

Perestroika Began in Prague

INTERVIEW WITH YEVGENY AMBARTSUMOV

PART I

Yevgeny Ambartsumov served as an adviser to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on issues of reforming foreign relations. He lived in Czechoslovakia (1959-63), where he was an editor of the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, working alongside several other figures who were to later impact Soviet reforms in the 1980s. After returning to Moscow, he held positions at various Soviet institutions, including the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) and the Institute of Sociology. Ambartsumov already had some notoriety inside the Soviet system for critical thinking on ideology when he was invited to help write the first drafts of Gorbachev's book *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (first published in 1987). Among those in Gorbachev's inner circle, he was one of the first to openly declare an end to the Brezhnev Doctrine, shortly before the collapse of the Eastern European allied regimes in 1989. He was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation in 1990, and served as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supreme Soviet. He also served in the Presidential Council of President Boris Yeltsin. Ambartsumov then served as Russian ambassador to Mexico (1994-99), where he now lives in retirement. His wife, Nina Ambartsumova, also participated in this interview. The interview was conducted in Russian and Spanish on March 19, 2006 by Fredo Arias-King in Tepozotlán, Mexico. English translation by Viktoria Stepanyuk.

Ambartsumov: I kept my Russian citizenship and my Mexican one as well.

Demokratizatsiya: I believe there is a way to keep both citizenships, unlike before. Though there is a danger that if [leftist presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López] Obrador wins, many of these small liberties will be cancelled. [Editor's note: Felipe Calderón, of the National Action Party, won Mexico's July 2, 2006 presidential election. He is still in office.]

Ambartsumov: I like that he is from the left, because I was always—even though I left the Communist Party in my time—I always considered myself as a leftist, a social democrat.

Demokratizatsiya: But is [López Obrador] a social democrat, or he is just part of the illiberal left?

Ambartsumov: He is not social democratic, but he is on the left, and the main difference is that he is, in contrast to [former Mexican president Carlos] Salinas, for example, a man of the people.

Demokratizatsiya: But he was actually one of Salinas's people before.

Ambartsumov: Once, maybe.

Demokratizatsiya: Yes, he was. I was reading recently how he praised Salinas, in that adulating style common in these regimes. Almost how Leonid Brezhnev would praise [Nikita] Khrushchev before stabbing him in the back.

Ambartsumova: Like [Eduard] Shevardnadze talked about [Leonid] Brezhnev. He sang praises to Brezhnev, wrote poems, even in Georgian.

Demokratizatsiya: Enough about Mexico. Let's talk about Prague and Soviet politics. You and your interesting circle helped create a new way of thinking in Moscow during Perestroika. Many in this circle coincided in Prague a few years earlier, and maybe the brewing situation there influenced the thinking of those people around the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*. What experiences can you share with us? Why did your circle in Prague later have such an influence on Perestroika?

Ambartsumov: Firstly, from the beginning, it was just a personal story. The thing is that practically everybody who worked on the magazine *Problems of Peace and Socialism* in Prague went on to take part in Perestroika later.

Ambartsumova: [Aleksei] Rumyantsev was the first, he brought all those people together.

Ambartsumov: Rumyantsev was the main editor of the journal . . .

Ambartsumova: Fredo is interested in why such a group was brought together for *Problems of Peace and Socialism*.

Ambartsumov: Rumyantsev's personality was quite important, of course. First, he was a very open person. Second, his relationship with Stalin was quite negative. And third, he organized the people who were close to him spiritually. It was an environment that was very honest, and even though there were different types of people, the vast majority were progressive thinkers. Everybody was writing articles, conducting interviews. In the context of the then-Soviet press, the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism* was somewhat of a black sheep. It was very progressive and published articles by people who did not have access to the publishing apparatus in Moscow. I can give you one example.

Ambartsumova: They were going to Prague to make a clean break, since the journal was different than publications in Moscow.

Demokratizatsiya: Interesting. This was during Prague Spring?

Ambartsumova: No, before.

Ambartsumov: I came to Prague at the end of 1959 and left in 1963, and later regretted leaving too early. There was a progressive atmosphere in Prague. When I was back in Moscow [for] the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in 1963, where I had worked before, it was worse there. Firstly, Rumyantsev could gather the progressive people, they were all looking up to him, as he was a very strong leader and progressive and open, as I have already said. We felt free ourselves, even in a material sense. We had good salaries compared to Moscow. We had nice living accommodations; everybody had their own flat. And practically everybody who worked on *Problems of Peace and Socialism*

consequentially became very famous: [Georgy] Arbatov, [Gennady] Gerasimov, Bovin, [Fyodor] Burlatsky.

