

In memoriam Alexander Moiseevich Piatigorsky

I have always been intuitively drawn not toward doing things well, but rather toward things that are fascinating.¹

Alexander Moiseevich Piatigorsky (30 January 1929 — 25 October 2009) was, as we can read from numerous sources, an internationally renowned Russian and English philosopher, buddhologist, indologist, translator and writer. In addition, he was a cultural theorist, philologist, semiotician, and one of the founders of the Tartu–Moscow school. On the one hand, one can agree with every single one (or all) of these characterizations. Yet on the other hand, with none (beginning with the words “Russian and English”), for every characterization inevitably delimits and suspends, but A. Piatigorsky was in principle indefinable, paradoxical, eccentric, and non-identical to himself, and not just over the course of his “public” life (papers, books, lectures, presentations, conversations, interviews), but often during a single paper or interview.

Alexander Piatigorsky graduated from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Moscow, after which, for four years, he taught history to fourth to sixth graders in Stalingrad. In an interview he has claimed that it was there that he became a teacher for the rest of his life. Later he worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the USSR Academy of Sciences, and defended the candidate degree² in 1962 on *The History of Medieval Tamil Literature*. He has published several

¹ Piatigorsky 2002 = Пятигорский, А. Пределом допустимого для Лотмана был я. Interview. [<http://www.guelman.ru/slava/nrk/nrk10/02.html>]

² Roughly equivalent to the PhD degree.

books *Tamil-Russian Dictionary* (1960, with S. Rudin)³, *Materials from the History of Indian Philosophy* (1962), *The Emergence of Semiotics in India* (1976, with D. Zilberman), *Symbol and Consciousness. Metaphysical Discussions on Consciousness, Symbolism and Language* (1982, with M. Mamardashvili), *The Buddhist Philosophy of Thought* (1984), *Mythological Deliberations* (1993), *Who's Afraid of Freemasons? The Phenomenon of Freemasonry* (1997), *Thinking and Observation* (2002), etc. Yet he declared already in the 1960s that he was not doing science, and to the question, what was he doing then, he replied that he is seeking the “adequate form of being” (Serebryanj 1998: 130).

Moreover, Piatigorsky, who mostly wrote on and talked about philosophical topics and who named his first novel *The Philosophy of One Street*, declared that “Philosophy is a certain kind of disposition that devolves into an illness. Philosophy — it is a way of approaching things thoughtfully and its object is irrelevant”; “Philosophers are, put simply, people who do not have their own ‘thing’”⁴. Or then again, he declared (in his own words as a “banal” introduction to one of his lectures) that there is no such thing as philosophy as a profession: “There is way of thinking and living. A way of thinking is unprofessional in the objective sense. Because anything can be the object of a philosopher’s philosophizing”⁵.

His assessment of oriental studies, indology and buddhology was, however, much more traditional and amicable: of course these are sciences. He has said that Juri Roerich (under whom Piatigorsky worked in the Institute of Oriental Studies between 1959–1960) was his teacher in the field of sciences, but not his mentor, that is, not a philosopher: “He was not at all a philosopher. He was a magnificent scholar [...] and an extraordinary person”⁶. Moreover, in the sciences, unlike in phi-

³ He has noted self-ironically that it was such a terrible dictionary that he ever saw just one that was worse.

⁴ Piatigorsky 2006a = Пятигорский, А., Философ — это человек, у которого нет своего дела. Interview. [<http://gtmarket.ru/laboratory/publicdoc/2006/2202>]

⁵ Piatigorsky 2006b = Пятигорский, А., Мифология и сознание современного человека. Lecture. [<http://www.polit.ru/article/2006/03/02/pjatigorsky/>]

⁶ In: Piatigorsky 2006a, see fn 4 above.

losophy, schools of thought are not only possible but inevitable: “I am generally against schools in philosophy. But when we are talking about one particular science, such as oriental studies, you cannot even do it without being part of a school. It’s not like that in philosophy”⁷. He was convinced that the 20th century was a century of bad philosophers, and that an era of unimaginable vulgarisation of philosophy is at hand.

Piatigorsky had connections with Tartu already before the first Summer School on secondary modelling systems took place between 19 and 29 August 1964. Numerous sources (including Piatigorsky himself in his interviews) impart that he arrived in Tartu to give lectures in 1963, at the invitation of Juri Lotman, whereas during one of his last appearances, in the radio *Echo of Moscow* show *Non-past times* (28.09.2008), he claimed: “But I was not invited by Lotman, but by another magnificent Estonian, Pent Nurmekund, an orientalist, who has now passed away. I got to know Lotman and that was it, from that day on we became fast friends, which lasted until his death”⁸. Also, “we became friends in an instant, in a single day. I have never become friends with anyone the way I did with him”.

