

Lev Ozerov  
**Andrei  
Platonovich  
Platonov**

01/03

Platonov is reading aloud,<sup>1</sup>  
reading “Fro”  
in the spacious apartment of Kornely  
Lyutsianovich Zelinsky,<sup>2</sup>  
just by the Moscow Arts Theatre.  
“A grand little hut!”  
he said afterwards,  
without a trace of envy.

Platonov reads with animation.  
I had not heard of Platonov.  
I know nothing of his ways,  
of his way in life.  
“That’s splendid!” I blurt out,  
unable to contain myself,  
when he reads the last page.  
Piercing eyes,  
and on his lips – kindness  
and irony, irony  
and kindness. Wary,  
Platonov says nothing.  
“Yes, but hardly relevant  
to the needs of our time,”  
Zelinsky concludes softly,  
meditatively. Head ever  
so slightly  
tilted to one shoulder, he is all  
heartfelt tenderness, forever  
warm, sweet, and compliant.  
We talk a little more, drink tea  
with sugar, with small bagels.  
And we sit there for a while,  
eyes sliding over the bindings  
of the books in the rich,  
well-cared-for library  
that resembles its owner.  
Platonov gets to his feet.  
I do the same.  
We run – fly – hurtle  
down the stairs  
and wander for a long time  
about Moscow.  
There are a lot of cars.  
Which are Black Marias,  
we don’t know. We don’t  
discuss this, but we know  
we both think about it  
and think about  
how we both know this.  
“And you? Can you  
make out  
what’s relevant  
to the needs of our time  
and what isn’t?”  
Platonov asks, boldly,  
on Bolshaya Ordynka.  
I’m twenty years old. Wet  
behind the ears. “No,”  
I reply. I feel ashamed  
of my answer, but it’s the truth.

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“Precisely!” A pause. A look.  
A pause. “Stay like that.  
Don’t change.” Platonov falls  
silent, withdraws into himself,  
then says, “In fifty years’ time,  
who knows, it may perhaps  
become clear  
what era you and I live in  
and what name  
should be given it. But,  
more likely, it will  
be given many different names –  
some very strange –  
chosen by the grandchildren  
of those in power at this hour –  
the grandchildren, I should say,  
of everyone living today.”

He was walking fast,  
not looking from side  
to side, holding his head  
up high,  
with its high cheekbones  
and flinty chin.

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*Translated from the Russian by Robert Chandler.*

*This poem will appear in the forthcoming collection Lev Ozerov: Portraits without Frames, translated by Robert Chandler, Boris Dralyuk, Maria Bloshteyn, and Irina Mashinski (NYRB Classics, November 2018).*

02/03

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**Lev Ozerov** (1914–96) was born in Kiev. He studied in Moscow, then worked as a front-line journalist after the German invasion. After the liberation of Kiev in 1943, Ilya Ehrenburg commissioned him to write an article for *The Black Book* (a planned documentary account of the Shoah on Soviet soil) about the massacre at Babi Yar, a ravine just outside the city. In the course of six months the Nazis shot a hundred thousand people, nearly all of them Jews. Ozerov also wrote a long poem about Babi Yar, published in early 1946.

From 1943 Ozerov taught in the Translation Faculty at the Gorky Literary Institute, himself translating poetry from Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ukrainian (languages he knew well), Lithuanian (which he could read), and from other languages of the Soviet Union with the help of a crib. He also wrote many books of literary criticism and did much to enable the publication of writers who had suffered or perished under Stalin. He was the first editor to publish Zabolotsky (his translation of *The Lay of Igor’s Campaign*) on his return from the Gulag in 1946.

Ozerov’s *Portraits without Frames* (published after his death) comprises fifty accounts, told in a variety of tones and with deceptive simplicity, of meetings with important figures, many – though not all – from the literary world. One poem tells how Yevgenia Taratuta, an editor of children’s literature, kept her sanity during brutal interrogations by reciting Pushkin and Mayakovsky to herself. A second describes Ozerov’s first meeting with Zabolotsky on his return from the Gulag. The poem ends with Zabolotsky’s daughter telling Ozerov, decades afterwards, how later that day her father had said to her: “I had thought I was forgotten, but people still seem to remember me.” Remarkably, Ozerov is able to write with compassion not only about gifted and heroic poets like Zabolotsky but also about such writers as Fadeyev, a Soviet literary boss who shot himself when Stalin’s crimes, and his own complicity, began to be exposed under Khrushchev.

Among the subjects of other Ozerov “portraits” are Babel; Platonov; Shostakovich; Tatlin; the ballet dancer Galina Ulanova; and Kovpak, a Ukrainian partisan leader. One poem tells of Slutsky’s generosity in making his room available to couples who had nowhere to sleep together; one evening he returns home to find a note: “Boris, / you are a great humanist, / and the heavenly powers / will reward you. The sins of others, / sins that are not yours, / will bring you blessings.”

– Robert Chandler

1

Andrei Platonov (1899–1951) is one of the greatest Russian writers. His longer works were published only long after his death, but the short stories he published during his lifetime are no less remarkable. “Fro” is one of the most charming and tender of these. Most of Platonov’s best short stories and short novels have been translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, in collaboration with Olga Meerson and other translators, and published by NYRB Classics and Vintage Classics.

2

Kornely Zelinsky (1896–1970) was a Soviet literary critic, of great influence from the early 1930s until his death. In 1940 he wrote a damning internal review of a collection of poems that Tsvetaeva, recently returned to the Soviet Union, was trying to publish. He also played an important part in the public attacks on Pasternak in 1958, after *Doctor Zhivago* had been published abroad.

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