Demokratizatsiya: You were there with them at the same time?

Ambartsumov: Partially.

Ambartsumova: [Yuri] Karyakin was there with him. He invited Karyakin.

Ambartsumov: I saw him not so long ago. I personally invited Karyakin to *Problems of Peace and Socialism*. And besides him, there was an exceptional person named [Eduard] Arab-Ogly. He died few years ago.

Ambartsumova: In reality, the last name is a normal Armenian surname, but his father was a Bolshevik and Arab-Ogly was his party nickname.

Ambartsumov: He was a very talented sociologist. . . . And he was without question the most erudite sociologist that time in the USSR.

Ambartsumova: He was a liberal, not so much a democrat, but real liberal. One hundred percent liberal.

Ambartsumov: Liberal-technocrat. Unfortunately he died, but he was my friend. I was there at his funeral.

Ambartsumova: He was writing a lot of the foreign articles, critiques. He was interested in futurism. He was teaching a lot of foreign languages—he spoke many languages—he was such an intellectual.

Ambartsumov: He was very educated. He was the most erudite from whole of our circle. Let's continue. When we got together, it was in 1960, I came at the end 1959, and was there in 1960, 1961, and 1962. Then in 1963, I came back to Moscow.

Demokratizatsiya: You were in Prague this whole time?

Ambartsumov: We returned to Moscow two or three times a year, but we were living there permanently. We got there together before Prague Spring, but we already had developed ideas that later became the Prague Spring. It is enough to name Zdeněk Mlynář. He was one of the main architects of the Prague Spring.

Demokratizatsiya: You knew him?

Ambartsumova: Yes, he visited our home.

Ambartsumov: Very closely.

Demokratizatsiya: He was close to [Mikhail] Gorbachev, too.

Ambartsumova: When Perestroika started, he came to our home twice. We did not have such a big flat and our parents were living with us, and we asked if he did not mind staying in the kitchen. And he said: "Always, when I am in Russia, I am in the kitchen."

Demokratizatsiya: Who were the other architects of the Prague Spring? Who else were you meeting besides Mlynář? Did you meet [Alexander] Dubček?

Ambartsumov: Of course. He was in Slovakia. We met each other, but at the time, we were not friends. We had a closer friendship with Mlynář.

Demokratizatsiya: How about Jiří Hájek? He was later the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia during Dubček.

Ambartsumov: Yes, I knew him, but not too well. I knew some of the leaders of Prague Spring, who were at *Literární listy*. This Jew—I forgot his last name—he was the main editor of *Literární listy*. Prague Spring was later, but we were preparing for it without knowing it. And I regretted, as I said before, that I left Prague too early, as interesting activities took place later. It's interesting that our group of Russians at the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism* was more progressive than other writers of other nationalities. The journal was an international collaboration, with Italians, French. But the most progressive were the Soviet colleagues.

Ambartsumova: Who were nevertheless orthodox Communists.

Demokratizacija: I believe that at the same time, Euro-Communism was appearing in Western European capitals.

Ambartsumov: In practice we were already Euro-Communists, although this term did not yet exist. This was around the time I befriended Santiago Carrillo, who wrote the first book about Euro-Communism. He was the secretary general of the Spanish Communist Party. I think he may have died.

Ambartsumova: He is forgotten.

Ambartsumov: He did quite a lot, we were friends.

Ambartsumova: We were interested in Euro-Communism at that time.

Demokratizacija: This Spanish Communist was talking about Euro-Communism in your publication, *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, first?

Ambartsumov: No, he edited a book.

Demokratizacija: What other Soviets were in that circle? Gerasimov told me that [Merab] Mamardashvili was there as well.

Ambartsumov: He was a writer, philosopher.

Demokratizacija: Merab was a close friend of Gorbachev; Gorbachev talks about him at times.

Ambartsumov: They were living together in the student dormitory.

Demokratizacija: And Zdeněk Mlynář, as well, in Moscow State University. Please talk about Merab.

Ambartsumov: About Merab—with pleasure. I remember, when he arrived [in] Prague, I was waiting for him at the railway station, he arrived by train. He was a very erudite person, he spoke a few languages, not only English, but also French and Italian especially well. He was friends with a lot of foreigners, and on top of that, he was a very talented philosopher. I remember that his first article was co-written with Ivan Frolov.

Demokratizacija: Frolov later became the editor of *Pravda*. He was in Prague with you as well?

Ambartsumov: Yes, he also was in Prague. Although Frolov became an academician and Mamardashvili did not, Mamardashvili was much brighter than Frolov.

