Koktebel

Maximilian Voloshin's Haven in the Crimean

Seryozha

1911 - 1916



Koktebel, Voloshin's house, Marina with hat on cart, Max Voloshin standing on the right  
1911

“Koktebel! Koktebel! We reached it the first time on a creaking cart passing the wilds of the Eastern Crimean. Only eight kilometers from Feodosia, but a whole day's travel," wrote Marina. Asya would join her later. "The landscape became more barren along the way until the earth was covered only by black volcanic rock, which, at noon, burned your feet through the soles of your shoes. We arrived at Voloshin's house and behind it lay the ink-blue sea. No green, no tree, no bush, only some tufts of high, bleached desert grass in a few sandy places. Stranded on the rocks. Max Voloshin called it 'Homer's Island'. At night the mythical heroes talked to us. We all went crazy, stricken by Greek madness. Marina was nineteen and I seventeen when we spent our first summer in Koktebel. We returned year after year before 1914." Marina had found her world, as uncompromising and as abstract as her poetry.



"Pra", Elena Ottobaldovna Voloshina



Maksimilian Voloshin

Every guest was enthusiastically greeted by Maximilian Voloshin and his mother "Pra," Yelena Ottobaldovna—the poetry of patronymics! Both dressed in long Tartar caftans, barefoot. Max, he was only fourteen years older than Marina, a corpulent, genial philosopher. He wrote poetry and painted. His widowed mother, equally voluminous, was a firebrand, the soul of their guest house. They charged next to nothing for their rooms. It was not yet a fashionable tourist spot. The guests prepared their own meals or walked three kilometers to a ramshackle Tartar café for food.



Koktebel, Seryozha and Marina in the door frame, Pra sitting, 1911

The motley crowd of greater and lesser poets, painters, and revolutionaries all fell under the spell of Koktebel, reading poetry to each other, critiquing their art, collecting pebbles, nude bathing, making love in the warm transparent sea, moonshine nights - real Greece not plaster Gods: Max Voloshin as the conjurer and psycho-pomp. . . .



Sergey Efron and Marina(?)  
Koktebel, 1911

There Marina met Seryozha, Sergey Efron, her "Boy-Prince" with the huge eyes, her shining "White Guard," the father of her children, emigrant, turncoat, informer, her husband in eternity, liquidated in Stalin's Gulag, her fate and destiny....



Sergey Efron and Marina at the time of their wedding, 1912  
One of the few photos in which she wears glasses!

Marina and Seryozha flew onto each other. She had found the beautiful prince of the fairy tales, who would deliver her from the shadows of her childhood. He was a year younger than she, barely eighteen. Their meeting gave Marina what her heart had longed for: romance, heroism, exalted feelings. Seryozha was not only beautiful, young, and innocent but so powerfully drawn to her, as if she alone could bind him to his life. They rushed into each others arms to overcome their loneliness by merging into each other. He called her his "enchantress". For the first and only time in her life her sarcastic and her ecstatic aspects were at peace, her soul at rest in her love for Seyozha. For two years she was so filled with happiness that she wrote very few consequential poems.

Veins filled with sun - not blood -  
In my Hand, brown already.  
I am one with my great love  
To my own soul.

I am watching grasshoppers, counting to hundred,  
Chewing a stalk's spine...  
- It is strangly feeling, so strongly and so simply  
The fleetingless of all that life - and his.  
Koktebel, May 15, 1913

Seryozha had a compromised family background. His mother came from the aristocratic Durnovo family, his father was Jewish. Both parents were active members of the "Black Repartition", a revolutionary group suspected of espousing terrorist ideas. His mother had been imprisoned during the 1905 uprising. Seryozha, the youngest of six children, was too young to have been part of his mother's revolutionary activities. His father had died in 1909 in France and his mother had hanged herself a year later. Marina and he had one thing in common, both had been orphaned at an early age.

In January 1912 she and Seryozha got married. They spent their honeymoon floating through Italy, France, and Germany. In September 1912 Marina gave birth to their first child, Alya-Ariadne, the carefully chosen name of the Greek goddess. From the very beginning Marina indulged "in her little shadow". Like her mother she projected herself into the child whole heartedly - a heavy burden for Alya.

...The beauty of two huge eyes,  
- They are a threat - their risk -  
Inaccessibility - pride - passion  
For the first time ...  
Theodosia, November 13, 1913

In 1913 Marina and Sergey founded their own publishing company "Ole Lukoe " and printed a second volume of "youthful" poems: *From Two Books*. The disenchanting critics tore it to pieces: it contained the same kind of lyrics as *Evening Album*. They had expected her to exceed herself. Marina fell back to her nearsighted hauteur. The opinion of the world

did not concern her.

My poems, written so early  
That I did not know, that I was - a poet,  
Thrown like drops from a fountain,  
Like sparks from a rocket,

That burst like tiny devils,  
Into the sanctuary of sleep and incense,  
My poems about youth and death,  
- Unread poems!

Scattered in dusty shops,  
(Where no one ever took or bought them!)  
My poems, like precious wines,  
Their time will come.

Koktebel, May 13, 1913

They returned to Koktebel and Max's kind, olympian ministrations every summer until 1914. In 1914 facing a new fateful emotional upheaval she dedicated these lines to Seryozha:

To S. E.

I am defiantly wearing his ring  
- Yes, in Eternity – as wife, not on paper. -  
His overly narrow face -  
Like a sword.

His mute mouth angles down,  
Painfully gorgeous eyebrows.  
In his face tragically merged  
Two ancient blood lines.

He is thin like subtle branches.  
His eyes - beautifully-useless! -  
Under the wings of his open brows -  
Two abysses.

To his face I am faithful and true.  
- As you all are, who lived and died without fear. -  
Thus – in such fateful times -  
I compose stanzas - and go on the block.

Koktebel, June 3, 1914

In Moscow awaited them the old drab every-day. Her father had been dismissed from the directorship of the museum by the imperial minister. He, nevertheless, doggedly worked on at no pay. Finally in 1912, a couple of months before Ariadne's birth, the

museum opened in the presence of Emperor Nikolas II. Having witnessed Marina's happiness and Ariadne's birth he died in September 1913. In this winter Marina and Seryozha fled to Feodosia where Asya, her newly acquired husband, and a little daughter had settled.

The Efrons moved into an apartment of their own on 6 Borisoglebsky Lane in Moscow. The big house with all its memories stood empty. The end of their childhood....



# Sofia Parnok

## Koktebel and Moscow 1914 -1916



Marina Tsvetaeva, 1914



Sofia Parnok, Koktebel ,1914

At Koktebel in the fall of 1914 Marina met the poet Sofia Parnok, "Sonya", nine years older than she. The encounter grew into a lesbian affair that lasted two years. What were Marina's motives is not clear. Why did she tempt her happiness, her relationship with Seryozha, with Alya in this fierce fire? Was it the emotional plateau she had reached, the tranquility offered by Seryozha's quiet temperament? A flood of new poems of an as yet unexpressed intensity, erupted like a volcano from her soul. Sofia Parnok derailed her completely. All the dormant chasms between her sensuality, her poetic sensibilities, and the guilt feelings of her upbringing were torn open. Again her poems are filled by the torments of the most exalted and darkest sides of her character.

Sofia Parnok had been briefly married and divorced. Driven by an insatiable need for freedom from all moral codes she had publicly declared herself a libertine and taken a lesbian lover. She was well known in Moscow. The fashionable woman literature of their times was full of such heroines. Asya swears that they had never read Verbitskaya or

Nagorskaya, who sold thousands of their sleazy novels: "a woman should be permitted everything she craves for!" Sofia's freedom must have exerted a magnetic attraction on the "spartan child".

In 1919-20 Marina put together a cycle of 17-stanzas to Parnok: "*Poems to a Friend*" (*female*). I include a few of these in my poems section.

Her first poem, written in July 1914, is an ecstatic evocation of their first meeting:

I saw you three times,  
But we cannot stay apart.  
- After your first sentence  
My heart burned through!

I feel it in the same darkness,  
Like the trembling of young leaves.  
You - just a portrait in an album -  
And I do not know who you are.

If everything – as they say – happened by chance,  
You can close the album ...  
Oh, this marble brow! Oh, the mystery  
Behind your huge forehead!

Look, I was true  
Before the call, to longing:  
My golden mane  
Did not know anyone's hands.

My spirit - has not humbled anyone.  
We - souls of various castes.  
My incorruptible demon  
Will not let me love you.

- "So what was it?" - This  
Passes judgement on the other judge.  
There are many no answers,  
And you do not know - who I am.  
July 13, 1914

I love you, - like a storm cloud  
Above you lies - sin -...

.....  
...even facing the grave  
I could not be saved!  
October 16, 1914

She writes and a few days later describes the state she is in.

This trembling, for what really,  
Am I longing in my dreams? -  
For the ironic charm  
that is yours - not his?

Under your caresses' lush plaid  
Yesterday's dream.  
What was it? - Whose victory? -  
Whose defeat?

Rethinking everything once more,  
I am torturing myself again.  
In fact, I do not know the words for,  
Was it love?

Who was the hunter? - Who - the prey?  
All devilishly-around!  
Did I recognize that long-purring,  
Siberian cat?

In that duel of willfulness  
Who, in whose hands was the ball?  
Whose heart - yours or mine, was  
Flying at a gallop?

And yet - what was it?  
What do I want?  
I still do not know: Oh, did I win?  
Or was I conquered?  
October 23, 1914

*What was it?* - I venture to suggest that Marina had one of her crushes on Sofia, and when Sofia, attracted by her obvious inexperience, took advantage of that - a deep kiss? caresses? - Marina discovered a hitherto unexplored erotic world that left her reeling. Her love of Seryozha was one between two lonely, deeply wounded children. They were both equally innocent, and in her poems to her "shining guard" she kept this innocence throughout her life. Erotic allusions never entered her poems to him. Sofia introduced her to the sensations of an entirely more consuming way of loving.

Pra and Max Voloshin, who disliked Sofia, were truly afraid for Marina and her marriage. However, practical Pra, in a letter to Seryozha [VS. p.102] realizes that nothing could be done about "the spell this Sonya has put on her." - It had to burn itself out.

Meanwhile World War I had broken out. Marina inserted one poem into a cycle to Pyotr Efron, Seryozha's brother. It shows her indifference to the mundane world. Pyotr Efron was dying, she was renting their house on Tryokhprudny Lane, the Tsar's quarrels did not affect her. The war would not turn their lives up-side down for another 2 years.

War, war! - burn incense before the icons!  
And the clatter of spurs.  
But the Tsar's proclamations do not concern me,  
Neither do the people's quarrels.

I seem on a frayed tightrope  
I - a tiny dancer.  
I - a shadow of someone's shadow.  
I - a sleepwalker  
Of two dark moons.  
1914

Marina and Sofia spent the winter of 1914/15 in Moscow. The storm was still raging. Sofia took her to parties, Sofia in expensive pants, Marina in a showy dress. The guests made fun of them. Chain smoking, sleigh rides, shopping sprees, bangles and earrings, lazing around, laughter... Sofia's life as a socialite was alien to Marina. Slowly she distances herself.

I repeat on the eve of parting,  
Towards the end of loving,  
How I loved those  
Possessive hands of yours

And those eyes - upon whom  
Did they not deign to rest! -  
Demanding a reckoning  
For every casual look.

All of you and your accursed  
Passion - God knows! -  
Requires reckoning  
For the occasional sigh.

Again I say wearily,  
- Don't hasten to listen! -  
That your soul has come to a stand still  
Across my soul

And I'll tell you:  
- All the same – on that evening! -  
Before this kiss of yours, this mouth  
was young.

Appearance - look bold and bright,  
Heart - five years old ...  
Happy is he who has not met you  
On his life's path.  
April 28, 1915

A few weeks later Marina gets even more explicit.

There are some, who are like suffocating flowers  
And their glances are like dancing flames ...  
They have dark twisted mouths  
With deep and wet corners.

There are women. - Their hair like helmets,  
They are wrapped in a subtly fatal smell.  
She is thirty years old. - *Why do you want, why need  
My soul of a Spartan child?*  
Ascension Day 1915

Finally she tells her quite rudely to go away.

....And now go ... - You, too,  
And also you, and you.

Cease loving me, all of you stop loving me!  
Don't keep an eye on me in the morning!  
So that I may safely leave  
To stand in the wind.  
May 6, 1915

Marina's infatuation had burned itself out. The final break between them came in February 1916. They parted with hard feelings. It took Marina six years to understand what had happened and open up her poems to others. She never engaged in another lesbian relationship. Fully conscious of her "sin" she doesn't hide it, doesn't write confessions like Akhmatova, doesn't write to shock like Mayakovsky or withholds herself like Mandelstam. She bares her soul, often at the risk of estranging her readers.

The affair with Sofia marks the final end of her childhood. The "soul of a Spartan child" is a thing of the past. Her poetry will never return to the interiors of Tryokhprudny Lane or the landscapes of Tarussa. She has been turned into a "vagabond", a "beggar", or a "gipsy"

roaming a world of darkness, wind, sleeplessness and yes – stealing when necessary. She tried to do her best to be a reasonable house keeper, a mother to Alya and wife to Seryozha. A few months after Sofia had actually “gone away” in anger, she wrote a poem to her husband begging for his forgiveness and help.

At a black midnight hour I came to you  
For the last time seeking your help.  
I am a vagrant with no memory of kin  
A sinking ship.

.....

By imposters and predatory dogs  
I was plundered to the end.  
At our palace, veritable king,  
I stand – a beggar!  
1916?



Seryozha with Alya, Marina aside, 1916

And Seryozha, how did he survive this purgatory? During the height of the affair he just held still – stunned? Some people see him as having had a weak character incapable of resisting or fighting for her. He was not in good health, tuberculosis outbreaks came and went. He had finished his Gymnasium diploma in Feodosia and worked as a medical

orderly. Eventually he was drafted to work on a hospital train and was absent for several months during 1915-1916. Konstantin Rodzevich told Viktoria Schweitzer [VS p.103]: "He just got out of the way and gave her the freedom she craved for."

# Sankt Petersburg - Petrograd

Osip Mandelstam

Winter 1915/16

Poetic Petrograd in 1915



Mikhael Kuzmin  
1872-1936



Alexander Blok  
1880-1921



Nikolai Gumilyov Anna Akhmatova  
1886-1928 1889-1966



Vladim. Mayakovsky  
1893-1930



Osip Mandelstam  
1891-1938



Marina Tsvetaeva  
1892-1941



Boris Pasternak  
1890-1960

Only three – Kuzmin, Akhmatova, and Pasternak – died of natural causes. Blok starved to death, Gumilov and Mandelstam were executed by the NKVD, Tsvetaeva and Mayakovsky committed suicide....



In December 1915 Marina was invited by the literary journal *Severnny Zapiski* (Northern Notes) to read her poetry in Petrograd – the name of Sankt Petersburg had been changed during the War to hide its Germanic origins. -

Literary Petrograd regarded Tsvetaeva as a representative of unsophisticated, provincial Moscow: A promising, slightly hysterical young woman, who didn't fit into any of the established literary circles of the capital. She was made to run the gauntlet. Her appearances and presentations continued to be awkward, especially considering the skilfully prepared productions of Akhmatova, whom she was compared to at every step. - Moreover, she shunned glasses and couldn't see her audiences clearly.

Marina was taken from party to party. Kuzmin, the versatile minstrel, grand-uncle, and co-founder of the Sankt Petersburg literary scene, took her under his wings. He fit equally poorly into fashionable labels and liked her poetry. Haughty Blok did not attend her readings, and Gumilyov and Akhmatova were absent at the time. This prevented a first confrontation with Akhmatova, her life-long rival. Notwithstanding, Marina adored the divine Blok and revered Akhmatova.

After her return to Moscow Marina wrote a cycle of poems to Blok and a seemingly embarrassingly extravagant collection of eleven poems to Akhmatova. She ever received a response from either poet. As an example, two stanzas from her first poem to Akhmatova should suffice

1.

Oh, Muse of weeping, fairest of the Muses!  
O you, chance progeny of a white night!  
You send a black blizzard upon Russia,  
And our screams pierce us like arrows.

And we jump and emit a dull: Oh! -  
Hundredthousands – swear an oath to you: Anna  
Akhmatova! This name - an immense sigh,  
And it falls into the depth, which has no name.

...etc.

June 19, 1916

The form of the poem hints at Marina's hidden objective: It is an imitation of Akhmatova's style of writing. In the remaining poems Marina becomes more explicit, making gentle fun of Akhmatova's diction and subjects. Akhmatova was lauded for her "classical" structure and subjects - what Mandelstam once called Akhmatova's "hieratic solemnity", which appeared stilted and arrogant to Marina. Yet Marina truly and without jealousy admired Akhmatova.

The differences between the two women lay deeper. Akhmatova concealed her inner fire behind a reserved constrained harmony, while Marina, the poet of extremes, was baring her turbulent soul, forever crying out in despair. Characteristics that Akhmatova viewed with distaste.

Marina made few friends on that visit. Besides Kuzmin she met Mandelstam and Pasternak, who had the sense to keep his distance from her, but became her closest and

most helpful friend in her anguished later years.

Mandelstam and Marina had first met in Koktebel in 1914, but Marina had only eyes for Sofia, and reticent Osip did only politely mingle with the guests of Voloshin's house. Now she caught fire: a young boy-poet with beautiful dark eyes covered by the longest lashes!  
- Forever the type she would fall for.

To O. E. Mandelstam  
From where such tenderness?  
Not the first - those curls  
I stroke, and his lips  
I thought them darker .

The stars rose and faded,  
From where this tenderness? -  
Our eyes rose and faded  
Under my very eyes.

No more hymns  
I listened to the dark night,  
Betrothed – Oh, tenderness! -  
At the breast of a minstrel.

From where such tenderness,  
And what to do with it, adolescent,  
Sly, wandering vagabond,  
With eyelashes – that couldn't be longer?  
February 18, 1916

This much recited lyrical poem is suggestive of another amorous adventure, one in which Marina was the driving force. Ecstatic as Tsvetaeva's poems are, one is inclined to discount her poetic words in particular in a society who considered a simple kiss an "erotic" sin. But Nadezhda Ginsburg, Mandelstam's later wife, confirms in her memoirs that it was indeed "wild and vivid Marina", who taught Osip how to love a woman.

Mandelstam visited Tsvetaeva in Moscow in February-March 1916. Seryozha was out of town. Marina showed him *her city*, the repository of the real Russia: the golden domes of the cathedrals in the Kremlin, the Moskva river, the bells ringing out the long history of the land. This was not the mirage in the swamps of the Neva, Peter's European illusion. Mandelstam would never forget and continued to associate Moscow with Tsvetaeva and Russia.

In exchange Mandelstam let her take part in his profound understanding of history and philosophy, subjects Marina had never contemplated before him.

And then, one night, she was overcome by an acute premonition.

## To Osip Mandelstam

A strange anxiety befell him,  
And sweet fear overcame him.  
He would stand and gaze heavenwards,  
And would neither see the stars, nor the morning glow,  
The youth with the farsighted eye.

Asleep – he saw eagles  
Flocking screaming around him,  
This led him to a wonderful explanation.  
And one - the Lord of the Rocks -  
Tousled his curls with his beak.

