

Architects of Russian Emigration in Rome Between Two Wars: Questions of Integration and Ways of Adaptation*

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Abstract—At the beginning of the 20th century, lots of young and promising Russian architects travelled to Italy, interpreting gained experience in projects and buildings (V.F. Shuko, I.A. Fomin), and some of them even had building practices there (A. Schusev). After the October Revolution of 1917 many actors of creative professions leaved Russia, but the architects were in the minority among immigrants and only a few of them settled (A.Y. Beloborodov, L.M. Brailovsky) or constantly worked (G.K. Lukomsky) in Italy. The paper tries to analyze the careers of the mentioned and other architects, to describe the particular circumstances of their work in the conditions of emigration, to determine their place in the Italian and international professional culture of that time.

Keywords—20th century architecture; contemporary history; Russian architecture; Russian emigration architects; Russian heritage abroad

I. INTRODUCTION

Russian architects began to travel to Rome since late XVIII c., as fellows of Imperial Academy of Fine Arts established in 1757 in Saint Petersburg. During XIX c. their Grand Tour did several exponents of Russian architecture [1], such as Aleksandr Brullov (1798-1877) and Konstantin Ton (1794-1881). The tradition of professional travelling to Italy was still strong in early XX century, so lots of future protagonists of Soviet architecture establishment travelled to Apennine peninsula in early years of their career: Aleksei Shchusev (1873-1949), Ivan Zholtovsky (1867-1959), Ivan Fomin (1872-1936). These trips were interrupted by the WWI and Revolution. In 1910s in Italy also studied two future key-figures of Soviet architecture: Moissej Ginzburg (1892-1946) in Milan, from 1910 to 1914, and Boris Iofan (1891-1976), in Rome, from 1914-1924 [2].

The case of Boris Iofan, who left Rome in 1924, for the

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further outstanding career¹ in Moscow, was isolated. At the beginning of the 1920s in Rome, like other cities of Europe and the world, there was a strong presence of Russian immigrants, represented above all by high and cultured social classes: aristocracy, bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. While emigrated architects were rather few, most of the professionals remained in patria, trying to adapt their work to the new conditions.

In early 1920s the trips to Italy sometime turned in emigration. In 1923 Ivan Zholtovsky, at the moment the director of the work on the new Moscow master plan and Lenin's protégé, left the USSR for Italy, where he stayed until 1926, probably, according to some scholars, trying to emigrate. The circumstances of his stay in Italy are still unclear [3]. Other architects of equal importance, as Alexei Shchusev or Ivan Fomin, did not leave the USSR, and almost immediately received important assignments.

II. RUSSIAN ARCHITECTS IN ITALY BETWEEN TWO WARS: REASONS OF STAY AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Anyway, some professionals left definitely their homeland. In 1920 Andrej Beloborodov (Andrea Beloborodoff, 1886-1965), one of the young and prominent architects left St. Petersburg and settled first in London, then in France, attending Italy to finally take up residence in Rome in 1934.

Also in 1924, after a first refusal, the Italian visa was granted to architect Vjacheslav (Wenceslas) Oltarzhevskij (1880-1966) with the resolution "a well-known person to this embassy" [4]. The visa request of Oltarzhevskij, issued by the Academy of Art Sciences, the purpose of the trip was explained as "to know and examine the technical and artistic part of the current construction abroad and, in part, the construction of garden-cities and villages for the workers". However, Oltarzhevskij didn't remain in Italy, and in 1924

¹ Since the very beginning of his work in USSR, Boris Iofan obtained important State commissions, among them — the Residential House — the House of the Government in Serafimovich Embankment in Moscow (1927-1931), in 1932 he became the winner of the Palace of Soviet Competition.

left for the United States where he remained until 1935. He graduated from the University of New York and worked as an architect for the construction of the first skyscrapers [5].

Since 1925, spouses Brailovsky (Brailovskij), Rimma and Leonid (Leonida), have settled in Rome, where their salon becomes an important reference point for Russian artists coming from the former Russian Empire. In Rome Leonid converted to Catholicism and found an important recognition of the Vatican for his paintings representing “the ancient” Russia, with churches and monasteries. In 1932, together with his wife, he exposed, in the Congregation of the Eastern Churches of Rome, 40 works representing Russian architecture and religious art, with the target of the conservation of the image of the heritage of the country that was disappearing in the struggle against the religion. These paintings were later donated to Pius XI for the foundation of the Museum of Russian religious art in the same congregation of the Eastern Churches. The collection was on show at the Petriano Museum, built in 1925 to house various works related to the construction of the basilica of San Pietro by the architect Giovanni Battista Giovenale (1848-1934) and demolished in 1966 by the Pope Paul VI to make place for the construction of Pier Luigi Nervi’s Auditorium (1966-1971). The last years of life Leonid Brailovsky lived in Russicum – Catholic College in Rome, dedicated to the studies of Russian culture, established in 1929. Nowadays the collection is kept in Congregation of the Eastern Churches of Rome in via della Conciliazione, 34.