Ambartsumova: Frolov didn't seem like anything special.

Ambartsumov: Frolov became an adviser of Devichev, who was the secretary of ide-

ology, a candidate-member of the Politburo. And Frolov became his adviser. And this pushed him upwards, obviously. And later, the chief editor of *Pravda*. But that was later. Mamardashvili was a very talented and erudite person; he became a deputy to the main editor of *Questions of Philosophy* [*Voprosy Filosofii*]. He was teaching at the institutes in Moscow. I remember, he was even teaching in the Institute of Cinematography. And later he was persecuted and forced to move to Tbilisi. He died there.

Ambartsumova: There was a good philosophy school at the university in Tbilisi. He was happy there; he felt at home. And there was quite a liberal philosophy-psychology school, more psychological. He was happy there and, as they were not in the center, they had more freedom in their publications.

Demokratizatsiya: It is like before Perestroika, in Novosibirsk, far away from Moscow, there was more freedom, which explains why the academicians there produced more relevant studies.

Ambartsumov: In 1950s, there was a novel, *Far Away from Moscow*, a Russian novel, and it was a symbolic phrase. Being far away from Moscow, it is possible to feel more freedom. It was something like a symbolic name—far away from Moscow, you can feel freer.

Ambartsumova: Who was the author?

Ambartsumov: It was a novel by [Vasili] Azhaev. Although he was writing his work while in prison, but he never mentioned it in the novel. What else?

Demokratizatsiya: What else do you remember about Frolov and Bovin?

Ambartsumov: Bovin did a lot, of course. He died, right? Two years ago. Romyantsev did a lot for the free word. Quite a lot. Not because he wrote very well but because he was uniting people and he had an article in *Pravda*, which provoked indignation among the top leaders. An article was about the importance of the intelligentsia, which highlighted how the intelligentsia had a leading role in the spiritual development of society.

Ambartsumova: The thing was that Romyantsev was uniting people, and he was protecting them. When his people were chastised for being much too free, Romyantsev protected them, always on his own terms, and when he had the power to do so.

Demokratizatsiya: Was Romyantsev a friend of Yuri Andropov, when they were both in the Central Committee?

Ambartsumov: Andropov's relationship toward Romyantsev was very good. And Khrushchev acted especially well toward him. When the chief editor had to be selected for *Problems of Peace and Socialism* there were various candidates. Andropov crossed them all out and wrote "Romyantsev." And Romyantsev became the chief editor under Khrushchev. That is a fact. And later, when Khrushchev was recalled, as Romyantsev was a person connected with Khrushchev, nobody even invited him to participate in the general assembly of the Central Committee, even though he was a member. The plenum of the Central Committee took place the same day when Romyantsev was going back to Prague from Moscow. He was not even informed. It was a violation of all laws, all rules in the Soviet Union.

Demokratizatsiya: Who was doing this? Brezhnev or Kosygin?

Ambartsumov: Brezhnev, but not even him, the party apparat had obviously made the

decision. What else? In general, it's important that there was a very liberal atmosphere in Prague. And even though it was many years before Prague Spring, and moreover before the democratization, the basis for Prague Spring and democratization was present even then. We did not know Gorbachev at that time. He was the secretary of Stavropol's provincial raykom [regional committee]. But he was up-and-coming. Moreover, he was a friend of Mlynář and, thus, they were meeting in Moscow as the former students of Moscow State University.

Demokratizatsiya: What do you remember about Gerasimov and Arbatov?

Ambartsumov: First, Arbatov. We were approximately at the same working level. I was officially the magazine's deputy editor—the editor was a foreigner, an Italian—from the Communist movement. Arbatov was a consulting editor. Sitkovsky was an editor; he died a long time ago. Arab-Ogly was a deputy editor, as we were talking about, and Arbatov was a consulting editor.

Ambartsumova: The Italian's last name was Druppi, but you don't know him. He was a member of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party. Druppi was one. Another was Rossi, also an Italian. But the editorial board [*redkolegii*] decided matters at the journal. Its chairman, Rummyantsev, was Russian, and the deputy was Russian as well. At the time, it was Sobolev, a descendant of Aleksandr Ivanovich Sobolev, and the rest were foreigners. Not all the foreigners were members of the editorial board or could vote. The members of the editorial board were French, Italian, German—a certain Berta—Argentine and [from] other places. Fredo was asking you what you remember about Gerasimov and Arbatov.

Ambartsumov: Well, Gerasimov and Arbatov were not the highest ranking members at the time, but later as they stayed longer after I left, they—especially Arbatov—were transferred to work at the apparat of the Central Committee. They had the same opinions as me, they were as liberal.

