I first met Lidia Ginzberg in April 1969 toward the end of a memorable but brief visit to the Soviet Union. It was somehow fitting that I should have spent my last night in Leningrad at the home of the most distinguished living Russian literary scholar. Two heterodox young littérateurs whom my wife and I had befriended in the course of a hectic week and who were clearly part of Lidia Iakovlevna’s circle, brought me to a get-together at her place. A brilliant and irreverent young Leningrad poet, having heard of the impending occasion, quipped: “You had better say the right thing; Lidia Iakovlevna is a stern lady.”

The warning proved less than essential. I found the hostess serious, intense, perhaps a bit austere, but neither dogmatic or intimidating. What was discouraged at Lidia Iakovlevna’s was not a “wrong” opinion but irrelevance, intellectual sloppiness or, for that matter, mere small talk. The free-wheeling conversation which was in full swing by the time we arrived focused directly and unabashedly on things that matter—most notably, on “chto delat’” in literary scholarship. I recall having been betrayed by the heady atmosphere of this intellectual free for all into an overly hasty aphorism: “What is needed is Formalism without enfantterrible’ism.” “Do you mean without Shklovskii?” inquired the hostess, clearly a strong believer in explicitness. I could not deny that this was indeed what I was implying.

I had considerable difficulty tearing myself away from the gathering where “zhizn’ stikhom” was the very air one breathed. But my Stockholm flight was only a few hours away. I vowed to myself to come back to Leningrad and to see Lidia Iakovlevna again.

When I did come back some four years later, a meeting with Lidia Ginzberg was one of my few “musts.” This time our encounter took place in a different setting. We converged on the apartment of one of my two young friends, who on that occasion exhibited considerable culinary prowess. We were sitting in S.’s kitchen munching vigorously, if somewhat absent-mindedly, the pelmeni amply provided by the host. Since it was a hot summer afternoon, the window was wide open, which did not prevent S. from making highly unorthodox statements at the top of his lungs. Once in a while L. la. would intervene to moderate what she viewed as rhetorical excesses. But most of the conversation involved the two of us. There was much to catch up on, many notes to compare and views to exchange. Once again I had the feeling of communing
with a totally committed and a marvelously incisive literary mind. Naturally, we didn’t always see eye to eye. Not unlike a number of literary Russian intellectuals I encountered in 1973, Lidiia Iakovlevna took a harsher view of Nadezhda Mandel’shtam’s *Hope Abandoned* than I did. Yet, our most memorable partial disagreement had to do with the work of a poet we both admired—“Requiem” by Anna Akhmatova. Lidiia Iakovlevna thought the cycle relatively weak as poetry. I confessed to having been deeply moved by it and averred that I had some trouble registering a purely literary response to Akhmatova’s harrowing sequence. Lidiia Iakovlevna looked at me disapprovingly. “How else should one respond to a work of literature?” she asked somewhat sternly.

I’m afraid there was no time for a half-adequate answer: I had to move on. But as I reflect upon this conversation today, I do not feel in the least apologetic about my “impure” response. It has been my conviction for some time now that there are situations in literature, most notably in modern Russian literature, where a “purely literary response” was neither appropriate nor for that matter, truly feasible, situations most strikingly summed up in the famous Pasternak line “I tut konchaetsia iskusstvo/I dyshat pochva i sud’ba.” Yet my motive for recalling this exchange is neither self-protective nor polemical. Even as I was unable or unwilling to share Lidiia Iakovlevna’s “purism,” I could view her position as not only legitimate but within her cultural setting downright salutary. For it was this unswerving and unequivocal dedication to literary values in the context of a blatantly, and often brutally, politicized culture that has made Lidiia Ginzburg the exemplar we are now honoring, so vital a survivor of a remarkable generation, so impressive a paragon of scholarly integrity and literary sensibility.

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