

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

## The Philosophers' Ship on Novinsky Boulevard

*The Legacy of Iuli Aikhenvald in the Work of His Descendants*

### 1. THOSE WHO STAYED BEHIND: WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT

How did the intellectual and spiritual legacy of those who were forced to leave Russia after the Bolshevik putsch play out for those who stayed behind? In many ways, the fates of those who remained in Russia mirror the turmoils of Russian history and the continuity, intellectual survival, and resilience of this endangered breed known as the Russian intelligentsia. Iuli Aikhenvald (Balta, 1872? – Berlin, 1928) was a prominent literary critic, a philosopher, and one of the key figures in the mass exile of intellectuals on what is known as “the Philosophers’ Ship” in September and October of 1922.

I focus on the ways in which his legacy was reflected in the lives and work of his descendants. Iuli (Ioil, Julius, or, in English, Joel) Aikhenvald (Eichenwald, Айхенвальд) is particularly renowned for his essays *Silhouettes of Russian Writers*, his “denial” of theatre as art form, his criticism of Vissarion Belinsky, and numerous books and articles on various literary topics. His book *Our Revolution: Its Leaders and the Ones Led* (Moscow, 1918) was a trigger for mass exile of Russian intellectuals in 1922 known as “The Philosophy Steamer” (for more on this, see Chamberlain 2007).

On the night of 16–17 August 1922, the security organs (the infamous “GPU,” the ancestor of the KGB and its current incarnation, the FSB) undertook arrests of prominent intellectuals who were to be deported, Iuli Aikhenvald among them. The materials of Iuli’s interrogation, on 18 August 1922, mention his marital status as “married, with three children.” As “befits a scholar of Pushkin” (Levin 1994), his children were named Tatiana, Boris, and Alexander. This essay focuses on Iuli’s three children as well as on his only grandson, Iuri Aikhenvald: the son of Alexander Aikhenvald and my father.



The lives of Iuli's children revolved around their father's apartment on Novinsky Boulevard, 32, apartment 9 (Moscow), where he was arrested and then exiled to Berlin. His study continued to be the main place of discussions and joint work for them and their friends, including A. I. Smirnitsky (1903–1954), a high-profile scholar of Germanic languages. In the mid-1920s, the big apartment was transformed into a "communal" dwelling, and the focus of intellectual interactions and meetings shifted to the former nursery and the living room, the two rooms kept by the Aikhenvald family until 1 November 1949. This date marked the end of the "Aikhenvald apartment," but not the end of its tradition and intellectual legacy.

## 2. CONTINUITY AND DEFIANCE

Two complementary paths – continuity and defiance – sums up the intellectual interactions between Iuli and his children, especially in his emigré years and after his death on 17 December 1928 (killed in Berlin in a tram accident).

### 2.1. The Teacher Gene

The "teacher gene" was perhaps one of the aspects of continuity between Iuli, his children, and his grandson. Iuli was a brilliant teacher, whose lectures at various tertiary education institutes and the People's University of Shanjavsky were remembered by his students long after his death. So were also Tatiana, Boris, and Yuri Aikhenvald. Former school students of Tatiana and Boris would share the memories of their remarkable teachers with us in the 1960s and 1970s. The legacy of Yuri as a teacher of literature is the focus of the collection *The Way of Life* (Obraz zhizni), edited by Tamara Margolina, a faithful friend of our family (Margolina 2014).

### 2.2. Tatiana Aikhenvald

Iuli's elder daughter, Tatiana Aikhenvald (1900–1963), was in some ways the direct opposite of her father. A graduate of Moscow State University's Faculty of Mathematics in the field of pure mathematics (1922), Tatiana spent the best part of her professional life teaching mathematics in secondary schools, in the Academy of Military Engineering (1932–1936), and the Institute of Architecture (1930–1937). Those who remember her recall her



precision in thinking, clear argumentation, and attention to minute details, as if in defiance to her father Iuli's method of "imaginative" criticism.

