

## *The Georgian Pages of Boris Pasternak's Life (Reading His Letters to Nina Tabidze)*

### *Boriso Pasternako gruziniški puslapiai: skaitant jo laiškus Ninai Tabidze*

Mariam MIREŠASHVILI  
Sokhumi State University  
A.Politikovskaia 9  
Tbilisi, Georgia, 0186  
m.miresashvili@gmail.com

#### Summary

While analyzing complex and controversial literary and cultural periods (that's exactly how the first half of the last century's literary atmosphere appears to be), one needs to study the letter as a document which represents the realities of the everyday life of the era. Therefore, on the one hand, we have a chance to watch the writer's "creative laboratory" (the stylistic, thematic, political and other tendencies of his work) and, on the other, we can discover the creator's personal qualities, his moral postulates, and lifetime convictions. In the following article, we will discuss Boris Pasternak's letters addressed to his Georgian friends. They are a kind of verbal fixation of Pasternak's beliefs about the art of translating, creativity, human relations, and human existential problems.

In monographs dedicated to Pasternak, literary critics always discuss the writer's visits to Georgia. Pasternak visited Georgia for the first time in the 1930's. He met Paolo Iashvili in 1930, while the latter was visiting Moscow. Paolo invited him to Georgia; in 1931, Boris visited Tbilisi for three months. He met the best Georgian intellectuals, such as Titsian Tabidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Chikovani, Nicolo Mitsishvili, Lado Gudiashvili, and others. Boris had only the best relations with these persons for the rest of his life. Messages and conversations between Pasternak and the Georgian poets lasted for thirty years and are a perfect proof of the fact that Pasternak called Georgia his "second homeland."

**Key words:** *Pasternak, letter as a document, "creative laboratory," Georgian poets.*

#### Santrauka

Tiriant sudėtingus ir kontroversinius literatūros ir kultūros laikotarpius (būtent tokia ir yra pirmosios praėjusio šimtmečio pusės literatūrinė atmosfera), į laiškus reikia žiūrėti kaip į dokumentus, kurie vaizduoja to laikmečio kasdienybę. Todėl iš

vienos pusės, mes turime progą stebėti rašytojo „kūrybinę laboratoriją“ (naudojamas stilistines, tematines, politines ir kt. raiškos priemonės), o iš kitos pusės, galime pamatyti jo/jos asmeninius bruožus, moralinę laikyseną ir įsitikinimus. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami Boriso Pasternako laišškai, parašyti gruzinams draugams, yra raštiškas liudijimas apie rašytojo tikėjimą vertimo menu, kūrybiškumą, žmogiškus santykius ir egzistencines problemas.

***Esminiai žodžiai:*** B. Pasternakas, laiškas kaip dokumentas, „kūrybinė laboratorija“, Gruzijos poetai.

While analyzing complex and controversial literary and cultural periods (that’s exactly how the first half of the last century’s literary atmosphere appears to be), there is a need to study the letter as a document which represents the realities of the everyday life of the era. Therefore, on the one hand, we have a chance to watch the writer’s “creative laboratory” (the stylistic, thematic, political, and other tendencies of his writing) and, on the other, we can discover his personal qualities, moral postulates and lifetime convictions. In the following article, we will discuss Boris Pasternak’s letters addressed to his Georgian friends. They are a kind of verbal fixation of Pasternak’s beliefs about the art of translating, creativity, human relations, and human existential problems.

In monographs dedicated to Pasternak, literary critics always discuss the writer’s visits to Georgia. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) designated 1990 as “the year of Pasternak” and organized a memorial exhibition in Moscow, where one of the themes was “Pasternak and Georgia.”

It is worth mentioning that Pasternak became interested in Georgia in his childhood. To be more precise, in 1891, a well-known Russian publishing house – Kushneirov-Pryanishikovs – published Lermontov’s *Mtsiri*, which was illustrated by Pasternak’s father. Since that time, Pasternak was fascinated with Lermontov; this can be proven by the poem *To the Memory of Demon*, written in 1917. The writer first visited Georgia in the thirties. In October 1930, he became acquainted with Paolo Iashvili, in Moscow, who invited him to Tbilisi. Later, in July 1931, Pasternak visited Tbilisi for three months along with Zinaida Neigauzand and her son. This period was quite difficult for Pasternak not only from the creative standpoint but also that of his private life (he left his wife – Evgenia Lurie – and his son; at the time, he was also in a civil marriage with Zinaida – the wife of a well-known pianist, Heinrich Neigauz – who herself had left her two sons. Boris and Zinaida officially

got married only in 1933). The writer found spiritual relief in Georgia. He met representatives of the Georgian intelligentsia: Titsian Tabidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Chikovani, Nicolo Mitsishvili, Lado Gudiashvili, and others. They remained his lifelong friends.

