

ME AND IRINA

Jag står i en kö på Sheremiestvo-flygplatsen i Moskva på väg fram till Aeroflot-planet som skulle till Tokyo då en något äldre och manhaftig kvinna framför mig vänder sig om och yttrar kraftigt, "I know you!!" Jag blev väl överraskad och kanske lite skrämmd - man var ju i SSSR - och alltid rädd för att något gått fel. Men så fortsatte hon och nämnde att hon sett mitt foto i en bok som jag publicerat och så presenterade hon sig som Irina Lvova, professor vid Moskva Universitet. Så var isen bruten och en bekanskap böjades som skulle fortsätta till hennes död.

Jag råkade sitta i raden bakom henne och det blev en livlig konversation genom natten som följde. Jag behövde inte berätta mycket om mig. det visade sig att man i Ryssland var förvånansvärt väl underrättade om västra

världen och japanska studier där medan vi, skam sägandes, inte visste något om dem. Hon var professor i japanologi vid Moskva-universitetet och studerat hos Professor Konrad i Leningrad. Hennes stora prestation i Japanstudiet var en full översättning i Kamakura-litteraturen av klassikern Heike monogatari, 60.000 ex som sålts som smör och nu inte gick att uppbringa.

Vi anlände till Tokyo och våra vägar skildes. Irina tog till det hotell som bestämts officiellt och jag till mitt sedvanliga längre ned i staden. Vi hade var våra program i Japan men vi möttes ofta och vår vänskap växte. Jag fick en inblick i det nogsamt kontrollerade liv man levde som sovjet-medborgare. De måste dagligen möta upp på ambassaden och fick lov att äta på bestämda restauranger till vilka man fick kuponger. Även hotellet var bestämt hemifrån. Det framgick att resor till Japan var all right eftersom hon var japanolog men till Västeuropa hade hon aldrig fått komma. Jag

lovade att inbjuda henne västerut.

Det löftet höll jag. I was much involved the European Association of Japanese studies and I soon found occasions for inviting Irina to the West. And the authorities allowed her to go. First time it was to England. we met in London and we were even allowed to live at the same hotel, the White House in the British Museum area. I have some very precious memories from the first two days.

First evening I invited he first to visit a typical old pub just cross the street from British Museum. It is an old place and, as I see it, a very typical British atmosphere: simple and old and a little musty. But Irina did not like it. She looked the pub over from the door, turned and told me in definite terms: “Let us go and find a democratic restaurant!” So we marched on down the street and found a cafeteria-like place with self-service from the counter. Well,

it was at least cheaper than the pub plus the better restaurant that I had planned.

I had also plans for the next day. I had especially thought of a Shakespeare play and I found that The Tempest was appearing at a theatre. I happily invited Irina when we met in the morning but then she had also an invitation from the Russian embassy that she had to accept. The embassy had also a sightseeing programme for her. So I went to the theatre alone.

I met a sad Irina later in the evening. The sightseeing had basiclly meant visiting the grave of Marx. It “had been a total waste of time”, she said sadly. She had loved to have seen The Tempest. I could not get over a line in the drama that reminded me of what she had told me the night before. She had been on a ship by Kamtchakta when the Pacific War broke out, December 1941. They had been approached by a Japanese war ship and they

worried about what would happen. Irina remembered that she had prayed and expressed that “she would not like to die a wet death!” The same was expressed by Shakespeare in the *The Tempest*, worded slightly differently. Shakespeare has Gonzalo say: "I would fain die a dry death. Coincidentia! I was touched! I never told her. I wonder how she would have reacted, hearing it. For me it was epiphany!

Next meeting took place in Copenhagen. The Tokai university and University of Copenhagen arranged regular conferences of Japanese studies and it was the second time that such a conference was arranged by me under the Japanese institute. I sent an invitation to Irina and, to my surprise, she was allowed to come. It was probably her first visit to western Europe and she was even allowed by the Soviet Embassy to live at our house as our guest. She participated in the activities and she gave a lecture at the university. The theme

was her translation of the classic Heike Monogatari into Russian. It had been printed in 60.000 ex., and been sold overnight; a copy was now not to be found. She was especially proud of the translations of waka poetry in the work. She had cooperated with a known Russian poet and the result had been so excellent that it surpassed the translation in an English translation. A question about what she valued most, classical or modern Japanese literature, she replied emphatically: “The Classical”. Next question. “why?” An equally emphatic reply: “Because it has the stamp of history!” Irina was generally emphatic in her statements.

A third and last meeting came at Durham, England, in 1988. She felt elderly and surpassed by younger scholars from the Soviet Union. They were supported by fellowships - and she was not! She suffered the the fate of being a supernumerary in the company of a new generation!

She spent her last years alone in Moscow. Her husband passed away before her and her contact with Moscow University was sparse. Through Professor Dolin, a colleague at the University of Moscow, I had the last news about her passing in the 1990s. He had kept her company to the end.

Irina Lwowa is a wonderful memory!