Tatiana was part of the trio, together with her brother Boris and her first husband and Boris's close friend A.I. Smirnitsky (1903–1954). The trio spent days in the "Aikhenvald" apartment discussing problems of literature and philosophy and trying to make sense of the overwhelming experience of Russian revolution. This fact was reflected in her novelette *The Tempest*. The text did not survive, but Yuri Aikhenvald remembered its beginning: "The tempest overcame everything, the tempest overcame the country, everything was on the verge of destruction, and just the three of us were still there, trying to make sure that at least something survives inside this chaos" (Aikhenvald 2003).

These words resonate with Iuli's attitudes to the revolution as a gigantic overwhelming force (as can be seen in the materials from his interrogation in 1922: see Aikhenvald 2022 for this and further references). Tatiana's fate was harsh. In 1930, after divorcing A. I. Smirnitsky (who remained her lifelong friend), she married Aleksey Panchenko (1902–1937), an expert in military chemistry (Aikhenvald 2003, 17–18). On 17 July 1937, Aleksey was arrested and executed later the same month. Tatiana, his wife and thus a "member of the family of the traitor of the fatherland" (or Chlen Semji Izmennika Rodiny, ChSIR), followed suit. She spent eight years in the various corners of the Gulag (Karlag and Segezhlag) and in 1945 was released as an invalid (she lost a finger felling trees in the taiga). Then she moved to a suburb of expanding Karaganda in Kazakhstan, teaching maths, history, and English, until her rehabilitation and return to Moscow in 1961.

That is when she started another major fight of her life: restoring the rights of the joint work by her brother Boris Aikhenvald and A. I. Smirnitsky: their joint translation, from Swedish into Russian, of *Frithjof Saga*, by Elias Tegner (published in 1935). The translation was plagiarised by a certain David Brodsky whose translation of the same text was published in 1959 (a brief account is in Smirnitskaya 2000). As befits a defender of tradition and the intellectual legacy of her brother and of her friend, Tatiana did what she could to prove plagiarism, including going back to the Swedish original of the text, with help from Olga A. Smirnitskaya. All to no avail: the plagiarist had strong supporters among the Soviet es-



tablishment. However, I am happy to report that the original translation by Boris Aikhenvald and A. I. Smirnitsky is getting traction nowadays, and the one by Brodsky is all but forgotten. Tatiana died of a heart attack on 23 April 1963 – three days after being discharged from hospital with a certificate stating that she was terminally ill.

### 2.3. Boris Aikhenvald

Tatiana's younger brother Boris Aikhenvald (1902–1938) was a philosopher, a translator, an expert in aesthetics and poetry, and a literary critic who partly followed in his father's footsteps. A graduate of the Department of Philosophy of Moscow State University (1922), his first paper was on "Phenomenalism and Immanentism with Regard to the Problem of 'Reality,'" which resonated with his father's philosophical interests, particularly towards Schopenhauer. Boris was a follower of Edmund Husserl and a student of G. G. Shpet, under whose leadership he became a member of the GAKhN (the Government Academy of Artistic Sciences) in 1926. After the GAKhN was dismantled in 1930, Boris lost his position, and continued as a teacher of literature – the career he had embarked on back in 1923. Anna Larina, later the second wife of Nikolai Bukharin, a student of Boris, remembered him as an inspirational teacher who knew how to stand his ground (Larina-Bukharina 2003, personal communication 1983). Boris was remembered as mild-mannered and soft-spoken (not unlike his father, Iuli). But once Anna, full of quasi-antibourgeois revolutionary ideas, wrote an essay claiming that Pushkin, a representative of the bourgeois tradition, was nothing compared to Nekrasov, a true 'Proletarian' poet. Boris did not take this lightly: he criticised Anna in front of the class for her superficial understanding of Pushkin and his work.

Mild on the surface, Boris was firm in his convictions and did not shy away from saying what he thought was right – once again, similar to Iuli). A scandal was imminent, but Anna's adoptive father, Yuri Larin, a Bolshevik and a member of the Lenin's old Guard, decided to transfer her to another school, to avoid any problems. (Incidentally, Yuri Larin knew Iuli Aikhenvald well, and visited him in Berlin, trying to persuade him to return to the USSR).