But with tightly closed eyes,  
His lips parted – he was asleep.  
And did not hear the night visitors  
Nor see how it was sharpening its beak  
The gold-spotted bird.

March 20, 1916

Marina did not realize the terrifying accuracy of her vision. Stubborn and indifferent to the ravenous “spotted bird,” Mandelstam repeatedly denounced Stalin, who had him imprisoned twice and finally executed in 1938.

Tsvetaeva was 23 and Mandelstam 25 when they parted in the summer of 1916. Mandelstam returned to Koktebel “for a retreat” and Marina was faced with a crucial change in her life.

In January 1917 Seryozha was drafted into the army. Because of his illness he was stationed in Nizhny Novgorod, not on the front. Marina was pregnant with their second child.

History turning somersaults rapidly became a blur: On March 3, 1917 Emperor Nicholas II abdicated, leaving the country to a Socialist government. In October 1917 the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace. The long expected Revolution had finally taken its course. In 1918 the War with Germany was ended by Trotsky at Brest-Litovsk. In July 1918 the Tsar and his entire family was executed by the Bolsheviks. Years of brutal infighting between Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and remnants of the White Guard would follow.

Seryozha had escaped to the Crimean and joined the White Army (1917). On Marina's instigation? In any case, she was immensely proud of him. - They would only see each other again four years later.

# Life with Alya

## The Hunger Years

1918 - 1920



Alya and Marina, Prague 1924  
Marina pregnant with Mur

Seryozha was gone to join the last fighters of the White Army at the Don river (1918). Shortly before he left, Marina had given birth to a second daughter, Irina. From the very beginning Irina was not a strong child, she remained sickly for most of her short life.

Within a year their world collapsed. The service personnel, which they had relied on for times immemorial, deserted them. Marina and Alya were alone in the house on Borisoglebsky Lane. Their inherited money disappeared overnight. There had been street fighting between the revolutionaries and the National Guard. In the winter of 1918-19 a severe food shortage broke out. Marina had to handle everything by herself from chopping wood and cooking to scavenging for food for her two children. Impractical as she was, she chafed under the burden of this "daily life". To forget this earthly routine

Marina escaped on flights to the otherworldly lands of her poetic imagination.

Alya became Marina's intimate companion, and Marina bestowed all her motherly hopes and instincts on her. There was no school. Marina taught her herself. Alya was a precocious child, at least as gifted as her mother, but without Marina's hyper-sensitivity and her need for otherworldly escapes. She was solidly grounded in herself. Her mother repeated all the mistakes she had been subjected to by her mother, only it was literature not the piano. Alya was able to read at four and could write at five. She became her mother's alter ego, with whom Marina shared all her most intimate experiences and fantasies. Alya never had a normal childhood. As a daily writing exercise Marina encouraged her to keep a diary, parts of which Alya included in her memoirs:

My mother is very strange. My mother is not at all like other mothers. She has light chestnut hair, curling around at the sides. She has green eyes, a hooked nose, and red lips. She has a good figure, and hands that I like. Her favorite day is Annunciation Day. She is often sad and writes poetry. She is all the time hurrying somewhere. Her hands are all covered with rings. She likes to read at night. Her eyes are nearly always mocking. She doesn't like people bothering her with stupid questions, it makes her angry. Sometimes she walks around as if she were in a daze. Then suddenly she seems to wake up, starts talking, and then goes off again somewhere else.

At twelve Alya would rebel and try to break free of her mother's oppressive influence (Prague, 1924). For a while relations between mother and daughter almost turned into mutual hatred. Marina was terrified by Alya's rebellion.

On one of her long train rides to visit her sister in Feodosiya Marina had met the young apprentice playwright and poet Pavel Antokolsky. He introduced her to Evgeny Bagrationovich Vakhtangov's theater studio. Marina fell completely for the theater, and the congenial crowd of actors, poets and writers she met there.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold had revolutionized the Russian stage. Stanislavsky had introduced his psychological "Method" of acting and Meyerhold a completely new style of staging large ensembles. Their students carried Stanislavsky's Method all over the world. Classical Hollywood is unthinkable without reference to him. Likewise, the infamous parades of Hitler's Germany, the Soviet Union, and China could not have been staged without Meyerhold's example. - Vakhtangov combined Stanislavsky's Method with Meyerhold's dramatic abstractions and encouraged young directors to produce intimate, futuristic plays in his workshop studio. Unfortunately he died too early. His theater is still active. It was on stage that the most exciting innovations took place in Russia.



Konstantin Stanislavsky  
1863-1938



Evgeny Vakhtangov  
1883-1922



Vsevolod Meyerhold,  
1874-1940

Marina took to the theater with all her enthusiasm. Between 1918 and 1920 she wrote seven verse dramas - for her newest infatuation, the actor Yuri Zavadsky.... "Oh, he was not a great actor," she writes, but he was a real adonis of a man.



Yuri Zavadsky and Yuliya Soltseva  
in the science-fiction film "Aelita", 1924

Avoiding her advances, Zavadsky, who seems to have been mildly gay, was not particularly enamored with her. The "affair" was over in less than a year. She expresses her disappointment with him in a last, unusually angry poem in November 1920

Love! Love! Even in convulsions, even in my grave  
I'll be attentive - charmed - confused - torn.  
O my dear! Not in a deadly snowdrift,  
Not in the clouds will we part without forgiving.

And not on my pair of beautiful wings  
Is my heart willing, to carry your weight.  
Swaddled, eyeless and voiceless  
I will not multiply the villagers miserable fortune.

No, I'll free my hands, and then my strong body  
With a single sweep of your sheets,  
Death, in a single blow! - For a thousand miles  
The snow will melt and the forest of bedrooms burn.

And even if - restraining my shoulders, wings, knees,  
Gritting my teeth - I'll let you take me to the graveyard,  
I'll be laughing over the ashes,  
And rise again as a poem or a blossom of roses!  
November 28, 1920

Zavadsky was followed by a line-up of other "romantic" passions, actors and actresses, poets, writers. They were spurious infatuations, but they appeared reflected in her poems, which imbued Marina with the odor of a "ravenous, bi-sexual adulteress". Occasionally she is still being censured for her amorous affairs by the philistines among her detractors. She was lonely and 27, at the peak of her female powers.- Besides, writing poetry is a complex and mysterious process. It requires a high-power engine - and few emotions are as potent as a volatile libido. Whether the poet has an actual physical, erotic experience is almost irrelevant. But her working among the inspired crowd of young actors and playwrights at Vakhtangov's studio - moreover working on entirely unreal plays - kept her worries about Seryozha, about finding food for her children, her concern for sickly Irina, and above all her own loneliness at bay.

In a letter in July 1918 to Liliya Efron, Seyozha's older sister, Marina begged her to take the children, especially Irina, she could no longer afford bread and milk for them. "We must make Irina eat potatoes, I cannot find cereal for her." Nothing came of this arrangement, Liliya was morally at odds with her.

As the winter of 1918-1919 approached, and the food shortage became a famine, Marina and the children retreated into her small room to share a primitive wood stove. Armed with an axe she would descend into the basement and "deconstruct" (her words) all kinds of wooden partitions for firewood. In the mornings the temperature in their room was often 5 deg C (39 F). - Prince Sergey Volkonsky, the former director of the

Imperial Theater, one of her temporary flames, described her place: "... an unheated house, sometimes without light, a bare apartment... Alya sleeping behind a screen surrounded by her drawings... no fuel for the wretched stove... The stairs dark and cold, the bannister had been partially removed (firewood for the stove), and there were three treacherous steps at the bottom..." [VS p.132] Bundled in blankets little Irina slept on an easy-chair. The habitat of a confused poet? Alya called it a shipwreck – and Marina a slum. In order to buy food for them and milk for Irina, Marina slowly sold their possessions on the Moscow flea markets – including many of her beloved books. She admits to stealing bread for her children from the tables of her friends, when she was invited for coffee and pastry.

It was to get worse in the second winter of 1920-1921. After Efron's relatives declined to take the children, in November of 1919, Marina saw herself forced to send her children to an orphanage in Kuntsevo near Moscow– she calls it a shelter. It was supported by American food donations.

A month later the shelter notified her that Alya had become seriously ill. She rushed there, bundled up Alya and carried her home. Irina appeared emaciated but not ill. She left her behind. At home Alya ran a roller-coaster of temperatures around 40 deg C (82 F). By January she seemed to get better only to come down with a third fever attack three weeks later. The doctor finally decided that she had malaria.

And then on February 3, 1920 Irina died, apparently of neglect and starvation. In a letter to Vera Zvagytseva and her husband Alexander Erofeev, her closest friends at the time, Marina writes:

Moscow, 7 February 1920, Friday

My friends!

I have to tell you of a great sorrow: Irina died at the shelter – on the 3rd of February, four days ago. And it is all my fault. I was so busy caring for Alya - and so afraid to go to the shelter that I put hope into fate...

And now this happened, and nothing can reverse it. I learned this by accident. I went to the League of Salvation, to find out about a sanatorium for Alya- and suddenly Kuntsevsky came up - I recognized him. He called, "Are you Mrs. Efron?" and when I confirmed, he said, "Your child has died without illness from weakness." - And I did not go to the funeral. Alya had a temperatute of 40.7 on that day - and to tell you the truth, - I just couldn't.... I still think that this must be a bad dream, and that I must wake up.... Many people will now conclude that it is all my fault, my adventurism, my making light of my difficulties, my monstous health, my endurance.... We all have a husband, a father, a brother - I have only Alya, and Alya was sick, and all I did was to attend to her.

– Explain to me, other women forget their children over balls - lovers - celebrations. My celebration of life has been my poetry, but I did not forget Irina because of my poetry. – In the last two months I did not write anything! And most horrible! - I did not forget her, did not forget her all this time. Despaired I told myself, "When Alya recovers, I am going to take care of Irina."- And now it is too late.



– Alya had these frequent attacks. Three days in succession her temperature was 40.5 – 40.7, and then it fell, and three weeks later came another attack, the third. The doctor now thinks it is malaria. Lord, if you have money to pay a sanatorium for Alya, I'll live for you, I'll sleep in your hallway or the kitchen and wash your floors.... Or better, let me go with her, if you can afford it. I'm afraid that in the sanatorium, she too might die. I'm afraid of everything. I'm in a panic, please, help me!

– Malaria can be treated with good results. It is not contagious. You have to keep her warm, I'm going to try. Before this happened, I had begun to prepare a collection of my poetry (1913 – 1916). – I was madly engaged in this work - in addition, I need the money. And now - all is gone....

– Friends, do not be horrified by my request. I am in constant terror...  
I kiss you both. - If possible, do not tell common friends. I am like a wolf in his den hiding my grief, it's hard on people.  
MTs.

– And then - could you, Vera, give Alya a bit of fun, she loves you and Sasha, you are gentle and funny with her. I so often remain silent. - I just ask you to visit me at home for an hour!  
M.Ts.

In another letter to Vera she cries out:

“The most dreadful thing is, when I start imagining that with Irina gone Seryozha doesn't need me, that it would have been better – more befitting! - for me to die. I am ashamed to be alive. How am I going to tell him?”

She was in a state of terrible confusion. For a while Marina in her pain and guilt-ridden panic accused Lily and even Vera for their inaction on behalf of Irina. - The news spread, and eventually friends produced a ration card for her. The event had distressed other writers. Help came too late for Irina, but Alya recovered.

The political situation in Russia became ever more desperate. In May 1921 Alexander Blok died at 42, exhausted and disillusioned. He had made no secret of his distaste for the Bolshevik regime, and Anatoly Lunacharsky had personally refused to let the ailing Blok leave the country. The Cheka began cleaning up among the dissidents. – This was still during Lenin's lifetime, many western European communist sympathizers, among them some famous people applauded! - In August 1921 the Cheka executed 64 members of the “Tagantsev Conspiracy” among them Nikolai Gumilyov. Shrewd Akhmatova escaped by a hair.

This period is not reflected explicitly in Tsvetaeva's poetry. Marina's mind, effected by these events, turned more and more to Seryozha's fate. She had heard nothing from him since the summer of 1919, when Max Voloshin had heard of him being in the Crimean. The last of the White Army had been killed or dispersed. Was he still alive? Life without him was unthinkable to her.

She had asked several people to search for him. One of them was Ilya Erenburg, the

politically ambivalent novelist and journalist. Erenburg had managed to spend the turbulent years before the Revolution in Paris. He returned to Russia in 1917 and became increasingly more pro-Bolshevik. In 1921 he managed to be sent abroad again as European correspondent for the newspaper *Izvestiya*. Fully unexpected this unlikely gentleman had located Seryozha in Constantinople! On July 1, 1921 Marina received a letter from Seryozha: [I have been unable to locate the originals of these letters in the internet and had to copy them from [VS p.207]

My dear friend, Marinochka, I got a letter from Ilya Grigorievich [Erenburg] today telling me that you are alive and well. When I had read it I wandered around the city all day, crazy with joy. What can I tell you? Where shall I begin? There is so much I need to say, but I've got out of the habit of talking, let alone writing. I am living to be with you again. There will be no life for me without you - stay alive! I shall make no demands on you - all I want is for you to be alive ...  
Through all the years we have been apart - every day, every hour - you have been with me, inside me. But you must know that yourself. . .  
S.

Her reply had to go through Erenburg. She never mentioned Constantinople.

My Seryozhenka! If people don't die of happiness, they can be paralysed by it. I have just received your letter, and I feel stunned. The last news I had from you was your letter to Max. Then - a void. I don't know where to begin - so I'll begin where I shall end - with my love for you...  
M.

A few weeks later she was trying to learn to breathe again:

Good News  
Alive and well!  
Louder than thunder -  
Like an ax -  
Joy!  
...  
Stunned,  
Awed.  
What instead -  
Cry?  
...  
So, am I alive?  
My eyelids closed,  
Breathing, I call -  
Do you hear?

...  
Dead - and risen?!  
Just enough for a sigh,  
A stone from the sky,  
A crowbar

On the head -  
No, up to the hilt  
A sword in the breast -  
Joy!  
July 16, 1921

Four months later Sergey had moved to Prague to be nearer her. Viktoria Schweitzer [VS p.208] reproduces a letter Seryozha had written to Olga and Vsevolod Bogengardt, friends of his from the White Army days:

Prague, 11 November, 1921

...A day after I arrived in Prague I got a letter from Marina. She writes that her plans to leave Russia have failed twice. But she is not giving up hope, and is sure that she will manage to leave by next spring. She is having a very difficult time of it. Correspondence between Prague and Russia is very easy. The mails are working normally,- a letter to Moscow gets there in two weeks. Erenburg has written that letters between the capitals can be sent without the least danger. You can even send parcels from here....

It would take her six months of perseverance to secure the required visa and an exorbitant amount of money. She had to sell her last furniture, a precious rug. And all this time she was painfully aware that she is leaving her Moscow, her roots, her youth, the very soul of her poetry.

Hunger had left its traces, wrinkles, her pasty skin color, sunken joyless eyes. Would Seryozha even recognize her? Accept her in the state she was in?. She looked at herself:

I have not gown prettier in the years of separation!  
Will you not be angry at my rough hands,  
They worked with bread and salt?  
- Callused from common labor!

Oh, no prettying up for the meeting  
Love. - Do not be shocked by my common  
Speech - no advisor, neglected:  
It chronicles my shot-gun language.

Disappointed? Pretend, no fear!  
That - uprooted from friends and affectionate  
Spirit. - In the confusion of anchors and hopes  
Irreparably broken was my insight!  
January 23, 1922

Marina and Alya left by train for Riga on May 11, 1922. The only person who saw them off was A. Chabrov-Podgaetsky – a musician and minor actor. Alya remembered his name, because he once gave a rose to her mother. They had to change trains in Riga. Alya remembers that her mother was uncommunicative during the entire long journey. - Alya didn't know that an unknown man at the station had whispered to Marina, "You are being followed by a man from the Cheka..." They did not sleep until they left Riga.

They reached Berlin a week later on May 17, 1922. No one met them. Seryozha was in Prague....[VS p.217]

# Berlin - Prague

Ilya Ehrenburg  
Sergey Efron  
Konstantin Rodzevich  
and  
Boris Pasternak

1922 - 1925

## Berlin 1922



Ilya Ehrenburg, 1920s



Seryozha and Alya(9), 1922



Marina and Alya, 1925



Boris Pasternak, 1920s

Marina and Alya took a taxi from the station to Ilya Ehrenburg's apartment, who had made his personal study available to them. His wife took them shopping for new clothes. Three days later Marina was already reading her own and Mayakovsky's poetry at the Russian House of Literature. Ehrenburg had arranged the reading. - A couple of weeks later Marina became embroiled in a fierce literary polemic defending writers persecuted by the Cheka in Russia with Count Alexey Tolstoy, the editor of the pro-Soviet journal of *Change of Landmarks*. Berlin at the time was the center of Russian émigré literature. - Vladimir Nabakov spent 15 reluctant years there, and his father was assassinated in Berlin in 1922.

When Seryozha finally arrived in June, Marina was already passionately involved in the intrigues of the turbulent émigré scene in Berlin, and needles to say, in new infatuations. They were late at the station and met Seryozha in the large hall. Alya recalls later:

“He ran all the way up to us, his face distorted with happiness, and embraced Marina – who opened her arms to him very slowly, as though they had gone numb. They stood there for a long, long time in a tight embrace, and only then did they slowly move their hands down to each other's cheeks – which were wet with tears.” [VS p.226]

For once Alya was not aware of the deep chasm between Marina and Sergey. Seryozha held a Czech scholarship at Prague University to study literature. Pretending that he had to be in Prague for the beginning of the new term, he left a few days later. They had agreed that Marina and Alya would live with him in Prague, but mother and daughter did not leave until August 1922.

What kept her so long in Berlin? She had no personal reasons to remain there. An affair with her publisher Visnyak had run its course. She had broken with Ehrenburg, seemingly over his disapproval of her poems on Russia. The tangle of relationships she had created around herself were outside her control. Seryozha's abrupt departure must have added to her confusion. Her mood was one of livid despair. Standing on their balcony of the small hotel they now lived in, she contemplates her misery and once again suicide.

Ach, to crash in a sheer fall -  
Down - into dust on the asphalt!  
The short span of earthly love  
Bathed in tears- for how long?

Balcony. With their salty downpour  
Come malicious kisses.  
And inescapable hatred  
A sigh: To expire in verses!

Squeezed into a ball in one's hand -  
What: heart or handkerchief  
Batiste? To such ablutions  
There is a name: - Jordan.

Because this battle of love is  
Merciless and savage.  
To soar up from granite brows-  
Is to expire in death!

June 30, 1922

At this critical moment appeared a new actor in this tragedy of errors, whose sudden entry from the wings even Seryozha may not have known about at the time. On June 27, 1922 arrived a letter from Boris Pasternak announcing a visit to Berlin. He wanted to meet

her and writes that "he had been captivated by the lyric power" of Marina's collection *Mileposts*, which had just been published in Moscow. "Something close to me lies behind the form of these poems, perhaps there is something similar in the experiences we have undergone that formed our characters..." [VS p.232] His words were like balsam for Marina's wounds: finally a Brother in Soul! After some hesitation she replied two days later. [Tsvetaeva's letters to Pasternak can be found in the internet, in Russian.]

