

A Captive of Time—My Years with Pasternak

by Olga Ivinskaya. Translated by Max Hayward, Harvill Press, 1978, 488 pp., £7.50. (Russian text: *U Vremeni v Plenu*, Fayard, Paris, 1978.)

Olga Ivinskaya is the original of Lara in *Doctor Zhivago*, and these are her memoirs. For the first few pages I felt embarrassed, as if I was accidentally overhearing an intimate conversation that was not meant for me, but the book improves steadily. Pasternak was a poet of genius, but I remember him as, above all, an enchanting person. One sees him here in all his naive profundity and wayward integrity. Readers of *RCL* will be specially interested in Pasternak as, in his own special way, a representative Christian of his generation, and in the varieties of ethical experience revealed in this account of relations between writers and a totalitarian government.

Most of the well-known Soviet writers of the last 40 years come into the story. Their behaviour shows very many varieties of the *trahison des clerics*. Hardly any were able to run a straight course throughout, but they were under appalling and unrelenting pressures.

The Pasternaks were free thinking but not unreligious Jews. Boris was baptized in infancy at the instance of his nanny who, I believe, taught him Christian beliefs. Since he was a Jew, this was felt to be "half secret and intimate, a source of rare and exceptional inspiration". It played a great part in his life, but his view of Christianity was personal and selective. While rejecting "church dogma" he had a deeply Christian feeling for life and "thought of the Bible as being mainly an inexhaustible source of creative inspiration". As John Arnold puts it, he gave "a strong yet elusive, undogmatic but truthful restatement of Christian faith" but "not the whole faith". In one mood he rejected "resurrection in the crude form in which it is preached", but I think he had other moods, and I wonder whether he would have thought St Paul's teaching on the resurrection crude.

The explanation of his inconsistencies is partly personal, but not entirely so. For him the years after 1910 were formative, and his religion was of that time, aesthetic, selective and élitist. Yet the brief and (on his side) cautious correspondence between Pasternak and Thomas Merton* shows how deeply he was rooted in the central traditions of Christianity.

His own form of belief brought him to Christ. His successors in the faith in Russia have found something more robust and straightforward, but it is good that they have this unforgettable reminder of another kind of faith, which was sometimes flickering, but never quenched.

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*Correspondence between Pasternak and Thomas Merton was published (in Russian) in *Kontinent*, No. 15, 1978, pp. 323-41.