

“It’s wonderful to be a Soviet writer!” Vera Inber’s Northern Journey in 1934¹

Ben Hellman

Department of Modern Languages, Helsinki University

ben.hellman@helsinki.fi

Abstract.

In the autumn of 1934, the Soviet writer Vera Inber (1890-1972) made a three months’ journey through the Nordic countries. The journey was undertaken on the invitation of Swedish and Norwegian student organizations and friendship societies. She met with journalists and writer-colleagues, gave talks in Stockholm, Uppsala, Oslo, Bergen, Copenhagen and Aarhus and collected material for a planned book about life in modern Scandinavia. In numerous interviews she praised the victories of socialism, the successful solution to the “women’s question” and the visible role of writers in the Soviet Union. When stating that “it’s wonderful to be a Soviet writer”, Inber was in fact at this point of her career passing from being a talented, highly original author of short stories and poems to becoming an obedient tool in the hands of the Communist Party.

1. The Year of 1934

In 1934 two Soviet Russian writers, Boris Pil’njak and Vera Inber, travelled through the Nordic countries, giving interviews, meeting with local writers and appearing before the public. The journeys were undertaken with official permission, and, as one can assume, under the close supervision of the security service. When talking about their life and work, the writers had to remember to express their loyalty to the Communist ideology and praise the Soviet cultural policy. The situation for the two travellers was not enviable; they could hope for increased interest in their writings, but simultaneously every ill-considered word or meeting could create serious problems at home.

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Pil’njak made his trip in the summer of 1934, stopping for two weeks each in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.² Everywhere he managed to charm the journalists and writers that he met, despite the propagandistic views expressed in his interviews. If you were to believe Pil’njak, the Soviet Union was a writers’ paradise, a paradoxical statement from a writer who for ten years had been one of the main objects of ideological criticism. Only in Copenhagen, during nocturnal conversations with his old trustworthy friend, the Soviet envoy Fëdor Raskol’nikov, did Pil’njak manage to temporarily free himself from the forced official role and express his worries concerning the situation in the Soviet Union. The journey did not lead to a book, as Pil’njak had originally planned, but only to a travel essay, written in the obligatory socialist vein. Three years later, on the eve of his arrest and execution, Pil’njak in a private conversation no longer saw his last trip abroad as a journey to a hostile capitalist world, but as the last taste of freedom and genuine friendship.

In the autumn of the same year another Soviet writer, Vera Inber, made the same journey, meeting with reporters in the four Nordic countries and giving talks to the public. A clear goal was to gather material for a book about life in the Nordic countries, presumably a work of the same kind as her *Amerika v Parizhe* (1928, America in Paris). Inber was already well-known in most of these countries (Sweden was in fact the first country to have published translations of her works), and, moreover, as a Soviet woman writer she was sure to meet with considerable interest.

Inber was born in Odessa in a middle class Jewish family with cultural interests. In 1914-1917 she lived in Paris, where her first collection of poetry was published. In the 1920s she belonged to the avant-garde group The Literary Center of the Constructivists, and her poems, short stories and the novel *Mesto pod solncem* (1928, A Place in the Sun) had little yet in common with the genuine Soviet literature which was gradually taking shape. However, when Inber visited the Nordic countries in 1934, she had finally chosen sides, renouncing her past and accepting the role of a “Party writer” with Socialist Realism as the basis for her writing. A year earlier, in August 1933, she had visited the White Sea Canal as a member of a writers’ brigade, led by Gorky, and subsequently participated in the infamous volume *The Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal: The History of Its Construction* (1934). Like the other participants, she refused to acknowledge the project for what it actually was, a death camp for political prisoners, but praised it as a successful reeducation experience. During her Northern journey she never mentioned her visit to the White Sea-Baltic canal and the anthology, apparently conscious of the dubious character of the undertaking.

In the spring of 1934, Inber went to Uzbekistan as a member of another writers’ brigade. The journey gave birth to a few short stories and poems, revealing an interest in the life of woman silk workers. According to Inber, life conditions for Asian women

² See my article, *The Last Trip Abroad of a Soviet Russian Globetrotter: Boris Pil’njak’s Northern Journey in 1934*, *Russian Literature*. Vol. 71, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 123-252.

had gone through a rapid change for the better thanks to Communism. In April, she attended the XVII Congress of the Communist Party in Moscow. In an article for *Izvestija*, “S”ezd - delo blizkoe i krovnoe” (“The Congress is Something Close and One’s Own”), she stressed the importance of the Congress, both on a private and a national level. Earlier, “the fellow travelers”, a group with which she had been identified, considered Party affairs to be of no concern to them. In addition, RAPP, the association of proletarian writers, had sown discord between writers and made Inber feel like a “stepchild” in literature, a stranger in her own country. But thanks to the April resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, everything had now changed. Soviet writers had merged into a group with common interests and goals with the former RAPP writers forming only a small, insignificant part of the big collective (Inber 1934a:91-93).

The most significant event in Soviet literature in 1934 was the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August, a grand manifestation of the achieved consensus among writers. Along with the Soviet writers, some foreign guests also attended the congress. While Pil’njak was given a modest role in the event, a reminder of his precarious position in Soviet literature, Inber was one of the invited speakers. In her speech, “Literatura sčast’ja” (“The Literature of Happiness”) she talked about a new type of literature being born in the Soviet Union. If literature traditionally had been born out of “sadness, pain and anguish”, Soviet writers wanted to have happiness and optimism as their foundation. However, looking back at the first fifteen years of Soviet literature, Inber could not find many examples of such an attitude within poetry, and she saw herself forced to criticize many poets by name for the shortcomings of their works. Inber accused the political leader Nikolaj Buharin, who had only three years left to live, for a lack of understanding of literature. Too often even the positive hero, a cornerstone of Socialist Realism, turned out to be an abstract and unconvincing figure. “It is much more difficult for us to write than we think”, Inber said in the conclusion of her speech (Inber 1934b).

Inber had planned to start her Northern journey in mid-September, but the unexpected death of her son-in-law, the writer Grigorij Gauzner (1907-1934), forced her to postpone her departure by a week. Gauzner, the husband of Inber’s only child, Žanna Vladimirovna (1912-1962), started writing at the end of the 1920s, and in 1934, he published what was to be his last book, *9 let v poiske neobyknovennogo* (9 Years in Search of the Unusual). One year earlier he had accompanied Inber on the journey to the White Sea-Baltic canal and he also participated in the collective volume. Gauzner died of meningitis on September 4 in Gagra on the Black Sea. Three days later Inber wrote in her diary: “A hard and terrible time. Everything at the same time: the failure at the Congress and Grisha’s terrible death. Trouble is hovering over our house.

Lethargy, fatigue, aversion to everything. Most of all I would like to just lie still and read books...” (Inber 1964:313).³

On what basis Inber thought her appearance at the Writers’ Congress was unsuccessful we do not know. No criticism is recorded in the minutes of the meeting. But whatever the reasons were, Inber started her Northern journey with a heavy heart.

2. Finland

Inber had begun to prepare her journey in July, applying for tourist visas at the Scandinavian embassies in Moscow (Nag 1987:104). While Pil’njak had personally taken the initiative for his journey, getting the final permission from the Central Committee, Inber claimed to have received invitations from Norwegian and Swedish student organizations (D.K. 1934) and the Swedish and Norwegian Friendships Societies – Sovjet-Unionens vänner (Inber 1977:368), an organization which existed between 1930-1934, and Soviet-Unionens venner (Inber 1967), founded in 1928.

The first stop, however, was Helsinki. For Inber, Finland did not hold much interest: she had no acquaintances here, the Finnish culture was foreign to her, and as a writer she was virtually unknown. Only the first chapter of *A Place in the Sun* and an unidentified short story, “Mutta me...” (“But we...”), had been translated into Finnish. Both translations were published in the left-wing cultural journal *Tulenkantajat* in 1933 (№ 10 and 24). It was also the *Tulenkantajat* circle of writers and intellectuals who came to serve as her Finnish contacts.

On September 24, shortly after Inber’s arrival, a reception in her honour was given at the Soviet Legation. The host was Nikolaj Pozdnjakov (1900-1948), chargé d’affaires at the Legation. One of the guests was K.N. Rantakari (1877-1948) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it is thanks to his report to the Finnish Investigative Police Agency (Etsivä keskuspoliisi), that we know the names of some of the other Finnish guests: Hella Wuolijoki with her daughter Vappu, Elli Tompuri, Helmer Adler, Katri Vala, Bertel Hintze, Olavi Paavolainen, Kaisu-Mirjami Rydberg, Liina Rejman, Väinö Lassila, Erkki Kivijärvi, Bertel Appelberg and Cay Sundström. The majority, but not all, had socialist sympathies. Not only did Rantakari try to figure out who had close personal contacts from before with the Soviet diplomats, but he also noticed how all the questions to Inber were given according to a fixed plan (Rantakari 1934). It should be added that Rantakari’s secret report is the only place where Inber’s Jewish nationality is mentioned throughout her 1934 journey.