They had last met by chance at the funeral of Alexander Scriabin's widow in Moscow in April 1920. But Pasternak had vanished before she could talk to him. In her reply she recounts all their missed meetings, and begins for the first time to read his poetry in earnest. This exchange of letters was the beginning of a relationship that would last beyond the end of her life. Notwithstanding its intimacy it had been Pasternak who had initiated their correspondence not she, and he was not "a young boy with the longest eyelashes" whom she could smother like her own child. He was her equal. This may explain why Marina fled Berlin a day before Pasternak was to arrive – and that would, for one reason or another, remain the pattern of their friendship. Despite that they met only once or twice, hastily or by chance, Pasternak became her closest confidant, her twin brother.

Marina and Alya arrived in Prague on August 1, 1922. A week later they moved to the village of Mokropsy in the suburbs, where a large colony of Russian émigrés lived. Marina was offered a writer's government stipend of 1000 crowns, her main subsistence during their years in the Democratic Republic of Czechoslovakia. Sergey retained the student room in Prague which was part of his 300-crown scholarship. He only spent the weekends with his family.

Life in rural Czechoslovakia was primitive. Like in Moscow during the last years, Marina had to fetch water from a well, cook on a single-flame primus stove, and chop wood, but the first few months were peaceful. She was worn out from her whirlwind life in Berlin.



Marina blowing poetic bubbles, E. Elevna (a friend), K. Rodzevich, Lelik, standing: Seryozha and N. Elenev, Outside of Prague 1923

But in the fall Marina "crashed" into Konstantin Rodzevich, apparently a friend and co-

student of Seryozha, and all her fierce destructive fires were aflame again. She directs this poem at poor Konstantin:

### Blade

Between us a double-edged knife  
I swore – to put it there in my thoughts...  
But it happens between- passionate sisters!  
But it happens in brotherly passion!

This is such a confusing subject  
Prairie in the wind, the edge of the abyss  
Blows ... Sword, protect us  
From our two immortal souls!

Sword, torment us, and, sword, pierce us,  
Sword, execute us, but, sword, know,  
What is the extreme  
Truth, the edge of the roof...

A double-edged blade - separates?  
It joins! So tear away the cloak  
And bring us together, ferocious guard -  
Wound into wound and grisle to grisle!

(Listen, if a star is falling ...  
Not by the will of a child in a castle  
And drops into the sea... Islands exist,  
There are islands for any kind of love ...)

The double-edged knife, that was tempered blue  
will turn red ... A double-edged  
Sword – we shall plunge into each other.  
This will be the best way to lie down!

This will be - a fraternal wound!  
Thus, under the stars, and nothing  
Innocent ... Just the two of us  
Brother, with a fused sword!

August 18, 1923

Rodzevich, frightened by the elemental tidal wave of Marina's passion, could not understand. While she, for the first time contemplating a divorce from Sergey, vacillated



between her insatiable need for freedom and a nagging conscience, Rodzevich longed for a simple family life. He soon ran from the onslaught. – Marina was devastated by his rejection. Her poetry of those months runs from searing ecstasies to deep depressions bordering on madness.

Fortunately Marina had sent Alya to a Russian boarding school in Moravia; she seems to not have known about Rodzevich. But Seryozha knew. He became the true victim. The longing for stability of his marriage seemed unreachable again. His health declined and he withdrew to his room in Prague. In his despair he wrote a long letter to Max Voloshin, but then couldn't make up his mind to send it off for over a month.

I reproduce the letter in its full length [quoted by Viktoria Schweitzer in her Tsvetaeva biography, [VS p.241-243] because he describes, beyond his own agonies, Marina like nobody else could.

My dear Max,

I received your splendid, affectionate letter long ago and have been unable to reply all this time. You are of course the only person to whom I could say all this, but it's not easy to say it even to you - for me, in matters like this, saying something seems to make it happen. Not that I have any hope, I was just held back by human weakness. Once I have said something, this needs to be followed by definite action - and I am quite lost. My weakness and complete helplessness, Marina's blindness, my pity for her, my feeling that she's got herself stuck in a hopeless dead end, my inability to help her clearly and decisively, the impossibility of finding any satisfactory way out - it's all moving towards a standstill. Things have reached the stage where every exit from a crossroads could lead to disaster.

Marina is a woman of passions. Considerably more than in the past - before I left. Plunging headfirst into her hurricanes has become essential for her, the breath of life. It no longer matters who it is that arouses these hurricanes. Nearly always (now as before) -- or rather always – everything is based on self-deception. A man is invented and the hurricane begins. If the insignificance and narrowness of the arouser of the hurricane is soon revealed, then Marina gives way to a hurricane of despair. A state which facilitates the appearance of a new arouser. The important thing is not what but how. Not the essence or the source but the rhythm, the insane rhythm. Today - despair, tomorrow - ecstasy, love, complete self-abandon; and the following day - despair once again. And all this with a penetrating, cold (maybe even cynically Voltairian) mind. Yesterday's arousers are wittily and cruelly ridiculed (nearly always justly). Everything is entered in the book. Everything is coolly and mathematically cast into a formula. A huge stove, whose fires need wood, wood and more wood. Unwanted ashes are thrown out, and the quality of the wood is not so important. For the time being the stove draws well - everything is converted to flame. Poor wood is burnt up more quickly, good wood takes longer.

It goes without saying that it's a long time since I've been any use for

the fire.

When I travelled to Berlin to join Marina, I immediately felt that I had nothing to give her. A few days before I arrived the stove had been lit by someone else. For a while. Then everything whirled round again and again. The final stage - the most difficult for both of us - was her meeting with a friend of mine from both Constantinople and Prague, someone quite alien to her and whom she had always ridiculed. My unexpected departure served as a pretext for the beginning of a new hurricane.

I found out about it myself by chance, though her friends had been informed by letter. It became necessary to put an end to our absurd life together, nourished as it was by lies, clumsy conspiracies and other poisons. That was my decision. I would have done it before, but I kept thinking that I might be exaggerating the facts, that Marina couldn't lie to me, and so on.

This last affair brought out into the open a whole string of previous meetings. I told Marina about my decision that we should separate. For two weeks she was in a state of madness. She rushed from one person to another (she had moved in with friends for a while), she didn't sleep at night, and she became very thin - it was the first time I had ever seen her in such despair. Finally she informed me that she was unable to leave me since she was unable to enjoy a moment of peace - let alone happiness - with the thought of me being somewhere or other on my own. (That - alas! - is what I knew would happen.) If Marina had ended up with someone I trusted, then I would have been firm. But I knew that the other man (a little Casanova) would abandon her in a week, and with Marina in her present state that would have meant death.

Marina longs for death. The ground long ago disappeared from beneath her feet. She talks about this incessantly. And even if she didn't, it would be obvious enough to me. She has come back. All her thoughts are with him. His absence inflames her feelings. Now it's her poems to him that she lives on. With regard to me - total blindness. An inability to come near me, very frequent irritation, almost malice. I am at one and the same time both a lifebelt and a millstone round her neck. It is impossible to free her from the millstone without tearing away the only straw she still has to clutch. My life is utter torment. I am in a fog. I don't know what action to take. Each succeeding day is worse than the one before. Solitude a deux is a burden.

My immediate sense of life is destroyed by pity and a sense of responsibility. Maybe it is just my own weakness? I'm too old to be cruel and too young to be both present and absent at once. But today my today is just putrefaction. I'm so completely defeated that I feel a revulsion towards everything in life, as though I had typhoid. It's a kind of slow suicide. What can I do? If only, from a distance, you could direct me back onto the true path! I haven't written anything about Marina's life in

Moscow. I don't want to write about that. I can only say that on the day of my departure (and you know what I left for), at the end of a brief stay in Moscow during which I looked at everything "for the last time" Marina shared her time between me and someone else whom she now laughingly calls a fool and a rascal.

She blamed the death of Irina (Alya's sister) on my own sisters (something she sincerely believes) and I only recently found out the truth and re-established contact with L. and V. [Lilya and Vera]. But that's enough. Enough of today. What can I do? This cohabitation cannot go on for long. Or it will be the end of me. M. is deeper than Asya. In personal life it's a sheer destructive impulse. All this time I have been attempting to avoid being harsh and yet to prepare both Marina and myself for the coming separation. But how can I do that when Marina is trying with all her might to do the opposite? She is convinced that she has now sacrificed her own happiness in order to forge mine. She expects to be able to satisfy me by attempting to preserve the outward appearance of living together. If you only knew how difficult and confused it all is. This sense of burdensome weight doesn't leave me for one second. Everything around me is poisoned. I don't feel one strong desire, just complete and utter pain. The loss that has hit me is all the more terrible because during recent years -- as you have witnessed -- it has been mainly the thought of Marina that has kept me alive.

I loved her so strongly, and straightforwardly, and unshakeably, that I was afraid of nothing except her death. M. has become so inseparable a part of me that now, as I try to separate our paths, I feel a sense of such devastation, such inner laceration, that I try to live with my eyes half-closed. The complexity of the position is still further exaggerated by one of my most fundamental characteristics. With me, ever since childhood, the feeling "I can't do otherwise" has always been stronger than the feeling "This is what I want". The static prevailing over the dynamic. Now all my sense of the static has gone to hell. And it was my only strength. As a result -- complete helplessness.

I await the coming days and months with horror. "The pull of the earth" is pulling me down. I am trying with all my strength to scramble out. But how and where?

If you were here, I know you would be able to help M. a great deal. I hardly ever talk with her about the main thing. She has grown blind to me and to what I say. Or maybe it's something to do with me, nothing to do with blindness at all. But that can wait for another time. I'm writing this letter to you alone. No one yet knows anything. (Or perhaps everyone knows.)

The letter is undated, but a postscript, dated 22 Jan 1924, includes the passage:

"I have been carrying this letter around for a month. Today I've made up my mind. Marina and I are continuing to live together. She has calmed down. And I have

postponed any radical solution to our question. When there is no way out, time is the best teacher. Isn't that so?"

Nothing could fuel Marina's poetic engine like distress: She threw herself into poetry. One of her most mature poems, "Trees", was written in 1922-23, and several large cycles of "Poema": "Poem of the Mountain", "Poem of the End", "The Ratcatcher".

In the tenth stanza of "Poem of the End" she voices, no, practically shouts her anguished answer to Sergey's demand for a separation. The poem is also an example of Marina's "cool and mathematical" reasoning. Even in her most distressed moments she is able to sharply express her pain:

...Not remembering, not comprehending,  
Just a lesser holiday on...  
- Our street! - no longer ours ... -  
- How many times we walked it - no longer will we...

- Tomorrow the sun will rise in the west!  
- Jehova will break with David!  
- What are we doing? - We are separating.  
- That word says nothing to me.

The most senselessly inhuman word:  
Se-pa-ra-ting. - Am I one of a hundred?  
Just a word of for syllables,  
Beyond which lies emptiness.

Wait! Is it true In Serbian or Croatian?  
It means cheating in the Czech Republic.  
Sepa-ration! To separate ...  
Is insane nonsense!

The sound bursts deaf ears,  
Beyond the edge of despair ...  
Separation - is not in the Russian language!  
Nor in that of women! Nor men!

Not in the language of God! What are we – sheep?  
To stare at us eating?  
Separation – In what language is that,  
If the meaning doesn't exist?

Even the sound! Well, just empty like the  
Noise of a saw, in a dream perhaps.  
Separation – in the school of  
Klebnikov's must mean the moan of a nightingale

Swan-like...  
 - But what happened?  
 Like a lake of water drying into the  
 Air! I feel your hand's touch.  
 To separate – a strike of thunder

on the head ... the ocean rushing into the cabin!  
 The ocean's ultimate promontory!  
 These streets are steep:  
 To separate – means to go down,

Downhill ... Two heavy soles  
 A sigh... at last the hand gets nailed!  
 A discussion that turns everything upside down:  
 To separate - means to be turned into separate people:  
 We who - are One ...

Prague,-Ilovishi, June 8, 1924

They reached an armistice. Marina desisted henceforth from the temptation of new infatuations, but Seryozha would never recover his old quiet demeanor. The lure of the "Motherland" seemed like the last salvation. He abandoned his White past and became increasingly politically radicalized, which, a few years later, would deliver him into the all pervasive hands of the NKVD.



Marina and Sergey, Prague 1924

In addition to the large cycles she wrote more than 200 smaller poems between 1922 and 1924. Among these is "Euridice and Orpheus". At first it appears enigmatic. A farewell to Rodzevich? A mythological confession of her role in her disastrous relationships: Euridice luring Orpheus into the underworld? The snakebite of immortality!?

## Euridice – Orpheus

Those condemned to their last rags  
Cover (not their mouth, not their cheeks! ..)  
Oh, are you not exceeding your powers  
Orpheus, while descending into Hades?

Those giving up their last connection to  
Earth ... On the bed of lies  
I committed a great dishonesty in contemplating -  
A deep sigh – an interview with a knife.

I have paid all the same – for all this rose blood  
is a spacious style to cover Immortality...  
It's all the same in Lethe's head  
Beloved - I need a break

Forgetfulness ... For in the ghostly house appeared  
Actually - your ghost, plain and real -  
I, was dead ... What should I tell you, except:  
- "That you didn't notice and left!"

There is no alarm! No cause!  
No hands after all! No mouth, clinging to  
Lips! - Immortality, the bite of the snake  
Ends female passion.

I have paid all the same – in vain my cries! -  
For this last insight.  
No need for Orpheus to follow Eurydice  
And a brother to disturb his sister.

March 23, 1923, Prague,

She sent the poem also to Pasternak – who, like Rodzevich, seems not to have understood it. Years later, in 1926 Pasternak in one of his letters to her quoted from this poem, and she realized his misunderstanding: *Brothers disturb Sisters!* The ghost had been Boris-Orpheus:

The turn-around of Orpheus – is the handiwork of Eurydice. ("Hand" - across the corridor Hell!) The turn-around of Orpheus - is the blindness of her love, her command (soon, soon!) - Or? - Oh, Boris, it's terrible – remember 1923, March, mountain, lines: No need to invoke Orpheus and Eurydice, and a brother to disturb his sister. Both are under orders - and lose. Everything in it is loved - the last memory, the shadow of the body, a

toe of the heart, not yet touched by the poison of immortality, remember? - - -  
...immortality, the bite of the snake ends female passion!

All that is echoed in her female name. As it was, he - went after her, she could not return, though she may possibly no longer have wanted to. Thus, transformation and sublime, - Do not laugh - do not be afraid.

M.Ts. - St. Gilles-sur-Vie, May 25, 1926

Oh, the mystifying vagaries of Marina's poetry! This inconspicuous poem is *her farewell to all men* she had lured into Hades: "soon, soon!" Pasternak was the only survivor. A meeting with him in Weimar came to naught. Even she sees the blessing in this failure. After 2 years they finally addressed each other by their first names: brother and sister in spirit. How much did Seryozha know of this correspondence?

In the relative calm of the truce between the two, Marina recovered her more earthly female aspects. She had wanted a son all her life. By the summer of 1924 she found herself pregnant. This child, Seryozha's child may have saved her life. Her erotic phantasies were transformed into an almost equally irresponsible idolization of the child she was carrying. It simply had to be a son, she had seen him in a vision already years ago! - And luckily it was!

Georgy "Mur" Efron was born on February 1, 1925. The child nearly died at birth. Overconfident of her female strength she had not consulted an obstetrician. Alone in the house at the edge of the village, in the middle of a blizzard, a woman friend and a local physician performed a difficult breach birth. The umbilical cord nearly strangled the child.

For weeks Seryozha and she argued about his name. Marina wanted to name him Boris - in honor of Pasternak, of course. - She relented in order not to have to explain her choice, and Seryozha's name of Georgy, the patron saint of Moscow, prevailed. She had addressed the growing child as "Mur" (after A. Th. Hoffmann's "The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr") and that name remained with him for life. They had a christening on June 8. With mixed feelings Marina describes the lengthy Orthodox ritual (she, as mother, seems not to have been banned from the ceremony as is customary in Russia):

"An exorcism of devils, you can feel their terrifying force, a real power struggle. And the church pushing with all its might against a dense mass, a living wall of sorcery and develry: "I forbid you! - Go away! - Depart!"

Mur was quite charming during the whole ceremony... He looked handsome. Being five months old, he wasn't totally immersed - not one of the vast Czech laundry tubs would have been big enough. A boy like him could only have been totally immersed in the sea. [VS p. 249]

Tsvetaeva wanted to leave Czechoslovakia for some time. She had never quite settled in rural Prague. She longed for the excitement, for the people of a lively urban environment. With the deteriorating freedom in Berlin the center of Russian émigré literature had shifted to Paris. There new literary journals were born every year.

Efron's tuberculosis had recurred, and he had spent part of the summer of 1925 in a sanatorium. He may also have been lured by the hub of Russian politics in Paris. Prague

was sleeping in Lethe's backwaters. A paid invitation by a Parisian journal to read her poetry and the offer of Olga Chernova and her husband, Russian friends, to put them up sealed the decision. - Maybe she would be able to earn some real money with her writing. She managed to retain her Czech stipend – it was supposed to be a temporary visit.



# France

1925 – 1939

## The Summer of 1926

### Pasternak - Tsvetaeva - Rilke

This long chapter is devoted to the correspondence between Rilke and Tsvetaeva.

Marina and her children arrived in Paris and moved in with the Chernovs in November 1925. Sergey joined them after Christmas. The Chernovs' was only a spacious three-room apartment, but it had central heating, a gas stove, and a bathroom! The Chernovs had three adult daughters and the place was crowded - but Marina had not lived in such luxury for years if ever. They helped each other, the atmosphere was congenial and harmonious. All five Chernovs were published writers.

Marina was still nursing Murg, nevertheless she managed to work extremely hard. By February she had finished two articles, "*The Poet on the Critic*" and "*Flower Garden*", both biting reviews of the expatriate literary scene. She had met the writer Dimitry P. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, one of the founders of the *Eurasia Movement* in France, who encouraged her and facilitated the publication of these pieces.

Her literary criticism hit Paris and eventually Moscow like a bomb. No other work of hers was greeted by such a storm of indignation. The expatriate community and some writers in Moscow accused her of being a Bolshevik, and the Soviet sympathizers of being a hopeless bourgeois romantic, a "hysterical young woman". In actuality the upheaval came down to her having offended a number of expatriate writers in France by exposing their sedate sloppiness and their unjust criticism of writers still in Russia. This is not the place to examine these pieces [see VS p.261-273]. They are dated today and only of interest to literary historians. Marina never replied to these attacks, they were below her level. Tsvetaeva's poetry lives, while the exposed victims are rightfully forgotten. But this backlash explains some of the hatred against Tsvetayeva, which after two generations still abounds especially in France.

