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CONFIDENTIAL FILING

Prime Minister's meeting with Mrs Ratushinskaya, 22 December 1986

PRIME MINISTER

December 1986

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
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~~13.1.87~~							
~~26.3.87~~							
13.6.88							

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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

13 June 1988

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you very much for your letter of 10 June enclosing a copy of Irina Ratushinskaya's new book which she was delighted to receive. The Prime Minister has read the earlier volume and was very moved by it. She would be grateful if you would convey her thanks to Irina Ratushinskaya and say what pleasure it gives her to receive this latest volume.

The Prime Minister was also interested to hear about your company and the work which it is doing, and has asked me to send you her best wishes.

C. D. POWELL

Neil Astley, Esq.

BLOODAXE BOOKS

P.O. BOX 1SN, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE NE99 1SN

TELEPHONE: 091-232 5988

Chairman: Simon Thirsk Managing Director: Neil Astley *Company Secretary:* Nansi Thirsk LLB

CF?

10 June 1988

Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher, MP,
10 Downing Street,
Whitehall,
London SW1A 2AA.

R11/6

APS/mtg records at file

Dear Mrs Thatcher,

As you know, Irina Ratushinskaya is grateful to the British Government for the pressure it put on the Soviets to release her from prison and to allow her to come to Britain in 1986.

We have just published a new book by her called *Pencil Letter*, which is a collection of the poems she wrote in the labour camp where she was imprisoned from 1983 to 1986. It is a sequel to *No, I'm Not Afraid*, the book which spearheaded the international campaign for her release.

Irina has signed the enclosed copy to you personally, and has asked us to send it to you with her compliments.

We thought you might also be interested in the enclosed article by the writer Harry Novak which tells the story of how Irina's poetry was smuggled out of Russia - and how it came to be published by Bloodaxe Books in Newcastle. We published her first book *No, I'm Not Afraid* when few people in the West had heard of her. The book was vital to the campaign, and Irina herself does not believe she would be living a free life in the West now had we not got hold of her work and published it.

Bloodaxe Books is a small literary publishing house which is grant-aided by Northern Arts. None of the London publishers had heard of Irina when we published her. We believe that the publication and success of *No, I'm Not Afraid* is just one example of how public subsidies are being put to good use in the arts.

Yours sincerely,

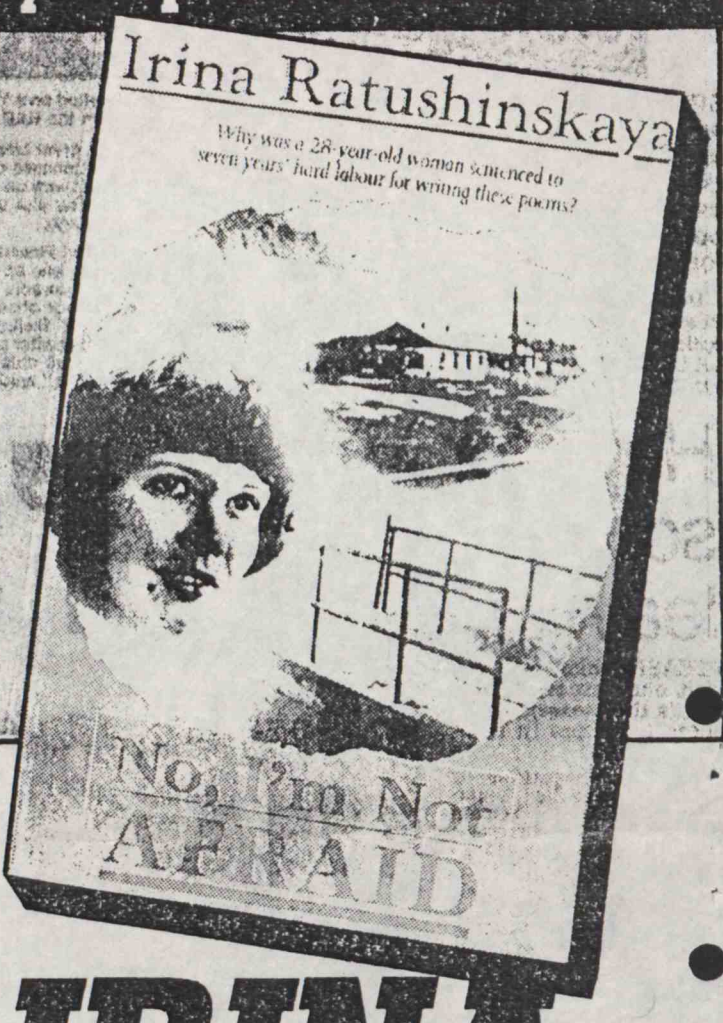
Neil Astley.

