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Mother as Forebear: How Lidiia Chukovskai’a’s Sofia Petrovna Rewrites Maksim Gor’kii’s Mat*

Sibean E. S. Forrester

Lidiia Chukovskai’a’s novella Sofia Petrovna (henceforth abbreviated as SP) has gained a respectable place in the canon of primary sources used in the United States to teach about the Soviet period,¹ though it may appear on history syllabi more often than in (occasional) courses on Russian women writers or (more common) surveys of Russian or Soviet literature. The tendency to read and use the work as a historical document begins with the author herself: Chukovskai’a consistently emphasizes its value as a testimonial and its uniqueness as a snapshot of the years when it was written. As she explains in the introduction to the 1965 Paris edition, Опустелый дом, “Я смотрела на нее не столько как на повесть, сколько как на свидетельское показание [...]” (I considered it not so much a story as the testimony of a witness; Chukovskai’a 1965: 7). Similarly, in Процесс исключения: “Не мне судить, какова ее художественная ценность, но ценность правдивого свидетельства неоспорима” (It’s not for me to judge its artistic value, but the value of truthful witness is indubitable; Chukovskai’a 1979: 9). The editors of the Paris edition irritated Chukovskai’a by changing her title and the names of several characters, as if to suggest that they took the story as documentary truth and wished to protect the characters along with the author, on whose behalf they gave the standard disclaimer that the book was being published without her knowledge or approval. Reviews and reception in Russia since the first official Soviet publication in 1988 have also stressed the work’s value

¹ This is true, of course, as long as the translation remains in print. First translated by Aline B. Werth as The Deserted House (based on the Paris edition; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc, 1967); revised as Sofia Petrovna, "emended" by Eliza Kellogg Klose (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). The story is also used in language instruction: see Olga Kagan and Mara Kashper, eds., Lidiya Chukovskaya’s Sofia Petrovna (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002).
as testimony; one 1988 review is entitled “Фактическая явь” (Factual reality; Nerler 1988). The sense of urgency during glasnost of resurrecting information after decades of suppression, treating the book as a source of truth rather than art, helps to explain this interpretation. However, emphasis on SP’s documentary qualities has distracted readers’ attention from its artistic aspects. This paper intends to address that imbalance, to draw attention to the tale’s literary structure and subtext, and to suggest that Chukovskaia be read as an artist wrestling with her literary heritage as well as a biographer/memoirist and dissident preserving threatened pages of her own and her country’s history.

Despite the author’s stress on her text’s factual aspects, and perhaps even her move to evade aesthetic consideration, several Western scholars have addressed the literary features of SP. In books devoted wholly or largely to Chukovskaia, Bella Hirshorn (1987), Beth Holmgren (1993), and Annette Julius (1995) examine SP, summarize and explain its plot, and point out its stylistic and other resemblances to Socialist Realism.3 The book does work as a short course in Socialist Realism, making even uninitiated readers, such as undergraduate students, complicit in the happy pictures of the first several chapters, preparing their dismayed response to later developments. However, its full significance as a literary document and as a polemic with Stalinist reality emerges only when we notice the ways it polemically rewrites one of the most famous Russian novels of all time, one of the foremost models for Socialist Realism—Maksim Gor’kii’s Mat’ (Mother).

SP resembles Mat’ in a number of ways, briefly outlined here. The central characters bear significant resemblances, both in the composition of the whole cast and between each pair. The mother, in both cases the titular heroine,4 is the center of

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2 Anecdotal evidence suggests that Russian readers reacted so powerfully to the publication in 1988 of what they perceived as naked, honest truth that it did not occur to anyone to ponder its literary antecedents.

3 Holmgren notes, “My hypothesis is that Chukovskaia is playing off the gamut of nineteenth-century radical fiction and its socialist realist offspring” (1993: 48n19); her view of Chukovskaia is shaped by the project’s other subject, Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, whose attitude Holmgren prefers. Julius gives a detailed reading of SP, pointing out in particular how the changes made by the editors of the Paris edition tend to smooth out Chukovskaia’s language and, if anything, make the wording sound more simple and thus increase the story’s resemblance to Socialist Realism (Julius 1995: 112–13).

4 Chukovskaia notes, “[н]есчастная, рехнувшаяся Софья Петровна—отнюдь не лирическая героиня; для меня это обобщенный образ тех, кто всерьез верил в разумность и справедливость происходящего” (poor, crazy Sof’ia Petrovna is far from being a lyrical heroine; for me she is a generalized image of the people who seriously believed in the reasonableness and justice of what was happening), and she emphasizes her choice of heroine: “В качестве главной героини я избрала не сестру, не жену, не возлюбленную, не друга, а
narrative consciousness but a limited and sometimes untrustworthy observer. The authors refer to the mothers in ways that keep the reader at arm’s length, maintain a certain distance by using the patronymic Nilovna, or more often simply “мать,” and the formal “Софья Петровна,” never “Соня.” Each heroine acquires a new identity through work outside the home, in the underground revolutionary movement (Mat’) or a Leningrad publishing company (SP). Each mother is ordinary, a kind of everywoman, but also fundamentally brave and decent: Nilovna works and eventually takes risks for the revolutionary cause, while Sof’ia Petrovna does not shun relatives of the arrested (SP 36) and risks speaking up for Natasha Frolenko, who is unjustly attacked at work (SP 63). Both mothers begin, at least, with a strong concern for propriety and careful speech, fretting that the younger generation will bring trouble on itself by speaking disrespectfully to authorities (Mat’ 39, 268; SP: 55, 68, 69).