The original reason of their visit, Marina giving her first poetry reading since Moscow, had to wait until February 1926: A trio played Italian songs. The evening exceeded all expectations. "*Marina read about 40 poems. The hall was overcrowded, people were standing outside.*" wrote Sergey full of enthusiasm and continued, "*Since this evening the number of her ill-wishers has expanded considerably. Other poets and prose writers are*

*full of indignation...."*

However, Marina had earned enough money to take her children to the seaside. [VS p.263] In April 1926 they moved to the small fishing village of St. Gilles-sur-Vie in the Vendée between Nantes and La Rochelle. After the cramped apartment in the industrial 19th arrondissement of Paris she was longing for nature and quietude. Sergey, involved in various publishing ventures and political work, remained in Paris.

Her six months in St. Gilles will forever be connected with the unrequited meeting of Tsvetaeva and Rilke. Their letters are an extraordinary document of European literature. Two poets explore the paths of poetry to the Empyrean. A sacred delirium between two people in rare resonance with each other. Pasternak made the connection between Rilke and Marina, but because of the vagaries of the mail system and Marina's possessiveness was largely excluded from the exchange. Rilke infinitely kind-hearted, not telling that he is very ill, feels himself being transported back to his "Russian Soul" and the memory of the Russia of Lou Andreas-Salomé. And an exalted Marina drives their fiery chariot beyond all limits to its final apotheosis: Rilke's death in December 1926, - unforeseen by either Pasternak or Marina.

While Rilke's kindness approaches on being charitable with his impestuous correspondent, Marina's letters are not flattering to her. She exposes many of her less pleasant *personae* which are otherwise hidden in her poetry. While her inability to sense the extent of Rilke's terminal illness can be explained by circumstances, her egocentricity is difficult to excuse.

This correspondence has only recently surfaced. I shall quote only the letters exchanged between Rilke and Marina, my space is limited. In attempting this, I see myself faced with the anguishing task of having to excise portions from their letters for space reasons. I have not removed Marina's self-centered passages! I can only hope that I will be forgiven for both my indulgences and my omissions. All texts have been copied from [PTR], the below referenced book, where the unabridged versions can be found in reasonable English translations.

This correspondence was published in German in 1983. Viktoria Schweitzer refers to it only in her bibliography. An English translation, *Letters, Summer 1926, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Rainer Maria Rilke*" (2002), referred by me as [PTR] is easily obtainable as a paperback. (I bought an unread (sic!) second-hand copy for \$6.75 through Amazon). A limited preview of the book can be examined at Amazon - less their letters!. The letters between Tsvetaeva and Rilke were written in German. As was her custom with most of what she wrote, some of her letters to Rilke she first jotted down in her notebooks. A number of these are now available in Russian at Tsvetaevas letters to Rilke.

Their meeting was based on a chain of coincidences as can only happen between people with Russian souls: In 1900 Boris Pasternak's father Leonid had befriended the young, still unknown Rilke on his second sojourn with Lou Andreas-Salomé to Russia. When in December 1925 all the world celebrated Rilke's 50th birthday, Leonid, now living in Berlin, had written the famous poet a long, humble letter, in which he had mentioned Boris. Three months later, Leonid's letter had to be forwarded by the publisher to Rilke in a Swiss sanatorium, Leonid received an equally long, handwritten reply from Rilke in

German and Russian! In a postscript Rilke mentioned that he had just read a French translation of "several impressive poems by Boris Pasternak in a literary journal edited by Paul Valéry."

A personal letter from the famous poet! Leonid informed Boris, who had remained in Moscow with his family, of Rilke's praise, but the precious letter had first to be copied by one of Boris' sisters. Boris received a transcription only weeks later. He had been in a deep depression, which Marina had tried to unravel during the past year. And now this accolade from the "greatest living poet!" A bolt from the blue! Impetuous, he composed a letter to Rilke: "Great, most beloved poet!" followed by six pages of effusive enthusiasm, "...and now I feel like I am reborn!..." Toward the end he asked Rilke to send a copy of his *Duino Elegies*, to Marina Tsvetaeva, "my greatest and probably only friend, who shares my love for you..." He had to send the letter via his father. Since Lenin's departure, there existed no postal services or diplomatic relations between Switzerland and Russia.

Rilke responded to Boris' request with surprising speed. On May 7, 1926 Marina received a letter from Rilke; his *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* arrived a day later.



[PTR p.103-105]

Val-Mont par Glion, Vaud, Suisse,  
May 3, 1926

Dear Poet,

This very hour I received a letter from Boris Pasternak, a letter brimming with joy and a great flow of feeling. All the emotions and gratitude that this letter stirs in me is to go first of all to *you*, as I understand from his lines, and then through you to him! The two books that follow this letter are *for you, are your property*. Two further copies will follow as soon as I have any: these are to go to Boris Pasternak.

I am so shaken by the fullness and power of his message to me that I cannot say more today, would you forward the enclosed sheet to our friend in Moscow for me?

...A stay in Paris last year brought me back into contact with Russian friends I hadn't seen for twenty-five years.

Rainer Maria Rilke Muzot, 1926

But why, I must now wonder, why was it not vouchsafed me to meet you, Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva? ... Will we ever have a second chance to meet?

Rainer Maria Rilke

Marina was so excited that she "forgot" to mail Rilke's note to Boris which caused him great anguish. She wrote Rilke by return mail, even postdating her letter. Her forward style is remarkable.

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.105-110]

St.-Gilles-sur-Vie,

May 9, 1926

Rainer Maria Rilke!

May I call you like this? You, poetry incarnate, must know, after all, that your very name is a poem. Rainer Maria, that sounds churchly - and kindly - and chivalrous. Your name does not rhyme with our time, stems from earlier or later - has always been. Your name willed it so, and you chose the name.

You are not my dearest poet ("dearest" - a level), you are a phenomenon of nature, which cannot be mine and which one does not so much love as undergo, - or (still too little) the fifth element incarnate: poetry itself - or (still too little) that whence poetry comes to be and which is greater than it (you). It isn't a question of Rilke the person (personhood: that which is forced upon us!), but of Rilke the spirit, who is still greater than the poet and who is what really bears the name of Rilke to me, the Rilke of the day after tomorrow... across all that distance.

What is still left for a poet to do after you? A master (like Goethe, e.g.) one overcomes, but to overcome you means (would mean) to overcome poetry itself. A poet is he who - overcomes life (is to overcome it). You are an impossible task for future poets. The poet who comes after you must be you, i.e., you must be born again. You give to words their *first* sense, and to things their *first* words. E.g., when you say "magnificent" you say "*wreaking great things*," as it was meant to mean originally (now "magnificent" is no more than a hollow exclamation mark of sorts). I might have said all this to you more clearly in Russian, but I don't want to give you the trouble of reading your way into it, I would rather take the trouble of writing my way into it.

The first thing in your letter that hurled me up the tallest tower of joy (not lifted, not placed) was the word *May*, [spelled "Mai" in modern German] the old nobility of which you restored with that y-spelling. *Mai* with an i - brings to mind the first of May, not the workers' holiday - no, the tame May of the bourgeoisie - of engaged and (not overly) enamored couples.

A few short biographical notes (only necessary ones): from the Russian Revolution (not revolutionary Russia; the revolution is a country with its own - eternal - laws!) I went - by way of Berlin - to Prague, and your books went with me. In Prague I read for the first time *Early Poems*. Thus did Prague become dear to me - on the first day - because of your having been a student there. I remained in Prague from 1922 to 1925, three years; in November 1925, I went to Paris. Were you still there? In case you were there: Why didn't I come to you? Because you are the dearest thing to me in the whole world. Quite simply. And - because you don't know me. From injured pride, out of reverence for chance (fate, the same thing). From - cowardice, perhaps, that I'd have to endure your alien glance - on the threshold of your room. (What could your glance at me have been if not alien! It would have been a glance meant for anybody, after all, since you didn't know me! - and

thus alien after all!) One more thing: I will always be a Russian woman in your perception; you in mine - a purely human (divine) phenomenon. This is the difficulty about our too individualistic nationalities: all what is inside us, is called "Russian" by the Europeans....

I am waiting for your books as for a thunderstorm that will come whether I want it or not. Almost like a heart operation (no metaphor! Every poem (of yours) cuts into the heart and carves it according to its knowledge - whether I want it to or not). No wanting! Do you know why I say *Du* to you and love you - and - and - and, because you are a *force*. The rarest thing. You don't have to answer me; I know what time is and what a poem is. I also know what a *letter* is. So there....

What do I want from you, Rainer? Nothing. - Everything. That you should allow me to spend every moment of my life looking up at you as at a mountain that protects me (one of those guardian angels of stone!). Before I knew you, it was all right; now that I know you, permission is needed.

For my *soul* is well-bred.

I am going to write to you though, whether you want it or not. About your Russian characters (e.g., your *Czars* cycle). About a lot of things. Those Russian characters of yours. *How touching they are!* - I, who never cries, like a Red Indian, I was almost ready to. I read your letter at the ocean; the ocean was reading along with me. We were both reading. I wonder if such a fellow reader troubles you. There won't be any others: I'm much too jealous (zealous - where you are concerned). Here are my books - you don't have to read them.-.put them on your desk and take my word that they were not there before me (by this I mean in the world, not on the desk!).

May 10, 1926

Do you know how I got your books today (on the tenth)? The children were still asleep (seven in the morning), I suddenly got up and ran to the door. At the *same* moment - I had my hand on the door handle, the postman knocked - right into my hand. I merely had to end my door-opening movement and from the same still rapping hand received the books. I haven't opened them yet, for if I did this letter wouldn't go off today - and it has to fly.

Switzerland won't let any Russians in. But the mountains will have to move (or split!) so that Boris and I can come to you! I believe in mountains. (This line, in my altered version - which after all is not an altered one - for mountains and nights rhyme - you recognize it, don't you?)

Marina Tsvetaeva

The letter is post-marked May 8. By dating her letter to the 10th, the date Tsvetayeva assumed Rilke would receive it, she must have tried to cancel out the time and space that separated them. A little later she sent him her "Poems to Alexander Blok" (1921) and "Psyche: A Romance" (1923) in Russian with her annotations in German.

Their letters followed each other like a torrent. Still on on the same day, a delighted Rilke takes her up on her little lie.

*Rilke to Tsvetaeva*  
[PTR p.111-114]

Val-Mont par Glion (Vaud) Suisse  
May 10, 1926

Marina Tsvetayeva,

Were you not here just now after all? Or *where was I?* It is still the tenth of May - and, strange thing, Marina, that was the date you wrote the concluding lines of your letter (cast forward into time, forward into the timeless moment when I was to read you)! On the tenth you thought you were receiving my books at the turning of a door (as one turns pages in a book)...; on the same tenth, today, in the eternal today of the spirit, today, Marina, I received you in my soul, in my whole consciousness, which trembles before you, before your coming, as though your great fellow reader, the ocean, had come breaking over me with you, heart's flood.

*What to tell you?*

You have held your hands, Marina, by turns extended and folded, in my heart as in the basin under a flowing spring: now, as long as you hold them there, the diverted flow spills over to you... let it be.

*What to say:* all my words (as though they had been in your letter, as if facing a staged scene), all my words want to go out to you at the same time; none of them lets another pass. When people crowd one another as they leave the theater, isn't it because, after having so much presence offered to them, they cannot bear the curtain? Thus I find it hard to bear the closed-up-again quality of your letter (once more, yet one more time!). But look, even the curtain is comforting: next to your beautiful name, next to this enchanting St.-Gilles - sur-vie (survie!), somebody has written a large flattersome blue "seven" (like this: 7!), the seven, my number of blessing.

The atlas was opened (for geography is not a science to me but a relationship that is immediately applied) and, *presto*, you have been entered there, Marina, on my internal map: between Moscow and Toledo somewhere I have made room for the onthrust of your ocean. In reality, though, you look at the Ile d'Yeu with the Pointe de Corbeau facing you.... And Ariadne (how big might she be now, how high up does she reach on you?) looks out with you, and... "children," you say, "*die Kinder*," in the plural? And yet in 1903, while I was trying to come to terms with Rodin, you were still a little girl yourself, whom I'm shortly going to look for in Lausanne. (Oh, how should I see you?)

You, poet, do you sense how you have overwhelmed me, you and your magnificent fellow reader; I'm writing like you and I descend like you the few steps down from the sentence into the mezzanine of parentheses, where the ceilings are so low and where it smells of roses past that never cease.

Marina: *how* I have inhabited your letter. And what an astonishing thing when the die of your word, with the score already called, fell by a further step, showing the complementary number, the final (often still larger) one. A force of Nature, you dear one, that which stands behind the fifth element, inciting and gathering it?... And I for my part felt again as though through you, Nature had assented to me, an entire garden of

affirmation around a spring. Around what else? Around a sundial? How you overgrow and overwaft me with your word-summer's tall phlox.

But, you say, it is not a matter of Rilke the person. I, too, am at odds with him, with his body, with which such pure communication had always been possible that I often did not know which produced poems more happily: It, - I, - the two of us? (Soles of the feet, blithe as often they were, blissful with walking across everything, across earth, blissful with primal knowing, pre-knowing, complicity of awareness beyond knowing itself!) And now dis-cord, doubly-cored, soul clad one way, body mummied another, different. In this sanatorium ever since December, but not quite allowing the doctor in, into the only relationship between self and self that can stand no mediator (no go-between, who would make distances irrevocable; no translator, who would break it apart into two languages). (Patience, long snapped, tied up again...).

My residence, *Muzot* (which saved me after the snarled tangle and cave-in of the war), four hours from here: my (if I may answer you literally) "my heroic French homeland." Look at it. Almost Spain, Provence, Rhone Valley. *Austere et melodieux*; knoll in wonderful harmony with the old turretry, which still belongs to it just as much as it does to the one who inures the stones to fate, who exercises them....

Rainer Maria

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.114-120]

St.-Gilles-sur-Vie

May 12, 1926

Dear Rainer Maria!

The *Beyond* (not the religious one, more nearly the geographic one) you know better than the *Here*, this side; you know it topographically, with all its mountains and islands and castles. A topography of the soul - that's what you are. And with your "*Book* (oh, it was not a book after all, it was becoming a book!) *of Poverty, Pilgrimage, and Death*" you have done more for God than all the philosophers and priests taken together. Priests are nothing but intruders between me and God (gods).

You, you are the friend who *deepens* and enhances the joy (is it joy?) of a great hour between Two (the eternal pair!), without whom one ceases to feel the other, and whom, as one is finally forced to do, *one loves exclusively*. God. You alone have said something new to God. You are the explicit John-Jesus relationship (unspoken by either). Yet - difference - you are the Father's favorite, not the Son's, you are God the Father's (who didn't have one!) John. You chose (electing - choice!) the Father because He was *lonelier* and - impossible to love! No David, no. David had all the shyness of his strength, you have all your strength's daring and risk. The world was much too young. *Everything* had to come to pass - for you to come. You dared so to love (to proclaim!) the unhuman (thoroughly divine) God the Father as John never dared to love the thoroughly human son!

I wonder if you understand me, given my poor German? French I write more fluently; that's why I don't want to write to you in French. From me to you nothing should flow. - Fly, yes! And failing that, better to halt and stumble.

Do you know how I fare with your poems? At the first blink of the eye. ("Flash of the eye" would be, and would sound, better; if I were German, I would have written: lightning, - after all, it is even quicker than a blink! And the flash of an eye is surely even swifter than ordinary lightning. Two velocities in one. (Not so?) As I was saying, at the first blink of an eye (for I am a stranger), I know everything - then - night nothing - then: God, how lucid! - luminous? And as I am trying to seize it (not allegorically - almost with my hand), it becomes hazed: nothing but the printed lines. Lightning on lightning (lightning - night - lightning), that's how it takes me as I read you. It must be the same with you as you write yourself. "*Rilke is easy to grasp*" - thus say, in the pride of the consecrated, the anthroposophists and other sectarian mystics (not that I have anything against them - better than socialism - but still!...). "Easy to grasp." All chopped up, in pieces: Rilke - the romantic; Rilke - the mystic; Rilke - the Grecian of the myths; etc., etc. - Come, pit your strength against the *whole* Rilke instead. Here all your clairvoyance is good for nothing. A miracle needs no clairvoyance. It is *there*. Confirmed, seen by any peasant with his own eyes. Miracle: inviolable: ungraspable.

For two nights I have been reading in your *Orpheus* (your *Orpheus is a country*, therefore "*in*"). ....

....*Orpheus*, can never have died, because he is right now (eternally!) dying. *В каждом любящем - заново, и в каждом любящем - вечно.* (In every loving - again, and in every loving - forever). Therefore - no consolation until we have 'died' ourselves." (More or less; it was better in Russian.) This kind of thing of course doesn't belong in "literature" (belles lettres); that's why they laughed at me.

Your *Orpheus*. The first line: "*A tree sprang up. O sheer transcendence!*" There it is, you see, the grand manner (grand of kind). And *how well I know this!* The tree is higher than itself, the tree overclimbs itself - hence so tall. One of those whom God happily leaves unprovided for (they look after themselves!) and which grow straight into heaven, into the seventh (in Russian) "*Song is existence*" (to be there; anyone not singing is not yet there, is still coming!). "*Heavy are the mountains, heavy are the seas...*" as though you were comforting a child, urging him to take heart... and - almost smiling about his unreason: "... *But the winds ... but the spaces...*" This line is *pure intonation* (intention), therefore pure, pure angel speech. (Intonation: an intention which has become sound. Intention incarnate.) ... "*We must not strain ourselves. For other names. Once and for all*" "*It's Orpheus if it sings.*" If it dies, among poets; that's what I meant overleaf. "*Is he from here?*" And already one feels the coming (approaching) "*No.*"

Oh, Rainer, I don't want to choose (choosing is rooting, polluting!), I cannot choose, I take the first random lines my ear still holds. Into my ears you write to me, by the ear you are read. "This pride out of earth" (the horse, grown out of this soil). Rainer! A book will follow *Craft*, there you will find a Saint George who is almost steed and a steed that is almost a rider. I don't separate them and I name neither one. Your horseman! For a horseman is not the one who rides, horseman is the two together, a new figure, something that used not to be there not knight and steed: rider-horse and horse-rider:



horseman.

Your penciled notation (is this right? no, annotation in the margin, I suppose!) - those dear, airy three words: "to a dog". Dear one, this takes me right back to the middle of my childhood, age eleven; that is to say, into the Black Forest (into the very middle of it!). And the headmistress (Fräulein Brinck was her name, and she was gruesome) is saying, "This-little Satan's brat, Marina, makes one forgive her anything; all she has to do is say 'a dog!'" ("A dog" - yowling with ecstasy and emotion and wanting - *ein Hund* with three *u-u-u's*. They weren't pedigreed dogs, just street mongrels!)

Rainer, the purest happiness, a gift of happiness, pressing your forehead on the dog's forehead, eye to eye, and the dog, astonished, taken aback, and flattered (this doesn't happen every day!), growls. And then one holds his muzzle shut with both hands (since he might bite from sheer emotion) and kisses, just smothers him.

Where you are, do you have a dog? And where are you? Val-Mont (Valmont), that was the hero's name in that hard and cold and clever book, Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses*, which - I can't think why, is the most moral of books! - was on our index in Russia, along with the memoirs of Casanova (whom I love with a passion!). I have written to Prague to have them send me my two dramatic poems (I don't think you can call them dramas), "Adventure" (Henrietta, do you remember? his loveliest, which wasn't an adventure at all, the only one that was no adventure) and "Phoenix" - Casanova's end. Dux, seventy-five years old, alone, poor, out of style, laughed at. His last love. Seventy-five years - thirteen years. You have to read that; it is easy to understand (the language, I mean). And - don't be amazed - it was my Germanic soul that wrote it, not my French one.

