

Zsuzsa Hetényi and Laurent Stern  
Recovering the Key the Censor Hid:  
on Vasily Grossman's 'In Kislovodsk'

---

Grossman's novella, published in the Soviet Union posthumously in a truncated version, admits incompatible interpretations. A comparison of the censored and the original versions reveals topics considered offensive by the contemporary censor. It also suggests a deeper and more satisfactory reading, beyond reading only for content. Literary artworks using not only self-censorship, but a censor-deceiving strategy, require an adequate reading strategy. We assume that Grossman tried to break through the censor's barrier in order to reach opponents of the regime, and to address readers of a later generation. Our strategy not only guided us further than earlier interpretations, but also yielded a method for choosing among incompatible readings.

Kislovodsk is a wonderful town in the North Caucasus named for its mineral springs. It was a fashionable spa, a venue for romantic holiday loves and duels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we know from Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. Quite different heroes went there in 1930s, visiting an exclusive sanatorium, built for the Soviet secret services. During World War II, it was occupied in 1942 by the conquering German army.

Vasily Grossman (1905–1964), author of several novels, among others the monumental *Life and Fate*, chose Kislovodsk for a story about the days of its German occupation. 'In Kislovodsk' (1962–1963) was published posthumously in 1967 in a truncated version.<sup>1</sup> The censor deleted thirteen passages, thereby cutting the

---

© Zsuzsa Hetényi, 2014; © Laurent Stern, 2014

© TSQ № 49. Summer 2014

<sup>1</sup> *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 23 August 1967, p. 7. A note is printed beneath the title: "published in a slightly abridged version."

original text of 3251 to 2441 words. Only in 1988—during the Glasnost period—could the full text reach the readers.<sup>2</sup> This was the source that brought it out of semi-oblivion for later publications in Russian and for Robert Chandler’s English translation.<sup>3</sup> Read only for surface content, ‘In Kislovodsk’ is a typical Soviet war story—at least, at first glance. According to professional critics and ordinary readers its point was that even a compromising, mediocre, and philistine doctor of an elite sanatorium can take a high-principled stand: he refused to become a willing executioner for the Nazis when they asked him to assist in murdering the injured Russian soldiers, his patients. Earlier he seemed to be unprincipled when declining to be evacuated only because he and his fashionable wife were not ready to leave the bric-a-brac in their nicely furnished house. They preferred living under the German occupation rather than suffering the refugees’ fate. Yet, unwilling to collaborate with the occupier to that point of no return, they saw no other choice than suicide.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> *Nedelia*, 1988, 5, pp. 20–22. Last reprinted in V. Grossman, *Neskol’ko pechal’nykh dnei*, Moskva, Sovremennik, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Yorker*, 12 June, 2006; slightly revised in *The Road*, trans. by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler with Olga Mukovnikova, New York, The New York Review of Books, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> According to Chandler, “Nikolay Viktorovich shows a moral strength he has never shown before.” R. Chandler, ‘After Life and Fate: Vasily Grossman’s Last Stories’, *Open Democracy Russia*, 13 October 2010. <http://opendemocracy.net/od-russia/robert-chandler/after-life-and-fate-vasily-grossman-s-last-stories> (accessed 24 August 2014). Jochen Hellbeck follows this opinion in a simplified form: “[t]he couple’s action overrides and redeems the petty corruptions of the soul that had accumulated over a lifetime.” J. Hellbeck, ‘The Maximalist. On Vasily Grossman’, *The Nation*, 20 December 2010. Finally, Benedikt Sarnov draws attention to “the sharp contrast between these ordinary, weak and even vulgar people, who decide to commit suicide without hesitation to avoid being involved in killing and the superstrong, stonehearted Bolsheviks, who in the name of the revolution destroy the lives of children, women and old people, and demand Bukharin’s execution despite the fact they are convinced of his innocence.” B. Sarnov, ‘Otkroveniia Sturmbanfiurera Lissa’, *Lechaim*, 2007, 3. <http://lechaim.ru/ARHIV/179/sarnov.htm> (accessed 24 August 2014).