Pasternak did not hide his appreciation of Georgia. This is visible in his letters, not to mention his artistic heritage and translations. He was attracted by the old Georgian culture, its originality and appreciation of nature and, of course, Georgian hospitality. After his first visit in Tbilisi, he wrote to Paolo Iashvili: "To me Tbilisi is the same as Chopin, Scriabin, Marburg, Venice." (Gensirovskaya, 2003) In the spring of 1932, an evening of Georgian poetry was organized by Pasternak in Moscow. This was the first time that the poetry of the modern poets was read in public independently of the classics. The poets included Paolo Iashvili, Titsian Tabidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Chikovani and others. In June of the same year, Pasternak wrote to Paolo: "[...] whatever my thought about my upcoming work plans, I cannot stay away from Georgia." (Pasternak, 1992) We believe that private relationships played a huge role in Pasternak's decision to do Georgian translations. It is worth mentioning that five or six years earlier, he had received a similar proposal from the Kremlin. To be more precise, according to Olga Ivinskaya's memoirs, either in late 1924 or in the first months of 1925, Pasternak, Sergey Esenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky met Stalin. "They were talking about translating Georgian poets in Russian language. They were counting on Pasternak's talent to exalt Georgian poetry in accordance with Stalin's decision," wrote Olga Ivinskaya (Ivinskaya, 1978). However, no translations followed this meeting. Only personal relationships with Georgian poets and his genuine love of Georgia made Pasternak start working on the translations.

In November 1933, Pasternak visited Georgia for the second time along with Nikolay Tikhonov, Yuri Tinianov and Olga Forsh. He started working on interlinear translations and in this way initiated a period of creative "silence" that began in the summer of 1932. Two years later, Russian readers accepted Pasternak's translations; Vazha-Pshavela's *Snake-Eater* was published in Moscow in 1934, followed by *Georgian lyric poets*, in 1935. The books were illustrated by Lado Gudiashvili.

Pasternak had a particularly close relationship with Titsian Tabidze. Not only was there a creative link between the poet and the translator but a spiritual unity as well. Their correspondence proves this. In a letter

dated 13 October 1933, Pasternak does not hesitate to show his gratitude towards Titsian for his friendship, which appears to have been a great booster for his translation activities:

Dear Titsian! Thank you for your praise; I heard about it from Paolo and Elefter [Pasternak has in mind Elefter Andronikashvili, Irakli Andronikashvili's brother, a physicist. M.M.] [...] Do you actually like my translations? Let me know if you have any doubts about it: all translations, no matter bad or good, in some way violate the original. My translations probably belong to the first group. In my opinion, I am simplifying your poetry. Every artist develops his own idea about the robustness of the language that emerges during the work process. I think that mine is rather rough; unfortunately, there is a lot of dilettantism in it linked to everyday life [...] I do understand it, but that is the reason why my translations of your poetry and Paolo's stand out; the one-burst in me is not over. Miracles of life still remain, they don't leave me, not even for a minute; and they wholeheartedly connect me to you and Nina Aleksandrevna [...] Kiss you. Yours B.P. (Pasternak, 2005, № 676)

*Georgian poets*, translated by Pasternak and Tikhonov, was published in Tbilisi in February 1935. It's worth mentioning that Pasternak understood perfectly the poetry of his favorite Georgian symbolists and was extremely proud when Russian audiences accepted his translations in a fitting manner. In a letter dated 8 December 1934, Pasternak writes:

Dear Nina Alexandrovna and Titsian! When I call you spiritual relatives, it's not just words [...] I've been telling you that there's something like a bottle filled with glue in my soul. It ties together everything, all the best I've ever experienced. I'll name the things I connect with you: Rolan, my elder sister, present-day revolutionary Germany, which is Rilke's natural continuation, etc. And suddenly I remembered that you, Nina, will understand me perfectly well, because you have a living bottle – Titsian – next to you. [...] Whatever people say, Titsian is one of the strongest lyric poets. I knew that before [...] You should have seen what was going on in the hall when I read his poetry! Nina, Titsian will be Moscow book's soul and heart [...] He's the glue we've mentioned above. This glue unites me and you, our hands tied [...] Hugs. Yours B. (Pasternak, 2005, № 716)