Demokratizatsiya: Do you remember occasions or events which reflected their opinions?

Ambartsumov: There were articles and publications reflecting their opinions. They were quite progressive. I remember one case that was connected to me. Roy Medvedev sent a response to some article. We didn't know Medvedev, I don't think he had become famous at that point. We published it. It came, as we say in Russian, spontaneously. Nobody had solicited the article, but it was written very well, and we published it. After that, the name Roy Medvedev became famous. I had a close friend and colleagues, such Yuri Ostrovityanov—he was the son of the vice-chairman of the Academy of Sciences' department of economics, the author of a book about socialist political economics. There is even a street named after Ostrovityanov's father; he was a cobelligerent of Lenin's. I liked him very much, he was a bright person. He died early, unfortunately. Well, I can't say that Arbatov or Gerasimov were somehow special. They were in our circle, and we all had approximately the same beliefs. It is interesting that Rummyantsev's deputy, who was administering practically everything, shaking with everybody in redaction, was the embodiment of a reactionary, a certain Vinogradov, Ivan Tikhonovich, who had been a deputy of the director of department of the socialistic parties at the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He would fall asleep during meetings. He fell

asleep in front of Khrushchev and started to snore. His colleagues were poking him: “Ivan Tikhonovich, get up!” He woke up and Khrushchev said, “He sleeps and sleeps, but he hears everything.” Nevertheless, he was immediately sent to Prague. And it’s interesting that although he was very reactionary, his son Igor Vinogradov is now a progressive literary critic, and a very good one too. I have a book of his about [Aleksandr] Solzhenitsyn. His son became a progressive critic. But this is all about Prague.

Demokratizatsiya: Interesting. Who else? Please tell me about [Anatoly] Chernyaev.

Ambartsumov: We now have a friendly relationship.

Demokratizatsiya: I know, I actually brought his book [*Shest let s Gorbachovym*, or *My Six Years with Gorbachev*] here, because he wrote about you.

Ambartsumov: Can I have a look?

Demokratizatsiya: You said you were ghost-writing Gorbachev’s book *Perestroika*?

Ambartsumov: It was a group led by Chernyaev; they got together in his *dacha* and were writing this book.

Demokratizatsiya: It mentions here some of the other people: Aleksandr Weber, Andrei Yermovsky, Aleksei Kozlov.

Ambartsumov: Right.

Demokratizatsiya: How did you meet Chernyaev? In Prague?

Ambartsumov: Yes, in Prague, yes. We had bad relationship at the beginning.

Demokratizatsiya: Why?

Ambartsumov: Because . . . I will try to explain. From the beginning, we didn’t have a very good relationship, as Chernyaev was close to the Central Committee and I was not. I was more or less an oppositionist. But we later made up, and Chernyaev started inviting me to some groups that were created at the Central Committee, always in his *dacha*. From what I remember, we were writing not only together with Andropov and Arbatov during the two weeks . . . we spent two weeks writing some anti-Chinese letter together with Andropov. It was in 1960, as I remember, I came back to Moscow, and Andropov invited me to write this letter. I remember very clearly that Andropov was very well prepared to work on this letter. He quoted Confucius and Rousseau, and I was very surprised, as I was not used to such finesse from top workers of the Central Committee.

Demokratizatsiya: You mean Andropov.

Ambartsumov: Yes. This was very rare. I heard from the person who was close to his family that Andropov liked me very much. And he really appreciated me. What he didn’t like was that when I came to write this letter, I was wearing a striped light informal shirt. I didn’t dress up, like it was customary at the Central Committee—wearing a tie—but later he told his son that “I like this one.” And later, Andropov was transferred to the KGB.

Demokratizatsiya: Before that, he was not at the KGB, but at the Central Committee apparat.

Ambartsumov: He was a secretary of the Central Committee, in the department of socialist parties. The Politburo members selected him, and he was transferred to the KGB. He was a very strong person. He was working at the KGB for about fifteen years. He was too strong when compared to all the old people at the time.

Demokratizatsiya: Tell me about Yegor Yakovlev.

Ambartsumova: He did not work on *Problems of Peace and Socialism*. He was the main editor of the magazine *Zhurnalist*. In Prague, he was working as a reporter for *Izvestiya*, during Prague Spring, right? And later he worked as a main editor of Perestroika's newspaper, *Moskovskiye Novosti* [*Moscow News*], when it was influential.

Ambartsumov: And another friend of ours became the main editor of *Moscow News*—Vitaliy Tretyakov.

Demokratizatsiya: I didn't know he was there. He was the founding editor of *Nezavisimaya gazeta*?

