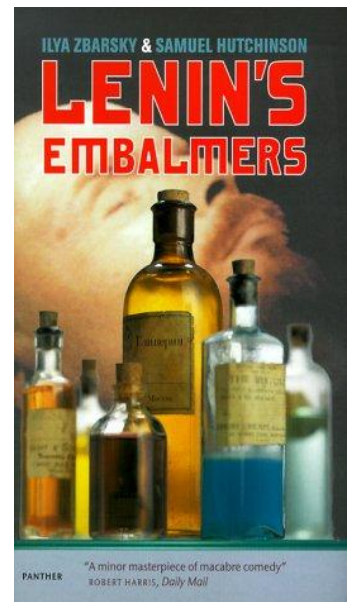


# *Lenin's Embalmers* by Ilya Zbarsky: book review

*Lenin's Embalmers* is the autobiography of Ilya Zbarsky (1913-2007) a chemist in the Soviet Union working on the preservation and display of Lenin's body in Red Square, Moscow. Reading like a history of the 20th century his autobiography charts the history of his family, first under Tsarism, through the Russian Revolution, the purges and mass terror, WW2, the death of Stalin, the period of glasnost and perestroika and finally capitalist restoration.



His autobiography contains many interesting unique observations and anecdotes on political life in the Soviet Union, writing from a rare position as the son of a key figure in the bureaucracy, yet influenced by and sympathetic of the analysis of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. He had an insider's view of life in the Soviet Union and was able to interpret events as he saw them. He never made his peace with Stalin, nor did he become an anti-communist, he was of the best layers in the Soviet Union.

Beginning with a prologue, he gives an excellent summation of

the inner party debate around what to do with Lenin's body after his death following a long period of incapacitation.

His autobiography then switches to his family history under Tsarism, the story of how his father came to be associated with the team at Lenin's Mausoleum. His father, first persecuted for his ethnic and religious background, was unable to find regular employment despite his extensive formal education. He eventually obtained a position working in a large chemical plant through the idiosyncratic whim of the widow of a powerful industrialist. As he had an important position in Russia's economy, he avoided conscription and the horrors of WW1. Following the October Revolution he took a position in an important biochemical institution in Moscow and eventually a role in the groundbreaking experimentation to permanently preserve and display Lenin's body.

Zbarsky goes on to write his observations of boyhood on family life and growing up from absolute poverty to then live in relative affluence corresponding with his father's new found success. Zbarsky attended a prestigious private school and later went on to study Chemical Biology at Moscow University. He saw the bastardisation of the curriculum through the crude 'proletarianisation' of the university which saw the suppression of all independent and critical thought. Disgusted with his experiences there, he eventually left the university and joined his father's team. Zbarsky then writes on number of interesting episodes with considerable insight; his commentary on the intricacies of the long term preservation of the body and scientific and academic life in the Soviet Union more generally are fascinating.

He lived through the mass terror, he witnessed the show trial of Rykov (successor of Lenin as the Chairman of the Council of People's commissars) and Bukharin (Editor of Pravda and Novy Mir), both former family friends of Zbarsky!

Zbarsky survived WW2 as the work of Lenin's Mausoleum was sent

to Far East Siberia so as to not endanger Lenin's body.

In the post war period Ilya was assigned to a team of Chemists responsible for the plunder of West Germany as its biochemistry labs were sacked of all useful chemicals and instruments before the region was handed over to the Allies.

The next period Zbarsky was tasked with the preservation of leading figures from other communist parties the world over, including those of Bulgaria and Mongolia.

It was around this time that his father fell under suspicion and was imprisoned. Though this was eventually overturned following the death of Stalin, Zbarsky too fell out of favour and was unable to find work for a long time.

Zbarsky is then forced to rely on the second hand observations of his contemporaries to conclude his story with the final chapter of the mausoleum lab. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Capitalist restoration in Russia, deprived of its massive state funding, the lab resorted to the preparation of the bodies of Russia's burgeoning Mafioso figures who are renowned for having extensive lavish funerals.

Zbarsky was a very intelligent man and his analysis of contemporary life in Russia was informed by the perspectives of the Left Opposition. While on a scientific mission in France, he was able to read works that were banned inside the Soviet Union, Trotsky's *My Life* among them. In addition, his father was a one time Social Revolutionary deputy, he once helped Trotsky cross the border from Austria to Russia while in exile. As such his biography is filled with a wealth of vignettes and anecdotes that correspond to the analysis made by Trotsky on the nature of the Soviet bureaucracy in his struggle against the grave digger of the revolution.

Zbarsky was uniquely situated to observe and document this phenomena and he excels in doing so. His book is engrossing, the information is very accessible and his acerbic wit means

his observations are quite humorous in places. Zbarsky's biography has many insightful comments and could act as a companion to any serious study of the Soviet Union and the degeneration of the Russian revolution.

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