PRIME MINISTER: mtg w/ [redacted]
Mr. Ratushinskaya
Dec 86

How a Newcastle publisher pulled off the literary coup of the decade

Two years ago Russian poet Irina Ratushinskaya lay unknown, dying in in a Russian labour camp. Now she is not only free but widely acknowledged as one of the greatest poets in the world.

Her freedom and fame are due largely to a small Newcastle publisher whose literary detective work created one of the publishing coups of the decade.



By Harry Novak

THE BOOK THAT FREED IRINA

WHEN Newcastle publishers Bloodaxe Books first published Irina Ratushinskaya the poet was still being tortured in a Russian labour camp, writing poems on bars of saop and smuggling them out. The big London publishers had never heard of her.

Yet within weeks of her book No, I'm Not Afraid being printed, 34-year-old, Irina, was being acclaimed as the most important Russian poet of her generation and an international campaign of protest was being mounted. The following Christmas she stood in front of the Christmas tree at 10 Downing Street with Maragret Thatcher — free.

Christmas 1986, Irina is greeted by Mrs Thatcher at Downing Street.

Campaign gathers momentum

Irina's fame and recognition all lay in the future in Christmas 1985, as she lay huddled against the lukewarm radiator pipes in an icy cold isolation cell.

She had been arrested on 17 September 1982, and charged with 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda'. On 3 March 1983, one day before her 29th birthday, she was sentenced to seven years' hard labour in a "strict regime" prison camp and five years' internal exile.

The following month she was sent to a camp at Barashevo in Mordovia, three hundred miles south-east of Moscow, to a special unit for women prisoners of conscience - the place that would later become famous as the Small Zone.

All the "crimes" committed by the other women in the Small Zone were as strange to the Western mind as Irina's: distributing poetry, publishing feminist and dissident writings, and talking to foreign journalists. Some were imprisoned for their work in support of religious groups, and some for campaigning for the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian peoples.

Draconian sentences were meted out to these women. One young woman was given five years' hard labour for distributing leaflets about the miracle of Fatima.

Meanwhile, Irina was continuing to compose poems, even in the punishment cell with no paper, where she and the other women were being starved, beaten, and then - when they went on hunger strike in desperation - force-fed as well.

She wrote them onto bars of soap with charred matchsticks, and then committed them to memory: "The soap was my friend. Writing poems was forbidden, so as soon as I had memorised what I had written, I had only to wash my hands to obliterate it. In camp I had a pencil and could use scraps of paper. But I still had to destroy everything."

She memorised over 150 poems. But when she could, she wrote them down in a tiny hand onto strips of paper which were hidden and then smuggled out of the camp. Sometimes cigarette papers were used.

When Irina made up a tiny packet of these miniature copies, she had no idea that a whole chain of people would take her poems from the prison camp to the other side of the globe, and that the final link in this chain would be a small publisher in northern England.

In February 1986 the Observer ran an article about her based on an advance copy of the book and linked to Dick Rodgers's caged vigil in Birmingham.

"By the time the book came things were snowballing," said Neil. "After the initial publicity, we were contacted by all kinds of people who wanted to do something for Irina.

"Theatre groups and playwrights were scripting plays about Irina which were then performed in Manchester, Leicester, Belfast, Edinburgh and Newcastle. The National Theatre in London staged a special reading of her work. And Evening Chronicle chief feature sub-editor, Simon Thirsk, who is also finance director and chairman of Bloodaxe, wrote a TV play linking Irina's case to the various protests which was taken on by the BBC."

Vigils

In the North-East, churches were holding vigils and fasts, and local branches of Amnesty International were taking part in a national campaign. People from Berwick to Darlington were sending thousands of letters appealing for Irina's release to Mikhail Gorbachev.

