



The Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin

in conversation with Sigurd Bo Bojesen ahead of the

World Literature Festival on Møn 2013

The writer Mikhail Shishkin was born in Moscow just over 50 years ago, at the height of the Cold War, whilst Stalin and Lenin were still lying in the mausoleum on the Red Square.

“In the kindergarten and in the primary school, we were told that we had been born in the happiest country in the world. Can you imagine my disappointment when I realised that my parents were slaves and I was born as another slave in a country of slaves. All people were slaves of the regime, even the biggest bosses in the Kremlin. Wouldn't it be a great experience for you to realize that you were born in a huge prison?” asks Mikhail Shishkin as he shows us around the five-room apartment in the Friedenau district of Berlin, where he lives with his wife, Evgeniya and children, Vera, 9 and Natasha, 14 during his scholarship in Germany.

“When I was at school – and a pioneer, of course - we lived at the bottom of a thick leather sack, so to speak, and had no possibility whatever of getting cultural information. We were cut off and had only stale “Soviet air” to breathe. The only books were those that were officially permitted. We had only Soviet tv, Soviet radio, Soviet music. “Non-Soviet” cultural information was accessible only in the form of the printed word, “Samizdat” (copies of forbidden texts that were passed among friends). Although my mother was a teacher of literature, I don't think she influenced me. It was probably my older brother, who began bringing me forbidden books, and that very strong wave of cultural influence had some effect. I began to associate with his friends, who were like gods to me. I was maybe 14, they were around 20. I would sit silently in a corner and listen to their intelligent, freedom-loving conversations, where I heard names I would not have heard anywhere else: Brodsky, Nabokov, Mandelstam—I got to know all of them through my brother. I think that this truly was the beginning,” Shishkin explains and continues:

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“Literature played an entirely different role back then. If there had not been this “vent”, life would have been humiliating, without this possibility to breathe different air through books. Living in the Soviet Union was generally humiliating. Reading forbidden books was the only way to find a niche where you were not being constantly put down but on the contrary had a chance to be raised up. This was how you preserved your human dignity.”

In his youth Mikhail Shishkin had two dreams: to travel the world and to become a writer. He realised that nothing was possible, neither to go abroad nor to publish what he wrote. Reading and writing for himself – even without any hope for publication – saved him.

“I felt as though my country was occupied by invaders. The enemies might be in possession of my body but they could not capture my thoughts. What was inside my skull was a territory of my freedom in that prison. Reading forbidden books (and even Joyce and Nabokov were forbidden) was my fight. And my own writing, too. The victory was mine,” he smiles.

Mikhail Shishkin's six year older brother, Alexander, lives in Moscow where he had a publishing house making wonderful non-commercial books, first of all poetry. However, he had to close it last year.

You were 18 in 1979, the same year the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Were you a soldier at that time and can you explain what you

— and other youngsters — thought of that war at that time.

“Yes, it was my generation. One guy from my class lost his life in that war. I was not in Afganstan because I was enrolled as a student at the Moscow Pedagogical University at the German faculty. We were all — boys and girls — educated as military translators. I was very happy that I didn’t have to go to Afganistan. One day a week at the university, we were drilled in how to interrogate German-speaking prisoners-of-war in the future. We spent one summer at a military camp and everybody got the military rank of junior lieutenant. I will never forget my military oath: I had to kiss the red flag and our banner was stinking of fish, of bloater. Our officers used to drink vodka in the headquarters and after eating bloaters they wiped their hands in the banner,” tells Mikhail Shishkin.

When did you start writing your first book and what inspired you to do so?

“I began writing very early. You probably have to distinguish between consciously or unconsciously becoming a writer. You have to be crazy to become a writer in adult age, but as a child you don’t ask yourself such questions. You take a sheet of paper and write on it: “A Novel.”

“Oh, Misha wrote a novel!” She smiled cheerfully enough, but if she’d said “Oh, Misha mopped the floor!” she would have been just as cheerful.

I, for example, wrote my first novel when I was nine — I remember it very well, and I described it in my novel „The Taking of Izmail“ (Vzyatie Izmaila). At our summer house I picked up a notebook and wrote a novel.

Once you’ve written your novel, you expect to have readers. It wasn’t self-evident that my grandmother with her three years of parish school could be considered a reader, so I waited for my mother to come home from work. I said: “Mamma, look, I’ve written a novel!” I remember very well her exclaiming: “Oh, Misha wrote a novel!” She smiled cheerfully enough, but if she’d said “Oh, Misha mopped the floor!” she would have been just as cheerful.