"We touch each other. - How? With wings that beat," Rainer, Rainer, you told me that without knowing me, like a blind man (a seeing one!), at random.

Tomorrow is the Feast of the Ascension. How lovely! The sky in these words looks just like my ocean - with waves. And Christ - is riding.

Your letter has just arrived. Time for mine to go.

Marina

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.120-123]

St.-Gilles-sur-Vie

Ascension Day, May 13, 1926

"...to him you cannot boast of matters grandly sensed..." [Ninth Duino Elegy]

Therefore, in a purely human and very modest way, Rilke the man. - As I wrote this, I hesitated. I love the poet, not the person. (As you read this, you came to a halt.) - This sounds like aestheticism, i.e., soulless, inanimate (aesthetes are those who have no soul, just five acute senses, often fewer). May I even choose? As soon as I love, I cannot and will not choose (that stale and narrow privilege!), you already are an absolute. And until I love (*know*), you, I may not choose because I have no relation to you (don't know your

past, after all!).

No, Rainer, I am not a collector, and Rilke the man, who is even greater than the poet (turn it whatever way you like, it comes to the same: greater still!) - because he carries the poet (knight and steed: horseman!) - I love inseparably from the poet.

By Rilke the man, I meant the one who lives, gets things published, whom one likes, who already belongs to so many, who must be tired by now of so much love. All I meant was the many, many human contacts! By Rilke the man I meant the place where there is no room for me. Thus the entire set of poet and man - renunciation, abnegation, lest you might think that I am intruding into your life, on your time, into your day (working day and social day), which has been planned and allotted once and for all. A renunciation - lest it hurt afterward: the first name, the first calendar date that one collides with, by which one is rejected (*'Vorsicht - Verzicht'*.)

Dear one, I am very obedient. If you tell me: Do not write, it excites me. I need myself badly for myself - I shall understand, and withstand, everything.

I am writing to you on the dune in the thin dune grass. My son (fifteen months old, George - in honor of our White Army. Now, Boris thinks he is a socialist! Do you believe that?) - well, then, my son, who is sitting astride me (almost on my head!), takes my pencil away (I happen to be writing in the notebook). He is so lovely that all the old women [*those costumes! If you could be here!*] have only one exclamation: "*Mais c'est un petit Roi de Rome!*" A Bonapartist Vendee- peculiar? The king they have already forgotten, the word *emperor* is still resonant. Our landlords (fisherman and his wife, a fairy-tale couple totaling one hundred and fifty years of age!) still know a good deal of the last empire.

Children in the plural? Darling, I had to smile. *Children* - that word stretches (two or seven?). Two, darling, a twelve-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy.[for unknown reasons she deducts 2 years from her children's, her own, and Sergey's age!] Two little giants from the children's Valhalla. Prize exhibits if ever you saw any. How tall is Ariadne? Oh, almost taller than I (I'm not small) and twice as hefty (I weigh *nothing*). Here is my picture - passport picture - I am younger and brighter. A better one will follow, taken quite recently, in Paris. By the photographer Shumov, the one who photographed your great friend's works [Rodin]. He has told me a lot about them. I was too embarrassed to ask if he didn't have a picture of you. I would never have ordered it. (That I am asking you for your picture - straight out and quite without compunction! - please, that much you understand by now.) "... the fear and blue of childhood..." [from Rilke, "*Self-Portrait, New Poems*"] I still remember that.

Who are you? Teuton? Austrian? (That used to be one and the same, didn't it? I am not very cultured - bits and pieces.) Your place of birth? How did you get to Prague? How to the Russian czars? There is a miracle here, after all: You - Russia - I.

All these questions!

Your earthly fate concerns me even more intimately than your other paths, for I know how difficult it is - all of it.

Have you been ill long? How do you live in Muzot? That magnificence. Large and somber and tall. Do you have a family? Children? (I don't think so.) Are you going to stay long in the sanatorium? Do you have friends there?

Boulevard de Crancy, 3 (not far from Ouchy, I think), that's where you can find me. I have short hair (like now, I've never in my life worn it long), and I look like a boy, with a rosary around his neck.

Tonight I did some reading in your *Duino Elegies*. In the daytime I never get to reading or writing. The day's work goes on deep into the night, for I have only my two hands. My husband - a volunteer soldier all his young life, barely thirty-one years old (I am turning thirty-one in September) - is very sickly, and a man, after all, cannot do woman's work, it looks ugly (to the wife, that is). At this moment he's still in Paris, but is coming here soon. He is handsome: the handsomeness of suffering. My daughter looks like him, although more on the happy side, our son is more like me, but both are bright, bright-eyed, *моя раскиаска* [my rascals].

What to tell you about the book? The ultimate stair. My bed turned into a cloud.

Darling, I know *everything* already - from me to you - but it is still too early for a lot of things. Something in you must still get used to me.

Marina

*Rilke to Tsvetaeva*

[PTR p.123-128]

Val-Mont par Glion (Vaud) Suisse

17 May 1926

"*Марина! Спасибо за мир ...* " - Marina! Thank you for the world... [from Tsvetaeva: "*Psyche: A Romance*"]

That your daughter should have been able to say this to you, Marina, and in the face of hard times! (Who in the days of my childhood, what child - in Austria at least, in Bohemia - would have found the inner urge of assent to speak like this?... My daughter perhaps might have wanted to say this to me if the word and its mode of address had been more urgent in her; but almost the only time I really was with her was before any verbalness at all, from her birth to sometime after her first birthday: for as early as that, what had arisen, a little against my will, in terms of house, family, and settling down, was dissolving; the marriage, too, although never terminated legally, returned me to my natural singleness (after barely two years) and Paris began: this was 1902. Now my daughter has long since married and settled somewhere on an estate in Saxony, which I'm not familiar with; and my granddaughter, Christine, whom I also only guess at, from a lot of small snapshots, passed her second year in November and is growing well into her third....

But all of this is on a different plane from the one on which Muzot stands, which ever since 1921 (when the most wondrous circumstances, no, outright miracle itself, allowed me to find it and hold on to it) I have inhabited alone (not counting visits from friends from time to time - which are rare, though), as much alone as I've always lived, more so if anything: in an often uncanny intensification of what being alone means, in a solitude rushed to an ultimate and uttermost state (for formerly, being alone in Paris, and Rome, in

Venice - where I have spent much time without being alone - in Spain, in Tunis, in Algiers, in Egypt... in that searching emphatic place, Provence ..., there was still participation, being part of a web of relationships and tutelage). Muzot, on the other hand, more challenging than anything else, allowed nothing but achievement, the vertical leap out into open space, the whole earth's ascension to heaven within me....

Dear one, why do I have to tell you, since you have the *Elegies* in your hands, since you have the *Elegies* in your hand and over your heart, which beats against them in shared witness....

These poems had been begun (1912) in no less grand a solitude, on the Adriatic, in the old (destroyed in the war) castle of Duino (near Trieste); in Spain and later in Paris fragments of lines turned up, and all of this would probably have converged into achievement in 1914 in Paris if that great interruption of the world had not cut in, making me go rigid and static. ]

For years. Whatever I might have saved out of that long winter of my being, I myself did not know when I was finally (1919) able to take refuge in Switzerland, as on a soil where something natural and guileless still had full authority. I did not find out until 1921, at Muzot, in the first lonely year I was in residence there, when the nature of my temperament, which circumstances had repressed, drove, within a few weeks, the unheard-of growth, first of *Orpheus* (each part in three days!), then of the *Elegies* into its season of completion. Violently, almost destroying me with the passion of its outbreak, and yet acting so gently and with such a sense of pattern that not one (think of it), not a single pre-existing line failed to be fitted into the place, in which it was a natural stair and a voice among the voices. How that healed together, the earlier with its already aging fractured surface so intimately fitted onto the glowing one, taking on such new glow from proximity and infinite kinship that never a visible seam remained! Triumph and jubilation, Marina, without equal!

And *this* is what the overabundance of solitude, in all its deadliness, was needed for. But, then, was it that I tried to maintain the impossible conditions of intensified isolation over and beyond what had been achieved, mastered? (This I did, not from stubbornness or to wrest a bonus from grace, but because letting in the "other," living by him and for him, instantly (just after the instant) entails conflicts and tasks I had to fear at a time when I had accomplished *everything* much too extremely merely to change to a new kind of achievement.)

Or is it (since the work itself, our great breathtaking labor, does not take revenge, after all; even when it forces us outside and beyond ourselves, it leaves us, not fatigued or exhausted, but staggering under the reward), is it that, mechanically, I endured too long the same special conditions of seclusion, in a heroic valleyscape, under the almost sun-raging sky of a wine country?

– At any rate, for the first time in my life and in a treacherous fashion, my own aloneness turned against me with a physical sting, rendering this being-with-myself suspect and dangerous, and more and more threatening, because of the physical disturbances that now drowned out what to me had been forever and ever the most primeval silence.

– Hence my presence here in Val-Mont, for the third time now (after two shorter stays

in 1924 and 1925), hence my long sojourn in Paris (January to mid-August 1925), where in all conscience the opposite, the adversary, of the life offered by Muzot seemed to gain entry in all its guises and permutations; hence my reluctance to withdraw once more into my solid tower with all the danger that had invaded me and was rankly growing inside me.-

– What do the doctors think? A trauma of the nerve which they call *grand sympathique*, that large, beautiful tree of nerves which, if it does not bear our fruits, at any rate (possibly) brings forth the most dazzling blossom of our being.... Disturbances of a more subjective than really factually or organically discernible kind (so far, at any rate); inroads upon that absence of bodily self-awareness from which harmony with our material stake (in ourselves) so involuntarily results. Slight disorders of my body which render me all the more at a loss, since I had been used to living with it in so perfect a concord, without a physician, that I was close to thinking of it as a child of my soul.

– This began at a certain turning point in my life (about 1899 and 1900, which coincided with my sojourns in Russia). Light and handy as it was and easy to take along into the most abstract spheres, how often voided, endowed with weight only by courtesy and still visible merely so as not to alarm the invisible! So intimately *mine*; friend, truly my bearer, the holder of my heart; capable of all my joys, disparaging none, making each my own in a more particular way; bestowing them upon me at the precise intersection of my senses. As *my* creature, ready for me and risen in service to my use; as pre-creature, outweighing me with all the security and magnificence of descent. A thing of genius, reared by centuries, glorious in the serene innocence of its not-I, touching in its eagerness to be faithful to the "I" in all its transitions and oscillations. Simple of mind and wise. How much I have to thank it, which, by dint of its nature, reinforced my delight in a fruit, in the wind, in walking on grass. To thank it, whereby I am akin to the impenetrable into which I cannot force entry, and to the fluid element that runs off me. And it was still conversant with the stars by virtue of its heaviness.

– To sum up: distressing, this dissension with it, and too fresh a distress to be ready for compromise yet. And the doctor *cannot* understand what it is that distresses me so profoundly, so centrally, about these handicaps, which after all are tolerable, although they have set up their branch offices all over the body while they were about it....

– All this about *me*, dear Marina, pardon me! And pardon also the opposite, if all of a sudden I should turn uncommunicative - which ought not to keep you from writing to *me*. As often as the spirit moves you to "fly." Your German - no, it doesn't "stumble," it just takes heavier steps now and then, like the steps of one who is going down a stone staircase with stairs of unequal height and cannot estimate as he comes down when his foot is going to come to rest, right now or suddenly farther down than he thought. What strength is in you, poet, to achieve your intent even in this language, and be accurate and yourself. *Your* gait ringing on the steps, your tone, you. Your lightness, your controlled, bestowed weight.

– But do you know that I overrated myself? Because I read Ivan Goncharov in Russian as recently as ten years ago almost without a dictionary and still have relatively little difficulty reading letters in Russian, and from time to time see one in *that* light in which all languages are a *single* language (and this one, yours, Russian, is so close to being *all* of

them anyway!), I was led to overestimate myself...: your books, even though you guide me through the more alien passages, are difficult for me - it has been too long since I have read consistently, save for scattered things like (in Paris) some of Boris's verses in an anthology. If only I could read you, Marina, as you read me! Nonetheless, the two little books accompany me from table to bed and in many ways outdo the ones easily read.

– What keeps me from sending you my passport picture is not vanity, but actually awareness of its lightning-flash fortuity. But I have put it next to your picture: get used to this first in pictures, will you?

– Rainer

– I shall have to go to Muzot for a day shortly, and there I'll pick up for you a few small, fairly valid pictures from two years ago. I completely avoid sitting for photographs or pictures: Shumov has made no picture of me. Send me that other one of yours soon!

After this letter there was suddenly silence. Marina stopped writing. Proud and vulnerable as she was in her self-exposure, she read all her egocentric misgivings into Rilke's tactful reference to his illness. She wrote about her hunches to Boris. After suffering for two weeks in silence, Marina took up the pen again, going back to the visit planned in the beginning, trying in the process to fend off Boris' intervention.

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.161-163]

St.-Gilles-sur-Vie

June 3, 1926

Much - everything even - remains in my notebook. For you let me quote only the words from my letter to Boris Pasternak: "When I used to ask you what we would do if we were together, you once answered, 'We would go to see Rilke.' I tell you Rilke is overburdened; he doesn't need anything or anyone. He breathes upon me the bitter cold of the possessor, of whose possessions I am knowingly and by predestination a part. I have nothing to give him, all has been taken in advance. He does not need me, or you. Strength, always attracting, distracts. Something in him (what it's called is your guess) does not want to be diverted. Must not be.

This encounter is a great wound, a blow to my heart (the heart not only beats, it also takes beatings - whenever it rises to a joyous higher beat!), the more so since he is right: in thinking that I (you) in our best hours are the same! - One sentence in your letter: - "... If all of a sudden I should turn uncommunicative - which ought not to keep you from writing to me. As often as ..." The moment I read that - that sentence asks for rest. Rest took place. (You are a little rested, aren't you?) Do you know what all this means: rest, unrest, request, fulfillment, etc. Listen, I suddenly seem to feel quite sure about this.

Before life one is *always* and *everything*; as one lives, one is *something* and *now* (is, has - all the same!). My love for you was parceled out in days and letters, hours and lines. Hence the unrest. (That's why you asked for rest!) Letter today, letter tomorrow.

You are alive, I want to see you. A transplanted from the always to the now. Hence the pain, the counting of days, each hour's worthlessness, the hour now merely a step to the letter. To *be* within the other person or to *have* the other person (or want to have, want in general - all one!). When I realized this, I fell silent.

Now it is over. It doesn't take me long to be done with wanting. What did I want from you? Nothing. Rather - around you. Perhaps, simply - to you. Being without a letter was already turning into being without you. The longer, the worse. Without a letter - without you; with a letter - without you; with you - without you. Into you! Not to be. - Die! This is how I am. This is how love is - infinite time. Thankless and self-destructive. "I do not love or honor love." says one of my lines (*a grande bassesse de l'amour*, or - better still - *La bassesse supreme de l'amour*). So, Rainer, it's over. I don't want to go to you. I don't wish to want to.

Perhaps - some time - with Boris (who from afar has "divined" everything! The poet's ear!) - but when - how... no meddling! And - so you won't think me base - it wasn't because of the pain that I was silent, it was because of the ugliness of that pain!

Now it's over. Now I'm writing to you again.

Marina

She and Boris did not even consider that Rilke might be dying! How could an immortal God, after all, be mortal? - And how well Rilke knew how to deal with difficult loves! He composed an "Eleventh" Elegy for her....

*Rilke to Tsvetaeva*

[PTR p.163-166]

Chateau de Muzot, s/Sierre (Valais), Suisse

June 8, 1926, Evening

So my little word, as you erected it before you, has cast this great shadow, in which you, incomprehensibly to me, stayed away, Marina! Incomprehensibly, and now comprehended. That I wrote it, that sentence of mine, was not because I was overburdened, as you reported to Boris - no, free, Marina, free and easy, only so unpredictably called upon (which is what you mean, after all). Only so totally without prior knowledge. And, for some time past, probably on physical grounds, so apprehensive lest somebody, lest someone dear, might expect some action or attention from me and I might fail them, fall short of what is expected. I still manage the most difficult thing from a standing start - but suddenly I fear the necessity (even the inner, even the happy necessity) of a letter like the steepest of tasks before me: insurmountable. I wonder if everything has to be the way your insight tells you? Probably. This sense we have of experience pre-empted: should one bemoan it, exult in it? I wrote you today a whole poem between the vineyard hills, sitting on a warm (not yet warmed through for good, unfortunately) wall and riveting the lizards in their tracks by intoning it. You see I'm back.

But first masons and other workmen must ply their trade in my old tower. Nowhere

any peace, and cold and wet in this wine country, which used to be sure of its sun.

Now that we have arrived at "not wanting," we deserve some mitigation. Here are my little pictures. Will you "despite everything" send me that other one of yours some time? I don't want to stop looking forward to it.

Rainer

## Elegie für Marina

I.

O Die Verluste ins All, Marina, die stürzenden Sterne!  
Wir vermehren es nicht, wohin wir uns werfen, zu welchem  
Sterne hinzu! Im Ganzen ist immer schon alles gezählt.  
So auch, wer fällt, vermindert die heilige Zahl nicht.  
Jeder verzichtende Sturz stürzt in den Ursprung und heilt.

Wäre denn alles ein Spiel, Wechsel des Gleichen, Verschiebung,  
nirgends ein Name und kaum irgendwo heimisch Gewinn?  
Wellen, Marina, wir Meer! Tiefen, Marina, wir Himmel.  
Erde, Marina, wir Erde, wir tausendmal Frühling, wie Lerchen,  
die ein ausbrechendes Lied in die Unsichtbarkeit werfen.

Wir beginnens als Jubel, schon übertrifft es uns völlig;  
plötzlich, unser Gewicht dreht zur Klage abwärts den Sang.  
Aber auch so: Klage? Wäre sie nicht: jüngerer Jubel nach unten.  
Auch die unteren Götter wollen gelobt sein, Marina.  
So unschuldig sind Götter, sie warten auf Lob wie die Schüler.

Loben, du Liebe, laß uns verschwenden mit Lob.  
Nichts gehört uns. Wir legen ein wenig die Hand um die Häuse  
ungebrochener Blumen. Ich sah es am Nil in Kôm-Ombo.  
So, Marina, die Spende, selber verzichtend, opfern die Könige.  
Wie die Engel gehen und die Türen bezeichnen jener zu Rettenden,

also rühren wir dieses und dies, scheinbar Zärtliche, an.  
Ach wie weit schon Entrückte, ach, wie Zerstreute, Marina,  
auch noch beim innigsten Vorwand. Zeichengeber, sonst nichts.  
Dieses leise Geschäft, wo es der Unsrigen einer  
nicht mehr erträgt und sich zum Zugriff entschließt,

rächt sich und tötet. Denn daß es tödliche Macht hat,  
merkten wir alle an seiner Verhaltung und Zartheit  
und an der seltsamen Kraft, die uns aus Lebenden zu  
Überlebenden macht. Nicht-Sein. Weißt du's, wie oft



trug uns ein blinder Befehl durch den eisigen Vorraum

neuer Geburt . . . Trug: uns? Einen Körper aus Augen  
unter zahllosen Lidern sich weigernd. Trug das in uns  
niedergeworfene Herz eines ganzen Geschlechts. An ein Zugvogelziel  
trug er die Gruppe, das Bild unserer schwebenden Wandlung.