When we talk about the spiritual unity between Pasternak and Titsian Tabidze, it is impossible not to mention a letter Pasternak wrote to Titsian immediately after undergoing a course of rehabilitation in France. In that letter, dated 6 September 1935, we read:

My dear Titsian! It will take me a long time to tell you what happened to me this summer [...] Someday I'll tell you in detail what I've experienced during these four months. As for now, I'll tell you things that you, only you, should know. I still loved my relatives and the older people during my illness [...] I didn't turn my back on my favorite friends. I even visited Marina T. [Marina Tsvetaeva, Pasternak's friend. M.M.] in Paris. However, during this trip, just as in many other cases, while being in a rehab where I almost went insane because of loneliness, I always held a constant thought, like a talisman, about Z.N. [Zinaida Nikolaevna, the writer's wife. M.M], about a letter from Rainer Maria Rilke [reference to a letter dated 3 May 1926. M.M.] and another letter, from you, written in the spring. Don't you remember?! [Reference to a letter dated 17 June 1935, written a few days before Pasternak went to Paris, where Titsian says he's concerned about Pasternak's condition. M.M.]. I would often put it under a pillow, hoping that I would sleep peacefully; I had been suffering from insomnia all summer long [...] You know how much I love you, don't you?! Only Zina is more precious to me than you are. Give my regards to Nina and Nita. Yours B. (Pasternak, 2005, №738)

In 1936, the writer finished working on another collection of lyrics – *Summer records*, which he dedicated to his “friends from Tbilisi.” This was Pasternak's last book published while his friends from Tbilisi – Paolo, Titsian, Nicolo Mitsishvili – were still alive. One year later, none of them were alive. The tense atmosphere that derived from a totalitarian regime can be felt in Pasternak's correspondence in 1936-1937. Writers of “non-proletarian” origin (Symbolists, Futurists and others) were persecuted. In the letter dated 8 April 1936, we can read:

Dear friends, Titsian and Nina! [...] A lot of blurry things happened in the recent past. I felt this straightaway. Nobody was going to touch me, but I wasn't being cautious. I defended Pilnyak and Leonov and let myself say I didn't like those articles in the newspapers: they seemed obscure to me [reference to a discussion about “Formalism,” where Pasternak criticized a newspaper's campaign: “If it's essential to make a lot of noise in the articles, isn't it possible to make a lot of noise about different themes? In this case, at least you'll be able to understand something, because if you make a lot of noise about one and the same thing, you understand nothing. Maybe it's even possible not to make noise at all – this would be amazing. If the authors of articles came to their senses and started thinking while writing them, then we might even have a chance to understand something.” (Pasternak, 2005). M.M.] And that's when everything began! Instead of publicizing in a newspaper the fact that I was being politically improvident (which would have been a grave punishment for me), they lightened my guilt and, to punish me, made me a Formal-

ist for five days [...] The only grain of truth in whatever was said and written could be the fact that the saying coincides with historical time infinity. But how can infinity be part of the critical porridge that we've been wholeheartedly eating throughout the month? This is my answer: truth was diluted with a weak solution; truth about the strength of thunder was diluted with milk and saliva. Don't believe in such a solution, Titsian! Believe in yourself, because the chemical compound you've created can dilute everything in this world to a higher degree than it's acceptable in "Literary" and "Evening" newspapers [Pasternak refers to the fact that, by that time, Titsian was under the same accusation. M.M.] [...] Don't believe in public charity, my friend, believe in yourself only! Deepen your roots, only yours. And if you can't find people, land and heaven, then stop searching for them because you won't find them anywhere else. That's the truth. And do you think there are a few like this? The results of their activities are obvious. You can stay calm, I'm not the only one who believes in you and knows your price. Don't believe in solutions. Trust in revolution, destiny, new fascinations, life events, not in the constructions of the Writers' Union. Because they will be transformed even before you sneeze [...] Give my regards to everyone. Kiss Nina and Nita [...] Yours B. (Pasternak, 2005, №752).