While reading the story and its harrowing ending, and trying to understand it beyond its direct, morally uplifting content, we found it useful to consider not only the time when the plot is set, but also the period when it was written.<sup>5</sup>

Grossman wrote this story at the end of his life, when he already had his own experience with the censors. A year earlier he wrote a letter to Khrushchev<sup>6</sup> requesting the removal of the ban to publish his great novel, *Life and Fate* arguing that he wrote all the truth and nothing but the truth. Writers, particularly critics of the regime who wanted to be published in the Soviet Union faced an absurd situation. If they wanted to reach their contemporaries and future generations, they were forced to break through the censor's barrier. This meant satisfying simultaneously three different and partly incompatible audiences: the censors, the regime's contemporary readers and critics, and later generations. Correlated to this writing strategy, an adequate reading strategy is required on the audience's part. Literary artworks using not only self-censorship, but a censor-deceiving strategy, remain closed books until a more careful reading adopts deeper interpretive methods than what is available when reading only for content. In such a reading the first challenge is to trace the differences between the censored and full versions.

For readers looking closer into the hierarchy of characters in the short story, a progressive reversal of the roles comes into view.

---

<sup>5</sup> Some elements of the story's plot recall the documents provided by eyewitnesses in 1943 on the Nazi occupation of Kislovodsk. About two thousand Jews were killed by the Gestapo on 9 September, 1942, and a Jewish couple, a doctor and his wife, committed suicide. Grossman was familiar with these documents since a detailed story of the mass murder of Jews in Kislovodsk was included into *The Black Book*, co-edited by him and Ilya Ehrenburg. This chapter was prepared for publication by the writer and formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky. In *The Complete Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, ed. Ilya Ehreburg and Vasily Grossman, trans. David Patterson, New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003, pp. 219–222. See also other witnesses in Yitzhak Arad, *Unichtozhenie evreev SSSR v gody nemetzkoi okkupatzii (1941–1944)*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1991, pp. 140–141.

<sup>6</sup> Translated in John and Carrol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), pp. 354–357.

At first Nikolay Viktorovich, director of the sanatorium in Kislovodsk, and his wife seem to be the protagonists, while his childhood friend, Volodya Gladetsky and Gladetsky's iconic hero, Savva Feofilovich, both patients at this sanatorium play secondary roles. In the middle of the story, Savva Feofilovich suddenly comes into sharper focus:

„During the course of a routine medical examination Nikolay Viktorovich once said to Gladetsky, ‘I can’t believe it. Savva Feofilovich’s heart is in better shape than the hearts of men half his age. It sounds so young and strong!’

And with suddenly renewed trust, with a surge of feeling, Gladetsky replied, “But he’s a superman, he has the strength of a superman! And believe me — I’m not saying this because he survived the Oryol prison, or the Warsaw citadel, or years in the underground with hardly anything to eat, or exile in Yakutsk, or life as an émigré with only the clothes on his back. No, I’m saying this because he had the strength to denounce Bukharin in the name of the Revolution. Yes, he had the strength to demand that a man he knew to be innocent should be sentenced to death; he had the strength to expel talented young scientists from a research institute merely because their names were on certain blacklists. Do you think it’s easy for a friend of Lenin to do such things? Do you think it’s easy to destroy the lives of children, women and old men, to feel pity for them in the depths of your soul as you carry out acts of terrible cruelty in the name of the Revolution? I know *from my own experience*<sup>7</sup> what it’s like — believe me! Yes, there’s no truer test of strength or weakness of soul.”<sup>8</sup>

This is the longest passage deleted by the censor. He must have had a vague notion of something subversive. Its point, italicized by us and rendered in my translation (Zs. H.) became the key to

---

<sup>7</sup> In Chandler's translation “I know only too well.” Cf. with the French translation by Luba Jurgenson “*je le sais d’expérience.*” V. Grossman, *Oeuvres*, Paris, Éditions Robert Laffont, 2006, p. 859. In the German translation by Katharina Narbutovic “*ich weiß das aus eigener Erfahrung.*” V. Grossman, *Tiergarten. Erzählungen*, Berlin, Claassen Verlag, 2009, p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> V. Grossman, *The Road*, pp. 249–250.

our new interpretation, and the working title for this essay: "I know *from my own experience*." (*po svoemu opytu*).

