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Serge de Chessin and Ivan Bunin

In the photographs taken when Ivan Bunin came to Stockholm to receive his Nobel Prize there are some familiar faces: his wife, his secretary Andrej Sedych, the émigré journalist Il'ja Trockij, the Swedish publisher Ragnar Svanström. But there is also a man with a rather distinctive, slightly Asian appearance who often stands next to Bunin: Serge de Chessin. Who was he?

Serge de Chessin, alias Sergej Šerševskij, was born in 1880 and died in 1942. He was of Russian and French ancestry. For 25 years he was a leading figure in the world of Stockholm journalism. During the late tsarist period he held a position in the Russian Foreign Ministry. In 1917 he came to Stockholm and embarked upon a very productive career as a journalist. He was employed as the French press attaché and eventually became the head of the very active Foreign Press Association (Utländska pressföreningen).

De Chessin wrote mostly in French but also in Russian (for émigré newspapers) and Swedish. His well-written Swedish articles betray that he probably had some help with the language. His range was broad. His area was primarily foreign affairs, but he was deeply interested in literature and culture as well. He wrote about the Soviet Union but also about Sweden and Denmark. He left behind a number of books, most of them in French, some translated into Swedish. He wrote about Sweden for France and about France for Sweden. He even authored some novels, but with a solid basis in reality, as for example *Les épaves blanches* (*Bland vrakspillror i Stockholm* in Swedish translation) from 1923 about the so called Hadjetlach gang's famous murders of Soviet diplomats in 1919.

In Stockholm de Chessin represented the papers *Écho de Paris* and *Revue des deux Mondes* and worked for the press bureau Agence Havas. In Swedish he wrote mostly for *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, but he also contributed to other French and Swedish publications.

He gradually built up an extensive contact network. His archive reveals that he often sent his books to political and cultural notables. And he often met with positive responses, both from

prime ministers (Aristide Briand, André Tardieu) and prominent fellow writers (Jules Romains, Roger Martin du Gard).¹

De Chessin's deeply critical reports on the Soviet Union include *Au pays de la démence rouge* (1919), *L'Apocalypse russe: la révolution bolchévique 1918-1921* (1921) and *La nuit qui vient de l'Orient* (1929, in Swedish 1930).

De Chessin was a great friend of Sweden. He spoke in interviews about how well he had settled in here and how congenial he found the Swedish mentality. He gave the Francophone public book-length portraits of both Social Democratic Prime Minister Hjalmar Branting and King Gustav V.² He became interested early on in the Nobel Prize and later made sure that the laureates in literature were always invited to the Foreign Press Association's Christmas parties.

He met Bunin for the first time on Capri just before the outbreak of WWI. When it seemed more and more likely that Bunin would be a Nobel candidate, in the summer of 1931 he traveled down to Grasse and paid him a visit on which he later reported in the form of an interview for *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* that highlighted Bunin's integrity and enormous capacity for work.³

When the 1933 Laureate arrived in Stockholm de Chessin was naturally among the reception committee at the Stockholm Central Station. He had helped plan Bunin's visit to Sweden and had already delivered a lecture on Bunin at the Borgarskolan Gymnasium on December 4. On Nobel Day he contributed a detailed portrait of the writer to *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*'s literary supplement.⁴ Later, on December 12, he addressed his guest directly in French at the foreign journalists' Christmas dinner celebration, to which many Swedes had also been invited.

¹ Serge de Chessin's file, Riksarkivet (Swedish National Archives), Stockholm, vol. 7, 9, 11.

² *M. Hjalmar Branting: un grand européen* (Stockholm 1923), *Le roi Gustave V de Suède* (Paris 1938).

³ "Kring ett författarnamn. Aktuell **intervju**" ("Portrait of a Writer. A Recent Interview"), *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (21 October 1931).

⁴ "Veckans porträtt: IVAN BUNIN. Diktare av Guds nåde. Pusjkins arvtagare. Fädernejordens beskyddare. Herre till Belvedere. Några minnen och anteckningar kring årets litterära Nobelpristagare" ("**Portrait of the week: IVAN BUNIN. Poet by the grace of God. Puškin's heir. Protector of the native soil. Master of the Villa Belvedere. Recollections and notes on this year's Nobel Laureate**"), *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (10 December 1933).

In 1934 de Chessin summarized his interpretation of Bunin's distinctiveness in the Swedish journal *Biblioteksbladet*.⁵ This brilliant commentary on the Russian writer's works shows that de Chessin the political writer was also a very solid judge of literature. Bunin was awarded the prize, he asserts, because he represents an entire literature—the whole classical Russian tradition. One of the most impressive things about him is that he has managed to avoid the rhetoric and idealization of the peasant class that not even the great Russian masters—especially Tolstoj, of course, but also Dostoevskij—were able to resist. He is an implacable realist who wears no blinders and eschews all artifice. With regard to means of expression he appears almost “ascetically austere.” For example, he does not even stoop to describe the murder in which one of his stories ends. His prose displays an inherent union of realism and lyricism. Like important predecessors such as Turgenev he is also a poet.

Bunin basically has two themes: love and death. His restrained sense of detail allows him the whole time to imply something larger, a deeper continuum beyond external events. He achieves his mastery through “almost intangible nuances” in syntax and shades of meaning in which intuition plays a prominent role. The broader context is only suggested, so that a story that consists of a single page can seem as capacious as a novel.

As de Chessin pointed out as early as 1931, Bunin is a genuinely Russian writer who has only become more Russian outside his native land. It is precisely because his national roots are so deep that he rises to universality. His portrayal of Russia begins with Puškin—it is a Russia that keeps a window open not only to the West but also to all of humanity.

In early 1931 de Chessin sent Bunin his book *La nuit qui vient de l'Orient*. On 19 February Bunin answered him very positively, declaring that “every Russian should bow to the ground” in respect for what de Chessin had achieved—the same conclusion he had reached the evening before in conversations with Georgij Fedotov and Il'ja Bunakov-Fondaminskij.⁶

Translated by Charles Rogle

⁵ “Ivan Alexejevitj Bunin. 1933 års Nobelpristagare” (“Ivan Alekseevich Bunin. The 1933 Nobel Laureate in Literature”), *Biblioteksbladet* 4 (1934).

⁶ De Chessin's file, vol. 11.

Дорогой Сергей Борисович,
посылаю Вам доверенность – простите, что с некоторым опозданием: совсем болен,
простужен, так как наступила наконец и у нас зима с дождем и даже некоторым снегом,
а дача у нас холодная, только с камином, кот. мне самому приходится топить, бегал за
корявыми оливковыми сучьями в ледяной сарай, что мне, при всей молодости моего
духа, все таки не совсем по годам.

Ваш Ив. Бунин

P.S. Вчера вечером сидели у меня И. И. Бунаков-Фондаминский и Г. П. Федотов. Много
говорили о Вашей замечательной книге и решили: всякий русский – да и не русский –
должен Вам за нее в пол поклониться!

19 февр. 1931 г.