

As ever, Deanna

On the dusty trails of distant planets...

By Vladimir Skrebickii

Many years ago, in 1987, I wrote a short story entitled *Deanna Durbin*, in which I recounted my teenage infatuation with this Hollywood movie star, most famous in the 1930's. The story was published by the "Literaturnaya gazeta" weekly and got, I must say, quite a good press. I wrote short stories and had collections of them printed both before and after this publication, but this story — one of my earliest — was especially fancied by the readers. This was because Deanna Durbin's image of a fairy descending from the movie screen into the humdrum and ruin of a postwar Moscow had made a long-lasting emotional impact on the people of my generation (I was born in 1934). Back then, I had received many letters, mostly from my Moscow readers who lived in the vicinity of Plyuschikha street. In fact, I lived there myself, and the amorousness of mine was spreading all over the lanes adjacent to Plyuschikha. Such lanes as Rujeinyi, Dolgii, Neopalimovskii, Novokonyushennyi, together the campus of Devich'e Pole and the Novodevichii convent, constituted the geographic map of my rambles and reveries, clearly visible through the text and just as easily morphing into quite different latitudes and landscapes: a Swiss village across which Deanna pedalled along with a covey of other girls, or the ball at a New York hotel from which she fled, losing one of her slippers on the stairs... No doubt, all this could not but affect the entire population of Plyuschikha in the first place.

Many years had passed. Finally, in the early 1990's, I arranged for myself a new date with Deanna at the "Illusion" movie theatre in downtown Moscow. *First Love* was on (its Russian title being "The First Ball") — the flick where her heroine was losing a slipper. By the way, many foreign movies shown in the USSR after WWII had been renamed. This was because they had been obtained as war trophies: that is, not commercially rented through official channels. Not that Communists cared about copyrights anyway, but still some precautions were taken. Therefore, such movies were usually shown at second-rate theatres or at dingy workers' clubs where handwritten posters merely announced "A Feature Film," meaning "first buy a ticket, then learn the secret!" Another part of this clumsy camouflage was the change of titles: "The First Ball" instead of *First Love*, or "The Secret of an Actress" instead of *Mad About Music*, etc. After finding my seat, but before the lights faded to black, I started a conversation with my neighbour who turned out to be a Deanna Durbin fan and who told me, O my God!, that he was her pen-friend. How badly had I wanted this—no! I could not even have dared to—40 years ago. Yet nothing was easier, for he indeed had been communicating with her and could give me her postal address in Paris... After the show was over, this new acquaintance of mine surprised me again: when I offered to give him a ride home (I was driving) and have a good chat on the way, he timidly smiled and said: "No, thanks. I'd rather stay on for the next show." The next show was the same movie! Then it dawned on me that over the past years my love for her had somewhat dwindled, while his (he was much younger than me) was at its peak.

So I wrote Deanna a letter. I wrote it in Russian and asked an English-speaking friend of mine to translate it. In the letter I described my feelings for Deanna and how much I dreamed (I still do!) to meet her in person. The letter was bundled with a printed collection of my short stories, *Deanna Durbin* was among them.



Deanne Durbin (b. December 4, 1921)
on the cover of *Yank Magazine*
(the photo courtesy of Wikipedia)

After a while, I received a letter with her reply. I remember myself standing on the stairs in front of my apartment, clutching the envelope and riding on the waves of reminiscence across the lanes of my long gone youth: Rujeinyi, Dolgii, Neopalimovskii... as if the past and the present had now come together.

When I read the letter, it appeared to me somewhat dryish. (Surely, in comparison with my passionate outbursts, anything might have seemed short of emotion.) She wrote that it was a pleasure to receive a letter and a book of short stories from me. She continued that, unfortunately, she could not read any Russian but was nevertheless quite sure that my friends liked these stories.

To help the situation, I immediately had *Deanne Durbin* translated into English (the translation was terrifying, as I understood later) and mailed it to her. She promptly responded, saying that she liked the story "in which you mentioned my person". This was quite a keen remark, since even though the story was about the life in a postwar Moscow seen through the eyes of a teenager, she indeed was its perceptual center.

After that, our pen-friendship had really started. More truly, pen-friendship was too strong a word: we exchanged Christmas cards, and each of hers containing season's greetings and good wishes was signed: *As ever, Deanna*.

By the way, later I learned that I was not the only corresponding admirer of hers. At different times, I had several no-nonsense rivals, such as, for example, Benito Mussolini, who also had a crush on her and tried to talk her... Oh no, not into marrying him!.. but rather into helping convince President Roosevelt not to declare war on the Axis Powers. But she didn't even consider this proposal — she was a true patriot, worshiped by GI's who also wrote her letters.

Our communication had lasted for four years: from 1993 to 1996. In my Christmas card of 1995, I asked her to send me a signed photo. Later, I learned from some article that she disliked such requests, but my wish was granted and I received her photo signed: *To Vladimir*. I must admit the photo was not quite to my liking: she looked like a pop singer on it, while I always preferred her in quite different appearances. But all this still could not justify what I did then (or rather what I did not): I failed to thank her in reply... How could I allow myself that — I still cannot realize. Was it due to our Russian uncouthness? Or to the lack of European politesse? Or to a passing whim, such as "Oh, this is not how I saw you in my imagination..."? None could serve as a proper justification... Still, it did cross my mind that, when I would be writing my next Christmas card, I should also mention how nice it had been to receive her photo and how grateful I was,

etc. Well, I really did that when the next Christmas season came, but she... she did not write me back ever since. In utter desperation, I had tried almost everything. I sent her my good wishes on every possible occasion: in particular, on December 4th – her birthday. To aggravate my stupidity, I even sent her photos of myself, but nothing had ever come from her, not a single line.

Before this “break-up” of ours I did not read any materials about her: she just had been a magic fairy of my youth, and no objective information regarding her person was of any interest to me. But now I started reading news articles about her and her own interviews, both of which imbued me with sadness. She felt very bitter about Hollywood, which broke the contract with her in 1949. She kept insisting that her own self had nothing in common with the cinematic image she had created in the 1930's and which she referred to as “a by-product of my youth”. But this was not quite true, for who on earth might have known about her, if it were not for this “by-product”, which had been constituting the happiness of so many people over such a long time. Who among the people of my generation was not overcome with sheer joy when from the movie screen she sang “Amapola” in *First Love* or “Two Guitars” in *His Butler's Sister*. I am sure that not only my generation, but many generations to come will discover her wonderful image and immerse themselves into fairy-tales which many a human heart sometimes needs; but, alas, she chose to stop writing these forever.

And one more thing: maybe the breach of our epistolary communication was not due to the fact that I had failed to timely express her my thanks for the autographed photo. Once, surfing the Internet, I have found out that in 1996 she lost her husband and, most probably, didn't feel like writing letters to foreign correspondents anymore.

One way or another, even though I haven't heard from her since 1995, each time I write correspondence to my foreign friends, I keep remembering the letters she wrote to me and I always sign my letters the way she taught me: *As ever, Vladimir*. ♦