I watched her as she began reading, and then she frowned and looked serious and dissatisfied. A single frowning glance from her could pacify a rowdy class at school—it immediately gave you goose bumps. And she said to me in a very serious, displeased tone of voice:

“Misha, you should write about

things you understand.” She had expected a novel about Indians or science fiction—about aliens and adventures, but it was about divorce. Because my mother and father seemed to be eternally getting divorced before my very eyes, I described the life that faced me.

Ever since then I think that the family theme has run like a red thread through all my works, and I’m always writing about things that I don’t understand.”

Later, as a student, Mikhail wrote a lot — though without any hope that it would be published in the Soviet Union.

“But who would have imagined that the three last Soviet leaders in succession would “kick off“ in a period of just four years and leave the young and weak Gorbachev to save the regime. The last Communist leader failed, so my books were published in Moscow and after that all over the world,” Mikhail Shishkin continues.

You have been compared to Tolstoy — did he inspire you?

“The literary tradition is very important to me. Actually there are only two traditions of writing whether you are Russian or not. The first one means earning money by writing what publishers and readers expect from you. The writer as a servant. And the other kind of writing I compare with a blood transfusion. A writer shares with his reader the stuff which is essential and vital for him. And this tradition comes to me through Tolstoy. But of course the blood group must match.”

Mikhail Shishkin has written a book dedicated to Tolstoy, “In the footsteps of Byron and Tolstoy”. In 1816, Byron made a long trip from Montreux into the Swiss Alps and wrote diaries. Forty years on, Tolstoy walked the same route without any idea that he was following Byron. Both were 28.

“Actually, I am sure that if Tolstoy had known that he was walking in the footsteps of Byron, he would have chosen another route. So I walked in their footsteps.

They were in the same situation as anyone who writes and they confronted the same problem, namely, what to do in this life, since you are going to die. You prepare for death your entire life, and during your entire life you try to fight death with your pen and your words. This is what the book is about. Actually, the original title of the book is “Montreux — Missolungi — Astapovo”. Montreux is where we started, Missolungi is the place in Greece where Byron died, and Astapovo is the railroad station in Russia where Tolstoy died.

The walk through the Alps becomes a metaphorical stroll through eternity. And the point is how to enter eternity and take all this world with you. Tolstoy worked on this question his whole life, and it’s interesting for me to understand what happened to him and how. In the end, Tolstoy becomes the main character of this book.

From you were 18, it was another 12 years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At 30, what did you think about the changes and could you give some examples of how these changes influenced not only your own life but also the life of your friends and the population in general.

“A lot of hopes came with the Perestroika. It was really a great feeling. For the first time in my life I did not feel like a spy in my own country but as a citizen. It was my country and I was in charge of its future. So I went to school to work as a teacher. I wanted to change Russia and I had to start with the children.

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The Soviet Union was dissolved and a very different Russia developed. — Many people (some of them criminals) became very rich and the country has, in many ways, been turned upside down,” Mikhail Shishkin explains.

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What do you see as a loss and are there any gains?

“The war in Chechnya killed all my last hopes. The murder of journalists like Anna Politkovskaya shocked me. But after the flash of emotions one tries to comprehend the terrifying event with a cold mind. And I was just wondering, how this brave woman desperately struggling against the ruthless war machine could survive so long. The investigations she undertook, resembled much more the commitment of a suicide than the fulfillment of a journalist’s job.

She was killed because she broke the main unwritten Russian law. There are a lot of written laws but nobody cares, they just appear to be laws. And you will be forgiven for breaking them — until you break the

only valid one.

My country lived and lives, and I am afraid, will go on living, using the law of the prison: strong inhabitants of the cells have the best plank bed at the window bars and take belongings and food from the weak ones and let them have the worst place at the dirty lavatory pan.

If you want to change this humiliating order and you are brave and stubborn, they will kill you because you are the law breaker and must be punished. And the worst thing is that the Russian population accepts this order. My people have had very bad historical experiences and all attempts to change this order have ended in devastating bloodsheds.

“It pains me to see what is going on in my country. This is unworthy of Russia.”

In their minds, the brutal order in Russia is better than disorder, so they think with nostalgia of Stalin’s time and hate “democracy”. Millions of Russians voted for Putin last year according to the Russian proverb: “don’t wish death to a bad tzar”. The next would be worse.

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How long was the period between the publication of your first short story, “Calligraphy Lesson”, in Russian and the publication abroad? Can you remember your thoughts about your first foreign publication?

