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ON THE EDGE OF THE KNIFE — COLLECTING SOVIET CHILDREN’S BOOKS 1930–1933

This paper looks at a private collection of Soviet children’s books collected during 1930–33 by a young couple of German architects, and its subsequent donation to the national library at Brera in Milan. The 257 book, which include 85 in Ukrainian and several in Yiddish, provide a snapshot of the Soviet Union at a time of transition, from the euphoric collaborations of the NEP to the purges during Stalin’s Terror.

Keywords: collection, children’s books, Soviet Union, education, literacy, Ukraine, Yiddish

The story begins with a brown leather suitcase. The daughter of the collectors Hans Edward and Hedwig Adler, Susan McQuail, first became aware of their collection of Soviet children’s books with the death of her grandmother in 1959. Her parents debated long and hard about what to do with their mother’s house in Germany. Realising they would never want to live there again they decided to sell it, which meant they were able to buy the flat they had lived in since 1943 (having emigrated to Britain in 1939) and could help their children buy a house when they were married in 1964. Some key pieces of furniture and other objects from the house in Germany, some of them acquired in Stalinabad in the 1930s, went to the children, but the Russian books in their brown leather suitcase remained with Susan’s parents. And there the story ended until Susan’s mother died in 1986, when she had to clear her mother’s flat and the suitcase came to her own family, who looked at them, admired them and then put the suitcase in the attic. In summer 2020, serendipitously,

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thanks to the generosity of Susan McQuail, the books in the suitcase were donated to the Biblioteca nazionale Braidense.

At the heart of the story of the books is a young couple, Hans Edward Adler and Hedwig Feldmann — he 30 and she 26 years old in 1930 — both architects, drawn by the possibility of helping to build a new world in a new country, different from the decadent, impoverished, rapaciously capitalist West they lived in. It is also the story of the young country, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, born at the beginning of a century that saw the collapse of the Romanov dynasty, the abdication of the Habsburg Emperor and the October Revolution, as well as Einstein, Picasso and Freud; and Relativity, Cubism, and psychoanalysis. Not since the French Revolution had there been such a dramatic rupture with the past, and never before did the answers to life's problems seem so clearly to be in the future, rather than the past. Staring at the ruins of European society at the beginning of the 1920s, it would be hard to imagine a future bleaker than the present, a present that was the result of centuries of feudal oppression, unfettered capitalism and dynastic hegemony. For some, whatever the losses entailed by destroying the legacy of the past, they would be made up for by a brighter future. Others were more cold-blooded — the virtuous end of the creating a Socialist paradise justified means that would be considered brutal even in Hell.

The end of the 19th century had already seen a new interest in children's education, and as public education became increasingly universal, educational theories were hotly discussed and disputed. The pioneering work of the Czech educational reformer Comenius found new readers; inspired by Pestalozzi Froebel created the first kindergartens; Montessori developed the innovative system of early childhood education. When Leo Tolstoy created his school based on enlightenment values at Yasnaya Polyana in 1860, and the former Director of Brera, Corrado Ricci, wrote 'The Art of Children' in 1887 the momentum for universal public education had increased, as did the drive for increased literacy.

There was definitely the need for a new system of early childhood education as the society broke free from the old world, and the children of the October Revolution were of real interest as they were the first generation born into a new value system and ideology. The new Socialist paradise needed new citizens, and in the spirit of the Jesuit maxim widely attributed to Ignatius Loyola "Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man" the Soviet authorities began to place a major emphasis on what the youngest comrades were doing and reading. The world of the 1920s was one of artistic ferment, and

Futurists, Constructivists, Suprematists and other champions of the pre-war avantgarde jostled to create new projects for children: books, games, theatre and graphics. The Commissariat of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunarcharsky presided over this explosion of creativity, which included experiments such as the agit-boats that travelled throughout Russia spreading revolutionary messages. He also gave support to Constructivist theatrical experiments and initiatives including the revolutionary posters of Mayakovsky, Rodchenko and others. Lenin's wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, who effectively controlled the Ministry of Education until her death in 1939, ensured the young comrades' minds were not seduced by bourgeois fantasy and fairy tales.