In 1924 also Georgij Lukomskij (1884-1952) left Russia. He was one of the outstanding exponents of the architectural critic of his time and promoter of neoclassical movement of 1910s. After the Revolution he was among the initiative group for the conservation of historical heritage of nationalized property. His last position was the curator of “Palaces of the ex-Palace Zarskoje Selo”. Lukomskij (Lukomsky) would live between France, Italy and England, publishing various articles on Russian and European (especially Italian) art in Russian, French, Italian, German and English. He wrote in the preface to his book “La vie e le mœurs en Russie de Pierre le Grand a Lénine”, published in Paris in 1928 in elegant edition with a bordeaux leather cover contained 107 phototypes: “Les circonstances nous oblige à s’journer loin de la Russie au moment où nous écrivons ces pages. Nous nous en consolons en évoquant la mémoire de Gogol, qui écrivit à Rome ses Ames mortes” [6]. Lukomsky wrote for several Italian magazines, including those of architecture, such as “Architettura e Arti Decorative”, since the 1920s [7], [8] and probably personally knew the directors-key-figures of Italian architecture establishment of that time Marcello Piacentini (1881-1960) and Gustavo Giovannoni (1873-1947). Piacentini followed with curiosity the news on Russian art and architecture², Lukomsky was among the few scholars who wrote about it in European languages, perhaps for that reason he was invited by Piacentini for the collaboration. Among his numerous articles and books were not only those on Russian heritage.

² Piacentini was the most productive writer on Russian architecture and published the articles on it since 1921 to 1952 [es. 9, 10].

He never interrupted his studies despite difficult condition of immigrant, publishing numerous books and articles on art in several European languages, including the monographs on Palladio, Vignola, Giulio Romano and both Sangallo. Moreover, he continued to promote the heritage conservation, denouncing the deplorable condition of Palladio’s villas in Italian press [11].

Since 1924, engraver, painter and architect Fedor (Theodore) Brenson (1893 – 1959) has been settled in Rome. In March 1927, in the famous Pesaro gallery in Milan [12], he exhibited the series of etchings and drawings depicting Rome, Naples, Venice, Assisi, Apulia and the surroundings of Florence. The introduction to the catalog wrote Pavel Muratov [13]. After publishing another album of sketches — “The Visions of Calabria” — “Le visioni di Calabria” (Florence: Valecchi, 1929), in 1931 Brenson left Rome for Paris and then, with the beginning of WWII moved to USA where he would successfully work as an artist and professor of painting.



Fig. 1. Theodore Brenson, The Last Column of the Temple of Hera (Juno) Lacinia, 1929. From: *Le visioni di Calabria*, Florence, Valecchi, 1929, Tav. 25.

There were not only emigrant architects who arrived from USSR to Italy for a long stay. A more well-known case is Georgij Golz (1893-1946), who after studying painting and graphic and becoming part of the Futurist movement, became a student of architecture at VHUTEMAS (Higher Artistic and Technical Studios), atelier of Nikolai Ladovsky, and was granted with the scholarship for travel in Italy after the graduation in 1922. He left Moscow two years later, together with his wife, in 1924. He confessed in his memories: “Italy has struck me very much. At the beginning I could not even draw”. He stopped in Italy for 7 months, visiting Florence, Rome, Naples, Pompeii and the Island of Ischia. He settled in Naples, perhaps because Maxim Gorky, who was an important point of reference for the Soviet Russians, lived in Sorrento. During his stay he collaborated with the magazines “Mondo”, “ABC” and “Il Mattino” [14]. His daughter Nika Golz, testified that Georgij collaborated with an anti-fascist magazine, which was then closed, and that would have caused economic problems for the family. During the trip Golz has executed a series of graphic works,

now conserved at the State Museum of Fine Arts A.S. Pushkin and the State Museum of Architecture A. V. Shchusev.

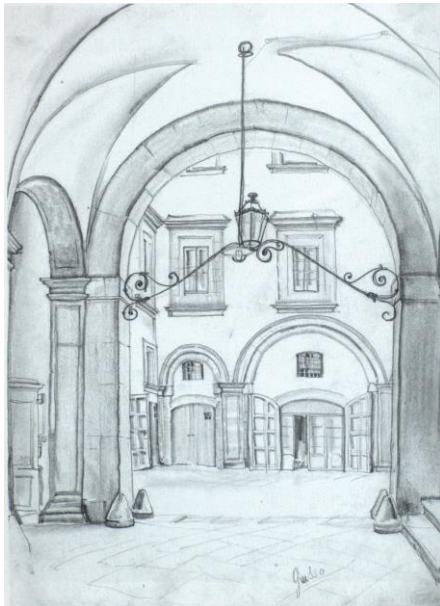


Fig. 2. Georgy Golz. Naples, the arch with a lantern, 1925, State Museum of Fine Arts A.S. Pushkin. Inv. P 23228.