Ambartsumova: He was taken from *Nezavisimaya gazeta* by [Boris] Berezovsky, and became the chief editor of the magazine *Politicheskii klass* [*Political Class*], and he has his own program on TV. He was selected as the chief editor of *Moscow News* in January.

Demokratizatsiya: Interesting, did you know that two weeks ago, Gorbachev was in the headlines of *Moscow News*, under the caption "*On dal nam shans*"—"He gave us a chance." Lilia Shevtsova wrote it. What else? Tell us of your work in this group that was meeting in the dacha during Perestroika.

Ambartsumov: We had a very good text prepared for Gorbachev, but he made it worse. He deleted all the piquant parts. He did not want to be very compromised as he was already a leader of the party at that time.

Ambartsumova: He was scared.

Ambartsumov: He made it softer. So, it was a good time, as Chernyaev and I were working on this project very freely. There was a person named Aleksei Kozlov. He was at the Central Committee. He was writing poems. I remember a piece, "Seven Gold Pen-feathers" by which he meant the people writing this book about Perestroika. I was one of those seven pen-feathers that he mentioned in the poem. I still have his poems at home in Moscow.

Ambartsumova: Kozlov wrote poems, and he talked about them: "Seven Golden Pen-feathers." He wrote good poems and was writing poems when they were sitting in the dacha.

Ambartsumov: He was very gifted person, Kozlov, very bright.

Demokratizatsiya: How did you get into the group, how did you start to participate in the book Perestroika? Through Chernyaev?

Ambartsumova: Through *Moscow News*.

Ambartsumov: No, through Chernyaev. I was working for Gorbachev and Perestroika through Chernyaev.

Ambartsumova: No, through *Moscow News*. Who knew what you wrote for Gorbachev? There is a book, *History of Marxism*, which Chernyaev wrote, and you were writing prologues.

Ambartsumov: The thing is, it started as a multivolume book edited in Italy. The multivolume work came from an international group of authors, it began in Italy, later went to France, or may be vice-versa; it started in France and later went to Italy. Then these volumes were translated, but it was one of those so-called private or closed translations.

Ambartsumova: You know, there were private or closed editions, which could not be bought.

Demokratizatsiya: Could not be bought?

Ambartsumova: Yes, they were just in a library and you had to have a certain permit. And so, *History of Marxism* was written and it was in a closed or private edition, not for everybody. But it was important, as it was connected to Perestroika, because in the beginning, Perestroika was seen as a return to real Marxism.

Ambartsumov: Yes, that's right.

Ambartsumova: So, *History of Marxism* was written already from the liberal, free point of view, not from the Stalinist one. It had great importance for cleaning minds, because people were reading it and seeing that Marxism could be something different than what we had in Russia. And we had to adjust based on that realization, we had to understand Marxism from a different point of view. **Ambartsumov:** The feeling had already started to change. And the thing is that *History of Marxism*, the voluminous work, in that closed edition, was published by limited print in the Progress publishing house.

Demokratizatsiya: You met each other there?

Ambartsumova: No, at another publishing house.

Ambartsumov: We met each other at the publishing house Molodaya Gvardiya.

Ambartsumova: But that's not important.

Ambartsumov: That is important! She was editing my book, which was published by Molodaya Gvardiya.

Demokratizatsiya: Interesting.

Ambartsumova: For *History of Marxism*, there were editions with white covers, like paper, all white, and were called "white editions" because they needed an ID and they were in a secret department in a library. You needed a permit to read them.

Ambartsumov: It was called the special fund.

Demokratizatsiya: And you were translating Western books for the Politburo, as well?

Ambartsumova: Of course.

Ambartsumov: I would like to say that those translations of the multivolume *History of Marxism* from the Progress publishing house were published in limited edition. I wrote the prologues for all the editions.

Ambartsumova: For every book, for every volume, he wrote the prologue. His prologues were drawing a line under . . . the authors were Communists, but they were of course much more free than our Communists were. And prologues were freer than the rest of the text. The prologue was interesting to read, because—oh, this is important—because the situation as it was during the Brezhnev era made it impossible. And we wanted to go somewhere, you understand?

Ambartsumov: Gorbachev told me he was reading those editions, where I wrote the prologues. And, as he was a graduate from the university's law school, he was more educated than other leaders were, and he marked those books with my prologue.

Demokratizatsiya: You mean Gorbachev was tainted with some of those ideas from you?

Ambartsumova: Yes, of course, but Gorbachev was not that intelligent, even though he graduated from the university.

Ambartsumov: He's an attorney, let's say.

Ambartsumova: Not even an attorney, but he was open.