As a true son of his father's, Boris wrote and presented several philosophical essays, including "Immanent philosophy,"



"The issue of reality in Hume's philosophy," "The world of reason and the problems of reality in Spinoza's philosophy," "The structure of word image," and the "Esthetics of Gogol" (a few of these survived in the form of brief abstracts published in the materials of the GAKhN: see Aikhenvald 2022). Boris followed his father's tradition of philosophical analysis and yet defied his opinions and ways of thinking. His published essay – written in a witty and ironic manner – on Marietta Shaginian's novel *Hydrocentral* – virtually demolishes her boisterous and empty rhetoric. This is quite different from endearing and laudatory words Iuli had for Shaginian and her poetry (Aikhenvald 1922, 91). Boris was a fan of Strindberg's: his unpublished essay is full of compassion and appreciation of this writer, according to Boris misunderstood by many. His own father was among those "many": in his brief article on Strindberg (Aikhenvald 1926), Iuli Aikhenvald does not mince his words in his demolition of Strindberg as a misogynistic misanthrope.

On 3 April 1928, Boris presented a talk on the future of cinema as a new art (see the abstract in GAKhN 1928). The discussion following the talk spanned two sessions (the main points were later published in an article by Zhinkin, Boris's supervisor). Boris's attitude to cinema (and to theatre) challenges his father's famous 'rejection' of theatre as an art form (Aikhenvald 2014). Further discussion and analysis of Boris's literary heritage is in Kravchenko and Shul'dishova (forthcoming).

Led by Boris and his best friend, I. D. Levin (1901–1984), the Aikhenvald apartment on Novinsky Boulevard continued to be the center of philosophical discussions until 15 April 1937. On that day, Nina Kirillovna Aikhenvald (Iuli Aikhenvald's widow) rang up Levin and said, "No need to come." There were no more philosophical meetings: Boris was arrested (in all probability, due to his connection with his brother). Convicted of failing to report a crime (what crime?), he was given a five-year term and sent to one of the worst death camps: Nagaev Bay, Maldiak, Far North (Sevvostlag). According to his fellow prisoners, his mild and trusting nature made life hard for him. He tried to survive: his major worry was the fate of his nephew Yuri, for whom he felt like a surrogate father, and also the fate of his PhD dissertation on Pushkin's poetry, confiscated during his arrest. The manuscript was never found (and was not returned to us after Boris's rehabilitation). Who knows, maybe some of Boris's legacy survives, purloined by someone else?



After hours of hard manual labour, Boris recited poetry and lectured on Russian literature to his fellow inmates, some of whom would feed him in exchange. But life in a forced labour camp with its inhuman cruelty was too much for him. As we know from a phone call by I. A. Flakserman (1895–1995), an old Bolshevik who survived years of forced labour camps, on 15 April 1938 Boris did not return to the barracks in the evening: he had lain down and fallen asleep in the snow in sub-zero temperature. His suicide was the only way out, to preserve human dignity and die on his own terms.

#### 2.4 Alexander Aikhenvald

Alexander Aikhenvald (1904–1941), or Suzhka (his family nickname), was in many ways a rebel in the family. He joined the Bolshevik party in 1920, and advocated his support of the new regime, openly challenging Iuli's attitudes to the revolution as a catastrophe. Interestingly, Alexander is the only child Iuli mentions in his writings: when the infamous Purishkevich, Iuli's former classmate from the Novorossiysk University days, rang up the Aikhenvald apartment in mid-1916, Alexander "started running around the apartment shouting his head off: 'Mummy, Dad is talking to Purishkevich!'" (Aikhenvald 1924). During Iuli's interrogation before his exile on 18 August 1922, Iuli suggested that the authorities turn to his youngest son, an established Bolshevik, to guarantee Iuli's compliance, should he be allowed to return home. The "established Bolshevik" was only eighteen.