In this quite impressive passage Gladetsky sounds as if he were singing an aria about Savva Feofilovich. In an aria, we first grasp the music and only later the words. As soon as we concentrate on what is said our judgment changes. At first we assume that this aria is a dithyramb about Savva Feofilovich's soul and strength. The name chosen for him by Grossman signifies something essential. The etymology of his patronymic reveal the Greek parts—Feo/Theo and fil/phil—meaning god and love. A Russian reader can easily trace the correspondence between Greek and Slavic names—in Russian, Theophan became Feofan, Timothy became Timofey. E.g., the Greek Theophilos (Θεόφιλος) became Feofil (the Cyrillic Феοфил). Savva is also of Biblical (Hebrew and Greek) origin signifying Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts. Since both names refer to divine contexts, we will write his name henceforth Savva Theophilovich. As a leader of 'hosts'—the Red Army—he was indeed cruel in serving his new god, the Revolution.

Socialist ideals in Russia were grounded not only on rational but also on dogmatic beliefs. The traditions of the French revolutions and their demands of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—today we would call it Solidarity—provided Russian socialism's revolutionary heritage. Its religious background relied on a spiritual revolution demanded by many Russian philosophers and writers in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This view converged for many with an idealized conception of the Russian intelligentsia on a messianic role of Russia as saviour of the sinful World and the Revolution as a cleansing chiliastic new beginning. Gorky's novels *Mother* (1907) and *The Confession* (1908) presented socialism explicitly as a new religion. While Lenin himself anathematized all messianic forms of popularized socialism, they were used and misused by the Soviet power. Faith, devotion and dogmas were more easily adopted by a non-literate or even illiterate population, than abstract arguments for the revolutionary and economic views of Marxism. It turned out to be also a first stone for a personality cult, replacing God first by almighty New Man,

and later by the almighty Leader. Savva Theophilovich is identified by his closeness to Lenin, by shaking hands with his idol.

Why was it important for Gladetsky to speak about Savva Theophilovich's pity for those he destroys? No one can know about a pity that is present only in the depth of another person's soul, unless it is expressed by his words or deeds. Gladetsky speaks about his own experience; he uses words he would like to hear about himself from others. He attributes his doubts to Savva Theophilovich, he projects his feelings into the depths of his friend's soul. Even if Savva Theophilovich felt pity, he could certainly not reveal it to others and only he could have known what he felt for his victims. The dictatorial regime would have considered such weakness worse than the refusal to sign Bukharin's denunciation.

The form and the narrative style of the aria may convince anyone that the writer's view is far from those of his hero. Grossman does not share but unmasks Gladetsky's views as he celebrates Savva Theophilovich in a contrary reading. Grossman is using an antiphrasis, conveying an idea that is exactly opposite to its ordinary significance — a good manoeuvre for defeating the censor. Gladetsky's heart-felt aria falls apart for it fails to make sense, and it is dangerous by making nonsense attractive.

Outside Grossman's story, friends of Lenin—whose name is four times recalled in this context—denounced Bukharin, another friend of the dead and idolized Lenin. What in the real world bound together all the friends of Lenin was reverence, maybe even veneration, for the small gains and supposed achievements brought about by the Revolution. They shared the promises and expectations created by their idea of Revolution. Each was capable of denouncing the other for failing to achieve their common goal, and each could have played the role of accuser or victim. At odds with each other and themselves, each could be used as an accomplice by the regime. At first they were asked only to condemn previously arrested victims, a further tightening of the screw could force them to denounce tomorrow's victims who were still at liberty. They may have rationalized their support of trumped-up charges by convincing themselves that they acted in the best inter-

est of their Revolution. Their rationalization was self-defeating: by their false testimony they acted against the idea of solidarity, thereby destroying the very foundation of their idea of Revolution.