Demokratizatsiya: Gorbachev always searched for ideas. He likes to argue.

Ambartsumov: In any case, we now see that he turned out to be better than Yeltsin was.

Demokratizatsiya: Absolutely. You know, I had a meeting with Ivan Polozkov, who founded the Russian Communist Party back in 1990. He did say something interesting, that if the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had been Yeltsin instead of Gorbachev back in 1985, there would have been no such thing as glasnost, no Perestroika, no democratization.

Ambartsumov: I agree.

Ambartsumova: It was a big mistake for Gorbachev to endorse Polozkov, who was a nobody, instead of Yeltsin, who was a charismatic figure.

Ambartsumov: He was a nobody.

Ambartsumova: If only he had come out and said, "I cannot trust Yeltsin." Gorbachev never says anything openly. If he stood up at the tribune—I remember, we were watching TV at the time. During that period, you remember, everybody was watching TV, listening to the radio. I was driving my car and was listening to the radio. And I remember how Gorbachev stood up at that time and said, instead of Yeltsin, I endorse Polozkov. And he didn't say anything else. If he had said, you know, Yeltsin is such-and-such a person, you cannot trust him . . . believe me, you can't trust Yeltsin. He changes his mind; who knows what he'll be. Let's elect, I don't know, another one. [Vadim] Bakatin, for example.

Demokratizatsiya: Bakatin. Yes, absolutely.

Ambartsumova: Or [Nikolai] Ryzhkov . . . though he wasn't very sharp either. No, you had to elect a very bright person, at least in comparison. Yes, Bakatin would have been nice. And he would have been comparable to Yeltsin. But as for Polozkov, compared to Yeltsin, he didn't offer anything. At the time, my reaction was, why Polozkov? I was for Yeltsin then. If Gorbachev told the truth about Yeltsin . . . he knew the truth about him. But the people did not know, because Yeltsin is nice and he can talk well.

Ambartsumov: And he captivates people.

Ambartsumova: At the time he was not a drunk, by the way. When he was elected he was nice, he was talking about Afghanistan, where kids were dying, saying "I am sorry. I did not kill your children." And Polozkov didn't do anything. If Gorbachev were a smart person, he would not have done it, he would not have supported Polozkov.

Ambartsumov: He was smart and decisive, he just hesitated.

Ambartsumova: He was not just hesitating! He did not want to tell the truth until it was too late! Gorbachev, you understand, was going with him to France. At the beginning of

Perestroika, he was in contact with him quite a lot. I was in very close contact; we were together during New Year's Eve. We were with our friends, journalists. They invited him to celebrate New Year's Eve and he came with his wife, Raisa. The Italian journalist Giulietto Chiesa was there. His wife and he are our very close friends.

Demokratizatsiya: He wrote a book about the USSR Congress of People's Deputies.

Ambartsumova: Yes, he was writing about the Afghan war, and not just about that. He wrote *Goodbye, Russia*, a wonderful book. His books are just wonderful!

Ambartsumov: Arrivederci Russia. But it was written in Russian. He wrote all his books in Russian. And Russian Roulette was another good book, edited not too long ago.

Demokratizatsiya: He's in Italy now?

Ambartsumova: Yes, he is in Italy. He was elected a member of the European Parliament. And Gorbachev, I would like to say, we have one more observation. During New Year's Eve, Chiesa invited Gorbachev, and he came. It was a holiday.

Demokratizatsiya: When was it?

Ambartsumova: Maybe it was around 1993.

Demokratizatsiya: When you were a deputy in the Russian parliament?

Ambartsumova: Somewhere around that time, yes. But I have the impression that at that time, Gorbachev . . . [Grigory] Yavlinsky was also a guest, Tretyakov and other friends, too. It was such a group. Gorbachev's behavior caught our eyes. You understand, he talks, but he wants to hide something. He does not want to speak directly, he always sidesteps. Maybe it was earlier, before the presidential elections. Yavlinsky was balloting that time.

Demokratizatsiya: That would be the 1996 presidential elections.

Ambartsumova: That means it was 1996, and you were there then? That means you were already ambassador.

Ambartsumov: I was ambassador.

