

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskij

Translated from the Russian by
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TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

Perestroyka has washed ashore thousands of historical facts, abandoned ideas, items of art and literature, and names hitherto forbidden or neglected. The opposition to Soviet totalitarianism manifested by these varies widely, and often one wonders why a story or a motion picture had to spend several decades in hiding. The astoundingly sophisticated prose of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskij—the Polish spelling would be Krzisanowski—(born 1887 near Kiev, died 1950 in Moscow), which has been appearing in print only since 1989, leaves one in such confusion: why only now? His method of fantastic writing does not engage political issues except tangentially. Why was he not published earlier? We know that, encouraged by his friends and supporters, he did several times try to publish his stories. That he never succeeded seems to have been due mostly to reasons unrelated to the content of his writing—e.g., in 1924 the press where he was scheduled to publish closed. Unlike his stories, Krzhizhanovskij's brilliant articles on Pushkin, Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw and various aspects of literary theory were repeatedly published in Soviet journals, yielding a very modest income.

According to the Russian poet Vadim Perelmuter, who has published five collections of Krzhizhanovskij's stories and essays, non-literary details about Krzhizhanovskij's life are hard to come by. The writer graduated from the Law School of Kiev University in 1913, and after that held some sort of paralegal position for about four years. Most likely, his vast erudition was the product of his phenomenal memory and vigorous self-education. Krzhizhanovskij became known in Kiev literary circles as a lecturer on literature, philosophy, theater, and even music history. In 1922 he moved to Moscow and lived in the same tiny room on Arbat Street almost until his death. In addition to public lectures and articles, Krzhizhanovskij's "official" employment included the writing of a couple of screen-plays and intermittent work for several theaters.

The story we have chosen to translate displays many characteristic features of Krzhizhanovskij's work: his highly self-conscious and literary style, his mastery at spinning out a complex self-reflexive narrative, his tendency to use some concrete starting point (however bizarre or absurd) and explore its narrative (and conceptual) potential, but also the sheer pleasure he takes in every detail and ironic turn of phrase. In Krzhizhanovskij's own words: "To treat concepts as images, to juxtapose them as images—these are the two fundamental devices in my literary experiments."

In our translation we have tried to stay close to Krzhizhanovskij's idiosyncratic style. This has resulted in a text whose average sentence—strung along by colons, semi-colons, and dashes—often bears little resemblance to the usual English sentence. We can only assure the reader that such sentences are equally unusual in Russian.

We would like to express our gratitude to Zoé Andreev who "discovered" Krzhizhanovskij for us, to Catherine Perrel for letting us consult her excellent French translation, and to Editions Verdier for granting us permission to translate and publish this story.¹

¹As we were going to press, we found out that there is already a published English translation of this story (in *Glas* 8, 1994). Yet we decided that because of the obvious differences in approach and style, both translations should become available to the English-reading audience.