We cannot illuminate Savva Theophilovich's and Gladetsky's motivation, but we know Grossman's motivation for writing about denouncing innocent victims accused by the regime. In 1937, at the beginning of his career, Grossman signed a collective open letter together with many other writers asking for the punishment of eight accused Red Army Generals.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, while he wrote about and fought against anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union,<sup>10</sup> he signed at the urging of his friends the letter written by the Jewish intelligentsia denouncing the accused in the planned show trial known as the *Doctors' Plot*.<sup>11</sup> He knew *from his own ex-*

---

<sup>9</sup> *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 15 June 1937, 2. Grossman's critics mistakenly attribute this letter to the Bukharin trial of March 1937. Other open letters appeared on the first page of this journal, one of them a repetition of its first publication in *Izvestiia*, 12 June 1937, 3, with the signatures of 46 most prominent writers — some of them were manipulated. Pasternak's signature was listed, despite his expressed refusal to sign the letter. Paradoxically, the appearance of his name was a sign of the still benevolent attitude of authorities toward him, following the attack against him in the press and at the congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in February 1937. After the publication of this public letter, Pasternak wrote a personal letter to Stalin explaining his decision. See Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak i literaturnye dvizheniia 1930-kh godov* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 625–632. Russian journalists prefer to mention only pro-Soviet writers and forget about Pasternak and others who signed similar letters on the first page of this journal. The generals were tried and executed on June 11–12, before the accusation was publicly announced by Voroshilov on June 13. Documents fabricated by the efforts of German and Soviet authorities supported the accusation. See, Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, New York, Summit Books, 1982, p. 304. The eight generals were rehabilitated in 1957.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to Grossman's many other stories and novels, in this short story the Jewish theme is absent, probably, as a result of self-censorship. Grossman had in mind the failure of the Black Book project, the most important document unveiling the intensifying Soviet anti-Semitism. It contained also his world famous first account of an extermination camp, "The Hell of Treblinka," written in 1944. The volume was repeatedly censored and in 1948 destroyed. Finally its original Russian text was published in 1980. See Note 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Pravda*, 15 January 1953, p. 2.

*perience* what it was like to accuse innocent victims. This provides grounds for claiming that the story he wrote is more complex than its mere plot. The characters he created are far from one-dimensional figures.

This is the key point in the short story — Grossman speaks about choices under any dictatorship. If regarded in historical context, the question is not only about a moral behaviour under German occupation, but also under Soviet terror. We can discover this turn in the longest deleted passage quoted above. Later critics failed to notice this hidden key. Only the contemporary censor conjectured its danger for the regime.

Let us see closer how Grossman's text helps to discover this general meaning in the story's penultimate paragraph, before the doctor and his wife commit suicide. "They behaved very vulgarly," and "they danced to vulgar songs," and "*this was more vulgar still.*" The censor must have been more than happy to read such an explicit ideological judgment. This censor-deceiving device was called in the Russian intelligentsia's slang a "cover." The monotonous repetition of vulgarity could be a sign of bad style or—if we keep seeking for a better and deeper interpretation—again an antiphrasis. The first choice closes; the second opens the door to further interpretations.

Interpretations are guided by factual and normative constraints. They must be compatible with our truth claims, and they must be guided by our attributing the highest possible value to what is interpreted. These factual and normative constraints permit us to override even a speaker's or writer's self-understanding. This can be expected not only from professional critics, but also from ordinary readers of literary artworks.

On our way to the deeper dimensions of the story, the first step is to understand that Savva Theophilovich with the god-references in his name is neither a real man, nor an ideal one-dimensional hero. He may have been a hero for a Soviet censor or Grossman's contemporary, but certainly not for Grossman or for his reader in later generations. He and Gladetsky are constructed by Grossman as characters embodying a contradiction between two guiding principles, each of which is taken to be true. They hide the contra-



diction by avowing in public what they disbelieve in private. In ordinary circumstances such behaviour is common—we encounter it in the context of political or religious beliefs—and at times even harmless. In totalitarian societies social pressures force underground what is believed and bring to the surface what is pretended. Motivated by such pressures, Grossman signed the denunciation of the accused in the *Doctor's plot*. If he never believed what he signed, his situation was the same as the two characters he created; if he initially believed what he signed, he had good reasons for feeling guilty about allowing to be deceived. Either way, his own experience informed him of what he must oppose.