Only two newspapers used the opportunity to present Inber to their readers, *Suomen Sosiaalidemokraatti* and *Hufvudstadsbladet*. Their texts were mainly based on the talk that Inber gave in German at the occasion. Unlike Pil’njak, who knew only a few

³ When the extracts from Inber’s diary were republished in 1966 (p. 432) and 1977 (p. 32), her words about the failure at the Writers’ Congress were excluded.

words of English, Inber was good at both German and French and could thus in principle get along without an interpreter. *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* called Inber a writer well-known “in all European countries, except for Finland”. The journalist, apparently Kaisu-Mirjami Rydberg, portrayed the Soviet guest as a “short, slim woman, dark, lively and charming”. She was 44, but did not look more than a few years over thirty. About her early years, Inber told the Finnish journalist that her mother had been the director of a big school, while her father was a publisher. “So thus I am a typical representative for the so-called intellectuals, of whom many others, like me, got involved in the reconstruction of our country on the eve of the revolution or after it had already taken place, and there found themselves a very interesting field of activity” (SSD 1934). Inber had depicted such an evolution in her novel *Mesto pod solncem*, but many other works also dealt with the same topic. Inber recommended Aleksandr Tolstoj’s *Hoždenie po mukam* (The Road to Calvary), Jurij Oleša’s *Zavist’* (Envy), Konstantin Fedin’s *Goroda i gody* (Cities and Years) and the now forgotten novel *Naslednik* (Heir) by Lev Slavin.

Inber also spoke of her recent journey to Uzbekistan. The ten writers of their brigade had been asked to deal with different aspects of Uzbek life, and Inber had chosen to focus on the issue of women:

I wrote about the role and development of women in this fascinating corner of the world, where people are currently going through a period of enormous change. What has happened long ago in the central parts of the country is now here and is new and exciting. You can imagine how the Uzbek women perceive their sudden release; not so long ago they were walking around with thick veils before their faces, living as if in eternal night, and they were not allowed to dine at the same table as the men, not to mention the fact that they would not have had the right to spend the money that they earned through hard work at the silk factories and plantations. (SSD 1934)

There was a huge interest in literature in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet writer was in constant contact with his readers: “Literature is not a rare hothouse plant for a few devotees, but it belongs to all, it is a vital part of our community.” Every day Inber received letters from all corners of the country. People wanted to discuss topics that she had raised, and they asked for advice or told her about changes in their lives. To find subjects and themes was easy, as the surrounding life was full of events. In the Soviet Union you could no longer find any bohemian writers, *flaneurs*, who lived only on a day to day basis, sitting in some coffee bar. If such a writer appeared he would seem so strange and ridiculous that people would think that he had escaped from some museum.

“It’s wonderful to be a writer in the Soviet Union and to write for such people as our people!” Inber exclaimed (SSD 1934). She taught workers how to write, helping them to become journalists and writers, and visited factories to talk about literature. Inber also informed the Finns about the recent grand writers’ conference. For her, as a writer, this had been one of the most important events of her life. Of uttermost interest were the speeches given by writers from parts of Russia where only now a written

language had been created and people were learning to read and write. In these places a printed book was still a great wonder. The Armenian representative was 76-year-old Aleksandr Shirvanzade, who when asked about the secret behind his good health, had answered: “I don’t grow older as I live in a country like this and in such times” (SSD 1934). (Shirvanzade actually died the following year.) Another writer of interest for Inber was Sulejman Stal’skij from Dagestan. Dressed in a colourful, local costume, he had been moving rhythmically back and forth during the sessions, mumbling to himself. Stal’skij had written a poem, a masterpiece, according to Inber, about the congress. Stalskij, who died in 1937, became a staunch Party writer and was completely forgotten after the death of Stalin.

Hufvudstadsbladet published only a short notice about the meeting with Inber, a writer “fully committed to Soviet power” in spite of her non-proletarian background. The anonymous journalist praised her for being “a master of style”: “The themes of her short stories, for example, are taken from Soviet life, but they are far from sensational, and one can call her manner of treating them exquisite” (Hbl 1934).

The poet Katri Vala (1873-1944) had missed both Pil’njak’s visit in June and the Writers’ Congress in Moscow in August because of her pregnancy, but now she was present, listening to Inber with rising enthusiasm. The Finnish translation of the short story “Mutta me...” (“But We...”) the previous year had actually been done by her. In an article in the *Tulenkantajat* magazine Vala gave her impressions of Inber, “a small, charming and soulful woman”, who was especially fond of Dickens and Anatole France. Inber’s short stories were “full of a rich, subtle humour and original figures of speech”. This was true art, not published in Finland, as the publishers were only interested in propagandist anti-Soviet literature in spite of its low artistic level. Vala’s sour comment was not altogether true, as in fact all modern Russian literature, be it Soviet or émigré, was shunned by Finnish publishers in the 1930s.

The actress Elli Tompuri asked Inber the unavoidable questions, “Do you have any censorship in the Soviet Union?” and “Are you forced to write about certain subjects?” Not willing to discuss censorship, Inber only replied to the second question: “I cannot be forced, I can only write about what interests me. They might ask me whether I want to go to Uzbekistan. Can you write something about life at the silk mills? If you say yes, you can go to see for yourself what there is” (Vala 1981:152).

Vala was impressed by Inber’s words about the great changes that had taken place in Uzbek life: minorities had been given new life, their native language was used in schools, everyone learned to read and write, and women were emancipated. She listened enviously to the Soviet writer’s praise of her native country, a place where a writer was not alone, but a true member of society. Inber’s exclamation, “It’s wonderful to be a Soviet writer!”, made Vala sigh: “When will a Finnish writer have reason to speak out in this way?” (Vala 1981:152)

The next day, September 25, around thirty people gathered in a cabinet in the Tornio restaurant to celebrate Vera Inber. The list of invited guests had been drawn up by Hella Wuolijoki and Olavi Paavolainen, who had both acted as Boris Pil'njak's Finnish hosts in June. On the list were "all the 'radicals' of that time", Paavolainen commented afterwards, not having in mind only political but also cultural radicalism (Paavolainen 1991:131).⁴ Among the people invited were writers like Katri Vala, Erkki Vala, Elina Vaara, Helvi Hämäläinen, Martti Haavio (P. Mustapää), Toivo Pekkanen, Viljo Kajava, L. Onerva, Iris Uurto, Barbro Mörne, Elmer Diktonius and Hagar Olsson, literary critics like Lauri Viljanen, Kaarlo Marjanen and Kersti Bergroth, the composer Sulho Ranta, theatre people like Liina Reiman and Emmi and Eino Jurkka, Communist activists like Mauri Ryömä, Jarno Pennanen and Cay Sundström, and the architect Alvar Aalto (Paavolainen 1991:131-132). Even if they did not all necessarily turn up, this was a truly unique event. The party went down in history on account of a scandalous scene. Elli Tompuri, who not long before had returned from a study tour in the Soviet Union, was reciting something "in an awfully cheap manner", when suddenly F. E. Sillanpää, the forthcoming Nobel Prize winner and an acquaintance of Pil'njak from a meeting in June, entered the cabinet, "drunk as a lord", and began to sabotage the reading. Tompuri burst into a hysterical fit of crying and started to insult her own country and all its artists. That was the end of the planned programme, Paavolainen writes (*ibid.*).

In Inber's diary nothing is said about the Tornio episode. In the notes from the short Helsinki visit she mentions an unemployed worker, whom she met in a park (Dnevnik 1934-09-26), there are thoughts about "the border feeling" ("чувство границы"), now and before 1917, and an exclamation, "How sad the city is without Soviet power!" A few days later she also comments on the situation of the Russian language in Finland: "Under the tsar, everyone knew it, but then they tried to forget it. Now they are trying hard to remember it" (Dnevnik 1934-09-28).

3. Sweden

From Finland, Vera Inber arrived in Sweden by steamship on September 28. In Stockholm she was to remain for around three weeks, staying at the Soviet Legation at Villagatan as the envoy Aleksandra Kollontay's guest. At the time of Pil'njak's visit in the summer, Kollontay had been in Moscow, but now she was back in Sweden and could compose a programme for her guest.

Sweden was the first country to publish translations of Inber's works, the first being a short story, "Lallas intressen" ("Ljaliny interesy"), in 1928. It was followed by the

⁴ Paavolainen erroneously (see: Ahti 1967:166) remembered that the list of guests was for a third occasion in honour of Inber

novel *Plats i solen* (1930, *Mesto pod solncem*)⁵ and two short story collections, *Näktergalen och rosen* (1931, *Solovej i roza*) and *Gråt inte, Ninel!* (1932, *Ne plač’, Ninel’!*). Add translations of eight short stories, published in Swedish anthologies, journals and newspapers in the period 1929-1934, and Kollontay was admittedly right, when asserting that Inber in 1934 was the most popular Soviet writer in Sweden besides Mihail Šolohov (Kollontaj 2008:419). Inber’s translator was most often Russian-born Josef Riwkin (1909-1965), but his wife Ester Riwkin and Daniel Brick also contributed. Inber’s literary works had furthermore been given good reviews by Anders Österling (1931) and Eugénie Riwkin-Söderberg⁶ (1933). In his article, Österling made an apt comparison between the short stories of Inber and Katherine Mansfield (1931:VII).