The son in each case has the typical traits of a Socialist Realist hero: Pavel Vlasov is tall and severe (Mat’ 32) but also “красивее всех” (Mat’ 20), while Nikolai Lipatov is tall, handsome, and gifted (SP 20). Both, remarkably, do not drink or smoke. Each mother loves and treasures her son, naming him in thoughts and speech with affectionate diminutive forms (Pasha, Kolia), and refuses to believe anything bad of her son: Nilovna looks at Pavel and thinks “Он не сделает худого, он не может” (He’ll do nothing wrong, he is unable to; Mat’ 27), Sof’ia Petrovna repeatedly asserts that her son was arrested by mistake (e.g., SP 72) and is incapable of doing anything against the Soviet state. Both sons are fatherless, though Pavel Vlasov’s no-good father appears briefly in the opening scenes of Mat’. Both widowed mothers are devoted to their sons, dreaming of the next generation (a daughter-in-law, even a grandchild) rather than taking any romantic interest themselves in other characters.

In both works, the son has a close friend, who becomes to some degree the mother’s foster son: in Mat’, the lanky Ukrainian Andrei (Gor’kii does not use the correct Ukrainian Andrii) Onisimovich Nakhodka, who grows so dear to her and so handy around the place that Nilovna invites him to move in (Mat’ 30); after he is arrested, Nilovna brings him clean linen and books once a week (48). Kolia’s “любимый товарищ” (favorite comrade) is Alik Finkel’shtein (SP 13). Andrei was a foundling raised by unloving people, while Alik lives with his aunt, who takes poor...
care of him (SP 20, 22); both are physically unattractive,\(^7\) yet lovable, dependable, and often more accessible or emotionally warm than Pavel and Kolia. Because they are not ethnic Russians, like the other main characters, they motivate the mother’s (and thence the reader’s) discovery of relatedness in an Other.

In each case the son’s love interest is of a higher social-class background but has lost or sacrificed her class advantages, so that she shares the son’s political opinions and activities. Sasha in Mat’ is an aristocrat whose family has disowned her, and Natasha Frolenko’s father, who died in 1917, was a tsarist army officer (SP 11–12). The first revolutionary girl to appear in Mat’ (Nilovna considers her a wonderful potential daughter-in-law) is named Natasha (Mat’ 17), like Frolenko. In fact, all the first names of major characters in SP occur somewhere in Mat’, though the reverse is not true. Each mother would prefer a better match than the one her son has chosen, though Nilovna comes around once Pavel is sentenced to exile and Sasha plans to join him there (Mat’ 27; 291). Sof’ia Petrovna creates a fantasy daughter-in-law named Liudmila (Milochka; SP 28, 96), and she overlooks Kolia’s romance with her own best friend, Natasha (SP 20–21), in a way that prepares the reader for her lack of acuity once she encounters the Terror.

Other characters do not stand out to the same extent, but they include a mixture of good, bad, and ambiguous persons: Rybin in Mat’, with his more spontaneous, peasant thinking, or Sof’ia Petrovna’s acquaintance, the doctor’s wife Kiparisova, whose advice falls between paranoia and harsh realism, focus on survival, and a terrified rejection of kindness and decency, as when she warns Sof’ia Petrovna not to send anything to Alik after his arrest, since that will let “them” link his case with Kolia’s and cause everyone more trouble (SP 86).\(^8\)

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7 Alik wears thick glasses and is described as “маленький, большеголовый, с торчащими ушами” (SP 22); Nakhodka is tall and awkward.

8 Nerler notes, “Ее отговорила Кипарисова, объяснив, что дело ее сына могут связать с делом Алика и может получиться 'контрреволюционная организация.' Разве это не трусость, не предательство верного друга, из-за ее сына попавшего в беду? Нет, все сложнее. Произошла, собственно, переориентация ума на абсурдное, алогичное—и потому верное восприятие этого фантастического мира, и Софья Петровна, еще хранившая рассудок, подчиняется им, инстинктивом чувствуя их необъяснимую правоту” (Kiparisova talked her out of it, explaining that her son’s case could be connected with Alik’s and turned into a “counter-revolutionary organization.” Is this not cowardice, betrayal of a loyal friend who came to misfortune because of her son? No, everything is more complicated. There has been, actually, a reorientation of the mind to the absurd, alogical—and therefore the true reception of this fantastic world, and Sof’ia Petrovna, still preserving her ability to reason, submits to it, feeling instinctively its inexplicable truth; Nerler: 203). Besides her appearance and probable background as a doctor’s wife, Kiparisova’s old-fashioned and aristocratic patronymic, Êrastovna, shows that she shares Natasha’s class origins.
There are significant additional similarities between the two novels: they share more than a general plot tendency as novels of formation or education. The mother is politically educated by or alongside her son and encouraged by his friends. She finds enlightenment, satisfying personal relationships, and even job satisfaction working outside her home. The similarities extend to such small details as her sudden need for reading glasses as her eyes age (*Mat‘* 84; *SP* 33). After the son is arrested, the mother frets until his trial. Once each son is sent to Siberia, the mother’s position becomes more perilous as she is surrounded by evil-wishers. The heroine acquires knowledge not just from her son, but from a variety of sources. Nilovna learns from the revolutionaries, most of them better educated than she even if they also come from peasant or working backgrounds. Sof’ia Petrovna receives (though she does not always make use of) advice from many people better equipped than she is to judge the situation. Her neighbor, the policeman Degtiarenko’s wife, does not shun her once her son is arrested, perhaps because a lower-class and less-“educated” background has let her preserve a realistic awareness of what is really going on with the arrests all over Russia and the back-stabbing in a communal apartment (*SP* 58, 91–92). Kolia’s friend Alik questions the Terror with growing awareness (*SP* 56, 75–76), perhaps because his Jewish background has provided him a better historical memory or a useful skepticism about state campaigns against undesirable groups. Natasha is slower than Alik to reach conclusions, but her background as a “former” upper-class person may help her to understand, if not to resist (she commits suicide after Alik’s arrest).

