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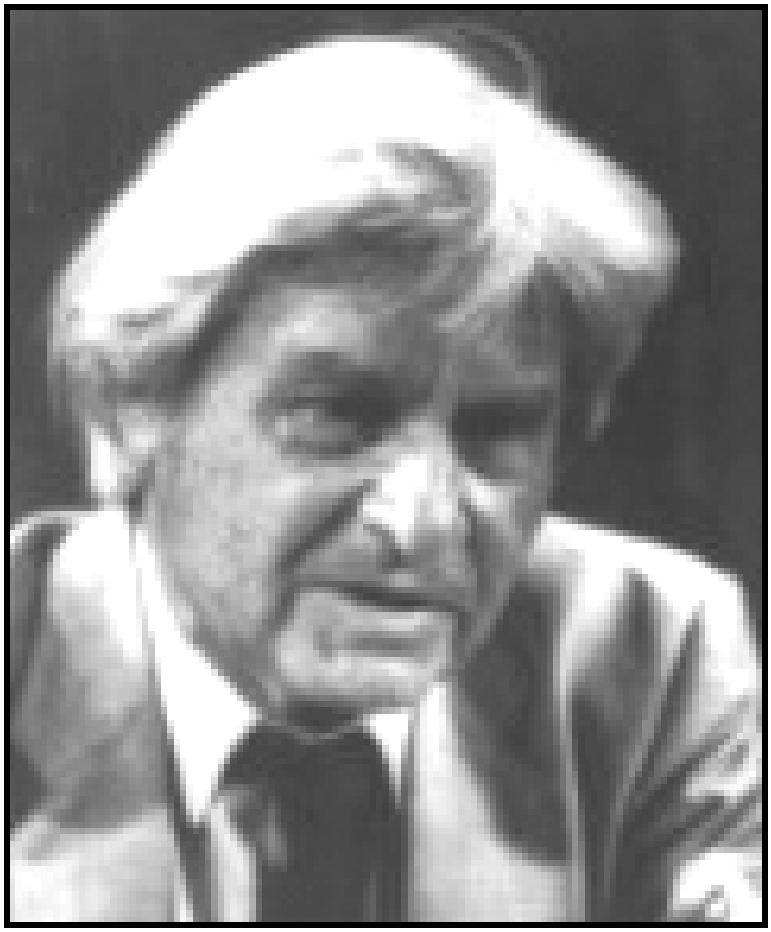
Valentin Mikhailovich Berezhkov: Surviving Interpretation (1916-1998)



An overview of Berezhkov's life

Valentin Mikhailovich Berezhkov was born July 2, 1916 in St. Petersburg, USSR, to a shipbuilding engineer and his wife. Berezhkov considered his father a "self-made man" (Berezhkov 1994: 13), due to his resourcefulness in finding work making soap and repairing shoes (*ibid.* 36) in times of hardship, and private tutoring when times were just slightly better. Over the course of his life, Berezhkov came to know both poverty and wealth. At age 4, during the Civil War (1918-20), he was nearly separated from his parents as they boarded a crammed train and he was torn from his mother's grasp on the train platform (*ibid.* 16). He and his family survived famine, and the arrest and imprisonment of their father. Later, Valentin's innocent father would be unexpectedly released from the hands of the security police, and the family would be reunited. During the 30's, he took a job with an agency in Kiev as a tourist guide. It was at this time that he began to see another way of life; Soviet authorities were attracting wealthy European visitors. While the country was in the midst of famine, the government was extravagantly renovating luxurious hotels and importing fine food for these tourist groups (*ibid.* 167). Berezhkov observed the great quantity of goods produced in the USSR that left the starving country by rail for Germany—in support of Stalin's esteemed Hitler. By this time he was working as an interpreter, fulfilling his childhood dream. But from what seemed to be one day to the next, Berezhkov's parents disappeared in the early 40's (*ibid.* 336). On top of this, there was yet another blow to come; he would be accused of conspiring with Poland be barred from the Kremlin.

A love for languages

As a young boy during the Civil War, Berezhkov was accustomed to having very little. There is one moment that stood out in his childhood; that kindled his interest for foreign languages: "[Father] visited his hometown, Chernigov, … and brought back shoe-repair tools and, for me, fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and a few books by Karl May in German and by Walter Scott in English with beautiful color illustrations" (*ibid.* 36). It is not likely that gifts were common since his father was taking on whatever work he could

to buy basic food for his family. Berezhkov must have spent many happy hours reading those books.