On the day of Inber’s arrival a press conference was arranged at the Soviet Legation with journalists from all the main newspapers present.⁷ What they met was “a small and lively lady [...] with glittering pepper brown eyes and a red mouth” (S-D 1934). Inber turned out to be “both a clever and an interesting person” (DN 1934), though “a bit shy” (SD 1934a). The renowned guest in fact reminded more of a middle-class Swedish wife than a famous writer (S-D 1934). Inber told them that she had for many years dreamed of going to Sweden. Her first impression of Stockholm was overwhelming: “It is so beautiful here, the sky is high, and all places are so clean and charming” (-nx 1934). Of the buildings she had seen, she especially admired the “magnificent” town hall (Inber 1967).

Inber answered all questions in a frankly straightforward way, never falling into the journalists’ traps (SD 1934a). She talked enthusiastically about the situation for Soviet writers, an important group in society. Usually their books were immediately sold out, spread throughout the country in cheap editions. In Moscow writers had a house of their own, where Inber also lived, high up in a three-room flat. Soon they were to have a small community of their own, Peredelkino, seventeen kilometres from Moscow, where everybody, Inber included, was to be given a small cottage and a plot of land. If they needed to travel within the Soviet Union, they could do it for almost nothing. All that was needed was membership in the Writers’ Union. To become a member it was not enough to publish books, but a board had to decide the importance and artistic value of your writings.

Inber saw herself first and foremost as a poet: “My poems cannot really be translated into Swedish and that is bad. You always want to show what you have written... but when it comes to poetry, it is always a long road and there are big obstacles between nations...” (-nx 1934). In the Soviet Union poetry was important,

⁵ The novel was translated from German by Marianne Gelotte, a minor Swedish writer.

⁶ Eugénie Riwkin-Söderberg, Josef’s sister, appears to have met Inber in Moscow before 1934, even though this is not explicitly said in her travelogue *Kulturen i Sovjet* (1933). She was probably the go-between when the collection of short stories *Näktergalen och rosen* was published in 1931 as authorized by the writer.

⁷ According to Inber’s diary (1934-09-28), nine newspapers made interviews, some of them by phone.

and much good poetry was indeed written. As an example of good poetry she mentioned *Rabota i ljubov* (1932, Work and Love) by Jaroslav Smeljakov:⁸ “[...] the new thing here is that it is work *and* love, and not work *or* love” (DN 1934). This approach differed completely from what could be found in Western Europe: “There they consider that work and love – not least the work of man and the love of woman! – are enemies. But here it is claimed that great achievements are reached only through great love.” Women encourage us to perform deeds, but prevent us from doing them, was a West European saying, but in the Soviet Union people took a different view, admitting that women, too, contributed to the attainment of important achievements (-nx 1934).

Books written by writers’ brigades were a new type of literature. As an example Inber mentioned, not the White Sea-Baltic canal anthology, but the volume based upon ten writers’ visit to Uzbekistan. Older established writers gave professional help to young writers; one of Inber’s disciplines was a young female poet. “There are many ways of writing, and things that were considered impossible are now being done”, she commented (DN 1934). One journalist, contemptuously called “bourgeois” by his colleague from the Communist newspaper *Ny dag*, asked whether Soviet writers wrote to order. “No, no”, Vera Inber protested with a smile. “I don’t think any writer is able to write anything worthwhile in such conditions. I myself would find it rather difficult to write about factories for example” (Tub 1934).⁹ In the Soviet Union no one was giving writers orders and telling them what to write (DN 1934). That Soviet literature was propagandistic to a certain extent was only natural. “Don’t all truly good books carry some kind of propaganda?” Inber asked (Tub 1934).

Under no circumstances was Inber willing to admit the existence of any restrictions concerning freedom of expression in the Soviet Union, and the Scandinavian journalists obediently reported her statements. “Are you really allowed to write what you like and criticize current phenomena?” the “bourgeois” journalist asked. “You just have to open any of our newspapers to get an answer to that question”, Inber replied. “Our people very much like their writers to expose abuses and point out the shortcomings that have yet to be taken care off” (Tub 1934). “You can write as you like and whatever you like, no matter what political views you have” (DN 1934). Writers were encouraged to come up with criticism (SD 1934a), and the only thing required from them was to write well. “And that is a requirement that everyone certainly must like” (S-D 1934).

Inber told that she would be interested in writing for the cinema, now that it was no longer silent. The spoken word was for her more important than conflicts and dramatic

⁸ Back in Moscow Smeljakov was arrested three months later after an article by Maksim Gorky carried fateful insinuations and accusations. He was released three years later.

⁹ Tub’s interview with Inber, published in the Swedish socialist newspaper *Ny dag*, was republished in a Norwegian socialist newspaper – “Den kjente sovjetforfatterinne Vera Inber i Oslo: Taler om forfatterens stilling i Sovjet-Unionen og om kvinner og barnens stilling”. *Arbejderen*, 1934-10-24, 2.

plots. As an interesting new film she mentioned Jurij Oleša’s *Strogij junoša* (A Stern Young Man). Writers called the script a good novel, playwrights called it good drama, while cinema critics called it a good film (Tub 1934).

Of Swedish writers Inber was especially fond of Selma Lagerlöf, whose *Nils Holgerson* she had read as a child and later read to her daughter (-nx 1934).¹⁰ Although many translations were published in the Soviet Union, modern Swedish literature had unfortunately remained almost unknown. Now there were plans to translate Harry Martinson¹¹ and Erik Blomberg, two writers whom she had met in August at the Moscow conference (DN 1934). Hjalmar Bergman, too, was on the list of candidates for a Russian translation (-nx 1934).

Inber was most interested in talking about Soviet children. When the topic came up at the press conference the colour of her cheeks rose and her eyes glowed: “I can tell you that children receive enormous attention in my country. We take care not only of books for children, but also give them a possibility to write” (SD 1934a). At the Writers’ Congress in August, children, too, had been given a chance to attend. Inber took a special interest in the way children saw the world, and she had collected letters and diaries of 9-10-year-old children, documents which she meant to use in her talks. Also the major Moscow newspapers, like *Izvestija*, printed the writings of children if they had something important to say. “What they produce is so much more original than what adults create, and that is why we encourage them to write” (SD 1934a). Children, too, wrote collectively: not long ago a book, *Baza kurnosych* (1934, The Base of the Snub-Nosed Children), written by ten Young Pioneers from Siberia, had come out. And in the film, *Rvanye bashmaki* (1933, Torn Shoes) all the actors were children. They had been told to play doctors and patients, for example, and were filmed without being aware of it. The result was an excellent film (Tub 1934). In the field of children’s literature, M. Iljin’s *Velikij plan* (The Great Plan) was widely read (Tub 1934).

Not only was Inber fond of children, she was also fond of dogs: “I love dogs [...], and I have never seen such beautiful dogs as here” (DN 1934). At home she had a bulldog and a dachshund, named after one of the Odessa bandits in a short story by Isaak Babel, as it looked like a crook-legged bandit. But none of her dogs was as thoroughbred and beautiful as the dogs she had earlier the same day seen in Humlegården Park. She was even keen to buy a dog in Sweden.

¹⁰ In 1958, when Selma Lagerlöf’s 100th anniversary was celebrated, Inber gave a talk about the Swedish writer at a meeting in Moscow and published an article in *Pravda*, full of standard Soviet phrases. Lagerlöf had “wrong ideas” about the peaceful coexistence between rich and poor people, the exploiters and the exploited, and declared herself to be apolitical, but, nevertheless, she was always on the side of those fighting for a more just society. Furthermore, Lagerlöf had worked for universal peace and condemned fascism. By celebrating Selma Lagerlöf, the Soviet people showed their love and respect for the best of world culture, everything that could lead to the victory of “peace, progress and friendship between people” (Inber 1958b).

¹¹ Harry Martinson’s novel *Nässlorna blommor* appeared in Russian in 1939 (Krapiva cvetët).

Inber had brought with her two speeches, both in German. On October 1, she gave her paper “Über die Schriftsteller in der Sovietunion” at the Stockholm University (SD 1934b). She talked about the problematic adjustment process that individualistic and petty-bourgeois writers had been forced to go through in order to find their place and role in society. Here she was clearly speaking from her own experience. Now this problem had been solved. While the writers in the West were isolated, socially impotent bohemians, the Soviet writer lived side by side with the people, taking part in the great formative work. The key word was collectivism. All writers had been gathered in the new writers’ union, and they often worked together in the form of writers’ brigades. An important part of Inber’s work was teaching young writers. There was a huge interest in literature, and between writers and readers an ideal, intimate relationship had been born. Inber received letters from her readers, from all parts of the Soviet Union, and she also regularly met her readers. Her speech ended with a few words about the Writers’ Congress.