In both stories, moments of emotionally heightened rhetoric punctuate the plot. Gor’kii gives a large amount of ecstatic speech by the mother or other characters. Sof’ia Petrovna and Natasha listen to the radio, weeping at the rescue of the Cheliuskin party (*SP* 24–25), and they read and discuss the newspapers together (*SP* 39–40). The characters move through danger and foreboding, though this atmosphere is more constant in *Mat‘*. In the early pages, Nilovna begs her son to stay out of trouble with words that would entirely suit the late 1930s, if Sof’ia Petrovna had thought to utter them:

Живи как хочешь, не буду я тебе мешать. Только об одном прошу—не говори с людьми без страха! Опасаться надо людей—ненавидят все друг друга! Живут жадностью, живут завистью. Все рады зло сделать. Как начнешь ты их обличать да судить—возненавидят они тебя, погубят! (*Mat‘* 13).

Live as you wish, I won’t disturb you. I just beg you for one thing—don’t speak with people fearlessly! You should be wary of people—they all hate one another! They live through greed, they live through envy. Everyone’s
glad to do wrong. If you start to expose and judge them—they’ll hate you, they’ll ruin you!

Both stories end with upsetting and ambiguous scenes, to which I will return in more detail below. Readers disagree in interpreting the final scene of Mat’ (was she violently arrested, or beaten and choked to death?), just as they question what it means that Sof’ia Petrovna burns her son’s letter. Finally, the works share an "underground" composition. Gor’kii wrote Mat’ outside Russia (largely while visiting the United States of America, where he was attacked in the press for traveling with his lover instead of his wife), while Chukovskaiia wrote SP “for the desk drawer,” in 1939–40, not only without hope of ever seeing it in print, but knowing that she was risking her life and the safety of everyone she loved.

Alongside the many resemblances which motivate comparison of the two works, there are crucial differences between Mat’ and SP. The ways Chukovskaiia rewrites the story, I will argue, become significant sources of meaning in the later work. Mat’ has frequent religious references; Gor’kii presents the other characters’ religious thoughts and ideas as quite heterodox (based, as many scholars have pointed out, on the theories of God-Manhood developing at the time as a kind of religiously infused Marxism), but religion is nonetheless strongly present. Nilovna often prays before the icons (Mat’ 7), or mentions Christ. There is no reference to Orthodox religion in Chukovskaiia, not so much as an exclamation of “Господи!” even in sections that recollect the pre-revolutionary past, where a religious reference would be entirely realistic in the narrative if only as a sign of some character’s backwardness (as at the New Year’s celebration at the editorial office, SP 29–31). Chukovskaiia’s own family was not religious, and indeed replaced religion with a cult of art, culture, and decency (Holmgren 1993: 35–36). In SP, the place of religion and of icons in particular is taken by portraits of and references to Lenin, Stalin, and the Party. Stalin’s picture graces every workplace and is particularly foregrounded at the office New Year celebration (SP 29), a holiday which functionally replaced Orthodox Christmas—and Sof’ia Petrovna thinks sentimentally about the possibility of a grandchild named Ninel’ or Vladlen after Lenin (SP 30), who by the 1930s has taken on the formerly saintly role of giving his name and presumably protection to children.

The time settings of the two works are obviously different, matching the times of their composition. Mat’ was written in the early 1900s and first published in 1907, the

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9 Among Western scholars, Katerina Clark (like Pavel Zalomov, the original model for Pavel Vlasov) interprets the ending to mean Nilovna’s death (Clark 2000: 53–54), while Barry Scherr (1988: 44) and Richard Freeborn (1982: 45) describe the novel as ending with Nilovna’s arrest.