What were the right kinds of influence? For the artists of the Russian avantgarde, inspiration often came from local folk traditions, primitive art entering the museums of St. Petersburg from expeditions to the outer edges of the Russian Empire, and the crudely printed blockprints known as *lubki* (sing. *lubok*). To these artists, children's art — like primitive and folk art — had an immediacy and power that was not captured by the Mir Isskustva artists' orientalist fantasies. Corrado Ricci's *Children's Art* had been published in Russian in 1911, and the grown-ups of the Russian avant-garde understood children's literary creativity to be equal to that of adults. Children's collages had even been included in the famous avantgarde exhibition 'The Target' in 1913 organized by Mikhail Larionov. Alexander Shevchenko, who supplied some of the children's drawings for the exhibition, underlined the connection in his manifesto on neo-primitivism that appeared the same year, and in 1914 Alexei Kruchonykh published a book on the children's drawings. The child was to be considered a creative artist in her own right.

In the late 1920s a new publishing trend emerged — 'samodelka' [do-it-yourself] books. There were other types of illustrated books at that time like books-riddles, books-toys, coloring books but *samodelka* soon replaced the fairy tales which had dominated the market before the Revolution. The end of 1920s and the beginning of 1930s experienced an industrial boom as Stalin put pressure to achieve the First Five-Year Plan. The new priority was industrialization, not literacy. Future builders of socialism were supposed to get involved as soon as possible, starting with hands-on activities. That was the task that publishing houses faced — to introduce young readers to modern technologies, professions and manufacturing. Books with the same format and layout were favoured at the expense of individual editions. The small format of school notebooks already familiar to children prevailed. Chromolithography was the main method for printing these books. Despite the low-quality paper used,

the high quality of this new type of book is due to the talent of their author-illustrators (including Vera Ermolaeva, Vladimir Konashevich, Eleonore Kondiain, Konstantin Kuznetsov, Natalie Paren, Lidia Popova and others) and writers (Boris Zhitkov, Mikhail Ilyin, Samuil Marshak, Yakov Perelman). These heady days were not to last. In 1929, Lunacharsky was removed from his position and sent first to the League of Nations, then to Spain as ambassador. Of the artists and writers, Marshak, Chukovsky and Lebedev were among the survivors of the next decade, but Mandelshtam and Bulatov perished in the gulag, Nikolai Zabolotsky and Ilia Zdanevich survived the gulag but died later of ill health, Mayakovsky was found dead with a bullet in his chest, Tretyakov died in prison, and Kharms died in a prison psychiatric ward. The brief Spring of the 1920s was followed by a cruel summer.

By the time the Ernst May Brigade arrived in Fall 1930 their assignments would include playgrounds, parks, pre-schools and kindergartens. Margarete Schütte-Lihotsky already specialised in designing for children and was assisted by the only other woman architect in the original team, Hedwig Feldmann, freshly arrived from Cologne. When they returned to Germany in 1933, the Adlers brought back over 250 Russian children's books, the work of 107 different artists. They include leading figures in fields other than children's book illustration: Lebedev himself, Shterenberg, Bruni, Deineka, Yermolayeva, Charushin, Favorsky, Konashevich, Kukryniksy and others were known as painters, printmakers, poster and theatre designers. The work of some of these individuals stands out; but almost equally remarkable is the presence of artists who have remained largely unknown. These artists were young: about half of them were under 30 in 1930. These witnesses remain, testimony to a brief but optimistic period in the history of the Soviet Union, when it seemed as if the Socialist paradise could become reality, despite Lenin's binary vision of the revolution, a 'third way', beyond feudal oppression, dynastic hegemony, and capitalist exploitation.

The legacy of these books — a time capsule of life in the Soviet Union 1930–33 — became the basis of over a year's intense work at Brera.