Returning to the story Grossman created, let us remember that we are seldom at the centre of our concerns. Yet, when we want to justify our actions, what is ordinarily hidden is moved to centre stage. To be sure, Savva Theophilovich is cruel to others and betrays them, thinking he is suffering for a noble cause. He lies to others when he denounces Bukharin, he lies to himself when he betrays his friends, he lies to himself and others if he claims that he serves the Revolution by what he does. Ordinarily, we call this self-deception. Anyone caught in such a trap, cannot easily break free.

Before Savva Theophilovich became a victim of self-deception, he did not have any doubts about who he was and what he stood for. As others who stand behind their words and deeds, he could appear on his life's centre stage and publicly state what he believed. Listening to him, everyone knew that he said what he believed. As soon as he fell into the trap of self-deception, he needed to stress that he said what he meant and meant what he said, but such a reinforcement was no longer at his disposition. By carefully hiding his authentic Self backstage and creating a heroic puppet occupying centre stage, he forfeited his undivided Self. Who was speaking at a later time, the authentic Self that he carefully hid backstage, or the heroic puppet occupying centre stage? While a self-deceiver cannot know that, we can choose to attribute his words and deeds either to the backstage artiste or to the centre stage puppet, but not to both simultaneously. Gladetsky idolizes the puppet, because he needs a hero whom he can follow, even if

that hero claimed what he knew to be false (that Bukharin was a traitor) and on whom he could project a sterile compassion generated by reverence for an abstract idea, called Revolution. So, let us focus on this heroic puppet.

On the center stage of his life, Savva Theophilovich asks for Bukharin's execution, for this puppet says that he is guilty. If others hold this to be true, they pass it on further and further. Thereby a chain of alleged truth claims is formed, starting with Bukharin's first accuser and ending with the last person repeating the accusation. By means of this chain temporarily a compact majority is formed—they are certain that Bukharin is guilty. At the same time a minority knows that this claim is false. (Gladetsky and Savva Theophilovich certainly belong to that minority.) Those who were unable to accept Bukharin's guilt were forced to create a puppet and hide their authentic selves backstage. If even *they* who spread the alleged truth could not accept it, then (in the long run) the majority must become even less convinced, and we can expect that over a period of time, the chain of alleged truth claims will fall apart. When that happens—as much later it did happen in the real world with Bukharin's rehabilitation in 1988—there is no longer a need for maintaining the split between a puppet and an authentic Self. The embodied character Savva Theophilovich—together with any other literary character or real person who followed in his footsteps and accepted a split personality for the sake of his idea of Revolution—becomes what he always was: an empty shell to be discarded and swept into the dustbin of history.

All the other characters of the story are endowed with such negative traits that upon reflection the reader will not find anyone who could be considered a hero. At this point he will discover that this tale does not offer any character with whom he can identify. Rather it holds up a mirror to the reader by modelling existential choices.

Ordinary hedonism was the guiding principle in the lives of Nikolay Viktorovich and Yelena Petrovna. They loved each other, and enjoyed their possessions. Political or professional ambition was not their concern. Grossman emphasizes their petit bourgeois characteristics. While Gladetsky worships Savva Theophilovich,

Nikolay Viktorovich and his wife worship a singer of tasteless sentimental songs. Until their penultimate moment, it seems that their way of dying will be very much like their way of living, and only in their very last moment do they manage to leave the scene in a startling and gruff way:

They behaved very vulgarly. They put on the clothes she had got ready for their evening at the theatre and she doused herself with French perfume. Then they had supper. They ate pressed caviar and drank wine; he clinked glasses with her and kissed her fingers as if they were young lovers in a restaurant. Then they wound up the gramophone, danced to vulgar songs by Vertinsky<sup>12</sup> and wept because they worshipped Vertinsky. Then they said goodbye to their dear children — and this was more vulgar still. They kissed their porcelain cups goodbye; they kissed their paintings goodbye. They stroked their carpets and their mahogany furniture. He opened her wardrobe and kissed her underwear and her slippers.