By the time he was 7 years old he started school. Years later he commented himself that though he took German and English lessons twice a week with a private tutor he took them for granted and did not put much effort into them. His parents however, insisted he continue, stating the classes would prove to be useful. Berezhkov shares in his book *At Stalin's Side* that he "resisted those studies, unaware of the important role the knowledge of foreign languages would play in [his] life" (92). In fact, Berezhkov's parents were the ones who urged him to continue his language study. They enrolled him in a seven-year program at a German school in Kiev, beginning in the third grade (*ibid.* 110). It was his education there that made German his "second mother tongue" (*ibid.* 121).

In 1934, while working at the Bolshevik factory, Berezhkov began taking evening classes in German and English in hopes of perfecting his command of these languages and becoming an interpreter. These dreams blossomed during hard times, when food was scarce though money was not. He applied for a job with Intourist, a tour company in Kiev, which was giving training for tour guide and interpreter positions. Strangely enough, the most attractive aspect of the job at the time seemed to be that guides were given free meals with their tourist groups (*ibid.* 166).

Berezhkov moved to Berlin six years later and took up work at the Krupp Factory where artillery was being produced for various German aircraft, battleships, and tanks (*ibid.* 75). It was here that he his language skills came into the light. Berezhkov explains, "the woman who acted as the people's commissar's interpreter wasn't too well versed in the technical terminology and was unable to translate into Russian much of what the engineer had to say. I volunteered to help" (*ibid.* 82). After the meeting was finished, Tevosyan questioned him on his background and training, knowing it was difficult at the time to find someone with such good language skills (as in Potter). Tevosyan requested he take a leave of absence from the factory in order to serve as his interpreter at upcoming meetings in Holland (*ibid.*). This offer was completely unexpected, and Berezhkov admits that "today it would be inconceivable that a young engineer who had spent only a few months working at the Krupp factory in Germany and had been trained

only in a narrow field of naval technology could be appointed to a position of great responsibility in the Commissariat for Foreign Trade" (Berezhkov 1994: 147). Indeed this was the opportunity of a lifetime. And to think that it was not by his own searching that he came by it. He was not hunting for a position as an interpreter but using his language skills in the factory where he was serving as an engineer.

The right man for the job

Although Berezhkov had not had any formal training in interpretation, his character displayed attributes, in addition to his language skills, that would contribute to success. In the first place, Berezhkov was inquisitive by nature. He had a desire to understand the whole picture and enjoyed collecting information and piecing it together in order to solve a puzzle. When he was hired on at the Commissariat he was regularly engaged in such mind exercises, asking himself questions like "why had the Germans agreed to supply [the USSR] their most modern military systems when the Wehrmacht was already planning to attack the Soviet Union?" (Berezhkov 1994: 76). Sometimes it would take years of observation and analysis before he would formulate an answer. He finally decided the answer to this riddle to be twofold: firstly, perhaps Hitler wanted to convince Stalin that he was not intending on invading the USSR; and secondly, the country was not esteemed to be competent with sophisticated weaponry (*ibid.*). Berezhkov concluded that at the time, Germany had become so advanced in the production of arms that Hitler was willing to send a relative few to Russia, to prolong the charade that there was no threat of attack on his country.

In the same way, Valentin was thorough and conscientious as an interpreter. With detective-like astuteness he took notes during government delegation meetings and drafted cables to Moscow (*ibid.* 157). He dedicated himself to taking in words objectively, so as to 'let the facts speak for themselves'. In his own writing he constantly separates true-to-life events from his personal opinion; he does this with word choices such as 'I think/ feel/ consider/ assume, in my opinion, etc. This meticulous division proved useful to his bosses at the Kremlin, for they could rely on him to recount detailed conversations with precision—and upon occasion this was asked of him (*ibid.* 226).

Berezhkov seems to consider himself as a political on-looker, close by, but remaining only indirectly involved.

This raises the question: what were his ethics? He admits that being a balanced bilingual led him into temptation—one of his grade-school teachers convinced the students to pretend they spoke only German on a class trip to the Ukraine. Berezhkov claims such practices represented the reality of what was going on with other linguistic populations at the time (*ibid.* 162). He even goes so far as to say that the game was successful but later, he recognized the 'disservice' his mentors had done him because the object of the game was hypocrisy (*ibid.* 163). Later however, when he was working for Intourist, a similar situation arose when he took an American couple to visit a model *kolkhoz* (cattle-breeding farm) and had to go to great lengths to avoid exposing the country's true farming situation. Berezhkov states simply, "it was best not to show foreign tourists the present sorry state of our country, but to give them a peek at its bright future. I felt no qualms about deceiving that nice couple (Berezhkov 1994: 170). It was during his training with Intourist that he learned "ploys to use to create a favorable impression" (*ibid.* 166). The techniques proved to be useful in debates where it was necessary to "[pass] off black as white" (*ibid.* 167). These 'acting lessons', combined with a knack for getting to the bottom of a matter were beneficial to his career as an interpreter. They gave him a keen understanding and with it, an ability to carefully and confidently translate the words of great world leaders. All of this, however, should not lead one to think Berezhkov did not have convictions.