"As it turned out, the KGB unwittingly supplied the last link in our chain of information. As we know, a copy of No, I'm Not Afraid did end up in the hands of the KGB interrogator at Irina's labour camp."

As Irina later said: "It was from the KGB that I first learned that my poetry was published in the West. The KGB were very angry. They came to me in my punishment isolation cell and said: 'What does this mean! Your poems are published in the West. Now you will get another sentence and you'll die in prison.'"

"I kept silent because I didn't use to speak to the KGB, but I was very happy at that moment. I understood that even if I died, my poems would survive."

A statement in No, I'm Not Afraid had been fullfilled: "Irina Ratushinskaya was imprisoned for her poetry. Could her poetry now secure her freedom? If it is powerful enough to move people to act on her behalf, perhaps it can".

So how did a small publisher working from Newcastle's Quayside pull off one of the literary coups of the decade?

Bloodaxe Books editor Neil Astley explains: "There was a chain of brave and committed people, coupled with a lot of painstaking work, and some luck.

"Huge amounts of banned material is smuggled out of Russia through samizdat, the underground publishing network which operates behind the Iron Curtain. As well as the poems, stories and novels by dissident writers, there are popular songs, scientific articles, political essays, sociological studies, and so on."

"People reading and circulating this material behind the Iron Curtain run the real risk of arrest.

"The first link in the chain was Irina's husband, Igor Gerashchenko. He produced duplicated copies of her poems, and circulated them in samizdat."

Exiles

"Some of her poems had been passed along the chain by word of mouth, in memorised versions, eventually these filtered through to Paris."

"They continued the chain by sending Irina's poems on to other Russian exiles in America, one of whom, Ilya Nykin, found he was reading the work of a girl he'd known at college ten years earlier in Odessa.

"He and a friend translated a couple of the poems into English, and sent them to a literary magazine in New York."

"That magazine was sent to me by an English translator of Russian literature, David McDuff, who had written an article in the same issue."

"I read David's article, and then started leafing through. Suddenly I found myself reading the kind of poems many literary editors spend their whole lives looking for and never find. I could feel the hair standing up on the back of my neck."

"Actually the translations were not that good - rather American in style, but they managed to put over some quite startling images. The more I read them, the more I became convinced that the originals must have some extraordinary power which somehow I knew was there but which these translations weren't conveying."

"It wasn't just that a young woman from Kiev had been packed off to a labour camp for writing poems which a judge called 'a danger to the state', it was the way she had translated that suffering into works of the highest standard."

"I looked at the date on the magazine and realised that she would have been in the camp for nearly two years when these poems were finally translated and published in America. But that would have been six months ago. That made it two and a half years. I didn't know if she was still alive."

The detective work began. "I got on to David McDuff, who said he'd heard that some more recent poems by her had appeared in Russian emigre journals in France. He tracked down a few of them, and sent me his own translations of them," said Neil.

"It was a revelation. When I read these poems, I felt a shiver go right through me. I'll remember that moment for the rest of my life. David McDuff is one of the world's finest and most sensitive translators of Russian poetry, and there didn't seem to be any language barrier where his versions were concerned."

"What I felt I was reading in his translations WAS Irina Ratushinskaya. And this was Irina writing from the labour camp: 'I will live and survive and be asked: How they slammed my head against a trestle, How I had to freeze at nights, How my hair started to turn grey.'"

Irina with her publisher, Neil Astley of Newcastle's Bloodaxe Books

'The day died'

The day died like a dog and won't come back,
So let's arrange a splendid funeral feast.
There will be many more days just as black,
I know. The further east
You go, the worse it gets
(That's the unusual fate of pioneers!)
But evening's slow-paced gladness will revive
Our worn-out sinews like a healing spring.
The day is done. Our blood slows. We're alive,
Though life is harsh, the age unpitying.
We take another lovely draught, and let
The dusk carry us back to some lost place
Where, with our young audacity, we face
Freedom — and accept the price of it.

Neil knew he had to move quickly. After commissioning McDuff to translate as many more of Irina poems as he could track down, he set off on the trail of other material about her.

