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Pushkin House Brings Russian Culture to London

By John Freedman

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Pushkin House is located in an 18th-century building on Bloomsbury Square in the center of London.
John Freedman

The Pushkin House in London began in 1954 as a club with a dual purpose — to teach the finer points of Russian to the children of emigre families, and to give their parents a place to congregate and share their love of Russian culture. Over the ensuing 59 years it emerged as a major cultural institution whose guest speakers in recent years have included rock musician Boris Grebenshchikov, the actor Valentin Gaft, and the filmmaker Andrei Konchalovsky.

Alexander Tvardovsky, the great poet, who as editor of the so-called thick journal Novy Mir, published Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," put in an appearance at Pushkin House in the 1960s.

Ralph Fiennes, the popular British actor who has performed characters from Russian

literature on stage and on the big screen, once took Russian lessons here. He also has performed readings of Russian literature in the house's ongoing series of lectures, seminars, performances and art exhibits.

I happened to be there last week to share some of my thoughts on contemporary Russian theater, but before I did so I asked Helena Hendin, Friends of Pushkin House Liaison, to sit down and tell me more about the cultural institution's history and mission.

"From the very beginning Pushkin House was the platform for people to come and exchange their ideas, regardless of their political affiliation," Hendin told me, "and to this day this is what we do. I think it is very important that we exist."

"Our audience doesn't necessarily follow the general line, be it of the Kremlin or of the BBC," she added.

Hendin, who was born and grew up in the Siberian cities of Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk, come to London to study in the 1990s. One thing led to another and she found herself a permanent resident of the city on the Thames.

Pushkin House is currently located in an 18th-century building on the southwest corner of Bloomsbury Square, just one block from the British Museum. But when it was founded, it was located on the street called Notting Hill Gate, west of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. This was at a time when, as Hendin puts it, "it wasn't a prosperous territory at all."

The original trustees were able to pay for Pushkin House by renting out upstairs rooms.

"About six or seven years ago the trustees of Pushkin House have decided to reinvent the place, and they sold the property in Notting Hill Gate, which by then became an extremely respectable area. So it was sold at a handsome profit and we were able to buy this building here. It gave us a new beginning."

Pushkin House hosts up to four or five events each week, Hendin explained. Currently, through May 17, it is offering an exhibit of paintings by Russian artist Felix Lembersky in its upstairs meeting hall.

To see Hendin describe Pushkin House and its pursuits, view a video chat that I made in the center's library.

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