In the audience sat Hagar Olsson (1893-1978), a Modernist Swedish writer from Finland. Inber’s words that the writer in the USSR was not alone anymore, as art had found its way to the people and the writer his place in social life, made a deep impression. “When listening to her talk you cannot but think: What a country for writers, the enormous, fermenting Russia with its thirst for education!” Olsson thought, certain that many writers in the audience upon listening to Inber reflected upon their own “chilly isolation” (Olsson 1934:1). Still she was not sure that Inber had managed to overcome her loneliness so easily. The painful expression upon the writer’s face and the nervous movements of her hands revealed that it could not have been easy to shift from an individual life view to the new, collective feeling. Even if Inber now appeared to be strong and balanced in her acceptance of the Communist spirit, Olsson thought she saw by her side the shadows of Majakovskij and Esenin, two writers who had not been able to overcome their loneliness and had committed suicide. In fact, Hagar Olsson was one of the very few who was in part able to see through Inber’s enthusiasm.

On the next day, October 2, Inber read the same paper at Uppsala University, where she had been invited by Estetiska föreningen, the student organisation Verdandi and the socialist organisation Clarté. In the local newspaper she was presented as one of the foremost modern Soviet Russian writers. Being a product of the pre-Revolutionary intellectual Russia she could not, however, be called a typical Soviet writer. On the basis of Inber's translated works, a critic signed O.S. wrote: “Most of her short stories can be seen as short, lyrical humoresques, often concerned with child psychology, but sometimes the depiction, the mild irony grows more bitter. In these places Vera Inber is a worthy follower of Gogol and other classic Russian social satirists. After all, there is in Vera Inber’s works a tendency to hesitate and look back towards the past and

what has been overthrown. She has tried to bridge the gap between the old and the new: she is faithful to the present while sympathising with the past” (O.S. 1934).

Around 200 people had gathered in the lecture hall in Uppsala to listen to Inber. “The speech turned into a praise of the situation for writers and readers in the new Russia and their relationship”, wrote an Uppsala newspaper (UNT 1934). In her diary, Inber thought of the event as successful: everybody had been carefully listening. In the audience she noticed both leftwing students, but also foes (Dnevnik 1934-10-3). When it was time for discussion, a young man with “a stupid and cruel face and colourless eyes” had addressed her with questions such as was promiscuity still common in the Soviet Union, were women common propriety, were small children taken by force from their mothers and given to collective state reformatories, was it true that the everyone was forced to do physical exercises, transmitted through the radio, in the middle of the night? “He’s a fascist”, somebody whispered in Inber’s ear. Laughter and loud ironic comments from the audience saved Inber not only from answering but also from more serious questions (Inber 1947).

Inber’s diary entries reveal her interest in student life in Sweden. In Uppsala she also got to know the Vienna-born otologist and Nobel Prize winner Robert Bárány (1876-1936), Professor at Uppsala University since 1917. When she returned to Uppsala, “the Scandinavian Oxford” (Inber 1967), three days later, she not only went to see the famous University Library, but also paid a visit to Bárány’s family (Dnevnik 1934-10-06).

On October 10, a reception in honour of Inber was held at the Soviet Legation. In her diary, Kollontaj commented on the event: no caviar, just “dull sandwiches”, plenty of invited guests, “all from the progressive circle”, people from the world of literature and culture, parliament members, and the Social Democratic Minister of Justice Karl Schlyter (1879-1959) (Kollontaj 2008:415-417). Even if the audience came from diverse walks of life and was somewhat reserved, Inber had no problems in gaining its sympathy. She gave a Marxist exposition, “clearly and simply”, partly humorously, of Soviet literature and its greatest names (Kollontaj 2008:416). After her speech, she read two poems in Russian, both incidentally children’s poems – “Kolybel’naja” (“A Lullaby”) and “Kroški-sorokonoški” (“The Little Millipedes”). When the millipede’s thirty-three children in the latter poem are about to start school, their father sits up at night with the abacus trying to work out how many galoshes he needs to buy for his youngsters. He cannot but envy the stork, whose only child stands on just one leg. Afterwards the Swedish Minister of Justice amused Inber by telling her exactly how many shoes were needed (Inber 1967, Dnevnik 1934-10-12).

All in all, the reception was a success with the Swedes falling for Inber’s charm. Doctor Ada Nilsson (1872-1964), a feminist from the Fogelstad group, prolonged the discussions with her many questions, while “the eccentric Finnish writer Hagar Olsson” came up and kissed Vera and on the request of the audience read some

“poems celebrating Russian poetry and its revolutionary spirit” (Kollontaj 2008:416). Present was also the journalist and writer Else Kleen-Möller (1882-1968). She introduced Fabian Månsson, a Social Democrat politician, to Inber as the writer of a book about the “Dackefejden”, a peasant uprising against King Gustaf Vasa. This book showed, according to Kleen-Möller, that Sweden, too, had had its revolutionary periods. Månsson was a person that they would have been proud of even in Moscow, as he had been fighting for the working class and for socialism all his life.

In Stockholm, Inber also gave a talk in a woman’s club. One day she visited a factory with 400 workers, where gas masks were produced. In a shop she bought herself a Russian typewriter, which was to serve her for many decades to come (Inber 1957:24). In the company of Kollontaj, Inber went to see the outdoor museum Skansen and attended court singer Åke Wallgren’s farewell concert of Richard Wagner arias at the Opera in the presence of the Swedish king, Gustav V (Inber 1977:369). The two women also spent one day in the park by the royal castle of Drottningholm, admiring the beautiful autumn landscape. They sauntered about for a few hours, talking about “everything”. Inber recited some of her poems, and in her diary Kollontaj confessed how much she loved Inber’s poetry, in which she found both “the deep pain and the clear happiness” of every woman. Surely no man could possibly capture the female psyche like Inber did (Kollontaj 2008:419).

Summing up her impression of Sweden in her diary, Inber expressed her liking of everything she had seen. “Everything here is first class. A magnificent order. Of all countries on earth, Sweden will probably be the last where the revolution will occur” (Dnevnik 1934-10-12).

4. Norway

In Norway, readers knew Inber through a translation of *Mesto pod solncem* from 1932, *Plassen i solen*, translated by Julie Aarflot for *Gyldendal*. In the same year the short story “Lalas intressen” (“Ljaliny interesy”) was included in a volume of Soviet short stories, *Polypen og andre fortellinger fra det nye Russland*.

Inber arrived in Oslo on the morning train from Stockholm on October 20. She was met at the station by Consul Naevskij and Madame Ždanova from the Soviet Legation,¹² the head of Det Norske studentersamfund Hans Vogt (1903-1986), Adam Egede-Nissen (1868-1968), chairman of both the Norwegian Communist party and the organisation Sovjet-Unionens venner, and Arnulf Øverland (1889-1968) from the

¹² At least for part of her weeks in Oslo, Inber stayed at a hotel (Dbl 1934) and not at the Soviet Legation. The Soviet envoy in Norway was Aleksandr Bekzadjan (1879-1938), who was arrested in 1937 and executed the following year, accused of counter-revolutionary activity.

Writers’ Union.¹³ Two female journalists were also present, prepared to interview Inber on the spot.

“Small, gracefully and easily” Inber jumped down from the train (Abl 1934a). The first impression was favourable: “Vera Inber is a modern woman in her forties, independent, energetic, full of a fighting spirit, and with a beautiful and often teasing smile” (Dbl 1934). She wore a “smart travelling costume of Western European type”, while the black ulster that she carried on her arm showed that she came from Moscow (Abl 1934a).

Inber readily answered the journalists’ questions while they walked from the platform to the station restaurant. She spoke about her writings, revealing that her best genre was short stories. By this time she had been writing for newspapers for ten years, and she commented: “You know, I think that in every writer there should be something of a journalist. A journalist must think clearly and fast, and he must work punctually. And to work punctually is so important for a writer, if he or she wants to get anything done” (Abl 1934a).

Since childhood, Inber had been dreaming of visiting Norway. She knew the Norwegian people from literature, feeling a kinship with Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen. “Great people!” she exclaimed (Abl 1934a). Always after finishing some work, she sat down to read Nansen. “At home they know that when I read *Fram over Polhavet* (Farthest North), it means that I am, figuratively speaking, making a journey again” (Dbl 1934). She had also read Nansen’s book out loud to her daughter when she was small (Abl 1934a). The journalists wanted to know what Inber thought about the question of women. “Should women play a greater role in the society of the future?” “Yes, even to a higher degree than men. In the Soviet Union professional women are something that you don’t even have to talk about. Women’s right to work is something we consider natural. We don’t talk about men and women, but about people” (Dbl 1934). “I consider women to be more accomplished than men. When you see what they have achieved since their liberation, you can expect great things of them in the future” (Abl 1934a).