Unfortunately, Pasternak's hopes did not come true. The situation of writers of "non-proletarian" origin got worse. Paolo Iashvili committed suicide in Georgia Writers' Union on 22 July 1937. According to rumors circulating in Tbilisi, Paolo was put under pressure during an interrogation and told to compromise Titsian Tabidze by saying that he was a spy. Paolo's death didn't save his friend's life. Titsian was imprisoned on 10 October 1937 and executed that same year on 16 December. Pasternak's other Georgian friend – Nicolo Mitsishvili – was the next target of repressions. Pasternak couldn't come to terms with his friend's death for a long time and entertained high hopes for Titsian's return. His hopes were expressed quite clearly in letters written to Nina Tabidze. Here are some extracts from those letters:

*November 1938, Moscow* – [...] Nina, do you have any idea how much I miss you? Leaving you and Nita, given the atmosphere and the conversations we've had, equals the sadness I feel about my parents and sisters, whom I haven't seen for 15 years. I always knew I loved Titsian, but what I didn't know was the place he had in my life [...]. We had so many feasts together, and we swore we would be loyal to each other (obviously, poor Paolo was with us [...]. Don't think that I will ever forget him!) [...]. We often thought we were exaggerating some things, that our fears were ungrounded. And now,

everything turned out to be much bloodier and more severe! [...]. (Pasternak, 2005, № 777)

**December 1939, Moscow** – “Dear Nina! I’m sorry for writing this. I guess I shouldn’t disturb you. I’ve heard rumors that Titsian isn’t alive any more. Can you imagine how I would feel about this?! However, a couple of hours ago I was told it’s just a rumor and that evidence for the opposite exists. When I came back home, I could barely stand on my feet, and now that I’m writing this letter, I am more and more convinced that the latter news is true. Please, confirm it. Tell me he’s still alive and send me a letter. Nina, this is what I want from you! [...] In any event that heaven gives us, I want you to know and remember that I belong to you and Nita with all my mind, all my essence [...]. I loved thinking about the fact that I live for him and he lives for me [...] Nina, I’m not sure what I’m writing now but I still have hopes. Your Borya.” (Pasternak, 2005, № 789)

**December 1940, Peredelkino** – “Nina, Happy New Year! I love you very much and if you can’t find traces of this love in the letters, it means the letters were written by either tiredness or speed. I write this because I know I will share happiness with you and Titsian very soon and, together with guests, will have a delicious dinner and share our summer experiences [...]. Titsian is alive and he’s somewhere near, we just have to wait for him a little bit longer [...]. Yours B.P. P.S. Everything will be much better in 1941 – you’ll see.” (Pasternak, 2005, № 824)

Unfortunately, Pasternak’s optimism didn’t come true this time either. His arrival in Tbilisi in 1945 was connected to Titsian Tabidze’s name. Pasternak was invited to the one hundredth anniversary of Nikoloz Baratashvili and was asked to give a speech. He agreed to the request as long as Nina Tabidze could attend the event and be in the hall. This was the first time that Nina Tabidze, the widow of Titsian, whose name hadn’t been rehabilitated yet, attended a public event. While reading the poetry, Pasternak referred to her in particular. Before his departure, Titsian’s widow gave Pasternak, a loyal friend, a case of paper with an Aquarius emblem on it on condition that he start working intensively. Indeed, Pasternak wrote the first chapters of *Doctor Zhivago* on those papers. Later, Pasternak would say that this scandalous work was *Nina’s novel*.

Nina Tabidze was in Peredelkino in 1958. She was one of the first to share Pasternak’s joy over receiving the Nobel Prize. Later, the Pasternak’s family was oppressed and persecuted because of *Doctor Zhivago*. The government made them leave Moscow temporarily. This was also

connected to Harold Macmillan's (the Prime Minister of Great Britain) diplomatic visit to the USSR, who decided to personally find out the reasons why Pasternak had rejected the Nobel Prize.

