

Moscow's Hidden Literary Sites Await Discovery

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July 30, 2012



Famous writers lived in this 1960s building on Krasnoarmeiskaya Ulitsa. **John Freedman**

Moscow is filled with reminders of past cultural achievements. Monuments, house museums and memorial plaques dot the city, keeping us mindful of writers and performers who have made this city what it is: one of the great cultural metropolises in the world.

But for every artist memorialized in some way, there are dozens more whose traces are harder to find. I recently went out, armed with a camera and a few old address books looking for hidden treasures. I found plenty.

My favorite, I think, was a modest building that bears the address of 8 Vtoraya Peschanaya Ulitsa. It is a clean, neat building located across from a large and attractive park well north of the city center, on the west side of Leningradsky Prospekt. For a time, the street bore the name of Romanian politician Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and that is who the street was named after when Yury Trifonov lived here in the 1970s.

Trifonov was the author of some of the finest novels and stories written in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, including “The Long Goodbye,” “The House on the Embankment,” “Another Life” and “The Exchange.” Trifonov had a way of perusing the mundane minutiae of the human experience and leading us to profound and wise discoveries. He was a writer whose unsentimental prose seemed “effortless,” that is, it was beautifully wrought and deeply felt.

The building he lived in when he wrote many of those tales was most likely built in the early 1960s. There is a deceptive simplicity about it that fools me into thinking that even today I can see the spirit of Trifonov in its walls. I was particularly moved by the entrance to the building, which is utterly nondescript but seems to have a quiet nobility about it — probably because Trifonov walked through that door thousands of times before his death in 1981 at the age of 55.

Trifonov is honored with a plaque on the famous House on the Embankment, where he grew up across from the Kremlin on the south shore of the Moscow River. But there is something about his “unknown” place of residence that strikes me as best reflecting his work.

One of the most famous writers’ buildings in Moscow is located at 21 Krasnoarmeiskaya Ulitsa, also north of the city center, but on the east side of Leningradsky Prospekt. The nearest metro stop is Aeroport.

Here, in a structure built in 1966, a large number of the 1960s generation of writers made their homes. This included two more of my favorites, Vasily Aksyonov and Fazil Iskander.

Actually, the whole area around the intersection of Krasnoarmeiskaya and Ulitsa Chernyakhovskogo once teemed with the best writers of that age. You can still imagine Aksyonov popping down to the street for vegetables or newspapers at the corner kiosk and running into poet Bella Akhmadulina or comic novelist Vladimir Voinovich, both of whom lived around the corner at 4 Ulitsa Chernyakhovskogo.

As Dickens might have written had he chosen to describe Soviet literature of the 1960s and 1970s, it was the best of times and it was the worst of times. Trifonov, Aksyonov, Voinovich, Iskander, Akhmadulina and many of their colleagues were busy creating a large oeuvre of lasting value. Meanwhile, many were having trouble getting those works published.

When Aksyonov was effectively kicked out of the Soviet Union in 1980 for his active role in publishing the samizdat miscellany “Metropole,” it was from 21 Krasnoarmeiskaya Ulitsa that he set out for exile in the United States.

Voinovich continually found himself on the short end of conflicts with the authorities. He documented some of those troubles in his short work “The Ivankiad,” in which he narrated the autobiographical tale of an out-of-favor writer trying to persuade bureaucrats to let him have an apartment. For those who may have forgotten, in the Soviet era, apartments were given or appointed to people, usually through their place of work.

I don’t know this for a fact, but it is a decent educated guess that the apartment Voinovich describes in “The Ivankiad” is the very one located at 4 Ulitsa Chernyakhovskogo. Based on the writing dates of his most famous novel, “The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of

Private Ivan Chonkin” – 1969 to 1975 – it is reasonable to assume that this great work was completed while Voinovich lived in this building. The Writers Union phone book I have listing Voinovich as living at this address was published in the early 1970s.

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