Of modern Soviet writers Inber mentioned Šolohov, Aleksej Tolstoj and Fëdor Panfjorov, but the Writers’ Congress had shown that there were many talented young writers too. Inber’s daughter had written poems, but Inber had told her that they were not sufficiently good and “if you cannot write better than me, then you should leave it alone” (Abl 1934a).

On the very same day, Inber gave a one hour talk in German at Det norske studentersamfund about “Women and children in the Soviet Union” to a large audience. She had become interested in the woman question already in Odessa, where her mother had been the head of a girls’ school. In Tsarist Russia the life of women

¹³ Øverland had been a Communist since the early 1920s, but changed his stand in 1937, partly in dissent over the Moscow trials.

was hard and living conditions were miserable. Women lacked legal protection, their opportunities to study were limited, married women were mistreated by their husbands while getting a divorce was difficult. As for children, you just had to read Gorky's *Detstvo* (Childhood) to learn how children lived in Russia before 1917.

After having given a dark picture of pre-revolutionary life for women and children, Inber went on to praise the cultural and economic changes that the October Revolution had brought with it, both in the central part of Russia and in the Asian republics (Arbeidet 1934a). The woman question, in fact, no longer existed, as the restrictions between women and men were gone. Now everyone was equal as men had lost their power over women. Women had learned to read and write and were now eagerly discussing literature. There were children's homes and children's hospitals. From diaries written by Siberian children, Inber read how they were given the chance to come to Moscow and visit the circus. Somewhat outside this theme was Inber's claim that no hero worship of the kind that you could find in the West existed in Soviet schools. In Oslo she nevertheless put in a word for Stalin, who at a congress for female kolkhoz workers in February the previous year had demanded that women should be given more influence in the kolkhozes. Liberated women are a strong source of power, Stalin had said, and the result was a stream of letters of gratitude from Soviet women (Abl 1934b).

Inber finished her talk with a personal remembrance. In the spring she had visited a part of Moscow, which in Tsarist time was without electricity and running water. Now the district was impossible to recognize. In a nursery, she saw a copy of *Azbuka kommunizma* (The ABC of Communism) lying by a child's bed. The mother had left it behind her when running off to take care of some other business in the house. In Inber's eyes, this book beside the cradle was a symbol of the new Soviet Union (Arbeidet 1934a). Political self-education was effortlessly combined with caretaking of the younger generation. What Inber could not foresee was that both authors of the book, Nikolaj Buharin and Evgenij Preobraženskij, were to be executed as enemies of the people in just three years' time with all their works being purged from libraries and book shops. A mother being arrested for reading forbidden literature would have been an even more symbolic picture of Soviet life.

Inber was satisfied with her first appearance in Norway. "I feel a great relief," she wrote in her diary in the evening (Dnevnik 1934-10-21). More was to follow. On October 22, she read her paper on Soviet Russian literature in Norsk-Russisk kultursamband. Invitations came from Filologisk forening (Philological Association), Yrkeskvinnens klub (Professional Female's Club) and Norsk PEN (Dbl 1934). It was probably in the latter, where a local writer, whom Inber accepted as "left-wing" only in quotation marks, did not praise the Soviet writers' total engagement in the political and social issues of the day. Inber quotes him as saying with a rolled 'r': "Honourable speaker, contrary to what you just have been saying, I believe that the writer does not

have to be an active force in the building of society. He should only be an onlooker, my honourable orator. Calmly, in the light of eternal truths he should...” (Inber 1934c) In her report in *Izvestija* after the journey, Inber did not even bother to comment on this, in her eyes, totally absurd standpoint.

From Oslo, Inber went to Bergen on the invitation of the local Students’ Union. A journalist from the socialist newspaper *Arbeidet* met her shortly after her arrival. In the interview Inber mentioned that the main reason for visiting the Nordic countries was to gather material for a book. In general, there was in the Soviet Union a great interest in the Nordic countries, thus she had already received an invitation to talk about her journey to Moscow students. In the Soviet Union, the October Revolution was once again going to be celebrated in a grand style with all the streets and large houses festively decorated (Arbeidet 1934b).

Inber’s talk about Soviet literature and the Writers’ Congress was given in Bergen on October 26.¹⁴ She also found time to visit *Den nationale scene* to see Pär Lagerkvist’s play *Bödeln* (The Hangman) in a translation by Øverland. The production reminded her of the young Majakovskij and his *Misterija Buffa* (Dnevnik 1934-10-13). In Bergen, Inber also got to know a lawyer, Steen-Olsen, with left-wing sympathies. She visited his family of four children as well as his office high above the city centre. In her diary, she mentions that this Norwegian Soviet sympathiser is “constantly dreaming of Moscow” (ibid.).

In the train on her way back to Oslo from Bergen, Inber wrote a poem, “Moskva v Norvegii” (“Moscow in Norway”) (Nag 1987:113). The first days abroad are wonderful, but then you are hit by loneliness. Walking in the harbour of Bergen with all its fish stalls, Inber nostalgically remembers her childhood city of Odessa. In a wish to communicate with a young Norwegian lad selling fish, she writes “Odessa” on her block note. The Norwegian takes her pencil and writes “Moscow” surrounded with sun rays. With a smile they shake hands. Inber concludes her poem: “With the remarkable word ‘Moscow’ / you are nowhere alone”¹⁵ (Inber 1958 I:165).

In Oslo, Inber visited the Sagene school with its 1,300 pupils, saw the classrooms and discussed pedagogical questions with Anna Sethne (1872-1961), the well-known head of the school (Dnevnik 1934-10-30). A visit to an exhibition in Norsk teknisk museum filled several pages in her diary (1934-11-01). In the company of Olaf Broch (1867-1961), Professor of Slavic languages at Oslo University and translator of Russian literature, she walked around in a workers’ district, familiarising herself with the living conditions and economic situation of Norwegian workers (Dnevnik 1934-11-12).

On November 4, Inber went by car to Lillehammer to meet Sigrid Undset (1882-1949), Nobel Prize winner in 1928. In an article from 1967, Inber recalls:

¹⁴ The planned second talk about the woman question in the Soviet Union had to be cancelled due to problems in finding a place. This sounds like a feeble excuse to prevent the Soviet writer appearing a second time.

¹⁵ «Человек с удивительным словом “Москва” / Не бывает нигде одинок.»

(...) the peaceful small town, covered with the first snow. Sleigh bells were ringing, sledges passed by, the first skiers in their bright sports caps and sweaters. I remember the old peasant hut of mighty logs, the home of Sigrid Undset. A strongly built, stout woman with an inscrutable face was sitting in front of me. Undset barely moves her lips. She is ice itself. Even the fire in the fireplace, by which we sat drinking tea, seemed almost on the point of freezing into ice. (Inber 1967)

Even though Inber was unable to find a common language with her Norwegian colleague and no feelings of sisterhood emerged – neither biological nor ideological – she nevertheless upon her return to Moscow in December mentioned Undset as one of the most interesting persons she met during her Northern journey, a writer “who has gone through an interesting evolution from a preacher of free love to fierce Catholicism” (D.K. 1934). It can be added that Inber does not seem to have made any impression upon Undset: nowhere in the writings of the Norwegian writer is the meeting with her Soviet colleague mentioned.

November 7 was a big day for Soviet sympathizers in Oslo, as the Soviet-Unionens venner society celebrated the anniversary of the October Revolution in Folkets hus. Inber was the guest of honour. The announcement promised “a speech by Vera Inber – one of the best-known women writers in the Soviet Union” (Arbejderen 1934a). The public interest was great with not enough places in the audience for everyone. After a prologue written by “comrade” Torgeirson and recited by Tormod Birkenes, it was Inber’s turn. Accompanied by loud applause she stepped onto the rostrum. In the name of Soviet writers she greeted the Norwegian friends of the Soviet Union in German. Her short speech, translated by Henry W. Kristiansen, dealt with the recent Writers’ Congress and the building of socialism in the Soviet Union. Egede-Nissen, president of the friendship society, asked Inber to give their greetings to the Soviet writers. Norwegian Young Pioneers sang songs in Russian and a speech choir appeared. In his principal speech Egede-Nissen spoke about the Soviet struggle for peace and the “enormous” progress that had been made on the country’s road to Communism. Everyone in the audience was asked to always speak up for the Soviet Union and this appeal was unanimously accepted. A choir of typographers sang, the actress Sigrid Søyland read poems by Rudolf Nilsen and Ingeborg Refling Hagen, and Lulu Ziegler sang satirical cabaret songs. The programme ended at midnight with everyone singing the International (Arbejderen 1934b).

During her three weeks in Norway, Inber was also in contact with Harald Grieg, the head of the big publishing house *Gyldendal*, which had published her novel *Mesto pod solncem*. Grieg’s brother, the writer Nordahl Grieg, who was living in Moscow, had written to Harald in advance, recommending Inber, who, unlike Pilnjak, knew many languages and was thus easy to communicate with (Grieg 1982:113). After Inber’s departure, Harald Grieg wrote to Moscow: “I was very happy to meet the lady, but, to be honest, the visits of Russian writers are becoming a bit expensive for me. Unlike other foreign writers, the Russian gentlemen and ladies assume, you see, that they ought to get an advance for *coming* books, and considering the grand reception that

you, my dear brother, apparently have received in their country, I feel that I have to be as generous as them. Mrs Inber turned out to be a bit cheaper than our friend Boris [Pil’njak, BH], but if there are going to be many Russians visiting us, there won’t be much left to pay our own poets and poetesses with” (Grieg 1963:201).