Ambartsumova: That means maybe you came. And at the time everybody was talking and Tretyakov told Gorbachev: "You have no chance. You do not speak openly, and you do not talk about your positions. What are you going to do?" Gorbachev had already been a head of state, and to reelect him without knowing what he was going to do . . . Tretyakov told him—he was a very honest person. And Gorbachev answered him: "All right. I can take back my candidacy." Raisa was still alive, and she said, "You can't imagine, we are so welcomed in the provinces." They came to a province, and everybody said: "Ah, Gorbachev!" At that time we did not have the political exhaustion that we have now. And she added: "We are so welcomed at the universities by youth." The youth are young. They do not think too much. And Gorbachev told Yavlinsky, "If I had known you were also running, I would withdraw my candidacy." As before, Tretyakov said something like: "Mikhail Sergeevich, why do you need to do this? You won't be elected anyway." Something like that. And they started to ask Gorbachev, and it was interesting: Gorbachev always avoids things—he is not open on some things. He could have said something. He criticized Yeltsin quite a bit, of course; that was his sore: "How could you? I know everything about Yeltsin, you will cry because of him." He said all this. The thing was to tell who Yeltsin really was,

as it was not clear at the time. But he avoided the subject, and this manner of his is regrettable. Wait a minute [to Ambartsumov], you were not there at all, you were in Mexico. And I came to that party alone. He was in Mexico, it means it was in 1996. I remember it very well and he was not there. I was introduced to Gorbachev, I had not know him personally: "This is Ambartsumov's wife." And he answered: "I remember him very well, he speaks all these languages." But he did not speak Spanish at that time.

Demokratizacija: And do you speak Czech? *Rozumíte cesky?*

Ambartsumov: I already forgot it all.

Ambartsumova: I read quite a few of [Václav] Havel's works. Do you remember his dissident work? Not his plays, I was reading his mostly social works. His more philosophical works. I was fascinated by him, I liked him very much. But later, when he became president, he became very pro-American. You know what his brother said when he became president? It's very funny: "Now whole the world will watch my brother's play."

Demokratizacija: After you returned to Moscow in 1963, did you at that time keep in touch with your Russian colleagues from Prague? Say, Arbatov, Burlatsky, Bovin?

Ambartsumov: I wasn't in especially close contact. After Gorbachev came to power, I renewed some of those contacts.

Ambartsumova: It had nothing to do with Gorbachev. The thing is that during the period of stagnation, you had contact with Bulatsky and [Len] Karpinsky.

Ambartsumov: At the time, I was writing for Moscow News quite often.

Ambartsumova: All those years you worked at the Academy of Sciences. You were writing some prologues. Later, we were meeting in the kitchen, as they say, which means that we were reading literature. Later, he was very interested in Euro-Communism. We were going to Italy. At the time there was an Italian, who was the founder of Euro-Communism. At the time, that kind thinking was not official. For example, some books came in through the contracts for writing the prologues. He was lecturing in foreign languages for the foreigners at the Institute of Social Sciences. Then, in Czechoslovakia, things were happening. I still have the manuscripts, a large amount of material about the Prague Spring written on a typewriter. How Dubček was accomplishing, I tried to read all about that.

Demokratizacija: Who else was reading? This is very important, as the Prague Spring "infected" the thinking in Russia.

Ambartsumova: Of course.

Demokratizacija: What were the channels?

Ambartsumova: What were the channels? First, everybody was listening to the radio.

Demokratizacija: In Czech?

Ambartsumova: No, *Voice of America*, the BBC, and *Radio Free Europe* from Munich. Everybody was listening to this, sitting in the evening and listening to what was happening in Prague. It was in Russian. Later there were translations. I have it in Russian, I don't speak Czech. And the material about how Dubček was performing. It would have been a pity to throw it away before this. I got it from Karpinsky. He was a very close friend of ours. We were in very close contact with him regularly. People were meeting in his house

and talking about interesting things. Karpinsky died. He was editor of *Moscow News*. It was Yegor Yakovlev, Timur Gaidar—Yegor Gaidar's father—, Medvedev. First, Roy Medvedev was the source of reading material. Mostly books. And who else was meeting there? Yuri Chernichenko, his colleague from institute Lisichkin. Another one was a correspondent for *Izvestiya*. He worked in Czechoslovakia, Krivosheev or something. He was deported from Prague after writing about the Prague events without condemning them, and even writing with some admiration. Yegor was doing the same thing as the *Izvestiya* correspondent. He refused condemn the events in Czechoslovakia, he also was deported. And so we were meeting in Len Karpinsky's house and looking at who was reading what. And Roy Medvedev was always bringing some literature. Roy Medvedev was bringing Havel's books and Western editions, small books with the thin paper. And he was the source of the literature. In general, he was in touch with Len Karpinsky, as Karpinsky was a real philosopher-thinker. And Roy Medvedev was always consulting with him about everything, and Karpinsky sometimes participated in our sessions. During this time, everybody was working at the Academy of Sciences. [Oleg] Bogomolov was harboring a lot of them who were sent from all kind of institutes. And from the beginning, he was a close friend. Bogomolov was an economist and the director of the institute. And, by the way, in the beginning, Karpinsky and Burlatsky were friends. They later wrote an article together and Burlatsky was fired from the Central Committee. They wrote an article against censorship in the theater. And when he was attacked for this, Karpinsky took the responsibility on himself and he was told to say: "No, I have not written this article." He didn't behave very well. He said: "It's his fault." But he was fired as well anyway. They were always getting fired from one job, then moving on to another position.

