

Seeing Past the Present, Part Two

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July 06, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Once on an early morning I was walking around Warsaw and thinking about Stanislaw Baranczak, the man who taught me most everything I know about Polish language and literature. Now, Baranczak, a poet, scholar and professor, is not to blame in any way for what I do *not* know about Polish culture. As you may imagine, Wikipedia couldn't hold all that.

But a few things have stuck in my cranium, and for all of them I can thank Professor Baranczak.

One came roaring back to me that morning in Warsaw. The year was 2008. It was a drizzly, lonely autumn Sunday. I had left the Stare Miasto, or Old Town, and was walking back to my hotel when something compelled me to look up at a building I was passing. There, just above eye level, as I remember it, was a plaque. On it were engraved the words that on this very spot the poet [Krzysztof Kamil Baczynski](#) fell in battle on the fourth day of the Warsaw Uprising.

It was as though my feet had turned to stone. I could not move. Here I was, a free, modern

man of the world, an American living in Moscow and traveling in Poland, and I stood right there where this horrible, famous event took place in 1944.

In the 1980s I read Baczynski and dozens of other Polish writers with Professor Baranczak in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Now, thanks to a simple plaque and a few short words, it seemed as though I had slipped out of time and space. Baczynski, Baranczak and I were all here together for one split second.

Moscow, too, is filled with memories of the past. And the reminders of it are everywhere. Following are some observations to accompany the photo gallery of historical places that you can access above.

One of my favorite plaques in Moscow is the one honoring the poet and social activist Nikolai Ogaryov. I think I like it so much because it seems so incongruous. More like a gravestone slab than a cultural marker, it actually has more blank black marble than writing. It looks marvelously old-fashioned. It always takes me back in time when I stand before it.

Born in 1813, Ogaryov died in Greenwich, England, in 1877. He lived in the building at 23/9 Nikitsky Bulvar from 1822 to 1834. It doesn't say so on the plaque, but the reason he left that location in 1834 was that he was sent into exile for helping to organize a radical student group. Eventually he joined his friend Alexander Herzen in London where he was active in revolutionary pursuits aimed at making Russia a democratic state.

Just across Nikitskiye Vorota Square and up the street known as Malaya Bronnaya is one of Moscow's most famous playhouses — the Theater na Maloi Bronnoi. Presently run by artistic director Sergei Golomazov, it has, in the past, been home to many famous theater artists. Andrei Goncharov and Anatoly Efros worked there in the 1960s and 1970s, and Sergei Zhenovach tested his mettle as a theater leader there in the 1990s.

But an elaborate plaque on the theater's facade honors a great actor who worked on stage there in the years following the revolution.

Solomon Mikhoels, one of the great Jewish actors of all time, famed for performances of [King Lear](#), Tevye the Milkman and many others, performed in this space when it was the home of the State Jewish Theater. There are rumors that his ghost still walks the backstage corridors, and another small plaque outside the dressing room closest to the stage marks the place where he supposedly donned his costumes and makeup.

The plaque outside the building at 4 Malaya Bronnaya Ulitsa indicates that Mikhoels worked there from 1922 to 1948. What it doesn't say, naturally enough perhaps, is that 1948 was the year he died. As we now know, he was murdered in Minsk by the Soviet secret police as one of the first salvos of a coming crackdown on Jews.

Just a few blocks from that theater, on the corner of Tryokhprudny Pereulok and Bolshoi Palashevsky Pereulok is an imposing reminder of one of the great actors of the Maly Theater — Alexander Yuzhin-Sumbatov.

The noise and fury of Sumbatov's acting glory, coming at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, died down long ago. What is curious is that his fame as a playwright, long

forgotten, may be on the verge of a revival. This spring the Sovremennik Theater staged the actor-writer's play "[The Gentleman](#)" and it was surprisingly witty and timely.

Next time you make a turn passing by this plaque, think about the vagaries of fame &mdash how it can come, can go, and, sometimes, come back again.

A few blocks north of Yuzhin-Sumbatov's old home is a reminder of a man that Russia will never forget. The great comedian and actor Arkady Raikin lived just a stone's throw from Tverskaya Ulitsa on Blagoveshchensky Pereulok between 1966 and his death in 1987.

I saw Raikin perform in Leningrad at the Estrada Theater in 1979 when my Russian was barely good enough to get me across the Neva River. That didn't hinder my appreciating one of the funniest humans I have ever seen. I knew he was that for two basic reasons: 1) the audience never stopped laughing for more than a few seconds throughout the entire performance, and 2) all you had to do was look at Raikin (below) to know that this man knew timing inside-out and upside-down.

Another of Russia's favorite funny-men lived a little less than a kilometer away at 13 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Ulitsa. This was Mikhail Romyantsev, whose name hardly a soul would ever recognize. Why? Because Mr. Romyantsev, when he stepped into the ring at the Moscow Circus as a clown, was known to, and adored by, every man, woman and child as Karandash &mdash or Pencil.

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