

## IN MEMORIAM: SOPHIA LUBENSKY

Sophia Lubensky (Софья Иосифовна Лубенская), internationally recognized expert on lexicography, author of the Russian-English Dictionary of Idioms, Professor Emerita of Russian at the University at Albany, passed away on Tuesday, 15 September 2015, in New York City. She was 80 years old.

Born in the Soviet Ukrainian city of Khar'kov, she completed her M.A. level education in Leningrad (Classics, 1957) and Khar'kov (English and Linguistics, 1963) Universities. In 1972 she obtained her kandidat degree (Ph.D) in Linguistics from Leningrad University.

Sophia's inability to compromise with the Soviet system – to engage in “double-think”, – combined with the widespread Soviet antisemitism, placed severe limitations on her prospects for an academic career. Prior to leaving the Soviet Union in 1976, as part of the Third Wave of emigration from that country, she worked as a freelance editor-consultant on the English edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia.

After arriving in the United States, she worked for a year at the Russian-language daily newspaper *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, and always spoke fondly of its editor Andrei Sedykh. She was also appreciative of the help given to herself, among many other émigré scientists and scholars, by Mary Mackler of the American Council for Émigrés in the Professions.

In fall 1977, Sophia Lubensky joined the faculty in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University at Albany. She began as an Assistant Professor of Russian. In 1983, she was promoted and tenured at the rank of Associate Professor, and in 1996 promoted to Professor. She retired from the University in 2007.

At Albany, Prof. Lubensky initially taught classes in the Russian language, especially at the advanced level for undergraduates and M.A. students. Subsequently, after the Slavic Department established a program leading to a Certificate of Advanced Study in Russian Translation and Interpretation – she played a major role in creating this program – she taught courses in translation and applied linguistics.

Sophia Lubensky was always searching for excellence – she strove for it in her own work and expected it from others. She asked her students to do their best, and in return gave generously of her time, attention and energy. She inspired students, drew them into her research projects and gratefully acknowledged their contributions. Many of those who worked with her went on to academic and professional careers involving the Russian language, or else dealing in some way with Russia itself.

During her many years at Albany, Sophia Lubensky's scholarship was concentrated in two areas – language pedagogy and lexicography. In the case of the former, she produced, in cooperation with colleagues from other universities, Donald K. Jarvis and Gerald L. Ervin, a Russian-language textbook to be used in first- and second-year courses. The two-volume "Nachalo: When in Russia...", with its accompanying workbooks, instructor's manual and video component was published by McGraw-Hill in 1996. The textbook was adopted at many institutions with Russian language offerings, and in 2001 a second edition came out.

Sophia Lubensky next turned her attention to the needs of advanced language learners. Together with Irina Odintsova (Moscow University), Slava Paperno, Marjorie McShane and Richard L. Leed, she produced "Ot teksta k rechi. Advanced Russian: From Reading to Speaking". Regrettably, the publication of this two-part textbook, which included an interactive multimedia component, was delayed; it came out in 2011 from Slavica Publishers – four years after Sophia's retirement.

The two textbook projects were made possible by major grant support from both the Federal government and major private foundations. Sophia was justifiably proud of her successes in the highly competitive world of Federal and foundation funding – one where scholars in the humanities usually have very low visibility. Moneys from her grant were used, in part, to support graduate students in the Albany Russian program – and this, of course, greatly strengthened the program during those years.

The other focus of Sophia Lubensky's scholarship was Russian-English lexicography. This was, in fact, her true love, rooted in her multilingual background and training in the Soviet Union, in her experience as translator and interpreter, and in the challenges she faced as an émigré communicating in a new society. She arrived with a superb command of English, and was drawn to the subtle differences between English and Russian, particularly in the area of higher level phraseological units. These interests led to her many years' labor on her magnum opus – the "Russian-English Dictionary of Idioms", which was published in 1995 by Random House.

The large-size volume of 1054 pages came out a few years following the breakup of the Soviet Union, during the most hopeful period in US-Russian relations. The book launching was held on 24 May 1995 at the Russian Mission to the United Nations, with Ambassador Sergei Lavrov (now Foreign Minister) in attendance. In her own remarks Sophia Lubensky noted that work on the Dictionary had been funded for many years by the Pentagon, and marveled that a volume with such a sponsor could be celebrated at the Russian Mission. The most recent news that the American Center in the Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow is being closed offers a sad counterpoint to that earlier event.

In her remarks at the book launch, as in the preface to the Dictionary, Sophia Lubensky, always scrupulous in such matters, acknowledged the many people who assisted the project in some way. She paid special tribute to two individuals to whom she felt particularly indebted – Judith VanDyk (Hehir) and Marjorie McShane.

