

Emilia Ivanovna Vosnesenskaya

**Lecturer, Department of Russian,
University of Edinburgh.**

**Born: Tsarskoe Selo, Russia, 12 February
1928.**

Died: Edinburgh 27 December 2015.

Emilia Ivanovna Vosnesenskaya was born in the Soviet Union. Emmie was brought up in the former imperial village of Tsarskoe Selo some 15 miles south of Leningrad, which, at that time, housed the Academy of Sciences where her parents, both geneticists, were employed.

Emmie's mother, Clavdia Petrovna Vosnesenskaya, born near Pyatigorsk, was from what Emmie described as a church family whereas her father, Ivan Fillipovich Bachmeier, was a descendant of Rhineland Germans who had been encouraged by Catherine the Great to come to Russia to build up its vineyards. Interestingly, Ivan Filippovich's research specialism was in diseases of the vine.



Emmie spoke of a happy childhood with the summers spent in and around Sochi as her father's institute had a research station close to vineyards in that area. While in the south Emmie would visit her maternal grandparents. On one such visit she was sent by her grandmother to fetch a pot of jam from another part of the house. Emmie was horrified to discover that the family's jam supply was being stored in her grandfather's coffin. Having obtained a fine piece of oak her grandfather decided to fashion a fitting coffin for himself and until it was required for use, it would serve as a secure storage place.

In 1938 Ivan Filippovich was arrested. Emmie remembered how her mother would stand for hours in a long queue with hundreds of other women who, like her, were seeking news of loved ones. The family was informed that Ivan Filippovich had died. In fact he had been arrested, tried and then shot within a matter of days. Emmie was to discover that all of her Bachmeier uncles had been arrested at the same time in various parts of the Soviet Union as had a young female orphan who had been taken in by one of them and given the surname Bachmeier. In the late 1990s Emmie was able to obtain copies of official papers, which stated in detail what had happened to her father. The loss of her father was a scar she carried all her life.

Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Emmie and her mother found themselves captives behind enemy lines in Tsarskoe Selo. Clavdia Petrovna had refused the offer of evacuation to Leningrad. Emmie said on more than one occasion that had they gone to Leningrad they would most certainly not have survived the siege as was the case of friends and neighbours who had gone to the city. In 1942 Emmie described seeing soldiers from the Spanish Blue Division (División Azul). Despite Spain's neutrality in the war, Franco had permitted volunteer units to serve in the German Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front to fight against Bolshevism. These soldiers were poorly equipped for winter clothing and used to

wear anything they could scrounge or steal, including female attire. Later, Emmie and her mother were taken away to work at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute near Berlin along with many others from the locality. Whilst there the-16-year old Emmie was employed by a German army officer to write love letters to a girl he had fallen for in Odessa. Emmie said that the officer had managed to get the girl back to Germany and that they survived the war and went to live in South America. As the war raged and the tide turned against the Nazis the workers were moved to other areas further west. In the ensuing chaos Emmie and her mother were advised to leave and save themselves. With great pride and a sense of satisfaction Emmie would tell friends how she and her mother had had to clamber over a bombed and seriously damaged bridge in Germany in order to reach a place of safety. When war ended Emmie and her mother sought refuge in a camp for displaced Ukrainians in Germany.

Emmie and Clavdia Petrovna were given permission to come to Great Britain, where they were sent to work in a tuberculosis hospital in Wigan. Emmie's reminiscences of their time there were amusing but also shocking. Emmie said she felt that there was an expectation that, as refugees, they should feel grateful and put up with their lot. However realising the potentially dangerous situation in which they were working Emmie plucked up the courage to knock on the Matron's door. Emmie told the Matron that she and her mother would rather be sent back to Germany and take their chances there than risk dying of tuberculosis in England. Matron could not believe her audacity but sometime later they were transferred to work in a maternity hospital. Emmie told the Matron she was delighted as she had already helped deliver babies in the camp.

Her education having been disrupted by war and the occupation Emmie needed to think about what she would do with her life. She got herself to university and naturally studied Russian. As part of her degree course Emmie was required to spend time with native speakers of the language. Despite being a native speaker herself and Russian being the language spoken at home Emmie was sent to the Russian émigré community in Paris where she found herself as a guest of the Princesses Lvovy in Clamart. Emmie's stories of those times were highly amusing as she described the sisters and their elderly staff. They looked upon her as their little Soviet curiosity and were amazed she could use cutlery properly. Having little money Emmie walked the length and breadth of Paris in order to save spending on transport. In this way she had enough to buy herself a coffee and savour it and savour being in Paris.

In the early 1950s and back in Cambridge Emmie found herself a teaching job with the Joint Services School for Linguists. The JSSL was an extraordinary initiative to push about 5000 of the best and brightest of Britain's National Servicemen through intensive training as Russian translators or interpreters, to meet the needs of its intelligence operations. Its fascinating and colourful story is told in 'Secret Classrooms' by Geoffrey Elliot and Harold Shukman. Emmie features in their account where she is referred to as Miss Voz or Emochka. In 1952 some of the students and their teachers performed 'The Cherry Orchard'. Emmie played the part of Anya.

Emmie came to teach in the Department of Russian at the University of Edinburgh in 1956 and this is where she spent her working life until retirement. One of her former colleagues, Dr Svetlana Carsten, remembers Emmie from that time: *'I joined the Russian Department at the University of Edinburgh in 1981 as a Teaching Assistant where I met Emmie Vosnesenskaya who soon became not only a respected colleague but a mentor and eventually a trusted friend. As it happened we shared some of the dark experiences that our country of origin had thrown at us.'*

The Department of Russian of the early 1980s had a vibrant and stimulating atmosphere and Emmie was very much part of its success. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Emmie and her colleagues were the first role models in my future academic career and undoubtedly contributed to my personal professional successes. There are few people one meets in one's lifetime who make a significant difference to professional life decisions and Emmie was one of those.

I remember Emmie as a linguist-purist, whose mastery of wit won the admiration of her students. She was very supportive of them. Where she spotted a talent, initiative and a mind that was inquisitive and open to learning, she would give her time and energy to ensure that students succeeded on the course and in their future careers. Some of them completed their doctorate thesis under her supervision and went on to become distinguished academics in their own right.'

Emmie was active within the Orthodox community in Edinburgh in an unassuming manner. She sang in the choir for many years, she served on the Parish Committee and taught the newly arrived young Greek priest how to pronounce Church Slavonic for use in the Divine Liturgy.

Emmie was witty. She enjoyed telling a good story and her stories were long, fascinating, humorous and at times risqué. She was a great observer of people and would mimic their mannerisms. She would speak of the eccentricities she had observed in the English with whom she and her mother had come into contact in the early post-war years. She lovingly poked fun at the dowager ladies of Drummond Place in Edinburgh where she first lived when her feral tom cat Pushka ran amok and despoiled their pedigrees. She would quote passages from Russian literature or throw a Russian proverb into a conversation. She was fun to be with.

In older age and declining health Emmie was able to maintain her independence and remain at home with her beloved pug dogs thanks to the day-to-day help given by two Russian-speaking Polish sisters, firstly by Anya and then for many years by Nina who cared very lovingly for her, provided companionship and that vital link with the Russian language.

Emmie's life ended on 27th December 2015. It was a full and fruitful life. It was a life that was imbued with her Russian heritage and with the profound experiences that made Emmie who she was. Her funeral service was held in the Orthodox Church of St Andrew in Edinburgh. Emmie is remembered with affection and appreciation. May her memory be eternal! *Vechnaya pamyat!*