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Kuzovkina, Tat'iana, Larisa Naidich and Natal'ia Obraztsova (eds.). 2022. *Lotmany. Semeinaia perepiska 1940-1946. Sostavlenie, podgotovka teksta, predislovie i kommentarii T. D. Kuzovkinoi, L. E. Naidich, N. Iu. Obraztsovoi, pri uchastii G.G. Superfina* (Tallinn: Izdatel'stvo TLU), pp. 716

The volume, published by the University of Tallinn in the fast-expanding series “Bibliotheca Lotmaniana”, is the result of a titanic archival enterprise undertaken by Tat'iana Kuzovkina (University of Tallinn), Larisa Naidich (Professor Emeritus at Jerusalem University and daughter of Lidiia Mikhailovna Lotman), and Natal'ia Obraztsova (philologist and daughter of Inna Mikhailovna Lotman), with the participation of Gabriel' Superfin.

The structure of the book is very interesting. The central documents, the 356 letters (of which 329 were previously unpublished) that Aleksandra Samoilovna and her children Inna, Lidiia, Viktroriia, and Iurii exchanged between 1940 and 1946, when Iurii Mikhailovich was fighting in the war, are encased in a wealth of supplemental material, both archival and not.¹ In fact, beyond the preface and the biobibliographical aids that the reader customarily finds in epistolary publications, the volume also includes several other documents and fascinating contributions.

The rich archival material presented in the book is organized thematically into three separate sections. Other than the aforementioned family correspondence, the volume also contains a second section featuring part of the Lotmans' correspondence with family acquaintances and friends, and a third block with heterogeneous documents pertaining to the Lotmans' activity in those years. Among the documents included in this last section, we find Iurii Mikhailovich's university certificates and his correspondence to be reinstated as a student in Leningrad after he was demobilized in 1946, alongside the short autobiography of Boris

¹ For a list of the previously published letters, see footnote 20 on page 32 of the volume.

Davidovich Lakhman, a schoolmate of Iurii Mikhailovich who tragically disappeared in 1939.

The letters and documents in all three archival-based sections are chronologically organized, and the principle that the editors pursued is that of the maximum degree of exhaustiveness. Indeed, the editors put together all the family letters still extant by drawing from a variety of different archives, including Obraztsova's and Naidich's personal archives, Iurii Mikhailovich's archive in Tartu, and Lidiia Lotman's fond in Saint Petersburg (IRLI).² Most letters were retrieved from Obraztsova's fond. Each letter from the family correspondence is accompanied not only by a thorough description of its appearance but also by footnotes comparing its content with salient passages from Lotman's 1995 *Ne-memuary* and from his still unpublished diaries. Following the principle of exhaustiveness, the choice of including correspondence with members outside of the Lotman family – material that *per se* is of marginal interest – finds its rationale, as the information in these letters resonates and supplements what the reader finds in the main correspondence.

The meaning of the family correspondence is further explored in a fourth section containing, alongside a short piece by Iurii Mikhailovich, essays by Mikhail Lotman, Liubov Kiseleva, and Larisa Naidich relating to Iurii Mikhailovich's memories and tales about the war. It is precisely in this polyphony of voices accompanying the family correspondence that lies the strength of the volume.

As always when confronted with the epistolary form, the reader must consider questions of methodological import. The correspondence *per se* is of unquestionable value but the pragmatic question remains on how to employ the material now available to us to further scholarly research. The polyphonic structure of the book, weaving the family correspondence in a complex net of documents and memoiristic essays, suggests several possible approaches.

The most straightforward answer to the question is to use the volume as a source of biographical information. While the letters allow only for a partial reconstruction of the military activities Lotman participated in, and while most letters are short communiqués where Iurii Mikhailovich informs his mother and sisters that he is alive and well, the

² Another minor note of criticism, it would have been better if all the archives used had been indicated separately to the reader. As it is, the reader is forced to reconstruct the archival work from the commentary to the letters.

chronological organization allows the reader to follow the evolution of one of the central themes of the correspondence, Iurii Mikhailovich's pursuit to further his education. He studies French, reads Hugo, Tolstoi, George Sand, Heine - whom he translates into Russian -, laments his inability to write good letters, and, after May 9th, starts to ask his sisters for handbooks to prepare for his return to university. From the letters penned by Lidiia Mikhailovna, we can also reconstruct with some precision the development of her dissertation, whereas one letter by Inna Mikhailovna records the lecture plan for the course in ancient Russian literature in Leningrad in 1946 (n. 265).