As Sophia would relate on occasion, a leading Russian linguist, upon receiving the Dictionary, told her that an entire institute in Russia would have been needed to equal the amount of work she and her assistants had carried out. Indeed, as anyone who has had occasion to consult it can confirm, the Dictionary is overwhelming in the number of Russian idioms it includes, in the sophistication and rigor of the lexicographic principles on which it is based, and in the richness and stylistic variety of the many English equivalents offered for each Russian example. An essential tool for the translator, it is a treasure house for the lover of language, for anyone wishing to explore the breadth and depth of Russian and English and much of the cultural history behind each.

The original Random House edition of the Dictionary sold out completely – a notable achievement for such a volume. It garnered numerous laudatory reviews in scholarly journals, as well as one in the New York Times. Of how many reference works could the same be said? If her textbooks brought her national recognition within the professional circles of teachers of Russian in this country, the Dictionary established her international reputation as a lexicographer and linguist.

In 1997, a Moscow academic publisher put out a Russian edition of the Dictionary. It sold out rapidly. In 2004, another publisher, the well-known AST Press, came out with the second revised Russian edition – no less successful than the previous one.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Sophia could feel extremely flattered. In addition to these authorized publications, she saw her materials freely used, without permission or credit, in other volumes in Russia. For some reason she did not approve.

When Yale University Press proposed to publish a new, revised edition of the Dictionary, Sophia Lubensky welcomed the opportunity to update her work to take account of changes Russian had undergone in the late 20th – early 21st century. The revision was a thorough one, and she worked very hard to finish the job during a period of mounting health problems. The new volume came out in 2013; Sophia derived much pleasure from showing off the first copies she received. Most recently, the work was selected as “Best Contribution to Language Pedagogy” in 2014 by AATSEEL (the American Association for Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages).

About a year prior to retiring from the University at Albany Sophia Lubensky moved to New York City, determined to enjoy its many cultural offerings and delighted to be near to her oldest and closest friends. She found an apartment on the West Side and immersed herself in New York City's many cultural and other benefits – from opera and film, to concerts and culinary matters. She became a subscriber to Lincoln Center's concert series, delighted in its outstanding programs, and did not hesitate to express her views to the Center's administration. Music brought her joy, and she was happy to discuss the performance of particular conductors, musicians and singers. She read a great deal, taking advantage of a public library branch not far from her building. She also became a devoted user of her Kindle.

Within the past couple of years Sophia, who had had a prior history of health problems, faced new challenges. She underwent major surgery that required adjustments to her daily routines. This was not easy, but she made up her mind, did what was necessary, and managed to find a balance that allowed her not only to enjoy her life – especially music! – but also to engage in new scholarly work. In November 2014, she delivered a keynote speech at the annual conference of the American Translators Association, held in Chicago. Most recently she co-edited, with linguist Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij, a round-table discussion in a special issue of the *International Journal of Lexicography*. She was somewhat frustrated at having to deal with contributors from various countries, but found the work intellectually stimulating. As recently as mid August, in one of our last conversations, she indicated that she had come up with new ideas that, she hoped, she would have the opportunity to explore.

This, unfortunately, was not to be. Unexpectedly, in late August she began to suffer chronic pains that left her incapacitated. The end followed quickly. During her final days she was cared for by members of the Savransky family and other loving friends.

People who knew Sophia Lubensky often characterized as a “strong, brave person” – in Russian, «сильный, мужественный человек». At times her strength of will, her determination to stick to a decision, once taken, and to go against the current no matter the cost, led to difficult situations. Yet these fade when looked at within the context of her life as a whole. It took courage and strength of will to emigrate alone from the Soviet Union, it took strength of will not only to embark for the first time on an academic career in a new country and to achieve so much as a teacher and scholar. It took strength of will to face several major operations and their aftermath. It took strength of will, within the past couple of years, to deal with the death of several of her closest friends.

Another aspect of Sophia's character was no less important: her interest in people, her ability to enter into their concerns, to love and support them. When Sophie would ask a student, a colleague or a friend “How are you” or “What are you up to?”, she would listen to the response and, if her interlocutor was willing to go beyond superficialities, enter into a substantial

conversation. If action was called for, if there was something she should or could do, she might offer to do it – never lightly, because she followed through on her words. In the last few years she had diminished hearing in one ear: rather than retreat into a semi-isolation, she would ask her guest to sit facing her good ear. Deeply committed to old friends and their families, she established new friendships with people from very different backgrounds. In a rapidly changing world, where it is so easy, as one grows older, to retreat from or reject change, she remained open to it, and found a common language with those very much younger than herself.

In her last few weeks, Sophia displayed to the utmost both her strength of will and her love and care for people. At first only suspecting, and then fully aware of what was coming, she made decisions regarding her own situation and looked for ways to share with, to help in some way those around her. Removing the irony from Pushkin’s famous line, one can only say, with all sincerity, about Sophia’s life and its end: «Ее пример другим наука» - “Her example’s a lesson to others...”

Henryk Baran