II.

Liebende dürften, Marina, dürften soviel nicht  
von dem Untergang wissen. Müssen wie neu sein.  
Erst ihr Grab ist alt, erst ihr Grab besinnt sich, verdunkelt  
unter dem schluchzenden Baum, besinnt sich auf Jeher.  
Erst ihr Grab bricht ein; sie selber sind biegsam wie Ruten;

was übermäßig sie biegt, ründet sie reichlich zum Kranz.  
Wie sie verwehen im Maiwind! Von der Mitte des Immer,  
drin du atmest und ahnst, schließt sie der Augenblick aus.  
(O wie begreif ich dich, weibliche Blüte am gleichen  
unvergänglichen Strauch. Wie streu ich mich stark in die Nachtluft,

die dich nächstens bestreift.) Früh erlernten die Götter  
Hälften zu heucheln. Wir, in das Kreisen bezogen,  
füllten zum Ganzen uns an wie die Scheibe des Monds.  
Auch in abnehmender Frist, auch in den Wochen der Wendung  
niemand verhülfe uns je wieder zum Vollsein, als der  
einsame eigene Gang über der schlaflosen Landschaft.

*Muzot, 8. Juni 1926*

Elegy for Marina

I.

O those losses to the Universe, Marina, the falling stars!  
We increase it not, where to we throw ourselves, to which  
Star we add! The whole has already all been counted.  
So also, who falls does not decrease the sacred number.  
Each averted fall falls into the origin and heals.

If all were just a game, a variation of the same, a shifting  
nowhere a name and hardly nowhere with practical gain?  
Waves, Marina, we sea! Depths, Marina, we sky.  
Earth, Marina, we earth, we a thousand times Spring, like larks,  
who throw a just emerging a song into the invisible.

We begin as jubilation, while already it has surpassed us ;  
Suddenly, our weight turns the song into a lament.  
But even so: Lament? Were it not a younger jubilation downward.  
Also the lower gods want to be praised, Marina.  
Innocent as the gods are, they are waiting for praise like their adherents

To praise, my love, let us be lavish with praise.  
Nothing belongs to us. We merely wrap our hand around the necks  
of unbroken flowers. I saw it at the Nile at Kom-Ombo.  
This way, Marina, a donation, themselves abstaining, offer the Kings.  
Like the angels go and mark the doors of those to be saved,  
So we touch this and that, seemingly tender one.

Oh, how ecstatic you are already, oh, how distracted, Marina,  
even in the most intimate pretext. A sign-giver, nothing else.  
This quiet pursuit[business], where one of us  
can no longer bear it and resolves to act,

takes its revenge and kills. For, that its power is deadly,  
we all noticed by its restrained manner and its delicacy  
and by the strange force, which changes us living into  
survivors. Non-being. Do you realize, how often  
a blind command carried us through the icy antechamber

of new birth. . . Bore: us? A body of eyes  
refusing under countless eyelids. Bore the in us  
flung-down heart of an entire generation. To a goal of migratory birds  
it bore the group, the mirage of our adrift mutation.

## II.

Those who love, Marina, ought not to know so much  
about perdition. They must be like new.  
Only their grave is old, only when their grave remembers, darkly  
under the sobbing tree, it recalls the past  
Only their grave caves in; they themselves are bendable like switches;

what bends them excessively, rounds them amply into a wreath.  
How they are blown away by the wind in May! From the middle of Time,  
in which you breathe and guess, that the moment excludes them.  
(Oh, how I grasp you, female flower on the same  
immortal shrub. How I disperse myself strongly into the night air

which will touch you soon). Early learned the gods

to feign halves. We, confined to circling,  
filled ourselves to a whole like the disc of the moon.  
Also in a waning time, also in the weeks of changing  
no one would ever again help us to fullness, but the  
own solitary walk across the sleepless landscape

Muzot, June 8, 1926

Marina's reply begins with an apology to Rilke about her "wounded" message to him and a long mortified confession that she had discussed Rilke's letter with Boris. [both omitted here] She feels terrible about this breach of confidence, - this violation of *her* possessive secrecy. She had promised Boris a copy of the Elegy, but never sent it. Boris only saw it in 1959. Boris, in his letter had *morally* upbraided her. She was sufficiently confused that she forgot to inquire after Rilke's illness....

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*  
[PTR p.178-181]

St.-Gilles June 14, 1926

. . . Your elegy, Rainer. All my life I have been giving myself away in poems - to all. To poets, too. But always I gave too much, drowned out the possible response. The response took fright. I had anticipated the entire echo. That's why poets wrote no poems to me (bad ones.-.still none, less than none!) - and I always smiled: they leave it to him who is to come in a hundred years.

And, Rainer, your poem, Rilke's poem, the poet's, poetry's poem. And, Rainer.-.my muteness. Reverse situation. Right situation. Oh, I love you, I can't call it anything else after all, the first word at random and yet the premier word and the best.

Rainer, last night I stepped out once more to take down laundry, for it was going to rain. And took all of the wind - no, all of the north in my arms. And his name was You (tomorrow it will be the south!). I didn't take it home with me, it stayed on the threshold. It didn't go into the house, but it took me along to the sea as soon as I went to sleep.

Signal-givers, no more. And about the lovers, of their being shut in and excluded ("From the center of Always . . .").

"And the long, still roving of the moon" And yet there is no other meaning to it but: I love you.

Marina

P.s. The first dog that you stroke after this letter *is me. Pass auf, was er für Augen macht!* - Watch his eyes.

On June 30 Rilke sent Marina a copy of his just published "*Vergers*" with the inscription

Marina: voici galets et coquillages  
remassés récemment á la française plage  
de mon étrange coeur...  
(J'aimerais que tu connusses  
toutes les étendues de son divers paysage  
dpuis sa côte bleue  
jusqu'á ses plaines russes.)

\*\*\*

Marina: some seashells and flints  
just picked at the French coast  
of my strange heart...  
I wish that you knew  
the whole of its view, which varies  
from its shore of blue  
to its Russian prairies.

R.

End of June 1926  
Muzot

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*  
[PTR p.220-224]

St. Gilles-sur-Vie  
July 6, 1926

Dear Rainer,

Goethe says somewhere that one cannot achieve anything of significance in a foreign language.-.and that has always rung false to me. (Goethe always sounds right in the aggregate, valid only in the summation, which is why I am now doing him an injustice.)

Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. That's why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French; he cannot be a French poet. That's ludicrous.

I am not a Russian poet and am always astonished to be taken for one and looked upon in this light. The reason one becomes a poet (if it were even possible to *become* one, if one *were* not one before all else!) is to avoid being French, Russian, etc., in order to be everything. Or: one is a poet because one is not French. Nationality.-.segregation and enclosure. Orpheus bursts nationality, or he extends it to such breadth and width that everyone (bygone and being) is included. Beautiful German.-.there! And beautiful Russian!

Yet every language has something that belongs to it alone, that is *it*. That is why you sound different in French and in German.-.that's why you wrote in French, after all!

German is deeper than French, fuller, more drawn out, *darker*. French: clock without resonance; German.-.more resonance than clock (chime). German verse is reworked by the reader, once more, always, and infinitely, in the poet's wake; French is there. German *becomes*, French is. Ungrateful language for poets.-.that's, of course, why you wrote in it. Almost impossible language!

German.-.infinite promise (that is a gift, surely!); French.-.gift once and for all. Platen writes French. You (*Vergers*) write German, i.e., your self, the poet. For German surely is closest to the mother tongue. Closer than Russian, I think. Closer still.

Rainer, I recognize you in every line, yet you sound briefer, each line an abridged Rilke, something like an abstract. Every word. Every syllable. *Grand-Mâitre des absences*.-.you did that splendidly. *Grossmeister* would not sound like that!

And "*partance. . . (entre ton trop d'arrivée et ton trop de partance.)*".[*Between your excess of arrival/And your excess of departure*].-.that has come from very far (that's why it goes so far!).-.from Mary Stuart's

*Combien j'ai douce souvenance  
De ce beau pays de Fiance...*

[*How full and sweet my memory runs/Back to the lovely land of France....*]

Do you know these lines of hers:-

*Car mon pis et mon mieux  
Sont les plus déserts lieux.*

[*For my worst and my best/Are more bleak than the rest.*]

(Rainer, what would sound splendid in French is/would be the *Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke!*

*I have copied "Verger" for Boris.*

*Soyons plus vite  
Que le rapide depart*

[*Let us be swifter/ than the express departs.*]

rhymes with my *Тот поезд , на который все опаздывают .*

[*The train on which everybody is late...*]

(about the poet).

And "*pourquoi tant appuyer*" with Mlle. de Lespinasse's: "*Glissez mortels, n'appuyez pas!*" ["*Why lean so hard*" .-. "*Glide, mortals, do not lean!*"]

Do you know what is new in your book? Your smile

(*"Les Anges sont-ils devenus discrets!" - "Mais l'excellente place.-.est un peu trop en face.. ."*). [*The Angels have become discreet!.-. But the excellent place is a bit too full*]

Oh, Rainer, the first page of my letter might as well be completely omitted. Today you are:

*... Et pourtant quel fier moment  
Lorsqu'un instant le vent se déclare  
Pour tel pays: consent à la France -*

[*And yet, what a proud moment/ When of a sudden the wind declares/ For such a land: consents to France*]

If I were French and were writing about your book, "*Consent à la France*" would be the

epigram.

And now - from you to me:

*Parfois elle paraît attendrie  
Qu'on l'écoute si bien, -  
Alois elle montre sa vie  
Et ne dit plus rien." (You, nature!)*

\*\*\*

*[At times she seems fondly aglow  
to be heard so well, -  
then she lets her life show  
and ceases to tell.]*

Still, you are a poet, too, Rainer, and from poets one expects *de l'inédit*. Therefore a big letter [from you], quick, for me alone, or I'm going to make myself out more stupid than I am and be "offended," "lacerated in my finest feelings," etc., whereupon you'll write to me after all (for the sake of peace and quiet! and because you are good!).

May I kiss you? It's no more than embracing, surely, and embracing without kissing is practically impossible, isn't it?

Marina

Rilke felt so lonely at Muzot that he moved to a Hotel in Ragaz, where his friends could visit him. He hid his ailments – still undiagnosed – from everybody and himself. His last letters to Tsvetaeva were written from there.

*Rilke to Tsvetaeva*

[PTR p.247-253]

Hotel Hof-Ragaz, Ragaz (Suisse)

July 28, 1926

You wonderful Marina,

As in your first letter, I admire in each of the ones that have followed your habit of precise seeking and finding, your inde- fatigable journey to what you mean, and, always, your being right. You are right, Marina (isn't that a rare thing with a woman, such a being-in-the-right in the most valid, the most carefree sense?). This having a right not *to* anything, hardly coming *from* anywhere; but from such pure self-sufficiency, out of the fullness and completeness of it all, you are right, and hence have forever a right to the infinite.

Every time I write to you, I'd like to write like you, to speak my self in Marinian, by your equable, and withal so feeling, means. Your utterance, Marina, is like a star's

reflection when it appears in the water, and is disturbed by the water, by the life of the water, by its fluid night; interrupted, canceled, and again admitted, and then deeper in the element, as if already familiar with this mirror world and, after each waning, back again and more deeply immersed! (You great star!)

Do you know of the young Tycho Brahe's- trip home, made at a time when he wasn't really allowed to practice astronomy yet, but was on vacation at an uncle's estate ... and there it turned out that he already knew the sky so exactly, so much by heart (*pense: il savait le par coeur.*) that a simple turning-up of his eye, more resting than searching, bestowed upon him the new star, in the constellation of the Lyre: his first discovery in starry nature. (And is it not, or am I mistaken, this very star, Alpha in Lyre, "*visible de toute la Provence et des terres méditerranées,*" which now seems destined to be named after the poet Mistral) Would that not be enough, by the way, to make us feel close to this era - that this is possible again, the poet flung beneath the stars: *Tu diras à ta fille un jour, en t'arrêtant à Maillane: void "Mistral," comme il est beau ce soir.*' [You'll tell your daughter one day as you stop at Maillane: look, there is "Mistral," how beautiful it is tonight!] At last a "fame" beyond being on a street sign!)

But you, Marina, I did not find by my free-ranging eye; Boris placed the telescope in front of my sky for me.... First, spaces rushed past my up-gazing eye and then, suddenly, you stood there in the middle of the field, pure and strong, where the rays of your first letter gathered you up for me.

The most recent of your letters has now been with me since July 9: how often I meant to write! But my life is so curiously heavy in me that I often cannot stir it from its place; gravity seems to be forming a new relationship to it - not since childhood have I been in such an immovable state of soul; but back then, the world was under the pull of gravity and would press on one who himself was like a wing wrenched off somewhere, from which feather upon little feather escaped into limbo; now I myself am that mass, and the world is like a sleep all around me, and summer is so curiously absent-minded, as though it was not thinking of its own affairs....

As you see, I am again away from Muzot: to see, here at Ragaz, my oldest friends and the only ones whom I considered still linked to me from Austrian times (how much longer? for their age overtakes me by a great span...). And with them came, unexpectedly, a Russian woman friend of theirs; a Russian - think how this struck home with me! Now they are all gone, but I'm staying on a little for the sake of the beautiful aquamarine-clear medicinal springs. And you?

Rainer

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.250-253]

St.-Gilles-sur-Vie

August 2, 1926

Rainer, I received your letter on my name day, July 17/30, for I have a patron saint, if

you please, although I consider myself the first person to bear my name, as I considered you the first holder of yours. The saint whose name was Rainer had a different name, I'm sure. You are Rainer. So, on my name day the loveliest gift - your letter. Quite unexpected, as it is each time; I shall never get used to you (or to myself!), or to the marveling, or to my own thinking of you. You are what I'm going to dream about tonight, what will dream *me* tonight. (Dreaming or being dreamed?) A stranger, I, in someone else's dream. I never await you; I always awake you.

When somebody dreams of us together - that is when we shall meet.

Rainer, another reason I want to come to you is the new I, the one who can arise only with you, in you. And then, Rainer ("Rainer" - the leitmotif of this letter) - don't be cross with me - it is I talking - I want to sleep with you, fall asleep and sleep. That magnificent folk word, how deep, how true, how unequivocal, how exactly what it says. Just - sleep. And nothing more. No, one more thing: my head buried in your left shoulder, my arm around your right one - and that's all. No, another thing: and know right into the deepest sleep that it is you. And more: how your heart sounds. And - kiss your heart.

Sometimes I think: I must exploit the chance that I am still (after all!) body. Soon I'll have no more arms. And more - it sounds like confession (what is confession? to boast of one's blackness! Who could speak of his sufferings without feeling inspired, which is to say happy?!) - so, to keep it from sounding like a confession: bodies are bored with me. They sense something and don't believe me (i.e., my body), although I do everything like everybody else. Too ... altruistic, possibly, too ... benevolent. Also trusting - too *much* so! Aliens are trusting, savages, who know of no custom or law. People from *here* do not trust! All this does not belong with love; love hears and feels only itself, very local and punctual - *that* I cannot imitate. And the great compassion, who knows whence, infinite goodness and - falsehood.

I feel older and older. Too serious - the children's game is not serious enough.

The mouth I have always felt as world: vaulted firmament, cave, ravine, shoal. [Untiefe]. I have always translated the body into the soul (*dis*-bodied it!), have so gloried "physical" love - in order to be able to like it - that suddenly nothing was left of it. Engrossing myself in it, hollowed it out. Penetrating into it, ousted it. Nothing remained of it but myself: Soul (that is my name, which is why I marvel: name day!).

Love hates poets. He does not wish to be glorified ("himself glorious enough"); he believes himself an absolute, sole absolute. He doesn't trust us. In his heart of hearts he knows that he is not lordly (which is why he lords it so!); he knows that all lordliness is soul, and where soul begins, the body ends. Jealousy, Rainer, purest. The same thing as soul feels for body. But I am always jealous of the body: so much celebrated! The little episode of Francesca and Paolo - poor Dante! - who still thinks of Dante and Beatrice? I am jealous of the *human* comedy. Soul is never loved so much as body; at most it is praised. With a thousand souls they love the body. Who has ever courted damnation for the sake of a soul? And even if someone wanted to - impossible! To love a soul unto damnation means being an angel. Of all of hell we are cheated! (... *Trop pure - provoque un vent de d dain!* ) Why do I tell you all this? From fear, perhaps - you might take me for generally passionate (passion - bondage). "I love you and want to sleep with you" - friendship is begrudged by this sort of brevity. But I say it in a different voice, almost



asleep, fast asleep. I sound quite different from passion. If you took me to you, you would take to you *les plus deserts lieux*. Everything that *never* sleeps would like to sleep its fill in your arms. Right down into the soul (throat) - that's what the kiss would be like. (Not firebrand: shoal.)

*Je ne plaide pas ma cause, je plaide la cause du plus absolu des baisers." [I am not pleading for myself, I am pleading on behalf of the most absolute of kisses.]*

You are always traveling, you don't live anywhere, and you encounter Russians who are not me. Listen, so you'll know: In Rainerland I alone represent Russia. Rainer, what are you, actually? Not a German, although all German! Not a Czech, although born in Bohemia ( - born in a country that wasn't there yet - that is fitting); not an Austrian, for Austria *has been* and you *are becoming*'. Isn't that splendid? You - without country! "*Le grand poète tchécoslovaque*," as they said in the Parisian journals. Rainer, perhaps you'll turn out to be a "Slovaque"? This makes me laugh!

Rainer, dusk is falling, I love you. A train is howling. Trains are wolves, wolves are Russia. No train - all Russia is howling for you. Rainer, don't be angry with me; angry or not, tonight I'm sleeping with you. A rift in the darkness; because it is stars I deduce: window. (The window is what I think of when I think of you and me, not the bed.) Eyes wide open, for outside it is still blacker than inside. My bed is a ship; we are going traveling.

*... mais un jour on ne le vit plus.  
Le petit navire sans voiles,  
Lassé des océans maudits,  
Voguant au pays des étoiles -  
Avait gagné le paradis"*

\*\*\*

*[.. but one day it was seen no more.  
The little ship without sails.  
Tired of oceans accursed,  
Bobbing in the land of the stars -  
Had come into Paradise.  
(Children's folk song from Lausanne.)*

You don't have to answer - go on kissing.  
M.

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*  
[PTR p.253-255]

St. Gilles  
August 14, 1926  
Dear friend,

I wonder if you received my last letter. I'm asking you because I threw it into a

departing train. The mailbox looked sinister enough: dust three fingers thick and sporting a huge prison lock. My toss was already completed when I noticed this, my hand was too fast; the letter will lie there, I suppose - until doomsday.