Inber had hoped to see more Norwegian translations of her work, but despite the huge public interest in her person only one further translation, the short story “Solovej i roza” (“The Nightingale and the Rose”) was made.¹⁶

After three weeks in Norway, Inber left for Denmark on November 10.

5. Denmark

In November 1934, the Soviet envoy in Denmark was no longer Fëdor Raskol’nikov, Pil’njak’s loyal friend, but Nikolaj Tihmenev (1885-1963), who had arrived in Copenhagen just a few days before Inber. Inber, however, did not stay at the Soviet Legation in Copenhagen, but in a new house, far from the centre (Dnevnik 1934-11-14).

Apparently only one newspaper, *Berlingske Aften-Avis*, cared to send a journalist to Inber’s press conference on November 12. Inber was totally unknown in Denmark, not even *Mesto pod solncem*, had been translated, nor did the situation change after her 1934 stay. In the interview Inber once again praised the situation for writers in the Soviet Union (“It’s wonderful...” and “The only thing we have been deprived of is the right to write bad books”), the wide readership (“We have the pleasure of being read, a rare thing for writers in the West”), the new Soviet literature, and the resolved woman question (women and men are equal, the only difference being that only women have the right to give birth to children). Inber loved reading foreign writers, like André Maurois, for example, but while those books were depressing and sad, Soviet literature, with names like Boris Levin,¹⁷ Jurij Oleša and Valerija Gerasimova,¹⁸ was optimistic. The wealth of young Soviet Russian writers were first and foremost serious and non-ironic. Writers were given tasks by the state; recently ten young writers had been asked to produce a book about the new Moscow underground, while another collective endeavour, a huge project of many volumes with sixty writers involved, was “Man in the Second Five Year Plan” (Minor 1934).

In the evening Inber gave a talk in Dansk-Russisk Samvirke (Danish-Russian Cooperation) at Borups højskole (highschool). The head of the society, Ejnar Thomassen (1882-1977), writer and translator of Russian literature, opened the meeting by giving his own impressions of the Writers’ Congress. Inber read her paper on modern Soviet literature “in a rolling German, enthusiastically, with smiling eyes

¹⁶ “En nattergal og en rose”, *Lördagskvelden*, 1935-02-02. Translation by Nils Jöntvedt.

¹⁷ Boris (i.e. Dojvber) Levin was one of the Oberiuts in the 1920s. He died on the Leningrad Front in 1941.

¹⁸ Valerija Gerasimova (1903-1970) had been a member of the *Pereval* group in the 1920s.

and elegant hand movements, a French *apparition*". She started by paying respects to the great Russian classics, like Gogol and Dostoevskij. True, their revolutionary commitment had been scant, but their strength was their psychological portraits and their language. Then Inber moved over to her real theme, "the metamorphosis from psychological to proletarian writing". In the Soviet Union, the period of Verlaine, bohemian life and "unpaid bills" was now gone. The writer was no longer a spectator but an active participant in social life. Inber had her own literary circles and "creative evenings", where talented young writers discussed each other's works. But – Inber pointed out – Soviet literature did not only deal with work and the collective, the eternal themes of love and death were still there. At the end of her talk, Inber gave a colourful picture of the Writers' Congress with its many representatives from all parts of the country and Gorky as its central figure.

Afterwards the audience had a chance to ask questions. According to *Politiken* (Scap 1934) Inber gave rapid replies to even the trickiest questions. A Russian émigré woman asked whether outsiders too could publish their books in the Soviet Union. "It naturally depends upon what kind of Russian you are!" Inber answered. The 'classic' question whether the Soviet writer could write freely, Inber met with a counter-question: "Is a European [writer, BH] free when he goes against his own class? When you understand for *whom* you write, then you feel free!" But was all Soviet literature tendency literature? "All literature is tendency literature, this is the case also in the Western Europe. Even old fairy tales for children are tendency literature."

At this point, Martin Andersen Nexø (1869-1954), sitting in the audience, could not refrain from bitterly commenting: "What about here? Can I write about anything I want after having returned from the Soviet Union?" (D.K. 1934) The Communist Nexø's uncritical admiration of the Soviet Union had made him a *persona non grata* everywhere, and his presence at the Inber evening was thus not reported in the newspaper.

After an appearance at the Danske kvinders nationalråds internationale klub (Danish National Council of Women) with her talk on the life of Soviet women and children, Inber paid a visit to Nexø in Hillerød, 35 kilometres north of Copenhagen, apparently on November 14 (Dnevnik 1934-11-14). Nexø lived in a small house, surrounded by fields and thickets. In his native milieu, amidst ordinary people, Nexø "with his mighty pen, his untiring struggle for the victory of justice" reminded Inber of Holger Danske, the figure from one of Hans Christian Andersen's tales¹⁹ (Inber 1964:159). Nexø complained about the boycott which he had fallen victim to because of his political convictions. According to him, *Politiken* had published a photo of Inber in the

¹⁹ In 1955, in connection with Andersen's 150th anniversary, Inber wrote an essay about the writer, full of the usual Soviet rhetoric. The main themes of the article were that Andersen, even though he never realised the true nature of the social conflicts he saw, nevertheless was aware of the dark sides of the society in which he lived (Inber 1958:509) and that he "celebrated the peaceful work of peace-loving people" (511).

company of Danish writers from which his picture had been removed²⁰ (D.K. 1934; Dnevnik 1934-11-14).

On November 16, Inber travelled to Aarhus, where she stayed at Hotel Ritz for three nights. One of her hosts was Adolf Stender-Petersen (1893-1963), Docent in Slavic Philology at Aarhus University and an eminent specialist in the history of Russian literature. Before her first appearance in Aarhus, Inber gave an interview to a local newspaper. Her appearance is described as “more Paris than Moscow”, she is short and elegant with small, well-manicured fingers, but when she starts to talk she is “a Russian through and through”. Emitting “a fanatical glow” she believes that after centuries of oppression Russia is now on its way towards Utopia, “the promised land, where everyone is happy” (Miss D 1934).

Inber spoke about the book on Scandinavian life that she planned to write, a task which she did not believe would be too demanding: “Here you can rather quickly get an overview of life, as the conditions have fallen low (faldet lave). There is surely life and development here, but not the seething anxiety that we have in Russia, where one hundred million people suddenly have had to change their life completely” (Miss D 1934).

The Aarhus journalist Miss D. took a special interest in the situation for children in the Soviet Union. Was it true that children were taken from their parents and raised in collective homes? “If the parents themselves want it or if they don’t have time to take care of their children, then yes,” Inber answered. “And in those cases the children are raised to be good citizens.” Before the Revolution there were not many children who had good homes, Inber claimed. Millions suffered from hunger and disease. Today large amounts of money were spent on the needs of children. In connection with large factories, cities rose up with new flats and excellent schools. There were also many kindergartens which enabled mothers to work in the factories. In no other country were mothers as protected by the state as they were in the Soviet Union. Before the Revolution half of the population was illiterate, but today almost everyone, including elderly people, could read. Special inspectors went from flat to flat, asking whether all the inhabitants could read. If you couldn’t, you were put behind a school desk and were not allowed to leave until you could read, she said.

At this point, Miss D. put in a concerned question: “Isn’t there a risk that the present collective system will have an effect on individuality and turn Russians into a kind of uniform people?” On the contrary, Inber reassured her. There were good workers, but also bad workers. But what about morals? “I understand that you are thinking about the excesses that took place soon after the Revolution”, Inber answered. “People who have been fettered, but then are let loose, will and must be guilty of going too far, not the least in this way. But in this respect things are also changing” (Miss D. 1934).

²⁰ Inber claims that she went to the newspaper office to ask for the negative, but was told that it had been lost (D.K. 1934). No photo of Inber in the company of Danish writers is to be found in *Politiken*.

On November 17, Vera Inber read her paper about Soviet women and children in Aarhus Studenterforening (Student Association). Højskolehotellet's large auditorium had been reserved for the occasion, but few people turned up. Inber was welcomed by Christen Møller (1886-1957), Professor of German Philology. Inber started by telling about the hard life of women in Tsarist times. The situation changed in 1919, when Lenin declared that both men and women should be turned into good and equal citizens. To solve the women question in Russia was a difficult task because of the huge national and cultural differences. First the condition of women had to be raised, and then they needed to be raised spiritually. By now, the process was already far advanced: "Women in modern Russia have become independent citizens who play significant roles in different positions." You could see the differences already in women's bodies for there were now more beautiful faces, more harmony in their movements: "At a sport parade in Moscow it was such a pleasure to see the slim, suntanned women bodies." But at the same time women had not been turned into men's competitors. Inber cited a Russian women writer who had said, "We don't want to raise women to become men but to become human beings." In her conclusion, Inber read letters from women and children, which all highly praised the Soviet Union (AST 1934:6). At the end of programme, Stender-Petersen gave a short summary of Inber's talk in Danish.