Then, in a harsh voice, she said, 'And now poison me, like a mad dog — and yourself too!'<sup>13</sup>

The couple re-appears centre stage. So far, they lived only for the present time, and not for a future utopia, as their foils Savva Theophilovich and Gladetsky. They did not lead exemplary lives, even if they led better lives than others in this story. Yelena Petrovna's last sentence—shocking in its vehemence—does not transform her or Nikolay Viktorovich who presumably acted on her advice into moral heroes. It is here that our understanding of their behaviour differs from that of the contemporary censor and tries to reach further than the critical readers of different national backgrounds of our generation.

Grossman creates at the end of the story a situation that requires explanation. Moral lessons gleaned directly from the plot

---

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandr Vertinsky (1889–1957) was a popular singer. He emigrated after the Revolution but returned to the Soviet Union in 1943. As the events of "In Kislovodsk" take place in 1942, his records were still illegal.

<sup>13</sup> Grossman, *The Road*, pp. 256–257.

do not convince the reader. As often in art and life, the couple's suicide hides both interrogation and exclamation marks — it suggests an open end of the text. None of the behaviour patterns presented in this story is admirable; Grossman's own behaviour that was at one time similar to Gladetsky and Savva Theophilovich deserves least to be emulated. With the shock caused by the last sentence and the open end, Grossman charges the reader: *de tua res agitur* — this story is about you. The absence of a hero deserving our identifying empathy and the ambivalent end hinder our parting from this story with a simple idea or a sigh that the rest is silence. The story continues to worry us by demanding our choices.

The choices among behaviour patterns are open, but not *wide* open. Excluded are Soviet functionaries or Nazi officials who may have been yesteryear's heroes and whose regimes have disintegrated. Excluded are hedonists without compassion and solidarity. Included are, however, all those who have the courage to change their lives—as Grossman did when he gave up his illusions about a socialist future. It is hardly believable that he would choose any of these characters as an ideal. Instead, he offers a schema of conflicts in special historic circumstances, without suggesting any guidance.

This strategy of providing an ambivalent ending was the guiding principle of his writings from his early short story, "In the Town of Berdichev." There also the reader is left with contrasting behavior patterns, both unattractive. Neither the woman commissar leaving her newborn baby behind then riding away with the revolutionary Red Army, nor the poor, shabby, and old-fashioned Jewish family adopting the baby who happened to be born in their house are perfect role models.

Like that story, 'In Kislovodsk' contrasts private and socially committed life styles, traditional and revolutionary ways of life. Also, Grossman again confronts the reader with choices. Throughout his career, he covertly developed a category of fiction incompatible with the dictates of Socialist Realism. The point of the literary artwork is no longer the creation of an ideal protagonist to be imitated, but the presentation of behaviour patterns that provokes the reader's self-reflection.

What quality in Nikolay Viktorovich and Yelena Petrovna makes possible their final decision to commit suicide? Savva Theophilovich and Gladetsky are split personalities, victims of a vicious circle of lies to themselves and to others. The main and only quality distinguishing Savva Theophilovich and Gladetsky from Nikolay Viktorovich and his wife is the undivided Self that the couple attains by living without lying to themselves. Yelena Petrovna and her husband did not live according to the highest moral principles, but each of them was able to maintain an undivided Self, for they never lied to themselves. Such a life is available independently of time, place and political regime. Grossman lets the reader decide what life he considers worth living.

We have searched far and wide while trying to answer the question what this story is about. We have consulted biographical data about Grossman, historical and political documents about two historical periods: the plot's wartime days and the years of the story's creation. After rejecting other alternatives, *our own experience* informed us that independently of all that can be discovered about this story's background, it is best understood, if we take it to be about Grossman himself, about choices in Soviet society, and most importantly about self-discovery. He aimed at readers attracted to or suffering from self-deception; he reached among them those responding by self-examination.