Approximately ten days ago. Contents? Letter *is* content, therefore *hasn't* any, but, not to be too pedantic: something about sleeping, yours and mine (*et le lit - table evanouie..* , [*And the bed - a vanished table* (Rilke)]. A bed - in order to see miracles, to divine things; a table - in order to do them, to bring them about. Bed: back; table: elbow. Man is bed and table, therefore doesn't need to *have* any.

(The other letter sounded quite different, and the train that... carries and buries it howled and whistled differently from a passenger train; if I could hear it, I would know at once whether the letter was still inside.) Rainer, write me a postcard, just two words: train letter received - or not received. Then I'll write you a long letter...

Rainer, this winter we must get together, somewhere in French Savoie, close to Switzerland, somewhere you have never been. (Or is there such a never? Doubt it.) In a tiny little town, Rainer. For as long as you like; for as briefly as you like. I write this quite simply because I know that you will not only love me very much but also take great joy in me. (Joy - attractive to you, too.)

Or in the autumn, Rainer. Or early next year. Say yes, so I may have great joy from this day on, something to scan the future for (looking back to?). (Past is still ahead...) Because it is very late and I am very tired, I embrace you.

Marina

*Rilke to Tsvetaeva*

[PTR p.255-256]

Hotel Hof-Ragaz, Ragaz, Suisse

August 19, 1926

The train, Marina, this train (with your last letter) of which you conceived a belated mistrust, steamed off breathlessly in my direction; the sinister mailbox was old, as camels and crocodiles are old, sheltered from its youth by being old: most dependable quality. Yes and yes and yes, Marina, all yeses to what you want and are, together as large as YES to life itself...: but contained in the latter there are, after all, all those ten thousand noes, the unforeseeable ones.

If I am less sure of its being vouchsafed to us to be like two layers, two strata, densely delicate, two halves of a nest - how much I would like to recall now the Russian for nest (forgotten)! - of the sleep nest, on which a great bird, a raptor of the spirit (no blinking!), settles... if I am less sure (than you)... (is it due to the oddly persistent affliction I am going through and often feel hardly likely to get over, so that I now expect the things to come to be not themselves but a precise and specific aid, an assistance made to measure?)... for all that, I am no less (no: all the more) in need of for once restoring, up-hauling myself in just this way out of the depths, out of the well of wells. But fear in between of the many days until then, with their repetitions; fear (suddenly) of the contingencies, which know nothing of this and cannot be informed.... Not into the

winter!...

"You don't need to answer" is how you closed your letter. *Could* not answer, perhaps: for who knows, Marina, didn't my answering come to pass *before* your asking? In Val-Mont that time I looked for it on the maps - *celle petite ville en Savoye*" - and now you pronounce it! Move it out of time, take it for granted, as if it had already been. I thought as I was reading you - and right then there it was, your writing in the right margin - "Past is still ahead...." (Magical line, but in so anxious a context.)

Now forget, dear one, blindly trusting, what was asked and answered there; place it (whatever it may be allowed to become) under the protection, under the power of the joy you bring, which I need, which I may bring if you start off the bringing (which has already been done).

That Boris is keeping silent concerns and distresses me; so it actually was my advent, after all, that came to lodge itself athwart the great current of his outpouring to you? And although I understand what you say of the two "Abroads" (which preclude each other), I still find you stern, almost harsh toward him (and stern toward me, if you like, in that Russia must never and nowhere exist for me except through you!). Rebellious against any exclusion (which grows out of the love root and hardens into wood): do you recognize me like this, like this, too?

Rainer

In October Rilke had engaged a young university graduate as secretary, Yevgenia Chernosvitova, to read to him the memoirs of Sergey Volkonsky in Russian, and to handle his correspondence. She eventually wrote the overdue letters to Leonid and Boris to answer their mail from months ago and release the tensions between Marina and Boris - the thoughtful Rilke.

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*

[PTR p.257-259]

St. Gilles

August 22, 1926

Rainer, just always say yes to all that I ask for - it won't turn out so badly, after all. Rainer, if I say to you that I am your Russia, I'm only saying (one more time) that I care for you. Love lives on exceptions, segregations, exclusiveness. Love lives on words and dies of deeds. Too intelligent, I, really to try to be Russia for you! A manner of speaking. A manner of loving.

Rainer, my name has changed: all that you are, all that is you. (To *be is to be lived. Etre vecu. Chose vecue. Passive.*) Do you imagine that I believe in Savoy? Oh, yes, like yourself, as in the kingdom of heaven. Some time... (how? when?). What have I seen of life? Throughout my youth (from 1917 on) - black toil. Moscow? Prague? Paris? St.-Gilles? Same thing. Always stove, broom, money (none). Never any time. No woman among your acquaintances and friends lives like that, would be capable of living so. Not to sweep any more - of that is my kingdom of heaven. Plain enough? Yes, because my soil is poor

enough! (Rainer, when I wrote in German "*fegeii - Fegefeuer - that* magnificen word - sweeping here, purgatory there, swept right into the middle of purgatory, etc., *that's* how I write, from the word to the thing, recreating the words poetically. This is how you write, I think.)

So, dear one, don't be afraid, simply answer yes to every "Give" - a beggar's comfort, innocent, without consequences. Most of the time my begging hand drops away - along with the gift - into the sand. What do I want from you? What I want from all of poetry and from each line of a poem: the truth of this moment. That's as far as truth goes. Never turns to wood - always to ashes. The word, which for me already is the thing, is all I want. Actions? Consequences? I know you, Rainer, as I know myself. The farther from me - the further *into* me. I live not in myself, but outside myself. I do not live in my lips, and he who kisses me misses *me*.

Savoie. (Pause for thought.) Train. Ticket. Place to stay. (Praise God, no visa!) And... faint distaste. Something prepared, won in battle ... begged for. I want you to fall from heaven. Rainer, quite seriously: if you want to see me, with your eyes, you must act - "In two weeks I'll be at such-and-such a place. Are you coming?" This must come from you. Like the date. Like the town. Look at the map. Perhaps it must be a large town? Give it some thought. Little towns are sometimes misleading. Oh, yes, one more thing: I haven't any money; the little I earn by my work (because of my "newness" printed only in the "newer" monthlies, of which in the emigration there are only two) - vanishes as soon as it is received. I wonder if you'll have enough for both of us. Rainer, as I write this I have to laugh: a strange sort of guest!

Well, then, dear one, when at some point you really want to, you write to me (a little beforehand, for I have to find somebody to stay with the children) - and I'll come. I am staying at St.-Gilles until October 1-15. Then to Paris, where I start from scratch: no money, no apartment, nothing. I'm not going back to Prague, the Czechs are angry with me for having written so much and so ardently about Germany and having been so firmly silent about Bohemia. And after all, having been subsidized by the Czechs for three and a half years (900 kronen monthly). So, some time between October 1 and 15, to Paris. We won't get together before November. But surely, it could also be somewhere in the South? (Meaning France.) Where, how, and when (from November on) you like. Placed into your hands. You can, after all... part them. I shall never love you more or less in any case.

I am looking forward to you *terribly*, as to a whole *totally* new realm.

About Boris. No, I was in the right. His answer was that of an Atlas liberated. (He, remember, carried a heaven with all its inhabitants! And, rid of this burden, he, too, sighed, it seems to me.) Now he is rid of me. Too good-natured, too compassionate, too patient. The blow had to come from me (nobody likes to terminate, to kill!). He already knew about the two Abroads. All I did was speak up, name things, break the spell. Now everything is all right, the realms separated: I in the innermost self - outermost foreign place - quite out of the world.

How much longer are you staying in Ragaz and how do you feel? What is the last thing you've written?

I take you in my arms.

M.

This letter became the last in their correspondence which had begun in such high expectations. Rilke never answered. Had he become tired of Marina, or was it because his illness had turned worse?

On November 7, 1926 Marina wrote a picture postcard to Rilke from Bellevue, Seine et Oise: "Here is where I live. - I wonder if you still love me?"

A week later his physicians came up with a devastating diagnosis - leukemia... There was no cure. Rilke moved into a hotel in Sierre near Muzot, and there he died on December 29, 1926.

Marina heard of Rilke's death at a New Year's party. Shattered she revoked her ban against Boris and wrote him a letter that very night:

"Boris, Rainer Maria Rilke has died. I don't know the date - three days ago...". She enclosed a copy of a Russian letter to Rilke from her notebook

*Tsvetaeva to Rilke*  
[PTR p.267-268]

Bellevue  
December 31, 1926-February 8, 1927.

The year ended in your death? The end? The beginning! You yourself are the New Year. (Beloved, I know you are reading this before I write it.) I am crying, Rainer, you are streaming from my eyes!

Dear one, now that you are dead there is no death (or no life!). What can I say? That little town in Savoy - when? where? Rainer, what about that "nest" to keep our dreams in? Now Russian is an open book to you, so you know that the Russian word for "nest" is *gnezdo*. And you know so many other things.

I don't want to reread your letter or I will want to join you - there - and I dare not wish for such a thing. You know what such a wish implies.

Rainer, I am always conscious of your presence at my shoulder.

Did you ever think of me? Yes, of course you did.

Tomorrow is New Year's Day, Rainer. 1927. Seven is your favorite number. You were born in 1875 (newspaper date?). Fifty-one years old?

How disconsolate I am!

Don't dare to grieve! At midnight tonight I will drink with you (you know how I clink glasses - ever so lightly!).

Beloved, come to me often in my dreams. No, not that. Live in my dreams. Now you have a right to wish and to fulfill your wishes.

You and I never believed in our meeting here on earth, any more than we believed in life on this earth, isn't that so? You - have gone before me (and that is better!), and to

receive me well you have taken not a room, not a house, but a whole landscape. I kiss you... on the lips? on the temple? on the forehead? Of course on the lips, for real, as if alive.

Beloved, love me more and differently from others. Don't be angry with me. You must grow accustomed to me, to such a one as I am. What else?

No, you are not yet far away and high above, you are right here, with your head on my shoulder. You will never be far away: never inaccessibly high.

You are my darling grown-up boy.

Rainer, write to me! (A foolish request?)

Happy New Year and may you enjoy the heavenly landscape!

Marina

Rainer, you are still on this earth; twenty-four hours have not yet passed.

# France

1925 – 1939

## The Lure of the Motherland

1927 – 1939

Sickly and unemployed Sergey Efron idled around town. He was never able to hold down a gainful job. Money simply didn't interest him. For a while he continued acting as an editor for a Prague émigré journal. In 1930 he earned himself a certificate as camera man in film making. Tsvetaeva was proud of him, but nothing came of it. Towards the end of 1930 he took a job as a physical laborer, but soon lost that too. Marina rarely mentions Sergey's misfortunes, and somehow he seems to have been completely indifferent to their poverty.



Sergey, Paris, 1930s  
Photo dommuseum.ru

It comes as no surprise then that Sergey became attracted to various expatriate

organizations: new friends, long political discussions, the lure of the New Russia. The most important one was the *Eurasian Movement*. The Eurasians rejected Communism but not the Revolution itself. Their Messianic vision was that an "Eurasian Russia" would overcome both. When the movement split towards the end of the twenties, Sergey joined the "left", pro-Soviet wing. For a year Sergey was the editor of their journal *Eurasia*. Marina was not unsympathetic to the movement and was friends with several of its members. The summer of 1930 they spent at a camp of the Eurasians in the Savoie. At home they had unending, often bitter arguments about a return to the Motherland. Everyone was for it except Marina.

The Soviet Union had a large number of enthusiastic admirers among the idealistic, left-wing European intellectuals, especially in France. Marina describes the ecstatic report of André Malraux from a visit to Stalin's Moscow. In this intellectual climate the idea of returning to the Motherland had much popular support among the Russian expatriats, and the NKVD took advantage of that. They seem to have infiltrated the left wing of the *Eurasians* as early as 1930. In their Savoie summer camps they supported political re-education classes. Many Russians left France during the following six years. Those who knew too much were imprisoned or shot on arrival in Odessa.



Alya, Paris 1935  
Photo dommuseum.ru





Mur and Marina, 1936  
Photo dommuseum.ru

Alya had grown up into an accomplished graphic artist. Marina spared no money on her education. Salomeya Andronikova found her a job. In opposition to her mother Alya drifted more and more towards Sergey's views. In November 1934 Alya (22) and Marina had a fierce argument. Marina finally slapped Alya for a particularly contemptuous outburst. Sergey in a furious rage, took Alya's side. [VS p.320-21]. After this Alya left their apartment. She would be the first who put her pro-Soviet convictions into practice.

Little is known for certain of Sergey's being recruited by the NKVD. He did not confide into Marina, who knew, as a matter of course, of his increasing radical fanaticism. Viktoria Schweitzer describes an interview with the daughter of the Bogengardts' [VS p.328]. She told her of a secretive meeting between Sergey and her father in 1935, in which Sergey confessed his collaboration – Bogengardt never saw him again. Unsubstantiated rumors in Russia [VB] accuse Sergey of having actively participated in recruiting for the NKVD and the Spanish civil war.

Marina bore the role of being the sole provider of her family. During 1927-1938 she rented one dismal, cheap apartment after the other in the Meudon area outside of Paris. So it was a true disaster when the Czech government notified her in 1929 that her stipend would end, unless she returned to Prague. After protracted negotiations, friends in Prague persuaded the authorities to continue paying her 500 kronen per month, half of the original stipend.[VS p.286]

Once or twice a month she would give poetry readings, her own and those of other contemporary Russian writers. These readings were sometimes arranged by friends. The most generous among them was Salomeya Andronikova, a member of an old Georgian noble family, who from 1926 to 1935 sent Tsvetaeva a monthly sum of 300 ffr from her own pocket and occasionally another 300 ffr that she collected from friends. To put this sum into perspective, the rent for their apartment was around 100 ffr. Marina had no compunction to beg for money. From a note to Salomeya we learn that she asked her to send an extra 80 ffr for a pair of solid shoes.[VS p.317]. Salomeya denied her nothing. She gave her clothes and furniture, and helped to find a publisher for Marina's only book to appear in France.

From 1923 to 1939 Marina had one close personal friend in Anna Tesková in Prague. She shared all her tribulations and small successes with Anna in uncounted letters, the largest source for her difficult 14 years in France. These letters affected me very much. They are of no interest here, but I went through similar experiences between 1945 and 1951 as the oldest of four siblings in Germany, although mother was more down to earth and did not write poetry. A horrible time, unimaginable if one has not gone through years of hunger, cramped quarters, an emotionally paralyzed father, and utter poverty.

To keep herself alive Marina still managed to write, mostly at night. A list of her poems and prose writings from these years can be found under Sources and References. After the large Prague *Poema* she wrote predominantly prose. She published her poems of 1922-1925 in book form, *After Russia*, (1927) with Salomeya Andronikova's financial help. Even the small edition of 500 copies that were printed of the book did not sell. During 1932 – 1939 she wrote four poem cycles: *Poems to a Son* (1932), *Poems to an Orphan* (1936), *Desk* (1937), and *Poems to the Czechs* (1938/39) and a few single poems. She complains many times to Teskova that taking care of her daily family chores did not leave her enough room to jot down the lines that passed her mind. Besides nobody wanted to print her poems – the book had shown that they were unsaleable.

The first two cycles circle around Russia: the burning question of “to return or not to return.” When she wrote “*Poems to a Son*”, Mur was seven, even in Marina's eyes an unruly, rebellious child. He was too young to understand Marina's agonies. The poem must, therefore, have been directed equally at her other, grown-up “boy”, Sergey, who had spent eight months during 1931 in a Red-Cross sanatorium in the Haut Savoie, because of his tuberculosis.

## Poems to a Son

### 2.

Our conscience – Is not your conscience!  
Enough! - Be free! - Forget all,  
Children, to write your own tale  
Of your own days and passions .

Here lies the salt of Lot -

In your family album!  
Children! You have to settle yourselves  
the many claims of Sodom's -

Destruction. You didn't fight your brother's  
Cause, my curly headed boy!  
This is your land, your age, your day , your time,  
Our sin, our cross, our quarrels

Rage . Orphans' in napkins  
Dressed in rags -  
Drop them and awake  
In an Eden, where you

Have never been! To fruit - and a view  
You have never seen! Understand they are blind  
Who lead you to this funeral  
Of a nation who eats bread

And you will be given- as soon as  
You leave Medon - for the Kuban.  
Our quarrel s- not your quarrels!  
Children! Prepare yourselves for the troubles

Of your own days.

January 1932

“Everybody in the family pressures me to return to Russia,” Marina wrote to Anna Teskova, “I cannot go.” A few months later Sergey must have made up his mind. He applied for a Soviet passport. His application was rejected. He had to “earn” it first. Marina never mentioned any of this to Teskova; she may not have known of Sergey's involvement with the NKVD, besides mentioning it would have been dangerous.

For a while Marina translated Russian poetry into French, her own and Pushkin, in the desperate hope of earning some money. After weeks of laboring she admitted to Teskova that her efforts were dissatisfying, especially her work on her own poems. Then she tried to write poetry directly in French. A few of those have survived: “Florentine Nights”, “Letter to an Amazon,” “Miracle with Horses,” (all 1932). In a letter to Rilke (July 26, 1926) she had characterized the three languages at her disposal: “...French *is*, an ungrateful language for poets...”. Her French poems are dry, cold, - in short “soulless”.

How much she longed for the love of a kindred man who could follow her poetic flights! Pasternak was too distracted by his disintegrating marriage and moreover was terrified of the authorities. Their correspondence never rekindled. And then came the “catastroph”: Boris divorced his wife (1931) and fell in love with a woman friend of theirs who was already married. Marina was indignant and irate. “Zhenya (his wife) was there before me, but to love another – no way! Boris is incapable of loving. For him love – is suffering. I am not jealous. I no longer feel any acute pain – only emptiness.” She writes to Anna Teskova.

In June 1935 Pasternak was obliged by Stalin to attend the "International Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture" - ten days in Paris! Marina seems to have avoided him, and he ran scared of the political watchdog who headed the Soviet delegation. Rumors have it that he "saw" her in a corridor of his hotel. He is supposed to have whispered: "Marina, don't return to Russia, it's cold there, there's a constant draught." - Marina wrote Anna, "It was a non-meeting..." - and left for the sea-shore with a sick Mur (he had had his appendix removed).

Her *Tocka*, nostalgia, homesickness for the Motherland was different from Alya's and Sergey's. She had few illusions. The Russia she loved and longed for was gone, the house on Tryokhprudny Lane had been razed and replaced by a shoddy apartment building. The people she loved had left, were alienated, or dead. She carried her Russia in her soul. For her there was nothing to be found in the new "Rodina". In 1934 she wrote a poem that expressed her loss:

### Homesick for the Motherland.

Homesickness! Long  
Unmasked confusion !  
I do not care -  
*Where* I am completely lonely

Or over what stones I wander home  
With a shopping bag  
To a house, that is no longer mine  
Like to a hospital or barracks .

I do not care that I am among  
Bristling people - captive  
Lion, or what human society  
Will cast me out - as it must -

Into myself, my individual feelings.  
A Kamchatka bear without ice  
*Where* I do no fit ( and no goodbye!)  
*Where* they grovel - I am one.

I will not be seduced by the language,  
The mother tongue's milky call.  
I do not care - in what language  
I am humiliated!