Alexander went on to becoming a prominent Bolshevik and a member of Nikolai Bukharin's right-wing opposition. And yet both Alexander's keen awareness of social injustice and his honest analysis of what had gone wrong in the Russian revolution resonate with his father's line of thought. Alexander visited Iuli in Berlin in early 1928 and tried, in vain, to persuade his father to return to the USSR. By that time, Alexander had published his book *The Soviet Economy*, the first ever publication in this area which was immediately hailed as a "classic of Marxist scholarship." The book (with a preface by N. I. Bukharin, Alexander's spiritual leader) was reprinted five times between 1928 and 1929. A copy of the book was presented to Iuli, with a dedication: "To my incorrigible father with faint hope to acquaint *Rulj* (the émigré newspaper of which Iuli was a faithful contributor) with the true Russian reality."



Before too long, the true Russian reality showed its ugly face. In 1930, Alexander, known for his outspoken behaviour, was expelled from the party for his membership in the 'right-wing' opposition. He did not repent: his words "Better to be a right-wing oppositionist than a hopeless idiot" were repeated time and time again by friends and even by enemies. His first arrest took place in 1933: he was accused of forming an anti-party group criticising Stalin's agricultural policy. He spent part of his term in the Suzdal prison for political convicts and then was exiled to Berezov. Arrested in January 1937, he was sentenced to the death penalty, which was then annulled and converted into ten years of prison. Eventually, he was sent to the Orel Jail and executed there on 11 September 1941 (as Germans were advancing) together with other "dangerous criminals" including Maria Spiridonova, Christo Rakovsky, and Olga Okudzhava (for a description of the mass execution, see: Bykov 2009, 50). He was rehabilitated in 1989.

Of Iuli's children, Alexander was the only one to openly challenge his father's views. Maybe his rebellious nature and fight for justice was something that appealed to Iuli himself? The only memoir about Alexander, written by his prison mate Joseph Berger (1971), portrays him as "a social philosopher and a lover of Russian literature" – an unlikely heir to his father trying to make sense of Russian revolution and history.

### 3. YURI AIKHENVALD: DIALOGUE ACROSS THE YEARS

Let us now turn to Iuli's only grandson (the son of Alexander) – my father, Yuri Aikhenvald (1928–1993): poet, translator, critic, theatre historian, and writer, whose work was published in *The New Review*.

Andrew Field (1986, 115) reports that at a meeting at Nabokov's place in Berlin on 16 December 1928, a few hours before Iuli's tragic death, he "was in a particularly good mood because he had just received word from his family in the Soviet Union [...] that he had become a grandfather."\*

\* According to the diary of V. N. Bunina (Bunin and Bunina 2016: 189), Iuli spent the night before his tragic death at V.E. Tatarinov's place (where V. V. Nabokov was also present), close to the place of the accident on the Kurfürstendamm Boulevard. I am grateful to Irina V. Kochergina for sharing this information with me.



Yuri Aikhenvald was a person of many talents: a poet, a literary and theatre critic, particularly a historian of the Maly theatre and an expert on the *Don Quixote*. He is perhaps the best known of the Aikhenvalds among true Russian intellectuals.

Yuri was a true heir and true torch bearer of the intellectual tradition – from his grandfather onwards. Until his mother's arrest in 1938, Yuri spent much of his time with his grandmother and Iuli's widow Nina Kirillovna in the Aikhenvald apartment on Novinsky Boulevard, and then moved there permanently. After Nina Kirillovna had to move to a hospice in 1943, he lived by himself – with some help from numerous friends and from his maternal uncle Kuzma "Orlov," a former Menshevik who had lived under a false identity ever since 1922 (see Aikhenvald 2003).

On 1 November 1949, Yuri was arrested as the son of his father Alexander, a member of Bukharin's right-wing opposition, plus due to the false report by a neighbour who wanted Yuri's room for herself. This was the end of the Aikhenvald apartment on Novinsky Boulevard – but not the end of the Aikhenvald tradition and legacy.

Yuri was exiled to Karaganda, arrested again in 1951 (accused of taking part in a trumped up "Zionist" conspiracy), and rehabilitated in 1955. He then returned to Moscow in 1955 and worked as a schoolteacher until 1968, inspiring students and creating lifelong friendships. Expelled from school in 1968 for having signed a letter in support of Ginzburg and Galanskov, and, despite having won the case against his expulsion, decided not to go back. He continued as a freelance journalist, writer, theatre critic, close to the dissident movement, always under the threat of arrest – up until Perestroika. He died of a stroke on 28 June 1993.

