About My Father

Andrei Sarabyanov
Director, Center for the Avant-Garde, Jewish Museum and Museum of Tolerance, Moscow
rusavang@mail.ru

I was first summoned to write about my father immediately after his passing in July, 2013. At that moment, I was just finishing the second volume of Entsiklopediiia russkogo avangarda [Encyclopedia of the Russian avant-garde] to which my father had contributed. In compiling the two biographical volumes, my colleagues and I had concurred that, apart from artists, architects, and photographers, the Encyclopedia should also include contemporary researchers of the Russian avant-garde—but with the proviso that their number would be limited exclusively to those who were no longer with us. However, we decided unanimously that Volume Two should not only include a lead article by Dmitry Vladimirovich, but should also be dedicated to his memory. Thus, it fell upon me to write about him as an art historian, which was not an easy task inasmuch as I had to observe a certain distance and to write not as his son, but as a colleague. The pain of his passing was not to manifest itself through the wall of objectivity and, indeed, I did manage to erect the wall, disallowing of all emotion, and the result was a sober, encyclopedic entry. No doubt, that was what was needed. But even today, I have a very hard time rereading the text.

More than three years have passed since my father’s death, yet for me he remains alive both as man and as scholar and so, when John E. Bowlt, one of Dmitry Vladimirovich’s primary students, asked me to write a few lines about him for Experiment, once again I immersed myself in reminiscences.

Dmitry Vladimirovich had a passion for work. For many years, the sure sign of this labor without respite was the click of his typewriter. Since he used to type with two fingers, the sound was always like a loud machine-gun salvo of words and sentences arranged and then interpolated by periods of silence as the sentences took shape. From time to time, he would come out to the

* With Vasily Rakitin, the author is compiler of the three-volume Encyclopedia of the Russian Avant-Garde (Russian and French editions).
kitchen, where our rather large family would be chatting away, drinking tea or something stronger, or just having a good time with (or without) guests; he would cast an unaccusing eye upon us, look us up and down, say something witty, and then go back to his study—and the machine-gun would resume its salvos. Later on, the click of the typewriter gave way to the rattle of computer keys, but by then he and I were living in different apartments....

Dmitry Vladimirovich’s academic career was a happy one, although his era was one of danger and misfortune. He enrolled in the Department of the History of Art at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History (IFLI) in 1941, on the eve of World War II. Two years later, he was called up to the front where, until Victory Day, he worked as military interpreter. Before being demobilized, he was wounded twice and his elder brother, Boris, a talented chemist, lost his life in action at Stalingrad.

In 1949 (the year of my birth), Dmitry Vladimirovich graduated from the Department of Art History at Moscow State University to become a university lecturer—although that did not happen right away. Between 1953 and 1960, he worked at the Institute of the History of Art (now the State Institute of Art History) as Senior Researcher and then as Vice-Director. So when people asked little me, who my papa was, I used to answer: “He’s a vice-scholar.”

In toto, Dmitry Vladimirovich gave almost half a century of his life to the university and to teaching, during thirty of which he was head of the Department of the History of Russian and Soviet Art (1972-85).

I would tend to divide Dmitry Vladimirovich’s academic legacy (his bibliography is enormous) into two parts. The first is linked to his teaching. He used to take his lectures very seriously, for they were never part of some stale routine but a vital process of cognition and self-perfection, and they nurtured many of his textbooks on the history of eighteenth to twentieth-century Russian art. He made styles and trends come alive and would write about them as if they were living creatures in possession of their own “artistic will” (even if he was not a disciple of Alois Riegl).

The second part concerns the methodology of art historical scholarship and the aspiration to a universal, integrative investigation reliant upon achievements in physiology, literary studies, and philosophy. His was a remarkable openness to innovation and an ability to see things anew, to apprehend the latest changes in art history, and to be their champion. At the same time, he was ever generous in offering to collaborate with younger colleagues and in suggesting research topics to his students for their diplomas and dissertations. His was a selflessness so unusual among intellectuals.

Dmitry Vladimirovich loved Russian art and felt a particular responsibility towards it. Among his heroes were many Russian artists: Pavel Fedotov,
Aleksandr Ivanov, Ilya Repin, Valentin Serov, and Vasily Surikov. Over time, Dmitry Vladimirovich changed his artistic preferences and when the right moment came, was one of the first to talk about the Russian avant-garde, granting pride of place to Robert Falk, Wassily Kandinsky, and Liubov Popova. He published books and numerous articles about them. With rare exceptions, whatever he wrote he published, several of his essays appearing in the Encyclopedia of the Russian Avant-Garde.

His later years were graced by a poetical creativity—he published three collections of verse. Sometimes he would labor long over each poem and, when we met up in the kitchen, would declaim his new verse to us: on love, death, and nature. His poetry is profound and penetrating. He was, after all, a poet....

He used to call me “lucky guy,” although I think that the sobriquet is applicable more to him than to me. Thanks to my mother and to his family life, he was a happy man—something which determined his success and fortune in so many spheres.

As a young man, he went in for sports. He also composed music and danced like crazy, until his partner dropped from exhaustion! He also loved hunting, fishing, and travelling. God granted Dmitry Vladimirovich many talents, sufficing for an entire generation of descendants and my hope is that these talents will find their further embodiment in his many grandchildren and great-grand-children.

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