Strings attached

Although Valentin had dreamed of becoming an interpreter, he could not have been aware of what awaited him at the Kremlin apart from interpreting. From the very beginning, he did not have a choice in many aspects surrounding his work. When Stalin hired him on, Berezhkov was asked if he would take on membership with the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Berezhkov considered his options; if he wanted the job, he would have to become a member. But, as he puts it: "Rejection of such a highranking position would entail unpredictable consequences. We all knew only too well the Leninist-Stalinist dictum, "He who is not with us—is against us." I would not

just stay a non-party member, I could become an "anti-Party element"" (*ibid.* 140). Thinking this through put everything in perspective; he had no more choice about the job than he did the Party membership.

There were other particulars that resulted from his unique situation as well. For instance, security was so stringent at the Kremlin that Berezhkov was often on-edge, not knowing at what moment he could be accused of treason. In November 1940 at the Molotov-Hitler and von Ribbentrop talks in Berlin he was caught preparing his dictation for cable to Moscow. Molotov was furious with him, suspecting the hotel room might be bugged, and leaving Berezhkov in a cold sweat, nervous of the possible repercussions of his conduct (*ibid.* 158). It is interesting to consider the cause of this nearly disastrous mistake. It was the result of improper training; Berezhkov had never been spoken to about the necessary security measures to be taken. He only wanted to do his job to the best of his ability, and this involved calling upon the typist at the interpreter's disposal. Nevertheless, he would have been held solely responsible had the contents of the meeting leaked out.

Over his stay with the CPSU Valentin would be attacked with more unexpected questions that would jeopardize not only his integrity, but also his life (*ibid.* 334). In 1941 however Berezhkov became less concerned with whether Stalin suspected him of anything; this was the same time Stalin became suspicious that German agents might be in the capital. Berezhkov, and his comrades at the Kremlin were each given a handgun in attempt to maximize security (*ibid.* 204). These circumstances are much more severe than any interpreter could imagine in the 21st century.

Showtime

While qualified interpreters, well versed in German and English were in low supply in the late 30's because Stalin had purged many government agencies (Berezhkov 1994: 148), Valentin Berezhkov's language qualifications should not be underestimated; the Soviet Foreign Ministry was not scraping the bottom of the barrel when they took him aboard, though the criteria had become less scrupulous. In fact, Hitler was impressed with Berezhkov's mastery of the German language, asking him on their first meeting if he was not German (*ibid.* 9). Because interpretation does not leave a trace, as translation

does, this comment serves as a valuable measuring tool, attesting Berezhkov's competency. He admits however, that due to the expulsion of staff, "there was a dire need for new personnel, and under those circumstances, the eligibility criteria were less rigorous" (*ibid.* 148).

Because Berezhkov had been schooled in German, English, and engineering technology but not interpretation proper, he required training. Upon arrival at the Kremlin he realized how much he had to learn:

> [he] had to go through thick files of recent commercial correspondence, minutes of trade negotiations, cables from Soviet trade missions abroad, as well as excerpts from the decisions of the Party's Central Committee and the Soviet of People's Commissars… in addition to [the] regular work and daily negotiations with the Germans, which [he] attended as an interpreter. (*ibid.* 148-9)

Clearly he was acquiring in-depth knowledge. This training, though primarily content-based, also applied what he was learning. Berezhkov was responsible for transcribing party and international meetings and drafting cables to the Soviet trade mission in Berlin (*ibid.* 149). In addition to these secretarial duties, he performed translations (*ibid.* 154). The position Berezhkov accepted encompassed much more than interpretation.

Berezhkov's work for Stalin was varied, and rather unpredictable, as was Stalin's character. He reports that Stalin treated him indifferently, as though he could see through him (Berezhkov 1994: 206). This must have been awkward, and even nerve-racking at times but the interpreter did not lose his desire to perform his task well and win the approval of his boss. What made him uneasy in the whole situation was that Stalin chose his interpreter, and he had two of them: Pavlov and Berezhkov. There was no predicting whom the leader would select—though they each had specialty areas. It was a regular occurrence that only one of them would be called on for several weeks, and the other would become concerned he had possibly offended the leader in some way. But then, out of the blue, that interpreter would be called on to work again. Berezhkov could only explain this as Stalin's way of maintaining "healthy competition" between the two (*ibid.* 207). Stalin seemed to enjoy putting people on edge, and keeping them there.

Nevertheless, even if Berezhkov did love working as an interpreter, these must have been very odd circumstances to work under.