The fourth and last time Pasternak and Zinaida Neigauz visited Georgia was from 20 February till 2 March 1959. Obviously, by that time, Georgia was a part of the USSR. However, according to Pasternak, unlike in Russia, nobody showed aggression or disgust towards him in Georgia. The guests asked Nina Tabidze to keep their arrival a secret. Nevertheless, Pasternak's Georgian friends still got together in Lado Gudiashvili's family. The ten days spent in Tbilisi were like a spiritual relief for Pasternak. He wandered around his favorite places for the last time together with Titsian Tabidze's daughter Nita. He also visited widows and family members of his deceased friends. Pasternak was seen off at the railway station by his friends (Nina and Nita Tabidze, Simon Chikovani, Lasha Tabukashvili etc.), who later said that the writer looked out of the train window and his last words were: "Nina, Nina, look for me in your home! I stayed there!" (Tabidze, 1999) "My life will end soon; so what was the most important thing that happened? The example I had of my father's outstanding work, my love of Scriabin's music, one or two new chords in my creation, Russian nights in the village, revolution, Georgia." (Margvelashvili, 1990) These words, said by the writer, are like a resume that sums up the thirteen-year-long relationship between Pasternak and the Georgian writers and proves that, for him, Georgia was like a "second motherland."

### Conclusions

1. In conclusion, in studying each and every literary epoch, there is a need to recognize the importance that the letter plays as a document. Studies of the epistolary heritage give us the chance to observe the writer's "creative laboratory" and, apart from this, let us discover the creator's personal qualities as well as his moral postulates and lifetime convictions.
2. Studies of Pasternak's letters written to his Georgian friends are essential for understanding the complexity, the controversiality, as well as the tragedy of literary and social lives around the turn of the twentieth century. In the monographs dedicated to him, literary critics always discuss Pasternak's visits to Georgia. He went there four times. However, it was right after the first visit that he established close relationships with the best representatives of

Georgian intelligentsia, such as Titsian Tabidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Chikovani, Nicolo Mitsishvili, Lado Gudiashvili, and others. Pasternak enjoyed the best relationships with these Georgians for the rest of his life.

3. It is worth mentioning that Pasternak got interested in Georgia as early as his childhood. To be more precise, in 1891, a well-known Russian publishing house (Kushneirov-Pryanishikovs) published Lermontov's *Mtsiri*, illustrated by Pasternak's father. The first time the writer visited Georgia was in the thirties. Pasternak did not hide his appreciation of Georgia; this is visible in his letters as well as his artistic heritage and translations. He was attracted by the old Georgian culture – its originality, the landscape and, of course, Georgian hospitality. After his first visit in Tbilisi, in the spring of 1932, an evening of Georgian poetry took place in Moscow, organized by the writer. It was the first time that the poetry of the modern Georgian poets was read aloud independently of the classics. These poets included Paolo Iashvili, Titsian Tabidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Simon Chikovani, and others.
4. Private relationship played a huge role in Pasternak's decision to translate Georgian writers. It is worth mentioning that five or six years earlier he had received such a proposal from the Kremlin, from Stalin, personally, whom he met later. However, no translations followed this meeting. Only personal relationships with Georgian poets and a genuine love for Georgia made Pasternak undertake the translations. Pasternak started working on the inter-linear translations and in this way, in the summer of 1932, ended up with a period of creative "silence".
5. Pasternak had a very special relationship with Titsian Tabidze. Not only was there a creative link between the poet and the translator, but a creative spiritual unity as well, which can be proved by referring to their correspondence. It's worth mentioning that Pasternak understood perfectly the poetry of his favorite Georgian symbolists, and he was extremely proud when a Russian audience accepted his translations in the way they deserved.
6. A tense atmosphere, which derived from the totalitarian system, can be felt in Pasternak's correspondence in 1936-1937. Writers of "non-proletarian" origin (the Symbolists and the Futurists) were being persecuted. In 1936, Pasternak finished working on

a lyrical collection – *Summer records*, dedicated to his “friends from Tbilisi.” This was his last book published while his friends from Tbilisi – Paolo Iashvili, Titsian Tabidze, Nicolo Mitsishvili – were still alive. One year later, none of them were alive. Pasternak couldn’t come to terms with his friends’ death and continued for a long time to have high hopes that Titsian would return. His hopes were clearly expressed in the letters he wrote to Nina Tabidze.

7. “My life will end soon – and what was the most important thing that happened? The example I had of my father’s outstanding work, my love for Scriabin’s music, one or two new chords in my creation, Russian nights in the village, revolution, Georgia.” These words belong to the writer; they are like a resume that sums up the thirteen-year-long relationship between Pasternak and the Georgian writers and proves that Georgia was like a “second motherland” for him.

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