

## Books False Friend

THE NOBEL PRIZE

by Yuri Krotkov

Translated by Linda Aldwinckle  
Simon & Schuster; 348 pages; \$12.95

When Yuri Krotkov defected to the West in 1963, carrying a micro-filmed manuscript detailing his experiences as a Soviet secret police agent, he might have chosen a new career as a writer of thrillers. Certainly he had enough material in hand. One of his first assignments for the KGB involved informing on boyhood friends. Later he specialized in the sexual entrapment of foreigners. His job was to introduce ambassadors and attachés to beautiful Soviet women, known as "swallows" in secret police parlance. Once a diplomat was caught nesting with a swallow, there followed a blackmail attempt and—the KGB hoped—recruitment of the victim as a Soviet agent.

Yet Krotkov seems uninterested in writing conventional thrillers. Instead, he has produced *The Nobel Prize*, a spy story of a different kind, about Boris Pasternak. According to the dust jacket, which does not mention Krotkov's secret police background, the author enjoyed "a close personal friendship with the Pasternak family." Though such a friendship between a KGB agent and Russia's great 20th century poet seems unlikely, Krotkov was indeed a frequent visitor to the home of Pasternak after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958.

The plot turns on actual events, beginning with the Nobel award. The Soviet authorities had been outraged by the publication abroad of Pasternak's novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, which they had banned as anti-Soviet. When the prize was announced, they launched a vast campaign of vilification against the author.

Pasternak cabled his acceptance of the award saying "infinitely grateful, touched, proud, surprised, overwhelmed." Six days later he declined it "in view of the meaning given the award by the society in which I live." He then wrote a letter to Nikita Khrushchev pleading not to be expelled from the U.S.S.R. In spite of these and other concessions, the attacks against him scarcely subsided, and he died in disgrace in 1960 at the age of 70.

Building on these facts, Krotkov has strained for verisimilitude. There are knowing touches of trivia: a mention of the poet's favorite felt slippers, the real names of his dogs. Bits of Pasternak's works and quotes from the Soviet campaign against him are cited with precision. Only the essence of the book is false. Krotkov's defection from the U.S.S.R. seems hardly to have been for ideological reasons, nor does he sympathize with the poet's struggles. For his portrait of Pasternak immeasurably coarsens him while

it diminishes his martyrdom. In addition, it has reduced him to the image purveyed by Soviet propaganda.

Pasternak is made to inveigh against capitalism, under which "every man must be prepared to commit any crime for the sake of money." In the U.S.S.R., on the other hand, "the Bolsheviks are reshaping human nature, directing man toward a better future." Metamorphosed into a true Soviet patriot and Communist, the fictional Pasternak has little trouble turning down the Nobel Prize: "What if I really am just a puppet in the hands of the imperialists?" In any case, he concludes, the prize was "not worth having."

Krotkov's book even demeans one of the most celebrated love stories of modern literary history. Olga Ivinskaya, Pasternak's model for Lara in *Doctor Zhivago*, had been the poet's companion and secretary for 14 years. Now 68 years old and living in Moscow, Ivinskaya has survived two terms in concentration camps



Yuri Krotkov

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for her association with the poet.

To judge by this book, Ivinskaya's fate was well deserved. As Krotkov tells it, she was responsible for *Doctor Zhivago's* publication abroad, thus causing all the troubles. Pasternak is said to have repudiated her when she supposedly pocketed some of the novel's foreign royalties. That allegation corresponds to the line taken by the Soviets in 1960 to justify the eight-year sentence meted out to Ivinskaya, who was convicted on a trumped-up charge of speculating in foreign currency.

Actually, as Pasternak's frantic letters to friends abroad show, his greatest fear during the terror-filled months following the Nobel award was for Ivinskaya. "She and her children are a kind of hostage for me," he wrote. In large part, his refusal of the Nobel Prize and his other concessions had been attempts to save her. Shortly before his death, he managed to send a letter to the West saying: "If, God forbid, they should arrest Olga, all toc-sins should ring, just as would have been done in my own case, for an attack on her is in fact a blow at me." Twenty years later the blows are still falling on Olga—and on Pasternak. —By Patricia Blake