10 See, for example, Hans Günther, “Соцреализм и утопическое мышление” (Günther and Dobrenko 2000: 45).

11 I thank Eric Laursen for making this point (December 2005).
year Chukovskaia was born; SP is set in the 1930s. Thus the two contrast a prerevolutionary (though perhaps specifically post-1905) moment, versus the time of high Stalinism. The central families come from different social classes, especially the fathers (doctor Lipatov, versus the hard-drinking factory worker Vlasov) but also the mothers. Pelageia Nilovna was born a peasant and bears a markedly peasant name that recalls some of Gor’kii’s other works, while Sof’ia Petrovna seems to have a petty bourgeois background—her dream of running a “швейная мастерская” (sewing shop; SP 6) teasingly recalls Vera Pavlovna in Nikolai Chernyshevskii’s novel Что делать, but she is imagining something more like the shop of Lara Guishar’s mother in Boris Pasternak’s later novel Доктор Живаго. Sof’ia Petrovna’s proximity to literature (she works first at a publishing house, then at a library) suggests that her story should be read with particular attention to its relationship to literature, while Mat’ is related most specifically to the previous body of Russian revolutionary novels (Clark 2000: 52). Mat’ focuses much more strongly on the son, Pavel, whereas Kolia in SP is less central, though he becomes more important and present in the narrative after his arrest. Pavel is vastly superior to his mother in education and political sophistication, while Kolia and Sof’ia Petrovna are more nearly peers. (One might hypothesize that these two differences reflect the genders of the authors.) Pavel is cool and undemonstrative to his mother, so that she treasures every warm word he utters, while Kolia is more childlike and affectionate—the text generally refers to him with the diminutive form of his name, and even his desperate final letter begins, “Милая мамочка” (SP 97).

Further differences between the stories are already freighted with a heavier meaning. Pavel Vlasov actually did something for which he could expect to have trouble with the authorities (he returns unharmed after his first arrest, but is arrested for the second time as he leads the workers’ May Day demonstration); the revolutionaries are well aware that their work exposes them to constant risk of arrest and often say so (cf. Mat’ 23). When his comrades offer to organize an escape, Pavel and the others in prison refuse the favor: “Мы не уйдем, товарищи, не можем. Никто из нас. Потеряли бы уважение к себе” (We won’t leave, comrades, we cannot. None of us. We would lose respect for ourselves; Mat’ 260). Nikolai Lipatov, on the other hand, is a heroic inventor on the first page of Pravda one day (SP 27–28), suddenly arrested almost the next. Moreover, the reader sees Pavel’s virtues give him strength and resolution in prison and in trial, while Kolia’s are broken down by abuse during

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12 Dan Levin notes, “Her name is Pelagea Nilovna, and Gorky’s names always matter. This is the Pelagea of ‘Foma Gordeyev’—his idealized peasant woman, who originally was old Isergil—but now lifted up beyond all sensuality; and her patronymic shows she is the daughter of Nil, that historical first proletarian hero, of Месчанье” (Levin 1967: 135).
interrogation and the harsh conditions in camp, and his final letter begs his mother to intercede for his freedom. The pre-revolutionary prison, described by Nakhodka (Mat' 72), is old, crowded, and dirty, but far less crowded and dangerous than the prisons that are seen only from outside in SP. Instead of the khokhol Nakhodka, the unprepossessing stranger who nevertheless becomes near and dear, Kolia’s best friend Alik is Jewish. Alik’s Jewishness is no accident for Chukovskaia. Writing about distinctions of German and Soviet fascism to a German Slavist who excerpted a passage from SP for a textbook without her permission, she adds this telling parenthetical question, “(Кстати, почему в Вашем тексте Вы умаляете фамилию Алика?)” (By the way, why do you leave out Alik’s last name in your text?; Chukovskaia 2000, 1: 444). Alik is only one of several characters with Jewish names in SP, but his ethnicity (in Chukovskaia it cannot really be called religion) also plays a role in the story. Early in the book, their classmate Sashka Iartsev refers to Alik with the pejorative term жид, and Kolia’s komsomol cell arranges a show trial where, ironically, Kolia will serve as prosecutor (SP 13). Kolia’s letter at the story’s end reveals that the very same Sashka Iartsev caused his arrest by fingering him as a co-conspirator (SP 98). This difference (Ukrainian versus Jewish friend) reveals a telling similarity on a larger scale: just as the revolutionary movement brings together different classes and

13 In his letter home, Kolia writes that the interrogator beat and trampled him, leaving his hearing damaged in one ear, and that his mother must save him, since he cannot survive long under the current conditions (SP 97–98).

14 Gor’kii seems to use the term хохол not in a derogatory sense, but as the word working-class Russians would have used in the early 1900s—Nilovna thinks of Nakhodka as хохол while clearly feeling affection towards him, and he uses it of himself (Mat’ 16–17). The term жид is sufficiently different to provoke a mock trial when one schoolchild uses it of another. Chukovskaia proves more careful than Gor’kii in introducing and describing ethnic Others. The mock trial also suggests how the Soviet state could have devoted its energies to reforming the attitudes of its citizens, rather than persecuting the innocent.

Chukovskaia’s husband, Matvei Bronshtein, was Jewish, but another reason for the importance of Jewish characters in SP emerges in a note from The Akhmatova Journals: “Rakhil Aronovna Braude (1901–71): My friend and neighbor; until ’37, she was the secretary on our editorial staff, but after the editors’ and writers’ arrests she was advised that it was obligatory for her to hand in her ‘voluntary’ resignation. Living on Rubinshteyn Street, right opposite me, she took great care of me after Matvey Petrovich’s arrest; she even used to take my place in prison queues at night” (Chukovskaya 1994, 1: 262n27). Just as Chukovskaia’s own experience as a stenographer (and once a hungry exile in the provinces) filters into her depiction of the wife of the arrested editor-in-chief (SP 70–74), Braude becomes a model at once for Sof’ia Petrovna and for the heroic helpfulness of Alik and Natasha.