Then Golz took part in the III International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Monza in 1927 [15], in the section of USSR, where the architect has exhibited his drawings, in the part dedicated to the graphic works. It is here that the Italian experience of the architect shined through, not from adherence to the traditionalism, but rather in the special way of composing and interpreting the classic motifs. Perhaps Golz was the only Soviet architect whose neo-fifteenth-century works are so spontaneous and full of style, such as, for example, the seat of Vsekokhudozhnik (1932) or the Watergate on the river Jauza (1937-1939) in Moscow.

As we can see, few architects remained in Italy after their first years of emigration, they mostly moved in other European cities or even in the USA. The social order, established by the fascist party, cautious for foreigners, and very rigid professional market, caused the further migration.

Though, Lukomsky continued to travel and to work in Italy. In 1933 the famous Milanese publishing house Ulrico Hoepli published his book “I maestri della architettura classica da Vitruvio allo Scamozzi” with 350 illustrations and the “Preface on the future of modern architecture taken from the discussions of Ugo Ojetti and Marcello Piacentini”, dedicated to the current polemics in Italian culture. It seems that Lukomsky found in Piacentini the embodiment of his neoclassical ideas, which he promoted before the Revolution in St. Petersburg, when he wrote, in 1915: “Contemporary Petrograd increasingly loses its national noble character, more and more it becomes an ordinary European city. Only the close-knit work for the construction, only the dictatorship of artistic power in the distribution of the places to be built and the involvement of the best forces can give to the capital even more impressive and marvelous aspect, which it had in

its best times — at the time of Alexander I.” [16]. “I maestri dell’architettura classica” has become a part of the Piacentini library, which now makes part of Fondo Piacentini at the Central Library of Architecture, La Sapienza University.



Fig. 3. Georgy Luckomsky, I maestri della architettura classica da Vitruvio allo Scamozzi, Milano, Hoepli, 1933.

The cases of Russian architects working in Italian studios were very rare. Rather unknown for both Italian and Russian historiography is Aleksandra Biriukova (1895-1967) [17] [18], who graduated in 1925 in Rome [19], as one of two first women architects in Italy, and then became collaborator of the studio of famous roman architect Arnaldo Foschini (1884-1968). In 1920, Aleksandra, together with her parents and sister, artist Yulia Biriukova (1897-1972), left Russia, where the Civil War was ongoing. They arrived in Rome in 1922. She was the daughter of the chief engineer of the Trans-Siberian Railway, Dmitrij Biriukov, and upon her arrival she already had a degree in architecture from Women’s Polytechnic Superior Courses in Petrograd, where she studied, from 1911 to 1914. Probably the second grade at Roman Royal High School of Architecture was considered by Biriukova as a path to the integration to the local professional community. In fact, she had worked in the studio of her professor Arnaldo Foschini since 1924. The archive of Foschini was voluntarily destroyed by the architect himself and there is no mention of Aleksandra among the few documents remained and conserved at the Engineering Department of the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. Therefore, we can presume in what kind of projects Biriukova was involved. In the 1920s, Foschini was engaged in several important projects (Art Decò style cinema Supercinema, several churches as well as the project for the reconstruction of the Trevi Fountain Square in Rome). During the 1930s, Foschini became one of the key figures of the fascist regime architecture; he was one of the winners of the Palazzo Littorio competition (1934), the author of several buildings of the new University of Rome (1935) and was the author of huge urban development interventions in old city center. But Aleksandra left Rome before that. In 1929, she moved to Toronto, in Canada, where she became one of the first women registered as an architect. It is emblematic that

the career in Canada of Biriukova revealed extremely short, after her first commission — Lawrence Harris villa in Toronto (1931) she stopped the practice and even withdrew from Ontario Association of Architects in 1934.