On the following day, November 18, Inber returned to Copenhagen. In Oslo she had been impressed by the great number of cars, but in the Danish capital it was the numerous bicyclists that caught her attention (Dnevnik 1934-11-25). And, what's more, the bicyclists were always in the right if they happened to run into a car (Inber 1977: 41).

A week later, on November 26, Inber left Denmark. "I am going home," she wrote in her diary (1934-11-25), but she had in fact first to return to Stockholm. Worried about Inber's loss of weight during her long journey, Kollontay took good care of her during the coming week, but no matter how good friends Inber and Kollontay had become, the Soviet diplomat was happy to see the writer finally leave. The journalist Leonard Gendlin remembers an occasion after the Second World War, when "Comrade Inber" interrupted his interview with Kollontay: "'I am sorry, but Vera Mihajlovna won't let us finish our talk,' Kollontay said irritably. 'I know her from long ago. She stayed with us in Sweden in the summer of 1934. Unfortunately, I offered Inber to be our guest at the embassy. We could take a breath only after she left...'" (Gendlin 1986:192).

6. Summing up

After an almost three-month journey through the Nordic countries, Inber was back in Moscow on December 6. In an interview for *Literaturnaja gazeta* (D.K. 1934), shortly

after her homecoming, she summed up her fresh impressions. She reported a big interest in the Soviet Union in cultural circles, but she had also encountered many naïve and wild opinions. Many people simply considered the social changes to be just surface phenomena, missing the main point, and the result was stupid questions, like “Are there still families in the USSR?”, “Can you refuse to give up your child to be raised by the state?” and “Can writers chose their themes freely or are they given certain tasks by the state?”

In Finland, Inber had met F.E. Sillanpää, “Finland’s foremost prose writer”. Keeping silent about the scandal at the Tornio restaurant, she strongly recommended that Sillanpää should be translated.²¹ In Sweden there was marked interest in Soviet literature, especially in Šolohov and his *Tihij Don*. On the other hand, the émigré writer Ivan Bunin was not well-known, in spite of his Nobel Prize, and only after a Swedish pharmaceutical company had put his face on their boxes of cough pills had he won more recognition! Inber was also surprised to notice that the director of the big publishing house Bonnier had never heard of the French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline.²² Among Norwegian writers, she singled out Sigrid Undset, in spite of her ideological deviation. The difficult situation of Nexø Inber took as an example of the existing limits on freedom of expression in the West.

Another thing that Inber had noticed in the Nordic countries was the strong individualism of writers. Nobody could understand Inber’s active work among young writers, and during her whole journey she had met no newcomers in literature. Writers did not like to talk about their plans, and to discuss theories of writing was foreign to them because of their naïve Freudian belief in the role of the subconscious in the literary process.

Unlike the writers she had met, Inber felt free to share her plans for coming works. As the main reason for her journey she mentioned everywhere her plan to write a book about life in Scandinavia. In her diary she drew up a plan:

1. The Oxford Movement. Psychoanalysis and Freud (Norway).
2. Workers’ Housing (Norway)
3. The Sagene School
4. Sweden. Uppsala
5. The trip to visit Nexø. A Christian Club. The Family [illegibly]. Bicycles.
(Dnevnik 1934-12-13)

A kind of introduction to the book, which was never to be written, is the article “The Return” (“Vozvraščenie”), published in *Izvestija* a week after her return in December. Here Inber expresses her feelings upon her way back to the Soviet Union from

²¹ Boris Pil’njak, who also met Sillanpää in 1934, recommended Sillanpää as well, but in spite of these recommendations, Sillanpää was translated into Russian only during the Thaw, in 1963.

²² The first Swedish translation of Céline is from 1971 (*Resa till världens ände*), while the same novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), appeared in Russian translation in the Soviet Union in 1934. Inber must have felt awkward afterwards at the thought that she had been recommending a writer who was to become a fierce anti-Semite and a devoted follower of Hitler.

Stockholm. She thinks of all the unemployed people that she had met in Sweden and Norway, young people, caught in a hopeless situation. Many of the European proletarians would be glad to have been born in the Soviet Union. Inber also reveals what must be the first thought of a Soviet traveller when meeting foreigners: Is this person a friend or a foe of the Soviet Union? The “elegant sceptic” often turns out to be a fascist, while the “unstable well-wisher” could be won over to the good cause through the right tactics (Inber 1934b:4).

Finland evokes warm feelings in Inber, not because of its people or culture, but solely on the ground of its closeness to the Soviet Union: “Helsingfors is already almost Leningrad and Leningrad is already almost Moscow.” Before 1917, she always returned to Russia with a sad heart, but now the dominating feeling upon her returns was joy. Passing the Finnish-Soviet border, she remembers that the new, monumental Beloostrov railway station would soon be open. The project had been close to the heart of Party Secretary Sergej Kirov, whose murder she learns from a fellow-traveller. The fact that such a grand building was erected on the border showed, in Inber’s opinion, that the Soviet Union had no intention of starting a war against Finland (Inber 1934:4), a view that reads ironically in the light of history.

A second article with a link to Inber’s autumn journey, in fact Chapter One in her plan for a book, appeared in *Izvestija* in March 1935, ““Bešenjy parlament”” (“The Mad Parliament”). In Oslo, Inber had come across the Oxford Group (which she erroneously calls the Oxford Movement). A team of thirty British representatives of the Oxford Group visited Norway that autumn, arranging three grand meetings for 14,000 people in all. Their message was simple: through personal revolutions with the Four Absolutes, that is absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love as inspiring goals, the world could be changed into a better place at a moment of crisis and unrest. All big international problems were at heart personal problems, and they could be solved only on the private level (WP 2013). At one of the meetings a letter from a Norwegian actress to her colleague Agnes Mowinckel²³ had been read as an example of the ongoing, purifying moral process. The letter demonstrated how feelings of hate and envy could and should be turned into love and forgiveness (Inber 1935).

Inber, who apparently attended one of the meetings, was horrified. In her eyes, the real goal behind the Oxford Group’s activity was “to smooth over, cover up and mitigate class contradictions” with “the balm of repentance” (Inber 1935). It was a way of fooling the proletariat into believing that the problems of capitalism, like unemployment, were not of a social kind. The reason for the success of the Oxford Group was, according to Inber, the intellectuals’ obsession with Freudianism. In Oslo, there were seven well-respected and several minor psychoanalysts, who were even

²³ Inber mentions that Agnes Mowinckel (1875-1963) had recently attended a theatre festival in Moscow and was now planning to put on Maksim Gorky’s *Jegor Bulychev i drugie* at the Norwegian National Theatre.

ready to give free “treatment” to poor, unemployed workers. Another bogus solution, based upon lies, was provided by the Salvation Army, which from the very start had been out to ‘save’ the working class from socialism. Inber visited one of its night shelters in Oslo, where seventy homeless alcoholics were ‘cured’ through Bible quotations stuck on the walls. As she saw it, the Oxford Group was a Salvation Army for rich people, the difference being that its members did not reside in some basement night lodging but in expensive rooms at the Grand Hotel.

Inber’s travelogue was never written in its entirety, and, likewise, Inber never finished the sequel to *Mesto pod solncem*, a project which she repeatedly mentioned as her main work at the time. Another type of literature was now needed, and Inber was not slow in responding to party demands.

7. The Four Last Decades: An Epilogue

In August 25, 1936, on the same day as the execution of the old Bolsheviks Grigorij Zinov’ev and Lev Kamenev, victims of the first Moscow Trial, the Presidium of the Writers’ Union held a meeting, in which the sentences were discussed. In her speech, Inber severely attacked the ‘Trotskyists’, supporting the death sentence of these ‘counter-revolutionaries’ (Gromova 2006:280). Afterwards, in private, she justified her behaviour by mentioning that Trotsky was a close relative of hers (he was a cousin of her father and her personal friend since childhood in Odessa). Inber’s excuse was overheard by the Secret police, and a NKVD report stated that “Inber admitted that her speech at the writers’ meeting had been bad, and said that she had been forced to ask for the floor” (Clark 2007:317). While other relatives of Trotsky were arrested and executed, the Soviet authorities kept Inber in perpetual fear, using her for their own purposes. In July 1938, her name was removed from the list of candidates for a state prize because of the compromising material NKVD had against her (Gromova 2006:363, 413), but even so, the following year she was presented the Order of the Badge of Honour.