15 Kolia himself writes that he confessed after being beaten and trampled, and he does not wholly blame Iartsev: “Его, наверное, тоже сильно били” (They must have beaten him hard as well; SP 98).
nationalities in Mat’, Stalinist terror arrests all possible ethnic groups—Finns, Poles, Jews, and Russians—in a mockery of internationalism (SP 49).

Kolia’s girlfriend Natasha commits suicide (SP 83), while Pavel’s love interest in Mat’, Sasha, merely risks damaging her health further by joining him in Siberia (Mat’ 291). Alik is arrested separately after trying to help Kolia (SP 79), and they do not meet in prison or the camps;16 Nakhodka is not only arrested, but tried and sentenced along with Pavel, in a group that maintains some solidarity. Sof’ia Petrovna is pressured to quit her job and persecuted in her apartment, and she has hardly any sources of support besides Kolia’s friends; but Nilovna receives admiring comments from parents of the other young workers on trial (Mat’ 275), and if anything she finds increased support and friendship from the other socialists after his arrest. After Pavel is taken away, she continues to learn from the revolutionaries and grows more devoted to the cause. Sof’ia Petrovna is slow to abandon her trust in the regime, and she often scoffs at what she hears from Alik, Natasha, or women in the prison lines.

In the overall plots of the two works, Nilovna’s development follows a smooth rising line, whether or not her final scene is a martyrdom for the cause, whereas Sof’ia Petrovna’s fate is broken in two or folds back onto itself: first she finds a job and develops in social and professional status, but after Kolia’s arrest she is forced to learn new ways of survival that undo what she had learned before. Not surprisingly, the unraveling of her earlier knowledge and confidence results in psychological distress. As Chukovskaia writes, the story treats the mass madness of that era, “Я собственно и хотела написать книгу об обществе, поврежденном в уме…” (I wanted to write a book precisely about a society that was mentally damaged…; Chukovskaia 1979: 9). Perhaps most weightily, considering Chukovskaia’s other concerns, Nilovna not only has the chance to speak with revolutionaries who have been in exile or prison and can tell her what that is like; she also witnesses her son’s arrest, has several chances to meet with him while he is in prison awaiting trial, and gets to attend his trial, at which he is permitted to make a speech to the people assembled in courtroom. His words are taken down stenographically and quickly printed up for distribution as revolutionary propaganda.17 Reading the two stories side by side, we see new irony in the complaints of characters in Mat’ that the sentences are known in advance (264) and that only family members are allowed to attend the trial (269); records of common practice in the pre-revolutionary period provide a bitter footnote to Sof’ia Petrovna’s thwarted efforts to find out why her son was arrested, where he was sent, and when she can see him again. She knows so little until she

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16 Kolia’s letter asks his mother to kiss Alik and Natasha, not knowing that one has been arrested and the other is dead.

17 The stenographic record of Pavel’s speech must have touched Chukovskaia, who was trained in stenography, and whose father notes his own stenographic records of some conversations in his memoir of Gor’kii. As noted above, one minor character in SP is a stenographer.
receives Kolia’s letter that she imagines the prison looking like the famous picture of Princess Tarakanova (SP 57–58).

The import of the endings is also distinctly different. Nilovna is arrested, beaten, and perhaps killed, but she leaves life, or merely her free revolutionary activity, while disseminating her son’s word (as if Mary were to be crucified for distributing copies of the Gospel on fresh papyrus), and she manages to get copies into many eager hands before she is stopped (Mat’ 307–09). The beating she suffers casts ironic light on her earlier certainty that she would not be tortured if arrested (Mat’ 69), but the trial scene does not suggest that Pavel and the other the defendants had been beaten. Sof’ia Petrovna fails to reach Stalin with three appeals (SP 89); when she finds Kolia’s desperate letter, clearly delivered by someone who has come from camp rather than by official mail, she shows it to only one person—Kiparisova. Kiparisova advises her to destroy it. Sof’ia Petrovna frets over it for a few hours, but then burns it. Each ending is ambiguous, but the general tendency is clear: Nilovna manages to carry out her mission, and others will pick up where she left off. Sof’ia Petrovna has been reduced to misery and disorientation and burns her son’s letter. Holmgren summarizes this ending as one of psychological and symbolic self-destruction: “By burning her son’s letter […] out of terror and confusion, Sof’ia Petrovna turns away from the last, the most vital personal connection remaining to her and performs the complicit treachery encouraged by the regime” (1993: 55). Not only is Sof’ia Petrovna broken and probably mentally ill—she has just destroyed the last words she may ever receive from her son. Unlike Nilovna, who risks and perhaps loses her life to spread her son’s word rather than allow the tsarist court to repress it, Sof’ia Petrovna spasmodically tries to save her own life at the expense of her son’s words, as burning assures they will remain secret. A 1988 review after the work’s first official Soviet publication recounts the ending in one sentence, commenting economically with punctuation: “Вернувшись домой, Софья Петровна… сжигает письмо!” (Nerler 1988: 204). This reading is less pessimistic, though: “… сжигая письмо, она не рвет с сыном, не предает его (как может показаться с точки зрения нормальных людей), нет, она предупреждает опасность—уничтожает улику, которая может еще больше навредить ему” (In burning the letter, she does not break with her son, does not betray him [as it may seem from the point of view of normal people], no, she prevents a danger—she destroys a clue that could cause him even more harm; Nerler 1988: 204). Indeed, the letter does not reveal Kolia’s location, and if her three letters to Stalin have had no effect then nothing Kolia begs her to try is likely to succeed. I will return below to this ending and the suggestion that Sof’ia Petrovna achieves a kind of twisted wisdom at the story’s end.