(Or by what readers , newspaper  
Swallowers, searching for gossip ...)  
They belong to the twentieth century -  
I am - before all time!

Stunned, like a log,  
Left over from an alley of trees.

People are all the same to me,  
And I could be just equal to -

The former native - only .  
All my signs, all meanings,  
All dates - are gone:  
My soul , who was born - somewhere .

For my country has taken so little care of me,  
That even my keenest eye  
Along with all my soul, all - have been alienated!  
That even my birthmark *cannot* be discerned!

Every house is alien to me , every church is empty,  
Everything and all - is the same.  
But if along the road - a bush  
Rises, particularly - a rowanberry...

May 3, 1934

A year later she expressed her aversion even more vehemently:

I never revenged and never will avenge myself-  
One is not forgiven nor forgives  
From the day I opened my eyes - till the coffin of oak  
I will not lower myself - and God knows  
Not overlook the great decline of this century ...  
- But if a man is worthy? ...  
- No. I never fight in vain: not with anyone.  
One is not forgiven: anything.

January 26, 1935

In the hope that prose would be more acceptable and bring in better money, she wrote a number of articles. Some of her pieces were printed in various journals. But the life span of the journals was ususally short, and often enough her honorarium vanished with their demise. Her prose pieces are peculiar: sharply voiced opinions, mostly unpopular ones, alternate with lyrical evocations of an equally personal quality. They invariably made her more enemies in émigré circles than friends. A list linked to the originals is found in my Sources and References.

Alya, encouraged by her fanatic father, became determined to return to the USSR. "What can they do to me? I am innocent. Your dark tales are only anti-Soviet propaganda." Recalcitrant as she was, with her 25 years she needed to assert herself and break free of her unyielding mother. She had no problem in obtaining a Soviet passport,

they needed people like her. She left in March 1937, seen off by a cheerful group of friends and well-wishers. Only Marina was full of dark premonitions.



Sergey Efron, 1937



Sergey and Alya, 1935

Photos dommuseum.ru

The following twenty-four months of 1937-1939 are a blur, a single catastrophe. Marina's letters and notes give no indication of what happened between her and Sergey. All evidence is based on unsubstantiated hearsay and rumors. Viktoria Schweitzer [VS p.337] tried to reconstruct that period. She doubts that Marina knew anything, but feels certain that in the very end Sergey and she talked.

On September 4, 1937 Ignaty Reyss, a Soviet agent who refused return to the USSR, was murdered in Switzerland. Efron was accused by the Swiss and French police to have been instrumental in shadowing Reyss. It later emerged that he had also been involved in tracking down Trotsky's son, L. Sedov. Efron was interrogated by the French police. After the first interrogation Efron disappeared. Apparently he was spirited by the NKVD to the USSR. He had no choice, they held Alya as a hostage.

A bizarre account of the details of his disappearance appeared in the Parisian emigrant newspaper *Renaissance* on October 29, 1937 [Sergey disappeared on 29 September 1937]. According to this article Marina and Mur were in the Russian embassy car with Sergey that was taking them to Le Havre. Near Rouen Sergey jumped from the car and fled. The Russian agents must have caught him quickly. He did not return. [VS p.337] - The immediate result of this was that everyone avoided contact with Marina.

A few weeks later Marina was interrogated by the French police. She is supposed to have told them, "Efron's trust may have been abused. My trust in him remains unchanged." She read them translations of her prose writings to show her innocence. Apparently she convinced the police that she knew nothing. Marina was cleared and let

go.

But there was, of course, no chance that she and Mur could remain in France. The question of her return to the motherland had been decided for her. She was a possibly dangerous witness. Two members of her family were practically under house arrest in the USSR. The NKVD, barely veiled, pressured her to return and even gave her a small allowance during the summer. After Sergey's disappearance she and Mur lived in the small Hotel Inova in Paris. She dedicated her last poem cycle, *Poems to the Czechs*, Стихи к Чехии (1938-39), to the sufferings of Bohemia before and during the German invasion in March 1939. Hurriedly she distributed her manuscripts among friends in France and Switzerland. She visited and arranged for the up-keep of the graves of the Efrons in Paris, Sergey's parents and brother.

Their final departure was delayed for three days. The Soviet embassy needed to make sure nobody interfered or saw her off. She wrote a last letter to Anna Teskova standing on the train to Le Havre. They left Le Havre on June 12, 1939

A last stanza from her *Poems to an Orphan* - Стихи о сироте

7.

Thinking of something else, undiscovered,  
like a buried treasure, - absentmindedly  
One by one, poppy by poppy  
I beheaded my whole garden.

So, someday, in the dry  
Summer, on the edge of a field,  
Death's absent-minded hand  
Will pluck off a head - mine.

September 5-6, 1936

# The End

## An Alien in the USSR

1939 – 1941

When they reached Moscow on June 18, 1939, Marina and Murg were put-up in a big, rundown dacha in the suburb of Bolshevo, where Alya and Sergey were already staying practically under house arrest. The place was rented, if not by the NKVD, then by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. They shared the house with the family of another Soviet agent, who had recently returned. Marina was short-tempered and tensions were high. Efron was being paid a small sum by the NKVD but had no work. Marina and Murg had still no Soviet documents, all three were entirely helpless. Alya had a job, friends, and a lover in Moscow, she rarely came home, and when she did displayed a false gaiety, which her mother quickly unmasked. Their relationship was at best frosty. [VS p.350]

Eventually, Marina was allowed to visit their relatives, her former friends avoided all contact. - Except for Boris Pasternak, who had the courage to briefly meet Marina clandestinely at Elizaveta Efron's place. Marina finally understood what it meant to live in constant terror of the authorities, and with her usual exaggerated sensitivity refrained from pressing herself on anyone.

The respite in Bolshevo lasted until August 28, 1939 when first Alya was suddenly arrested, and on October 10, 1939 Sergey and the other NKVD agent. Marina and Mur were ordered to leave the dacha. Elizaveta Efron put them up in her single room. Marina had become an official non-person, without papers and without a place to stay. It was at this point that Pasternak came to her aid. He put her in contact with Viktor Goltsev a writer and translator, who gave her some translation work. With this job eventually came an internal identification card and a residence permit She was told to move to Golitsyno, an hour-and-a-half west of Moscow (December 1939). She and Mur had to find their own room in the village, but were allowed to eat with other writers at the local "House of Creativity".

Marina was paid the usual rate of 4 rb [rubels] per line, but worked so conscientiously slowly that in the spring of 1940 she earned a mere 770 rb per month. The meals at the House of Creativity cost 830 rb, the lodging 250 rb per month [from her notebooks, and VS p.362]. In April she saw herself forced to buy only one meal coupon - the lion share went to Mur. She went back to her 1919-practice of begging for and occasionally stealing a piece of bread from the tables of friends she visited.





Marina Tsvetaeva, Golitsyno 1939

No intellectual imagination could have prepared Marina of what life in the USSR would be like for her. She blamed Alya for presenting a rosy picture, but what else could Alya have written? Everybody was scared of the authorities. Marina simply could not imagine the terror that reigned there. As she left for the USSR, she had abandoned all hope of writing poetry again. She was much too proud to stoop to the level of the established writers. Now she realized that she was not even tempted to write. The terminology in use had changed so much that the spoken Russian was no longer the same. But worse was the fact that old and new friends avoided her. She was lonelier than ever before – an alien in her own country.

It was not only that she had officially become “an enemy fo the people”, the wife of two political prisoners, her whole appearance was alien. Paranoia among the ordinary citizen in Moscow was still abnormally high in the 1980s, and much higher then, viz., Mikhail Bulgakov's first chapter in “Master and Margarita” where the devil in the guise of Woland undermines the sense of reality of righteous Berlioz. Who was this foreigner Marina in her outlandish clothes, with a Parisian handbag and a collection of silver bangles and rings on her arms and hands? And she, like Woland, spoke a fluent if antiquated Russian! All of this was made more suspicious by her erect hauteur, by her sharp tongue. Poor nearsighted Marina still wore no glasses and couldn't tell whom she was talking to or remember their faces. The writers in the House of Creativity fell silent, when she entered at dinner time.

Alya and Sergey were kept imprisoned in Moscow. Marina spent endless hours waiting in line to bring clothes and food for her two family members. At least she knew that they were still alive. Early in 1940 Alya was sentenced by a special commission to ten years of hard labor – for espionage! Efron was sentenced by a military court and disappeared. On her next routine visit to his prison, Marina was told that he was no longer there, and that she should write to Beria personally for permission to visit Sergey. Her two letters to Beria are preserved, touching examples of her naïve belief in Beria's humanitarian generosity. Marina would never see Sergey or Alya again, but she was able to send letters to Alya until her evacuation to Elabuga. – Beria, of course, never answered her appeal for Sergey – In those days, Sergey's complete disappearance from the records of the prison system was equivalent to him having been sentenced to death. Sergey was shot, apparently in 1941. It is not clear when or where. As I see it, this knowledge was probably the major reason for Marina's suicide.

She had returned to Russia, to be near and care for her family members. That long-standing promise to herself had come to an end. She was no longer needed by anyone. There was only Mur. She had been able to find a school for him, but she felt that she increasingly stood in his way of becoming a Soviet citizen. She was in a terrible state of depression. Her life-long thought of committing suicide grew more urgent by the month.

At this point Germany invaded Russia, - *her* Germany! It was a terrible blow to her dearest childhood values. She had already suffered for the Czechs, now Russia seemed to collapse at an alarming speed to the German onslaught. The invasion had an immediate effect: On August 17, 1941 she and Murg were evacuated from Moscow to Elabuga, a remote town on the river Kama in the Tatarstan Republic. She wrote three last letters recommending Mur to the care of various people. – Two weeks after her arrival in Elabuga she hanged herself on August 31, 1941.



Last photograph of Marina Tsveteava  
Moscow-Kuntsevo, June 18, 1941

The idea of suicide is disturbing to people. Not surprisingly her suicide has generated various explanations for its ultimate reasons. Immediately after her arrival in Elabuga Marina wrote a letter to the Writers Union requesting employment as a translator. And on August 26 she wrote a brief note to the Council of the Literary Fund in Chistopol, the seat of the administration of the region, asking to be employed as a dishwasher. But as Viktoria Schweitzer writes, "Tsvetaeva had no wish to translate or wash dishes, she was determined to do away with herself." Schweitzer gives an account of her last months [VS p.374-378]. It is based on personal interviews and a wealth of information, which I do not feel entitled to reproduce here.

In 1943 Boris Pasternak wrote a belated requiem for his friend

### In Memoriam of Marina Tsvetaeva

A gloomy day with bad weather.  
Inconsolably rivulets run  
Down the porch in front of the doorway  
And through my open windows.

Behind the fence along the road  
The public gardens are flooded.  
Like wild beasts the clouds,  
Sprawl in shaggy disarray.

In such rainy weather I dream of a book  
On the beauty of the land.  
I draw a forest of chimeras  
For you on the title page.

Oh, Marina, your fate took a long time,  
And my labor is long overdue.  
Your abandoned ashes should be moved  
From Elabuga by a requiem written for you.

All your triumph of your homecoming  
I considered last year  
Near a snow-covered stretch of the river,  
Where boats winter locked in ice.

What can I do to please you?  
Give anything in exchange for news.  
For the silence of your going  
Has left my reproach unexpressed.

A loss is always mysterious.  
In vain am I looking for clues  
I torment my brain with no result:  
Death has no form.

Everything - hints and shadows,  
Slips of the tongue and self-deceptions,  
And only faith in resurrection  
Can give the semblance of a sign.

Winter – like a lavish funeral:  
Outside my house  
Adds currants to the dusk,  
Pours wine – and there is a cake.

Outside an apple tree stands in a snow drift.  
And the snow-shrouded town has been-  
A monument to your memory,  
What a long year it seems to me.

With your face turned to God,  
You're reaching for him from the land  
Like in the days when you walked on it  
Where you will yet be appreciated.

December 1943

# Marina Tsetaeva (1892 - 1941)

## Chronology

- 1892 Marina born Moscow 8 Oct 1892, on Tryokhprudny Lane
- 1894 Sister Anastasia (*Asya*) born
- 1902 Mother suffers from tuberculosis, family lives at hotel in Nervi, Italy
- 1903 Marina and Asya at Pensionat Lacaze, Switzerland
- 1904 Marina and Asya at Brink boarding school, Freiburg, Germany
- 1905 Family returns to Yalta, Crimea
- 1906 First Revolution in Moscow  
Family lives at dacha in Tarusa. Mother dies, return to Moscow
- 1909 Marina translates Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, infatuation with Sarah Bernhardt  
Studies French in Paris: V. O. Nilender, infatuation with Napoleon
- 1910 Finishes High School,  
Summer with Asya in Dresden  
Publication of *Evening Album*,  
Meets Maksimilian Voloshin
- 1911 First Summer in Koktebel: meets Sergey (*Seryozha*) Efron
- 1912 January, marries Sergey Efron  
Honeymoon in Italy, France, and Germany  
Father Ivan Tsvetaev opens *Emperor Alexander III Fine Arts Museum*, Moscow  
Asya's son Andrey born August,  
September, Marina's daughter Ariadne (*Alya*) Efron born  
They move to 6 Borisoglebsky Lane
- 1913 Summer-Winter, Koktebel. Seryozha finishes high school  
Publication *From Two Books* and

*Magic Lantern* (dedicated to Sergey Efron) under their own "Ole Lukoe" label  
September, father Ivan Tsvetaev dies, Sister Asya divorced  
Poems to the dying *Pyotr Efron (P.E.)*

- 1914-16      Affair with Sofia Parnok
- 1916      Sojourn in St Petersburg, "affair" with Mandelstam  
*Mileposts I* Collection including poems to Akhmatova, Blok and Mandelstam
- 1917      Seryosha is drafted into the army (Nishki Novgorod)  
Revolution in St, Petersburg, Nicholas II abdicates  
Birth of Marina's daughter Irina  
Bolsheviks seize power in Petrograd  
Seryozha involved in Moscow street fighting, escapes to the Crimea
- 1918      Sergey Efron enrolls in White Army  
Marina travels to Tambovsk to find food, works in *Information Department of People's Commissariat for the Affairs of Nationalities* (1918-21)  
Infatuation with the actor Yuri Zavadsky at the Evgeny Vanganov's Studio
- 1919      Romantic Dramas *Knave of Hearts*, *Snowstorm*, *Adventure*, *Fortune*, *Stone Angel*, and *Phoenix for Yuri Zavadsky* (published 1974-1976)
- 1920      Daughter Irina dies of starvation in an orphanage  
*Contemporary Notes* (published Paris), *Poems Camp of Swans* (1957)
- 1921      Marina learns from Erenburg that Seryozha is alive in Constantinople.  
Gumilev executed, Blok dies disillusioned  
Publication of *Mileposts* (1917-20) in Moscow
- 1922      May 11, Marina and Alya leave Russia for Berlin  
Friendship with Bely and correspondence with Pasternak.  
Seryozha joins them in Berlin.  
Publications in Moscow: *End of Casanova*, *Mileposts I and II*, *The Tsar Maidens*  
Publications in Berlin: *Separation*, *Poems to Blok*, *Psyche*, *Craft*

August 1, move to Prague, where they obtain state support and Seryozha studies.

Marina works for journal *Will of Russia*,

- 1923      Large Poema: *Poem of the Mountain*  
Affair with Konstantin Rodzevich
- 1924      *Poem to the End, The Swain*. Edits an anthology for the journal  
*The Ark*
- 1925      Birth of son Georgy (Mur) Efron  
November 1 move to Paris, lyrical satire *The Rat-Catcher*
- 1926      February 6, first poetry reading in Paris  
Correspondence with Pasternak and Rilke, Rilke dies  
Efron involved with pro-Soviet emigrant group *Eurasians*
- 1927      Move to Meudon, Poems to Rilke: *Your Death, Poem of the Air*
- 1928      Intense family debate on a return to Russia.  
Summer with the *Eurasians* in Pontailac. Efron becomes editor of  
their journal *Eurasia*  
Marina meets Mayakovsky on visit in Paris,  
Publication of last book by Tsvetaeva: *After Russia*
- 1929      Friendship with Natalia Gonchorova  
Split in *Eurasian* movement, *Eurasia* folds, Efron sick and  
unemployed
- 1930      Mayakovsky commits suicide.  
Family returns to Paris
- 1931      Tsvetaeva writes *History of a Dedication, Poems to Pushkin* (pub.  
1937)  
Efron grows increasingly enamored with the Soviet Union
- 1932      Move to Clamart, Essays: *The Poet and Time, Art in the Light of  
Conscience*  
Maksimilian Voloshin dies in Koktebel  
Poem cycles: *Ici-Haut, In Memory of Voloshin, Poems to a Son,  
Nostalgia for the Motherland*  
Efron becomes an foreign operative affiliated with the NKVD,

- 1933 Efron unsuccessfully applies for a Soviet Passport
- 1934 Move to Vanves. Andrey Bely dies  
Efron begins work for *Union for the Return to the Motherland*, controlled by the NKVD
- 1935 Everyone except Marina wants to return to the Soviet Union
- 1936 August in Haut Savoie. Family disagreements on return to USSR.  
Alya works for pro-Soviet Journal *Our Union*  
Spanish Civil War 1936-39  
Poem cycle *Poems to an Orphan*
- 1937 Completion of *My Pushkin* (prose work), Marina works for journal *Russian Notes*  
March 15, Alya leaves for the USSR  
Alya informs Marina of Sofia Gollidey's death: *Story of Sonechka*  
September 4, Soviet double-agent Ignaty Reyss murdered.  
French police implicates Efron. The NKVD spirits him to the USSR.  
Sept/October Marina is in length interrogated by French police
- 1938 Tsvetaeva moves to Paris, prepares to return to the USSR  
Entrusts her archives to Margarita Lebedva (lost 1940-42) and Prof. E. Maler in Basle  
Hitler's *Munich Agreement*
- 1939 Hitler invades Czechoslovakia: *Poems to Bohemia*  
June 12, Tsvetaeva and Mur leave Le Havre to follow Seryozha and Alya to the Motherland  
Family lives in a NKVD dacha at Bolshevo near Moscow  
August 28, Alya, October 10, Efron arrested on orders of Beria  
Tsvetaeva moves to Golitsyno near Moscow
- 1940 Tsvetaeva petitions Beria on behalf of Sergey and Alya in vain  
spends long hours in prison queues  
Translates poems by Vazha Pshavela (published 1947)  
Moves to various rooms in Moscow, given temporary apartment in October  
Volume of her poems rejected by Soviet publishing house  
Trotsky assassinated in Mexico City
- 1941 Tsvetaeva's only meeting with Anna (Andreeva Gorenko) Akhmatova  
Hitler invades the USSR



August 17, Marina and Mur evacuated to Elaburga on river Kama  
August 31, Marina Tsvetaeva hangs herself in Elaburga. There is  
no grave.

Much later Alya erected a sign: *Somewhere in this cemetery lies  
buried Marina Tsvetaeva.*

Sergey Efron was executed in 1941, the exact date is unknown to  
me.

Georgy-Mur Efron fell 1944 at the front.

Ariadne Efron - after 15 years in the Gulag - was released and  
rehabilitated in 1955. She found a home and is buried in Tarusa.

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