“I think my first translated novel was „Taking of Izmail“ (“La Prise d’Izmail”), which first appeared in France in 2003. But the German translation was much more important to me because I live in the German speaking space.

For many years, I got only refusals from publishers like Suhkamp, Fischer etc. To tell the truth, it is very depressing to get a refusal.

They wrote: “Your novel is great but too challenging for our readers”. I couldn’t understand why publishers consider their readers fools. Finally DVA in Munich took the risk and in 2011 published my novel “Venushaar” (“Maidenhair” 2012 - “Venushär” 2013).”

The book received the German prize for the best translated book of the year (Preis des Hauses der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin) and had a lot of success with the press and the public. Another novel “Briefsteller” (“The Light and the Dark”) has been translated into 25 languages.

You went to live in Switzerland only two years after the publication of “Urok Kalligrafii” (“Calligraphy Lesson”), in 1995 - why?

“I didn’t choose Switzerland. It happened so that my former wife was Swiss. We got married in Moscow and lived there for some years, but then she became pregnant and it was difficult for her to be with the baby in the middle of the Russian exoticism. So we went to Switzerland, but it was not emigration, just a family matter.

I think this transition and changing the scenery helped me a lot as

goes for writers. If they live only in Russia and write only about that world, they think that they know everything. They have to leave to understand that they know nothing. Least of all about Russia.

Compared to Russia, Switzerland is a very boring country. No war wounds, no bloodshed. But people still die everywhere, even in Switzerland. It makes the mutual understanding of all people on the earth

remain, continues Mikhail Shishkin.

Could you explain what you personally get from writing and what you hope your readers will get?

“Now a days, I often go to Russia to meet my Russian readers, in the bigger cities as well as in small provincial towns - which is very interesting and inspiring. There you can see that nothing has changed in the past 20 years: my real Russian readers — provincial teachers, doc-

You read English very well — but I take it you still write in Russian? What are the losses in translating from Russian into English — and for that matter into other languages?

“Most of all, I like my translations into Japanese or Chinese. It looks great. And I have no idea what has been lost in translation.

The worst thing is to read my German or English translations because I realize what has been lost. To



The Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin with his wife, Evgeniya, who is expecting in August, and her two girls, Vera, 9 and Natasha, 14, in their temporary apartment in Berlin.

a writer. I am sure, that it is useful for any writer to live not only in his or her country of birth, but also abroad.

Earlier, in the nineteenth century, the Academy of Art in Petersburg sent artists abroad to Italy not only to learn technique by looking at excavated ancient Roman statues and the ruins of the Colosseum and the paintings of the great masters.

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They also left Russia in order to look at a different sky and different colors and to understand what the sky was like in Russia. As long as you are living in Russia and haven’t visited Italy, you can’t understand the colors of the sky. The same

possible.

I came to calm and peaceful Zurich but I found myself, through my job as a translator for the Migration office, in the epicentre of Russian high tension. Horrible stories poured into me. In Moscow you can avoid newspapers, keep the radio quiet, throw your television-set out of the window, close your curtains and read old, good, books. But in Switzerland, I became the funnel for Russian stories. The refugees don’t tell funny stories. Of course, people can lie to obtain political asylum. But they lie true stories. If they say that on returning home they would be killed, it could be true.

Even if they are not involved in dirty politics, but have some debt to their cruel business partners. One must pay his debts anyway. So their words at the interview conquer their death. As a writer I must translate their lives into words. People and their lies will vanish. Words and their truth will

remain, continues Mikhail Shishkin.

“Communist lies have switched to “democratic“ ones. This literary tradition still works in Russia: writers write to save their souls and readers read to save theirs. Reading in Russia is more than reading. And it always will be.

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Do you have a writing routine?

“I usually write at home, in the morning after my cup of coffee, one novel in five years,” smiles Mikhail Shishkin.

me, the art of writing is making no compromises. The art of the translation is actually the art of compromising.

What do you consider the most important issues in the translation and do you have any choice in selecting the translator?

“How can I select a Hungarian, a Slovenian or a Danish translator? No, this is the job of the publisher.

From my English publisher I got three sample translations of one of my novels. No sentence was the same. Not because one translator was better or worse but because they are different personalities with their own unique tastes and life experiences.

If all of them translated the novel, I would have three different novels in English.

I think the only possible way of working with the translator is to trust them. A translator must feel free to create and to be my co-author,” concludes Mikhail Shishkin.