For readers, the relationship between the books has several results. Gor’kii’s novel was tremendously popular and influential not only in the USSR; it was translated and published in many languages. Chukovskaia’s choice of Mat’ as a subtext for
her work may reflect her hope to leave a record that would be recognizable and comprehensible to a huge number of people. As many scholars and reviewers have noted, \textit{SP} begins by invoking Socialist Realism, making even uninitiated readers complicit in the happy pictures of the first several chapters, preparing the reader’s response to later developments even as Sof’ia Petrovna proves to be an unreliable interpreter of events. If \textit{Mat’} establishes many of the traits of Socialist Realism, then \textit{SP} uses these traits against themselves, creating a palimpsest effect for any reader who also knows \textit{Mat’}. Gor’kii himself considered \textit{Mat’} a bad book (Freeborn 1982: 51), and readers might assert that it was compromised when the Soviet literary establishment adopted it as a founding work of Socialist Realism.

Chukovskaia, however, had many reasons to appreciate Gor’kii, not least of them her own “left” political and cultural views. The editors of the Paris edition, entitled \textit{Опустелый дом}, show their appreciation of Chukovskaia’s politics, perhaps sensing the Gor’kian subtext as well as the work’s general relationship to Socialist Realism: “Предлагаемая повесть написана автором советским, советским патриотом” (The povest’ offered here was written by a Soviet author, a Soviet patriot; Chukovskaia 1965: 6). This is not mere verbiage to protect an author being published in tamizdat, but simple truth. Chukovskaia did not become a dissident because she preferred tsarist Russia: she did her best by the new regime, demanding the rule of law, suing her publisher to get the rest of her legal royalties as described in \textit{Процесс исключения}, expecting the Soviet Union to live up to its promises.

The relationship between \textit{Mat’} and \textit{SP} seems so obvious that it is hard to believe that no one has noted it until now. Of course, the relationship may be so obvious that no Russian reader who knew \textit{Mat’} would think it worth mentioning in print (though that has not stopped many obvious observations from achieving publication). Perhaps the long ban on \textit{SP} meant that when it finally appeared, late-Soviet readers were absorbed by its plot and its frank depiction of the Terror and thus did not seek or consider its literary antecedents. Perhaps, too, Gor’kii had lost so much status during his long afterlife as a sacred cow that by the 1960s, never mind the late 1980s, no one would have expected that choice of model (especially not the generally disparaged \textit{Mat’}) for a work that so challenged the official history of its time. In any case, after much searching, the nearest suggestion I have found is the comment in Lynn Sterns’s 1988 M.A. thesis, “Everybody’s Autobiographer: The Strategy of Self-Effacement in the Memoirs of Lidiia Chukovskaia,” that \textit{SP} fits the type of Socialist Realist novel exemplified by \textit{Mat’}. As Katerina Clark notes in \textit{The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual},

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18 Based on Chukovskaia’s open letters, etc., Rudolf Tökés locates her among the “left” Soviet dissidents; the “right” includes both Stalinists and “Russian Patriots” (Tökés 1975:15).

\end{flushright}
ual, the plot formula of Mat’ “proved so effective for structuring any novel as a par-
able of historical progress that it became the basis for Socialist Realism’s master plot” (Clark 2000: 65). The details of plot and character similarity are what make the relationship of the two works clear, and these may be lost in the overall Socialist Realist family resemblance.

In any case, Chukovskaia had many reasons to look to Gor’kii for a formative subtext for her first novel. In 1939, only three years after his death, he still enjoyed high status and was an admired revolutionary writer. Sof’ia Petrovna’s employment in a publishing house, which draws on Chukovskaia’s own work experience at Lengiz, similarly connects to Gor’kii’s role as a founder of Soviet publishing enterprises. Chukovskaia’s family had a long connection with Gor’kii, described in her father’s memoirs (Chukovskii 1985a: 118–56), and she shared his background as an intelligent and raznochintsev. The two-volume edition of Chukovskaia’s works includes a letter she wrote to Gor’kii in 1928, when she was about 21 years old, asking him to intervene for her father when Chukovskii encountered trouble with the Soviet censorship (Chukovskaia 2000). Though the letter was not published until 1991, the two-volume edition presents it as the first of her many open letters about Soviet literary and social injustices. She (or her literary executors) clearly considered the letter to Gor’kii a fully valid part of her moral and creative legacy.