Children's literature was already present in the library's collections, which included artist's books created by children, and a rich archive of Italian children's periodicals from the 1930s. When Milan locked down on February 23rd, 2020, and families and children were isolated in their homes, the library immediately began an extensive programme of readings by famous actors of children's stories, including classics by Marshak, Chukovsky and Mandelshtam. The need to find early editions

of these works led indirectly to the discovery and subsequent donation of the Adler Collection. Another consequence of the lockdown and the development of online materials was the creation of Brera's enhanced online offer Brera Plus (<http://www.breraplus.org>) which featured interactive documentaries co-produced with the Moscow-based production company VIKO. One of the first documentaries was the story of the Adler Collection, and included interviews with Varvara Shlovskaia, Memorial, Yakov Marshak and Irina Rudenko. Despite the uncertain situation at the end of 2020, it was decided to proceed with the exhibition *Tempi Terribili Libri Belli*, which opened to the public on January 20, 2021 and was to run until 21 March. The exhibition began with the brown suitcase, and was organized according to a double logic: the intertwined lives of the Adlers and the USSR, and the history of illustrated children's literature from the beginning of the 20th century until the Stalinist Purges. Unfortunately, after only 10 days, the exhibition had to be closed due to the Covid lockdown. Nevertheless, the exhibition was accompanied by an illustrated booklet by Corraini and an interactive guided tour online, to supplement the existing documentary on Brera Plus (<http://www.breraplus.org>). The Adler collection is one of Italy's most significant, so an important goal was not only to catalogue, scan and make available the collection online, but to create the definitive catalogue. Putting the books into the context of both the 1930s in the USSR and the lives of the two young architects, the bilingual and extensively illustrated Catalogue Raisonné published by Corraini in November 2021 made the Adler Collection available to a wide audience. As both the end of a full year's activities and a beginning for future research projects, on 19 January 2022, the Biblioteca Braidense together with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence hosted a Study Day for international scholars on various aspects of the Adler Collection, in particular its emphasis on Modern architecture.

Another consequence of the Adler donation was the creation of the International Centre for Research in the Culture of Childhood (CIRCI). The Centre was created by the Braidense Library to preserve, study and communicate the experience of childhood and the values of curiosity, creativity and learning. It is committed to defending the competence, curiosity, imagination, ambition, desires and fundamental human rights of children. Its first research projects include 20th century Italian children's literature, innovative pedagogy in the early years of the Soviet Union and the contemporary role of children's literature.

Above all the Adler Collection has become a symbol of the library's renewed commitment to childhood. Now, as in the 1920s and 30s, we are

living through times of rapid change, political turbulences, and economic uncertainty, not helped by an international pandemic. Now as then, this means returning to the centrality of childhood and a recognition of the importance of young minds and new approaches.

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Пинакотека Брера

НА ОСТРИЕ НОЖА: КОЛЛЕКЦИЯ СОВЕТСКИХ ДЕТСКИХ КНИГ
1930–1933 ГГ.

В статье рассматривается история создания частной коллекции советских детских книг, начало которой было положено в 1930-х гг. годах супружеской парой немецких архитекторов — Гансом Эдвардом и Хедвигой Адлерами. Супруги приехали в СССР в 1930 г., привлеченные мечтой о строительстве коммунизма. Вернувшись в Германию в 1933 г., Адлеры привезли с собой более 250 русских детских книг, созданных 107 советскими художниками. Среди них работы корифеев детской книжной иллюстрации и художников широкого профиля — Лебедева, Штеренберга, Бруни, Дейнеки, Ермолаева, Чарушина, Фаворского, Ко-нашевича и прочих, книжки авторства В. Маяковского, С. Маршака, Б. Житкова, М. Ильина, М. Перельмана. Эта коллекция в 2020 году была передана дочерью Адлеров Сьюзен Макуэйл в дар Национальной библиотеке Брейдэнси (Библиотека Брера, Милан), а затем представлена на выставке детской книги. Собрание из 257 книг, среди которых 85 напечатаны на украинском языке и несколько на идише, дают блестящее представление о детской литературе и искусстве детской книги в Советском Союзе в переходный период: от НЭПа до времени первых пятилеток (1933 г.).

Keywords: советская детская книга, книжная графика, коллекция советской детской книги, Национальная библиотека Брейдэнси (Библиотека Брера)