The Second World War brought Vera Inber back to the fore as a writer through two works about life in Leningrad during the siege – the poem *Pulkovskij meridian* (1942, The Pulkovo Meridian) and the diary *Počti tri goda* (1946, Almost Three Years). The second work was translated both into Swedish (*Dagbok från Leningrad*) and Finnish (*Melkein kolme vuotta*) in 1946. In the same year, *Mesto v solntse* was finally translated into Finnish (*Paikka auringossa*), while a new Swedish translation came out in 1967. The Swedish interest in Inber’s works was shown by a third collection of short stories, *Månens död*, published in 1945. The stories are said to have been translated from the author’s manuscripts, which indicates that the translator, Vladimir Semitjov (1912-85), born in Russia and the son of a writer with the same name, had

been in contact with Inber. Semitjov was also responsible for the Swedish translation of Inber's *Dagbok från Leningrad*.

Reciprocally, Inber took some interest in Swedish literature, translating poems by Nils Ferlin ("Akvarium") and Lars Englund (RSP 1986:356, note 3). During and after the Second World War, Inber wrote scripts for propagandist Swedish radio programmes broadcast from Moscow (Inber 1977:171, 241). In 1947, she quite unexpectedly started a controversy with a provincial Swedish newspaper, the Social Democratic *Örebro-Kuriren*. In an editorial, the undemocratic rule of the Soviet Union and its grip on its East European satellite states, had been criticised. The Soviet Union was called the greatest threat to world peace, acting in the same spirit as Hitler in the 1930s (ÖK 1947). Probably on the request of the Soviet Embassy, Inber sent an open letter to *Örebro-Kuriren*, rejecting all accusations and calling the Soviet Union a peace loving country and a bulwark of "true democracy". Recalling her visit to Uppsala in 1934, she reminded the chief editor of the Swedish newspaper that Sweden in fact was a country where you could find Nazi sympathizers in the 1930s (Inber 1947).

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In October 1958, the case of Boris Pasternak and his novel *Doctor Živago* was discussed at a Writers' Union meeting in Moscow. Voices were raised that Pasternak should be expelled from the Union because of his "disloyal behaviour", that is, publishing an "anti-Soviet" work abroad. Vera Inber was one of the most vicious speakers. Her attack on her old friend Pasternak was met with whistles, but this did not prevent her from giving a few days later on both radio and TV the same message: Pasternak is no longer one of us. Furthermore, during the war, when the Soviet people were fighting and bleeding and Inber shared the hardship of her compatriots in the siege of Leningrad, Pasternak had been living a peaceful life at his *dacha*, translating Shakespeare. His poetry Inber dismissed as "anti-Party", and as far as *Doctor Živago* was concerned, it had only made a "depressing impression" upon her. The speech ended in the same aggressive spirit: "Don't you see, comrades, that Pasternak has struck a blow against the Soviet people, against the victories of the great October Revolution, with a gloating smile he has slandered the Communist Party, insulted the great Lenin..." (Gendlin 1986:191).

Again, as in 1936, Inber privately explained her behaviour as enforced. The leadership of the Writers' Union had once again played the Trotsky card, giving Inber the simple choice of either attacking Pasternak or being sent to Kolyma (Gromova 2006:281). Inber was most likely reading a ready-made text on this occasion. One can also doubt whether Inber was even in a position to read the forbidden *Doctor Živago*.

In 1959, one year after the "Pasternak affair", Vera Inber visited Finland for a second time. In the Soviet delegation of four writers, Inber was the only one of any reputation, even though almost fifteen years had passed since the last translations of

her works. In November the group spent ten days in Finland on the invitation of the Unions of Finnish and Swedish Writers, visiting Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Keuruu, Tampere and Porvoo. The main Finnish publishers also participated in the reception of what was said to be the first official Soviet writers’ delegation to visit Finland. In Helsinki the group stayed at the Hotel Vaakuna.

At the press conference on November 20, Inber was overshadowed by the head of the delegation, the playwright Afanasij Salynskij, and Valentina Morozova, responsible for Nordic contacts with the Writers’ Union. The Finns wanted above all to hear about translations of Finnish literature in the Soviet Union. Inber expressed her delight to have heard her poetry read in Finnish²⁴ and to have seen the Finnish translation of *Počti tri goda*. She was also quoted as admitting that prose was more read than poetry at the moment, even though there were promising new names among Siberian poets. The Soviet writers were asked whether it ever happened in the Soviet Union, like in Finland, that a work, heavily disparaged by critics, became popular among readers. Apparently unwilling to discuss the problem, the guests claimed not to remember any such case (HS 1959). It was wiser to deny the existence of such a conflict, as it would have forced them to admit that an official critical reception normally meant the prohibition of the work, as in the case of Pasternak’s *Doctor Živago*.

Upon her return to Moscow, Inber wrote an essay about her second visit to Finland, “V strane kamnja i vody” (“In the Land of Stone and Water”). Bypassing all ideological questions, the travelogue is brimming with enthusiasm. Helsinki is “a real, big European city” with impressive architecture, “brisk” traffic and an exemplary order reigning everywhere. When asked to compare her impressions from 1934 with those of 1959, Inber declared that “the city has become even more beautiful, livelier, more comfortable, it is enriched by new buildings, as for example the main post office building” (Inber 1960:25-26). She took most interest in architecture, praising the work of the “ingenious” Alvar Aalto, “the Nordic Rastrelli”. But it was not only the Jyväskylä Pedagogical College (today Jyväskylä University), designed by Aalto, that impressed the Soviet visitor. An elementary school, a newly-built hospital and the Otava publishing house building in Keuruu, and private houses and flats in Helsinki all made her lyrical: everything was bright, clean, cosy and well-planned. The national poet J.L. Runeberg’s home museum in Porvoo moved her with its similarity to Vladimir Korolenko’s home museum in Poltava.

The many people – mostly writers – that Inber met this time in Finland are no longer divided into friends and foes. In Tampere the Soviet writers discussed literature with Väinö Linna, the author of the war novel *Tuntematon sotilas* (1954, The Unknown Soldier), and in Helsinki they met Sylvi Kekkonen, the President’s wife and

²⁴ This must have been the two poems included in the anthology *Venäjän runotar: Venäläistä lyriikkaa* (Helsinki, 1946) – “Pjat’ nočej i dnej” (“Five Nights and Days”), written in the aftermath of Lenin’s death in 1924, and an extract from *Pulkovskij meridian*, the poem about the siege of Leningrad.

author of the story *Amalia* (1958, Russian transl. 1960). Other names mentioned in connection with the 1959 visit are the head of the Union of Finnish Writers Martti Santavuori, the head of the Union of Swedish Writers' J.O. Tallqvist, and the writer Marja-Liisa Vartio. She sees Martti Larni, the most popular Finnish writer in the Soviet Union, walking by with a manuscript for a new book in his hands. Oscar Parland, psychiatric and writer, and Kai Laitinen, influential literary critic, opened their homes to the Soviet guests. Still, it was in the company of the “democratic” writers, with whom Inber and the other Soviet writers spent their last evening in Finland, that they felt most at home. Through the thick tobacco smoke Inber discerned the smiling, friendly faces of Aili Nordgren, Eva Wichman and Elvi Sinervo. Tito Colliander, “the Swedish Dostoevsky”, was also present on the same occasion (Inber 1960:29). All these meetings stand as symbolic of what Inber now saw as the main task of a writer, that is, to strengthen the bonds of friendship between nations. Only once does she make an explicit comparison between Finland and the Soviet Union, when she mentions that television is much more common in the Soviet Union than in Finland. In the last passage Inber also points out the importance of Soviet orders for Finnish shipbuilding industry (Inber 1960:27).

A year later, in 1960 Inber was present when a gravestone for the Fenno-Swedish poet Edit Södergran was erected in Raivola (today Roščina) on a Finnish initiative. The text on the stone, taken from Södergran's poem “Ankomst till Hades”, Inber translated into Russian for her diary: «Здесь берег вечности: взгляни, / Здесь времени поток несется мимо, / И жизнь поет в кустах прибрежных / Известную мелодию свою.» (“Se här är evighetens strand, / här brusar strömmen förbi, / och döden spelar i buskarna / sin samma entoniga melodi” (Inber 1977:316).

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In 1964, the journalist Alma Braathen (1906-67), who says that she had met Inber earlier in 1934, visited Inber in Moscow. In the interview for *Dagens Nyheter*, Inber talked about her writings, translations, travels and the duty of all writers to work “in the service of peace”. She was most concerned with the problem of whether she could find time to write yet another poem about Lenin. The Northern journey of 1934 Inber remembered with warmth: “I gave a talk in Uppsala, visited Norway and Denmark. I was born by the Black Sea, but I love the Nordic countries – the cold waters, the fjords, the islands, the people with their warm hearts. It is the only time I have visited the Nordic Countries, if you don't count Finland. I would like to see Sweden once more, I'll try to go there next year” (Braathen 1964). Inber was never to revisit the Nordic countries. She died in 1972.

In Wolfgang Kazak's *Leksikon russoj literatury XX veka* (1996:167), Inber's literary career is summarized in one telling sentence: “Inber started as a talented poet, but squandered her talent in attempts to adjust to the system.”

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