Mat’ itself offered a great deal to an attentive reader like Chukovskaia, even if it was hardly Gor’kii’s best work. The novel acquired new relevance after the arrest of her husband Matvei Bronshtein in 1937, because it describes in detail several arrests (perhaps using details from Gor’kii’s own experience of arrest after Bloody Sunday in 1905) and a trial. These descriptions could have both informative and therapeutic value. The same concerns may have drawn her to Aleksandr Herzen’s Былое и думы, that original classic of the dissident memoir, on which she later wrote a monograph (Chukovskaia 1966). In Chukovskaia’s novel Спуск под воду (Going Under, written in 1949–57), the heroine Nina Sergeevna is desperate to learn anything at all about what might have happened to her husband after his arrest; Sof’ia Petrovna insists that Alik repeat over and over the details of Kolia’s arrest (SP 54). If Mat’ works out Gor’kii’s feelings about the failure of 1905 (though also, scholars suggest, about the debacle of his American tour), SP may perform a similar function for Chukovskaia and the failures of 1917. Given her own exalted values, Chukovskaia may have found the exclamations in Mat’ about the cause and the value of good people (e.g., Nakhodka, Mat’ 28) sympathetic.20 Even if Chukovskaia thought of herself more than

20 Sof’ia Petrovna and Natasha find themselves equally engrossed in the new high-pathos public discourse of Soviet culture (SP 24ff).
of any eventual audience as she wrote _SP_,\(^{21}\) she could be sure that any Soviet reader would know _Mat´_ well. In fact, juxtaposing the similarities and differences in the two works, as described briefly above, allows her to make a more trenchant critique of the Terror, and especially its treatment of prisoners and their relatives, in comparison to the supposed brutality of the earlier tsarist regime. This critique would have weighed down a work of fiction if laid out explicitly, but it is activated every time a difference between the texts occurs.

Why did Chukovskaia choose to leave the relationship unmentioned? The plot borrowing is too extensive to have been unintentional; she may have considered it too obvious to need mention. It is also just conceivable that, writing under stress and in secrecy, she herself was not fully aware how much the story resembled parts of _Mat´_. She may have reacted to Gor´kii’s loss of prestige after Stalin’s death (though not enough to censor or destroy her 1928 letter to him). She writes that once she retrieved the manuscript of _SP_ in the 1950s, after the death of the last person who was hiding it, she refused to edit or change anything in the manuscript.\(^{22}\) Stressing that the work was not altered after 1940 might respond to anyone who felt that her description of the Terror was compromised by reliance on a formerly sacred, now-tainted text. Her view of Gor´kii may also have changed, as she developed her uncompromisingly dissident stance beginning in the early 1960s. It seems most likely that she chose to stress the work’s documentary aspect as she came to consider herself a dissident rather than a belletrist and took on a relatively egoless, almost saintly model of dissident behavior.\(^{23}\) Playing the role of a dissident who stresses the truth above all would lead her to emphasize the realism of her depiction, not its literary engagement.

_SP_ might also be read for messages about Gor´kii himself. One might see in Sof´ia Petrovna, who persistently and wrongly trusts in the decency of the Soviet government, a judgment of his decision to return to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and his support of Stalin and various repressive projects thereafter. Sof´ia Petrovna’s connections to the world of literature (she works first in a publishing house, later in a library) give her a relationship to Gor´kii as well as to Chukovskaia herself.

To summarize Chukovskaia’s achievement, _SP_ first teaches a reader what Socialist Realism is, and then it brutally recreates the psychology of the time. It pro-

\(^{21}\) Chukovskaia did show the work to Akhmatova, and she also read it to a few trusted friends. One of them informed on her, leading to her attempted arrest in connection with a work “about 1937.”

\(^{22}\) The original manuscript has been deposited in the Public Library in St. Petersburg, so anyone who wishes to can check the accuracy of her claim (_Izvestiia_ No, 107, 6-10-1997).

\(^{23}\) Holmgren might explain this as a sign of Chukovskaia’s feminine, “handmaiden” position vis-à-vis literature (Holmgren 1993: 35–37); it comes not only from her father, but also from Gor´kii and other intelligentsia men of lower class backgrounds.
vides a wonderfully ambiguous ending, however, and this paper will conclude with a rereading of that ending. As summarized above, the story’s ending has often been interpreted as the final descending step in a tragedy: a mother who burns her son’s letter because she has finally lost her sanity or become complicit in her own terrorization. Russian readers like Nerler, on the other hand, see the novel’s end as a sign that Sof’ia Petrovna has at last learned how to preserve the memory of her son in an era when written evidence is too risky, and with luck to keep a vestige of family life to welcome him back, when and if things change. The ending may be read through two additional lenses: through the ending of Mat’, and through Chukovskaia’s own other writing from the same period as SP. The end of Gor’kii’s novel strongly suggests that Nilovna is killed (uttering a Christ-like “poor things” of the spies and police who beset her—they know not what they do). Sof’ia Petrovna may die, too, committing suicide like Natasha; she may go mad or she may disappear into the maw of the Gulag. Although the heroine is still alive in the final words, SP’s ending seems to lack even the hope that lights the ending of Mat’, where other revolutionaries will take Nilovna’s place, inspired by her example and the words of her son. On the other hand, Sof’ia Petrovna is not dead yet, and in 1938 that counts for a great deal.