Smuggled

Amnesty International confirmed that as far as they knew, Irina was still alive, and they were able to provide a paper on the women prisoners of conscience imprisoned with Irina as well as part of their Diary of the Small Zone which had also been smuggled out of the Other sources yielded further material, from Russian emigres in America to the writers organisation International P.E.N. in London.

Church groups provided a further lead, and Keston College, an organisation working for Russian Christians, was the link to the Rev. Dr Dick Rodgers, who had also taken up Irina's case and was planning to live on labour camp rations in a cage in Birmingham's Bullring for the whole of Lent."

"All this material began to fit together like a jigsaw," said Neil. A portrait of Irina began to emerge. By then David McDuff had managed to track down and translate about 60 poems, and I was piecing everything together into a book which was half poetry, half documentary."

She came across as a woman of indomitable spirit who would never allow herself to be broken." Although I'd only read a few translations, I knew right away that she was not just a good poet who'd been unjustly treated. She was, quite simply, a great poet - probably the best from Russia since Brodsky and Pasternak."

Poems were smuggled back

Bloodaxe also tried smuggling Irina's poems back to Russia.

"We produced a special copy of a book by another one of our poets, the Belfast writer James Simmons," said Neil. "His book was quite big and just the right size for the job.

At first glance it looked like his latest Bloodaxe collection, with the innocuous title Poems 1956-1986, but we got our printer to bind pages from No, I'm Not Afraid into the middle, and then arranged for someone involved with the underground network to take it to Russia. When it reached Irina's husband, Igor Gerashchenko, he might wonder at first why he'd been sent a book by Jimmy Simmons, but we didn't think he'd be disappointed by its contents once he looked inside."

If Mikhail Gorbachev could not help hearing about Irina's case, the same might not have been true of Irina herself.

However, Bloodaxe didn't just send out copies of her book.

Every day they sent the latest press cuttings to all the main bodies campaigning for her in Britain, to the Russian Ambassador in London and to Mr Gorbachev.

"We also posted everything which appeared in the press to Irina in the labour camp and to Igor," said Neil.

"We knew these would be confiscated by the KGB. But it was a way of showing the Soviet authorities the level of concern for Irina in the West, and so - every day of the week - exactly how much publicity she was getting.

"The publicity could only help Irina, and every piece which appeared was an embarrassment to the Russians - and clearly at odds with the more tolerant image which Gorbachev was trying to promote through his new policies of glasnost and perestroika."

Dr David Owen took a copy of No, I'm Not Afraid to Moscow, and raised her case in the Kremlin: "When asked if she was a good poet, I was able to give him the English edition which I had in my case, so he could judge for himself," Dr Owen told the Sunday Times.

"I like to think that perhaps this had some influence in the later decision to free her from prison."

The Foreign Office conveyed an offer of free medical treatment for Irina in Britain if the Russians would release her. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, said: "The imprisonment and harsh treatment meted out to this brave young woman have caused widespread concern in this country.

Her case has been taken up by British Ministers with the Soviet authorities on many occasions."

It was because of the pressure put on the Russians behind the scenes by the British Government that Irina was received by the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher,

Because of the international publicity, Irina was transferred from the labour camp in June 1986 to the KGB's investigation prison in Kiev, and held there for three months before being release on 9 October 1986, on the eve of Reykjavik summit.

When the news broke, Neil Astley decided to try phoning her in Kiev: "The line wasn't open for long. Once the authorities realised that she was speaking to people in the West, they cut her off. But Russia is a huge bureaucracy, and there was time for us, for her friends and for the press to ring through and offer our congratulations and good wishes."

"I was able to tell her that Dr Owen had given a copy of her book to Gorbachev, and that Ronald Reagan also had the book in this briefcase when he set off for the Reykjavik meeting.

She really didn't know about everything which had been going on in the West, so all this came as quite a surprise to her."

On June 9 Irina visits Newcastle for the publication of two new books. Bloodaxe are publishing Pencil Letter (4.95 paperback & 10.95 hardback), a collection of the poems she wrote in the prison camp - a joint publication with Century Hutchinson. Hodder & Stoughton are bringing out Grey Is the Colour of Hope (12.95 hardback), her own story of her labour camp ordeal. She will be signing copies of the books in Waterstones, Grey Street at 6.p.m..