Of particular interest from the scholarly perspective are the epistolary discussions on literature between Iurii Mikhailovich and Lidiia Mikhailovna. The siblings discuss articles by Gukovskii, Azadovskii, and other contemporary scholars that Iurii Mikhailovich could get his hands on: as Iurii Mikhailovich frequently wrote to Lidiia, the possibility to participate - albeit from a marginal position - in the scholarly discussions was of vital importance for him. Particularly noteworthy are two "theoretical letters" (n. 231, 244, and 251, written between April and June 1945) where the siblings discuss questions such as the relationship between form and content in literature and art: "I really cannot understand how the new content fills the old form, as I cannot imagine what we mean here by form and what we mean by content" (Kuzovkina et al. 2022: 367), writes Iurii Mikhailovich criticizing Lidiia's Belinskian perspective.

The third and last "theoretical letter" from June 1st 1945, where Iurii Mikhailovich describes his conception of culture as an interrelated whole - a possible prefiguration of the semiosphere? - suggests the second way to frame the correspondence:

It is impossible to understand an epoch [...] without knowing, for instance, female fashion and everyday details, and without feeling that the Impressionists are more linked to long-range cannons than to the Romantics. The former link is like that of a hand to his leg, whereas the latter link is comparable to that between my hand and the hand of a Roman (Kuzovkina et al. 2022: 336).

The relationship between an artistic movement and military advancements contemporary to it, so Lotman argues, runs deeper than the relationship between two artistic systems that are chronologically distinct. Synchronicity trumps issues of genealogical and, more importantly, intellectual dependency, so that no author or literary text can be understood without the knowledge of the *byt* of the epoch to which they be-

long. The publication of the Lotmans' correspondence in the war years forces the reader to consider a question similar to that posed by Iurii Mikhailovich to his sister in 1946. What – and how deep – is the link between Iurii Mikhailovich Lotman and the experience of the II World War, and to what extent should we consider it when discussing his intellectual heritage? In the words of the editors in the preface: “The published material forces us to consider the influence that the experience of the war had on the personality and scholarly work of Iurii Mikhailovich” (Kuzovkina et al. 2022: 34).

The memoiristic essays by Kiseleva and Mihhail Lotman detailing how Iurii Mikhailovich would speak about his war years later in his life could provide important clues to answer this question. Mikhail Lotman's essay, however, reminds us that the reader must approach the letters as documents subject not only to military censorship but also to *family censorship*: virtually absent are any references to the dangers Iurii Mikhailovich was exposed to, and to the hardships he had to endure lest his family worry too much. Similarly absent are indications of the difficulties that Aleksandra Samoilovna, Inna, and Viktoriia encountered during the siege of Leningrad. Later on, Iurii Mikhailovich would narrate different war episodes to different addresses, sparing his children the violence he had witnessed. Mikhail Lotman, in short, forces us to consider the letters – as well as Iurii Mikhailovich's later war stories – within the boundaries of a specific genre with a given narrative and discursive logic, and not only as biographical sources. As Sergei Ushakin and Aleksei Golubev wrote in the preface to their anthology of war correspondence, by setting aside a strictly biographical perspective, the reader can concentrate on other questions, like the “place of the letter in the formation of the symbolic order, [...] the position of the letter in relation to other forms of documental sources, and [...] those intersubjective relationships that emerge in the epistolary process” (Ushakin et al. 2016: 8). From this perspective, the presence of selected letters from and to people outside of the family circle could be of great importance. Whatever scholarship the volume will inspire, the publication of the Lotmans' correspondence marks an important event for the scholarly world interested in Lotman. The editors' complex weaving of the correspondence into a variety of sources, and the polyphonic nature of the volume provide an array of stimulating interpretive avenues to the engaged reader.

Bibliography

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