The ending of SP looks quite different through the lens of Chukovskaia’s other writings, especially her memoirs of Anna Akhmatova. These “notes” describe the system Chukovskaia and Akhmatova devised to preserve Akhmatova’s poetry in secrecy. The poet would jot a newly composed or revised text on paper while Chukovskaia spoke about a random topic in order to confuse any surveillance attempts, then Chukovskaia would quickly commit the lines to memory while Akhmatova maintained the audio camouflage, chattering about something trivial. After this, Akhmatova would burn the paper over an ashtray. 24 The ritual (to use Chukovskaia’s term) of burning takes on tragic, sacrificial, but also triumphant significance in the retelling. Sof’ia Petrovna may have burned her son’s letter to preserve its contents safely in her memory, rather than risk her life as Nilovna does with a public distribution of printed copies of her son’s words. Sof’ia Petrovna has already wondered whether she should tear up the suicide note her friend Natasha left (SP 87), so she is aware of the danger of any compromising document even before Kiparisova warns her about this one. As the story ends she is disoriented:

24 “[S]uddenly, in mid-conversation, she would fall silent and, signaling to me with her eyes at the ceiling and walls, she would get a scrap of paper and a pencil; then she would loudly say something very mundane: ‘Would you like some tea?’ or ‘You’re very tanned,’ then she would cover the scrap in hurried handwriting and pass it to me. I would read the poems and, having memorized them, would hand them back to her in silence. ‘How early autumn came this year,’ Anna Andreeneva would say loudly and, striking a match, would burn the paper over an ashtray.

“It was a ritual: hands, match, ashtray—a beautiful and mournful ritual” (Chukovskaya 1994: 6).
Матери встала, чтобы зажечь свет, но никак не могла отыскать выключатель. Где в этой комнате выключатель? Невозможно вспомнить, где был в этой комнате выключатель? Она перебирала по стенам, натыкаясь на сдвинутую для уборки мебель (99–100).

Sof’ia Petrovna stood up to turn the light on, but she could not find the light switch. Where was the light switch in this room? She couldn't remember where the light switch was in this room. She groped along the walls, stumbling against furniture that had been moved for cleaning.

Her disorientation (expressed in internal monologue by triple repetition of the word выключатель) could be read as the sensory confusion following a stroke or a new birth. When she finds the switch the first thing she sees in the new light is the letter, crumpled on the table, as if its full significance is finally clear to her. The wording of the last sentence also suggested a kind of transformation: “Софья Петровна бросила огонь на пол и растоптала ногой” (Sof’ia Petrovna threw the fire onto the floor and stamped it out with her foot; SP 100): the letter is no longer mere paper, but fire, огонь. While the verb растоптала “stamped out” echoes Kolia’s lament that the prosecutor Ershov beat and trampled him (“топтал ногами”; SP 97), the final flame sends the reader toward strategies for preserving truth and human connection under the most difficult circumstances, toward a word that can survive fire, with hope to triumph in human memory. The crucial knowledge at the end of the story, as in Mat’, belongs to the reader rather than to the mother.

Critics who stress the tale’s indubitable documentary value, and the amazing bravery of its author in composing and preserving such a document at such a time, have in essence adopted Chukovskaia’s dissident agenda: the book provides a model of behavior, implicitly calling others to adhere to similar standards of bravery and decency. Indeed, later in life Chukovskaia took on an unyielding posture reminiscent of the heroes (and, occasionally, heroines) of the Russian revolutionary novel, becoming herself a kind of Pavel Vlasov.25 The whole story urges the reader to think hard, not to be fooled, to recognize the risks of speaking thoughts that should be private,26

25 Nilovna frets about her son’s монашеская строгость “monastic severity”—“Ей казалось, что все боятся его и никто не любит за эту сухость” ([I]t seemed to her that because of that dryness everyone was afraid of him and did not love him; Mat’ 36).

26 Before Natasha Frolenko is fired, for a typing error that putatively reveals an anti-Soviet attitude, she disturbs the accepted choreography of a meeting by asking what the “wrecker” Gerasimov had done, besides being the nephew of “the Moscow Gerasimov” (SP 34–35). Sof’ia Petrovna is pressured into resigning not because of her son’s arrest, which she has wisely kept secret at work, but because she speaks in defense of Natasha at another such meeting (SP
while still showing that the most admirable characters are willing to risk asking questions and defending one another. Sof‘ia Petrovna probably is crazy at the end of the story—but only a crazy person, able to do one thing while thinking and believing something else, could survive in such a time. Chukovskaia stated on many occasions that she wrote her *povest* because she was unable not to write it, and this reflects its therapeutic function for her: working out that the secretiveness and cognitive dissonance she must have found herself practicing were essential to staying alive, if not quite sane, through horrible and confusing experiences, but ensuring that she could pay back later by bringing out the truth she had once concealed. Sof‘ia Petrovna’s painfully learned survival tactics of silence and dissembling help to explain the urgency of Chukovskaia’s later insistence that no threat short of arrest and death was enough to justify not speaking the truth. Her later dissident practice also worked to rewrite the destruction of the ending of *SP*, as she turned the fragile and “private” genre of the letter into a weapon of reproach against the Soviet state, as her open letters indeed became manuscripts that would not burn.

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References


63). As Nerler points out, trying to question or resist the Terror often simply singled one out as a suitable victim for further persecution (1988: 203).
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