

Leona Toker  
Ilia Zakharovich Serman (1913—2010)

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A recurrent motif of orations at the funeral of Professor Ilia Zakharovich Serman (1913—2010) was the passing of an age — in particular, of the long twentieth century of traditional Russian literary scholarship. For over thirty years Serman was a bastion of this tradition at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, even though this military metaphor is not quite appropriate to his kindly, stoical, level-headed, and open-hearted scholar, whose room, crowded with books and papers, in the Mt. Scopus campus constantly attracted students, colleagues, and visitors. So did his little apartment in Ramot where he had lived with his wife, the writer Ruth Zernova, before and after her death in 2004. A reserved yet not introverted conversationalist who both stimulated and balanced others, Professor Serman was splendid teacher: an inspiring classroom presence and an advisor to a great number of doctoral students. His own special field was Russian literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but his keen intellectual curiosity and strong methodological principles allowed him to supervise doctoral research in fields ranging from old to modern Russian literature.

When Professor Serman started teaching at the Hebrew University he was already 66 years old, and with a difficult past behind him. He had been a soldier in World War II, demobilized after a contusion. In 1948 his work on his dissertation in Leningrad was brutally disrupted by arrest, his own and his wife's, for "slandering Soviet policies." This was part of Stalin's operation against Jewish intellectuals, and the Sermans were easy victims because of the courage with which they, especially the brilliant and energetic Ruth, once a translator in the Spanish Civil War, expressed themselves in the presence of their multiple guests

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(and when alone too — their apartment was, apparently, bugged). At the trial Ilia Zakharovich appealed for clemency, especially for his wife, mother of two little children, yet they both got long prison sentences. The children were lucky enough to be looked after by relatives instead of being sent to government orphanages, yet they suffered deeply on being separated not only from their imprisoned parents but also from each other.

Serman served a significant part of his sentence in the freezing camps of the Kolyma region; eventually, in writing his memoirs, his stoical character, as well as the fact that the main work of testimony about the camps had already been done, caused him to downplay the acute suffering of six years and recollect mainly stark facts and amusing incidents. About a year after Stalin's death, the Sermans returned home and resumed their family life with their children; some time later they were legally rehabilitated. Serman managed to complete his dissertation, though his teacher, the eminent literary scholar Grigorii Gukovskii, had also been arrested in 1948 and had died in prison.

After several fruitful decades in the Leningrad Institute for Literature and the Arts (the so-called Pushkin House) and in Leningrad University, Serman came under a cloud again and was fired from the Institute after the emigration of his daughter Nina and her husband. It is possible to see this catastrophe as fortunate: the Sermans themselves immigrated to Israel in 1979, and Ilia Zakharovich started teaching at the Hebrew University; he later lectured also in the USA, England, and France. The move opened new research directions for him, as if liberating him from earlier grooves of thought. He published books on Lomonosov, Karamzin, and Lermontov, as well as numerous articles; together with other scholars he put together and edited collections of essays on the history of Russian literature. Festschrifts were published in honor of his eightieth and ninetieth birthdays. Even when he worked as an adjunct teacher, well past the mandatory retirement age, many of his courses attracted large numbers of students. His 1974 book *Konstantin Batyushkov* was published by Twayne Publishers in the English translation; his new books,

published in Jerusalem, were reprinted in post-perestroika Russia, where Ilia Zakharovich himself was warmly welcomed on a visit a few years ago.

One of the striking themes in the works written by Ruth Zernova in Israel was the Russian immigrants' mystical feeling of being at home in this country, despite problems with the Hebrew language and the initial unfamiliarity with customs, religious holidays, and national rituals. She believed in the historical mission of the Jews in the host countries and in the cultural synergy upon their return to Zion. She saw no problem and no paradox in being a Russian intellectual, a Jew, and a citizen of Israel, in any combination of the three — this argument is made by one of Prof. Serman's last doctoral students, Rachel Wirtzburg, in her dissertation on Israeli Russian writers. It seems that Ilia Zakharovich shared these attitudes, in his usual understated way. He certainly remained faithful to his own mission of transmitting knowledge, stimulating creativity, maintaining standards, and acting as a cohesive force in his academic and human milieu until the end of his long and active life.