There were monumental events in world politics that Berezhkov was a privileged part of. Some of these included the signing of a non-aggression treaty between Russia and Germany (*ibid.* 40) and the subsequent Treaty on Friendship and the Border in 1939 (*ibid.* 42). The following year, Berezhkov assisted Soviet Ambassador Dekanasov at Ribbentrop's declaration of war against the USSR. From that time until the end of the war, Berezhkov held the position of Personal Interpreter to Stalin and Molotov and served them well during the conferences between the anti-Hitler coalition—Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill (as in Potter). This final position took him to interpret at the Tehran Summit, which planned and ordered the immediate D-Day invasion (as in U.S. News).

Unfortunately, Berezhkov does not detail his method of interpreting. It is known however, that interpreters' booths were used in Russia for the first time in 1933 (Chernov, 149). This would make it possible that Berezhkov interpreted simultaneously. What would have probably been more frequent however, would be the use of *whispered interpretation*, "where the interpreter sits between the two delegates and gives the interpretation *sotto voce* for them only" (as in Termium, italics added). This is more likely the style Berezhkov used because he was most often interpreting for Stalin or Molotov in private company.

What Berezhkov does say about his approach is that he hung on every word, "in effort to get across... the tone and tenor of [Stalin's] every thought" (Berezhkov 1994: 348). It was not only to the message that he gave his attention but also to every nuance, every subtlety. Through this conscientious work of precision, Berezhkov came to worship the man.

Personal impressions

One might assume that Berezhkov would have spent a good deal of time with Stalin. The truth of the matter however, is that he would only join the leader moments before his guests would arrive. Stalin would usually be nervous, pacing the room and planning out details, like where he wanted each person to sit (Berezhkov 1994: 204-5). Berezhkov did spend enough time in the man's presence to say that while Stalin was "flattering [the people] by hailing them as "builders of communism," ... [he was] calling them fools under his breath as they praised him loudly" (*ibid.* 7). This is the kind of hypocrisy that Berezhkov saw manifest itself daily in Stalin's conduct. After Stalin's death, his interpreter would say "this lonely and morbidly suspicious man wasn't attached even to the people closest to him, not even to his sons" (*ibid.* 349). He was indeed unique, in many ways; always fearing food poisoning, he went to great lengths to have his food looked after (*ibid.* 223). Even so, Berezhkov idolized him.

In retrospect, he admits that Stalin was a man lacking all respect for human life (Berezhkov 1994: 202), plotting the death of many (*ibid.* 318), and polluting the country from its very foundation. Without a doubt, he was a very influential man but he was brainwashing people (*ibid.* 156). And "despite all his repulsive personal traits, Stalin was capable of charming his interlocutors. He was unquestionably a great actor..." (*ibid.* 205), fooling even the people closest to him. But he was trapped in his own game, fooling himself too. He denied that Hitler would ever take any action against the Soviets, ignoring blatant warning signs and pretending that they were comrades. On June 22, 1941 the Soviet Union was declared to be under attack by the Germans and Stalin was disgraced with himself and the position he found himself in (*ibid.* 5-6).

Moving on

Following the war, Berezhkov was let go from foreign affairs and became Deputy Chief Editor of the Soviet weekly *New Times* (as in Potter), leaving interpreting behind. Journalism became his new love. In 1969 he founded the Soviet journal, *USA-Economics, Politics, Ideology* and he remained there until 1989 as its Chief Editor. In the meantime, he also filled the position of First Secretary, representing the Institute of USA and Canada Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, working out of the Soviet

Embassy in Washington (*ibid.*). In his latter years, he was a professor at the Monterey Institute's Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies as well as International Policy Studies (*ibid.*). He died in Southern California on November 20, 1998 (*ibid.*).

Concluding remarks

Berezhkov's life paints a sober picture of political history in the 20th century. His experience as an interpreter is at times closer to a slave than a professional. In *At Stalin's Side*, Berezhkov writes that the administration of Stalin's system was based on discipline, fear, and reward (Berezhkov 1994: 210). It is safe to say that Berezhkov was taken victim of all of these; he suffered under the discipline of Party membership, feared his work would not meet the scrupulous and capricious demands of the Party leader, and was bound to taking a high-status job in order to survive the food shortage which spanned the country. It was the fear of Stalin that drove Berezhkov to serve him, and worship him--seeking his approval.

One can ask how he carried on living, after contributing to such a destructive regime, but Berezhkov would answer that the people were brainwashed to sincerely believe that they were furthering a good cause and supporting the betterment of their

country (*ibid.* 156). Sometimes the only thing left to do is to learn from one's mistakes and educate others so as to avoid repeating them. This is precisely what Berezhkov's life, as an interpreter, diplomat, journalist, and scholar accomplished.

After the completion of his memoirs, in which he appeals to coincidence, chance, and fate, Berezhkov's pen turns, in the postscript, to the Author of life pleading one thing: "May God spare [my grandson, Daniel,] the experience of my generation!" (*ibid.* 388).

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