Another Russian student of Royal School of Architecture in Rome was Vladimir Volkonsky (Wolkonsky), who graduated in 1932 [20], and immediately passed the state exam at the Royal School of Engineering in Milan. In the same year, in 1932, Volkonsky designed St. Nicola's Church in the Palazzo Chernysheff in via Palestro [21], which was the first proper building of the Russian Orthodox Church in Rome. His collaborator, engineer Ferdinando Poggi (1902-1986), then was involved in the construction of the Benito Mussolini Health Institute in Rome, one of the important "regime" works of the Italian capital. Princess Maria Chernysheff had left her house of the late nineteenth century as a legacy to the Russian Orthodox Community to transform it after her death in the Church, which occurred in 1919. The parish took possession of the palace only in 1931 "for complications of legal order". The church was consecrated on 10 April 1932, the decorations, icons and paintings, created in XIX by several fellows of Imperial Academy of Fine Arts — Karl Briullov, Konstantin Ton and others, were transferred from Palazzo Menotti in Piazza Cavour. The solution proposed by Volkonsky is rather atypical for Orthodox Russian ecclesiastical spaces. The absence of mural painting, the white painted walls, the stiff decoration — a strip of green marble on the triumphal arch and the apsis decorated with golden mosaics, without any figures, a delicate use of antique furniture, bears the imprint of the new trends in Italian architecture. The pure and solemn space in addition to its spiritual qualities also transmits us the aesthetic sympathies of the author for the rationalism and the Art Deco. Actually, it is the only building designed by Russian architect in Rome, which authorship is undoubted, however it is unique.

III. ARCHITECT BEYOND THE ARCHITECTURE: THE CASE OF ANDREJ BELOBORODOV

A singular case was that of Andrej Beloborodov (the Italianized name — Andrea Beloborodoff) [22, 23, 24], who emigrated from Russia in 1920. His career began on the eve of the Revolution and gave all the signs of prosperous future. Among Beloborodov's first clients there were the Imperial Court and Prince Felix Yusupov, thanks to whom the architect remained linking to the international aristocracy after emigration to Europe. After the solo-exhibition "Vedute di Roma e dell'Italia" at the Pecci Blunt Palace in 1934, he settled in Rome. The exhibition was hosted by famous collector Anna Laetitia-Mimm ìPecci and was composed of engravings and watercolors from the 1920s to early 1930s, already successfully exhibited in Paris. In Rome, Beloborodoff made a series dedicated to the demolition of the historic center, exhibited in 1936 at the Museum of Rome to his personal "La nuova Roma monumentale (immagini dell'urbe mussoliniana)", after that six works from the exhibition were acquired for the Museum's collection.



Fig. 4. Andrea Beloborodoff, The view of the Colosseum and the Temple of Venus under the reconstruction, 1936. Museo di Roma, Roma. Inv. GS — 12050 Courtesy Museo di Roma, Roma.

In the 1930s Beloborodov, at the salon of the Russian poet Vjacheslav Ivanov, his close friend approached Italian cultural society. His graphic works were published both by the traditionalist Antonio Muñoz "L'Urbe magazine", and by the promoter of modernist architecture and design Giò Ponti on his refined issue "Lo Stile" [25]. The professional affirmation was rather slow and certainly would hardly have reached the level, where the architect found himself at the dawn of his career. In 1938 he started the reconstruction of the Court of Honor of the Villa of the French collector Maurice Sandoz at the Aventine Hill and after 10 years he continued his total refurbishment [26, 27]. The rigid neoclassical style, to which the architect remained faithful since his graduation in Petersburg, gained the interest of the Roman public and the commissions of the two other convinced classicists: the artist Giorgio De Chirico [28] and the art historian Mario Praz. But Beloborodoff was not on time to realize these commissions.

Perhaps his most peculiar work was the set design for the film "Noi vivi", continued by "Addio, Kira" (1942), based on the novel "We, the living" by Ayn Rand (1936) — Russian emigrant in London Anna Rosenbaum. The film, made by Goffredo Alessandrini on scenario by Anton Giulio Majano and Corrado Alvaro, had great success. The sets by Beloborodoff, made in collaboration with George Abkhasi [29], represented a post-revolutionary Petersburg in which the constructivist posters hung on the solemn neoclassical buildings. At the end of the plot of the film a Bolshevik "of the old team" turned out to be a more honest person than both the new corrupt "communists" and even the Russian "white", who revealed himself as too weak to be true to his principles. The subject is rather sudden for fascist Italy in the middle of the war with the USSR, which suggests that the authors had used the "Bolsheviks" to detect the tragedy, where the Fascism had arrived at its twentieth year of life.

IV. CONCLUSION

The illustrated cases display that the professional careers of Russian architects who emigrated in early 1920s in Italy, rarely had a successful development, most part of them didn't remained in Bel Paese for a long time. Overwhelming majority didn't have the construction practice and turned to graphic work. This circumstance was due to the bureaucratic condition of foreign architects in Italy who couldn't work without obtaining of the local diploma and the "state exam" for the title of the architect. Another factor, of course, was the highly competitive local professional community, which didn't want "external" participants. These conditions were complicated with the lack of commissions from other emigrated Russians who mostly found themselves in difficult economic situation too. The graphic work was the way to continue the artistic work and to keep in touch with local cultural community. Only in few cases, such as those of Beloborodoff, the adaptation was going to turn into integration. But the life of the architect was not enough to complete to define his place in the Italian professional society.

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