An intellectual dialogue with his grandfather permeates much of Yuri's work, especially in the treatment of *Don Quixote* and the attitudes to the Russian revolution. His life work veered towards trying to understand the legacy of his father (whom he hardly remembered) and his grandfather (whom he never met), especially so in his long essay "Commentaries to Grandfather's Texts" (Aikhenvald 2003).

His books and poems speak for themselves, especially "A Poem about the Name" (*Poema ob imeni*) and "My Genealogy" (*Moia rodoslovnaia*). Yuri became a major theatre historian, as in defiance of Iuli's heritage as "the negator" of His life's work



*Don Quixote on Russian Soil*, which contains pages and pages of analysis of Iuli's attitudes to *Don Quixote* and about *Don Quixote* as a reflection of changing Russian reality (1982, 1996). This work awaits further study.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The story of the Aikhenvald family mirrors the history of twentieth-century Russia. The intellectual heritage and legacy of Iuli Aikhenvald in the work of his children and his grandson is testimony to spiritual and intellectual continuity which has always kept Russian intelligentsia together, across centuries, countries, and regimes. Against all odds, the legacy of the Philosophers' Ship survived and even thrived in those who were left behind (despite their tragic fates).

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**Panel 1 (In English)**

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald

**The Philosophers' Ship on Novinsky Boulevard: The Legacy of Iuli Aikhenvald in the Work of His Descendants**

The intellectual and spiritual legacy of Iuli Aikhenvald (1972? – 1928), a prominent literary critic, a philosopher, and one of the major émigrés of the Philosophers' Ship, percolated the lives and work of his children. Their lives largely revolved around their father's apartment on Novinsky boulevard in Moscow. Two complementary paths – continuity and defiance – make up their intellectual interactions with Iuli, especially in his émigré years. Boris Aikhenvald (1902–1938), a philosopher, translator, expert in aesthetics and poetry, partly followed in his father's footsteps. And yet, he defied Iuli's views on a few authors, including August Strindberg. Boris' view of the future of cinema is somewhat opposite to his father's famous "rejection" of theatre. Alexandr Aikhenvald (1904–1941), a prominent Bolshevik and a member of the right-wing opposition, openly challenged Iuli's attitudes towards the new regime. And yet Alexandr's keen awareness of social injustice – and honest analysis of what had gone wrong in the Russian revolution – resonate with his father's line of thought. Iuli's only grandson was my father, Yuri Aikhenvald (1928–1993), poet, translator, critic, theatre historian, and writer (whose work was also published in *The New Review*). Intellectual dialogue with the grandfather he never met is a thread that permeates much of Yuri's work. The story of the Aikhenvald family and the legacy of Iuli Aikhenvald is testimony to the spiritual and intellectual continuity which has always kept Russian intelligentsia together, across centuries, countries, and regimes.

Lesley Chamberlain

**The Origins of *The Philosophy Steamer*. Meeting the Frank Family**

Meeting Victor Frank, eldest son of the philosopher Semyon Frank, when I was still in my first year at university, was in large what prompted me to write my book *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London 2006). Though I was slow to realize it at the time, his presence during the time of my writing and researching that book on the fate of a generation was vivid. There was a moment when I wondered whether the book shouldn't be a novel. Victor was born in 1909 and the image of that 13-year-old boy standing on deck, forced with his family to leave Russia in 1922, was vivid. In 2006 the BBC Radio 3 allowed me to broadcast a 20-minute evocation of his life and his work. Victor, in his work for the BBC Russian Service in London and Radio Liberty in Munich, stressed the succession (*preemsnvennost'*) in his weekly talks on literature, politics and other topics. I would like to share with the conference the



**RUSSIAN EMIGRATION**  
**ON THE WAVES OF FREEDOM**

*Proceedings of  
the International Conference  
dedicated to the centenary of  
the Philosophy Steamer and  
the 80th anniversary of The New Review*

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