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

26 March 1987

I attach a copy of a letter the Prime Minister has received from Dr Richard Rodgers.

I should be grateful if you could provide a draft reply for Private Secretary signature. It would be helpful if this could reach me by Thursday 9 April.

(CHARLES POWELL)

Lyn Parker Esq
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Rev. Dr. Richard Rodgers
63 Meadow Brook Road
Northfield
Birmingham B31 1ND
Tel: 021 - 476 0789

25th March 1987

R26 Pros.

Dear Mrs Thatcher,

Thank you for recieving me when Irina Ratushinskaya and her husband visited you in December.

You may know that my friend, Athanasius Hart, an Orthodox layman from Bath, fasted for the whole of Advent in a London church out of concern for the plight of ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV,36.

Alexander was released in the recent "review" but on arrival in Moscow he found that his wife had just married another man. His loss is compounded by his present inability to persuade any Moscow District administration to give him a residence permit. One had been promised him in his wife's district but it is said no longer to apply since she has remarried.

His former wife has given him custody of their son but without a home he cannot care for him.

He is understandably very reluctant to leave the comparative protection of Moscow, yet by now without a residence permit he is liable to arrest unless he leaves.

It is a heart-rending human tragedy.

If the oportunity presents itself, would you mention Alexander's continued plight to Mr Gorbachev.

I do wish you well on your visit, and I am grateful for any help you may be able to give.

Yours sincerely,

Dick Rodgers

KESTON

MORE DIFFICULTIES FOR OGORODNIKOV (USSR)

(KESTON NEWS SERVICE No. 271.) (19th March 1987)

Recently released Russian Orthodox dissident, ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV, is encountering great difficulties in registering for residence in the Moscow area. The problems appear to be, basically, bureaucratic, but Ogorodnikov is worried that if he does not receive permission to register within a week, he can be arrested under Soviet law for "violating passport regulations". The problem has arisen because Ogorodnikov's wife remarried five weeks before his unexpected release on 14 February, so the document received upon release making him eligible to register in her place of residence proved to be invalid when he arrived back from camp. (Ogorodnikov and his wife were married in a church ceremony only, so, from the point of view of the authorities, was not legally binding on either party. In Ogorodnikov's release papers it is noted that he can register for residence in her area although "only a church ceremony" made them man and wife.)

Now, Ogorodnikov is being sent from one government office to another. The registry in his wife's area refuses to register him because his wife is "legally married" to someone else. Registry offices in other areas refuse to accept his applications, telling him to apply to the area registry where his ex-wife lives. Ogorodnikov fears that because of this bureacratic buck-passing he will be arrested, and sent back to the camps.

In a bid to resolve this dilemma, on 14 March Ogorodnikov wrote the following application to the chairman of the Moscow regional executive committee (Oblispolkom):

"On 14 February I was released from imprisonment on the basis of a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR dated 12 February, and directed to register for residence in the town of Bolshevo in the Moscow region (Oblast). On 5 March 1987, the 5th section of the Militia of the Internal Affairs Department issued me the passport, the details of which are listed at the head of this letter. My son, DIMITRI ALEXANDROVICH LEVASHEV, 10 years old, lives in Bolshevo sector 3, house no. 17, flat 14, and is a student at school no. 5. His mother, ELENA MIKHAILOVNA LEVASHEVA, of the same address, now has a new family.

She has yielded full rights to me to raise and support our son, as can be seen from her appended statement.

I had been directed for residence to Bolshevo because my son, Dimitri is my only living relative in need of my support and guidance. Therefore, it is essential that we have a common residence. Moreover, it is vital that I secure some kind of employment.

In connection with the above, I appeal to you to resolve the problem about my housing together with my son, and to authorise permanent residence registration in accordance with the constitution of the USSR, which guarantees the right of every citizen to a roof over his head.

I am appealing to you because all my applications to date to the local authorities, to the chairman of the Bolshevo-1 Executive Committee, M.N. Zaitsev, to the Bolshevo Executive, the Bolshevo Passport Bureau, the Bolshevo militia and the Kaliningrad executive committee have not resolved the situation."

14 March 1987
Alexander Ogorodnikov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