He called himself a non-epistolary person who is incapable of keeping a diary or to write memoirs. Yet he is the author of several novels and was awarded a literary prize in Russia. As he himself noted in an interview, nobody at his age likes it that his prose is mostly read by thirty-somethings, which is astonishing because they do not know anything about the times he was writing about.

Piatigorsky was not only one of the more prominent founding members of the Tartu–Moscow school of semiotics (he is considered to be one of the school’s five or six key figures by nearly all of its members), not only one of the co-authors of the school’s manifesto, *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures*, first published in 1973 (and in Estonian in 1998), but also an active participant in all of the Summer Schools. His papers were regularly published in the Tartu journal *Trudy po znakovym*

⁷ In: Piatigorsky 2006a, see fn 4 above.

⁸ Piatigorsky 2008 = Пятигорский А. Непрошедшее время. Interview. [<http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/time/543196-echo>]

sistemam (*Sign Systems Studies*) until 1973, until his emigration from the Soviet Union in 1974. Most of the papers were on buddhological topics. Considering his last paper to be published in Tartu, “On some theoretical presuppositions of semiotics” (in *Collection of Papers on Secondary Modelling Systems*, 1973), even its title notifies us of its importance for today’s situation. In this paper he attempted to present semiotics as a certain elementary phenomenology. Juri Lotman was fascinated by the paper. Unfortunately, neither this nor other papers by Piatigorsky have been translated into Estonian; all the while, the lack of attention paid to the theoretical problems of semiotics, and the lack of development of its terminological foundation was, for many members of the Tartu–Moscow school who shared their recollections during the 1990s, the main reasons for the crisis, stagnation and eventual death of the school (Koshelev 1994).

Piatigorsky was in Estonia for the last time in 2002, at the conference dedicated to Lotman’s 80th anniversary. We trust that his talk left a lasting impression on those present. He was an excellent lecturer, emotional, with an expressive body language. While his health was not the best at the time and at receptions he looked weak and feeble and could barely stand, during his talk there was an astonishing transformation: he radiated ardour and energy worthy of biblical prophets, and when he stepped forward to thunder criticism upon semiotics, he made the first rows to recoil in fear and then to nod in energetic agreement, just to escape from his penetrating gaze. Nearer to the end of his talk he chose the massive mirror at the opposite end of the hall as his opponent. It is not a coincidence that one of the authors of the recollections, G. Lesskis, associates the last (winter!) event of the school with Piatigorsky’s sending off during the summer of 1974 and with Isaak Revzin’s death at the end of March of that same year, which, for Lesskis “symbolised the end of Kääriku, the end of an era, ‘a crisis of genre’. I remember that when we drove to Tartu with I. I. [Revzin] in February 1974, I told him several times that I had the feeling that we were driving to our own funeral” (Lesskis 1994: 317). Coincidentally, it was precisely in that “funeral year” of 1974 that the first international congress of semiotics convened in

Milan. And it was this very author who penned the sentimental lines with which we would like to conclude our story: “Dozens of marvellous people of every age passed through Kääriku, from the student Garik Superfin to professor Petr Bogatyrev; but more than any of the others, except for Olya and Isaak Revzin, I see in my mind’s eye the pale, oval face of a black-haired, tall, slightly limping and slightly squinting man, the face of the beloved (one of his favourite words) Alexander Moiseevich Piatigorsky” (Lesskis 1994: 316).

Irina Avramets, Silvi Salupere⁹

References

- Koshelev 1994 = Кошелев, А. 1994. Тартуско-московская семиотическая школа глазами ее участников. In: Кошелев, А. (ed.), *Ю. М. Лотман и тартуско-московская семиотическая школа*. Москва: «Гнозис», 265–351.
- Lesskis 1994 = Лескис, Г. А. О летней школе и семиотиках. In: Кошелев, А. (ed.), *Ю. М. Лотман и тартуско-московская семиотическая школа*. Москва: «Гнозис», 313–318.
- Serebryanuj 1998 = Серебряный, С. Д. «Тартуские школы» 1966–1967 годов (Заметки маргинала). In: Неклюдов, С. Ю. (ред.), *Московско-тартуская семиотическая школа. История, воспоминания, размышления*. Москва: Школа «Языки русской культуры», 122–132.

⁹ Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu Jakobi 2, 51014 Tartu, Estonia. E-mail: silvi.salupere@ut.ee; irina.avramets@ut.ee.