Demokratizatsiya: It was like in Prague after the invasion of the Soviet tanks. This so-called normalization was in the Soviet Union as well.

Ambartsumov: No, that was much later.

Ambartsumova: No, not so much later. In Czechoslovakia it was in 1968. The stagnation was here in the seventies.

Ambartsumov: The thing is, the Prague Spring was a cold shower for the atmosphere in Russia. It scared Brezhnev, and the stagnation had started.

Ambartsumova: Yes, they already knew that it is possible to have socialism with a human face. The whole idea that socialism was human was popular.

Demokratizatsiya: Why didn't the Hungarian insurrection in 1956 capture the minds of the Soviets the way the Prague Spring did?

Ambartsumova: It was a totally different story. And I don't remember the details now, but we have a friend, a specialist on Hungary, and says that Hungary was another situation. It was not liberalization, but strictly a provocation by Imre Nagy. No, [Mátyás] Rákosi. Do not confuse Czechoslovakia and Hungary. They were different situations. Of course, it was horrible that Hungary was invaded by tanks. It was Andropov who participated in it.

Demokratizatsiya: So when the Prague Spring was taking place, your Soviet colleagues from Prague were meeting in Moscow?

Ambartsumova: Of course, but not everybody. We were not friends with Arbatov.

Demokratizatsiya: Why?

Ambartsumov: It was just like that.

Ambartsumova: You know, not just like that. They were the people whose goal was to get in the government. And our group was sitting in the academy . . .

Demokratizatsiya: Interesting, so there was somewhat of a split between the academic types, and those who wanted to get in the government—the so-called “careerists,” right?

Ambartsumova: Arbatov for sure. Maybe Gerasimov, too.

Ambartsumov: No, Gerasimov, not so much, but Arbatov especially. That’s why he made a career of it.

Ambartsumova: Burlatsky really wanted to be in the government, but he was not selected. And he was a little bit scared. He was even scared to participate in our circle when Len Karpinsky, who was later excluded from the party from because he wanted to edit a magazine, was there. This is how everything got accomplished. People wanted to write and wanted to make this *samizdat* magazine. They started to edit this magazine, and Karpinsky was immediately fired from his job.

Ambartsumov: And from the party.

Ambartsumova: He was working as a manager at Progress at the time. I was not yet working there, but he was working there as a manager. Progress was a huge publishing house for foreign languages. After serial unpleasantness, Len Karpinsky was accepted as a director of the philosophy division in Progress. They started to edit the magazine and after that, they were fired constantly. They were not working anymore. But we were meeting at his residence anyway, and we were helping him. I was working at another publishing house, and he wrote very well. Maybe you have read something he’s written. And it was possible to edit some things. We were editing him under a pseudonym, and we were paying him.

Demokratizatsiya: And after the Warsaw Pact invaded in 1968, what happened? What was the mood among your colleagues?

Ambartsumov: Well, there was stagnation after the attack, during the Brezhnev era. And nothing was happening, practically until Gorbachev was selected.

Ambartsumova: No, they continued writing. The kind of things that were written for [Boris] Ponomarev, for Brezhnev a little bit. And—you know what?—Burlatsky joked about this. He was always talking, and he was thrown out. And Arbatov was thrown out. And all this, like Kozlov, they were forced to become censors themselves, because they wanted to sit in the Central Committee. Kozlov was sitting in the Central Committee, Chernyaev was sitting in the Central Committee, Bovin also wanted to be in the government.

Demokratizatsiya: And you were in the Academy of Sciences, not in the Central Committee, all those years?

Ambartsumova: He worked in different institutes of academy for twenty-seven years.

Demokratizatsiya: Did you meet with other future figures of Perestroika there, such as Tatyana Zaslavskaya and Abel Agabengyan?

Ambartsumova: Yes.

Ambartsumov: They were economists.

This interview will continue in an upcoming issue of Demokratizatsiya.

Correction

In Kimitaka Matsuzato's piece "The Five-Day War and Transnational Politics," featured in the Summer 2009 issue of *Demokratizatsiya*, we incorrectly cited the title of Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia and the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church, in that article's Notes section. *Demokratizatsiya* regrets the error.

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