

# CSWS Research Matters

## From a Boarding House in Tianjin to a Home in Eugene

### The Extraordinary Story of Antonina Riasanovsky and Her Family

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Few people in Slavic Studies have not heard of the Riasanovsky family, which was a veritable intellectual dynasty in twentieth-century America. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, the most eminent member of the family, taught Russian and European history at UC Berkeley from 1957 to 1997 and wrote numerous books including *A History of Russia*, which was first released in 1963 at the height of the Cold War and still remains in print sixty years later. His younger brother, Alexander, also had an impressive academic career. He taught history at UPenn for some thirty-five years and co-authored *Readings in Russian History*, which were often assigned in tandem with his brother's influential textbook. Both brothers, who were born in Harbin, China and emigrated from Tianjin, China to Eugene, Oregon as children, were members of the interwar generation of Russian and East European immigrants that shaped the Slavic field in America.

As prodigious as the Riasanovsky brothers' talents were (both had illustrious undergraduate careers at the University of Oregon that earned them Rhodes Scholarships), we can speculate that "Riasanovsky" might not have become a household name in Slavic had it not been for the entrepreneurial literary activities of the family's matriarch, Antonina Riasanovsky, who worked as a teacher in Harbin prior to the family's move first to Tianjin and then

to Eugene. Her fiction, which she published under the penname "Nina Fedorova," did much to secure the stability of the Riasanovsky family during its initial years in the Pacific Northwest. Her story, which is even more remarkable than that of her sons, was the focus of my CSWS research, which was generously supported by the Mazie Giustina Fund for Women in the Northwest.

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Antonina Riasanovsky and Her Home in Eugene, The Sunday Oregonian, January 19, 1941.



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An overview of Antonina Riasanovsky's trajectory reads very much like a Hollywood film script. Finding herself in Tianjin in 1938 amid Japanese bombings, Antonina, along with her husband, Valentin, and their young sons, left for Eugene via Victoria, BC. Attracted by the familiar sound of the name "Eugene" (she had a sister named Eugenia), she had decided the family should settle in the college town. (The fact that her husband was a prominent scholar of Chinese, Mongolian, and Siberian law, no doubt, also entered into the decision.) A year after their arrival and thanks to the language classes she had taken at the YMCA in Harbin, Antonina managed to write a novel in English entitled *The Family*, which was awarded a \$10,000 prize sponsored jointly by *The Atlantic Monthly* and Little, Brown and Company. The text, which appeared in 1940, sold 50,000 copies and, according to Publishers Weekly, was the tenth most popular fiction book of the year. (Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* occupied the fourth spot and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* the eighth.) In fact, Riasanovsky's novel created such a sensation that a sequel was optioned and it was adapted for Broadway. Translated into Chinese, Russian, and a host of other languages, the book enjoyed a global readership and was esteemed by none other than Vladimir Nabokov, who in 1940 arrived in the U.S. from Hitler's Europe.

*The Family* takes place in a boardinghouse, run by a Russian woman together with her teenage daughter and elderly mother, that provides refuge for individuals of diverse backgrounds (British, Chinese, Jewish, Romanian, and Russian) in the British Concession of Tianjin in 1937 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although the novel employs the setting of the pension utilized earlier by Nabokov in his own debut novel, *Mary (Mashen'ka)*, 1926), to epitomize the precarity of Russian émigrés in Berlin, *The Family* gestures toward a prosperous future for the family of Russian exiles in America and contains copious praise of Americans and U.S. institutions. The text devotes ample space to the daughter's relationship with, and eventual engagement to, an American serviceman in China. In spite of the fact that her fiancé must return to the U.S. with his regiment, the promise of life in America is kept alive by the letters she receives from him in Berkeley, California, where he is attending college. If realization of the American dream ultimately eludes the Russian characters in *The Family*, such was not the case for Antonina. With the prize money she received for her novel, she was able to purchase a family home at 1848 Moss Street in Eugene and to put down roots in America—a fact she readily disclosed in an interview for *The Sunday Oregonian*.

By examining *The Family* alongside publishers' archives, press releases, book reviews, translations, and author interviews, I attempt to show how Antonina Riasanovsky crafted a novel

that appealed to a broad reading public at the beginning of World War II. Of particular interest to me is how she cannily mediates between national and international concerns in order to make her work legible to an American audience and exportable to a global one. Equally integral to my analysis is how she uses gender to her advantage, readily embracing her female authorship and a matrilineal narrative of exile that resonated with the female readership that drove book sales and that was eager for stories about women in contemporary history. It is my hope that recovery of this forgotten bestseller might lend further depth and nuance to our understanding of Russian-American literature—one that encompasses not only art for art's sake of the likes of Nabokov but also middle-brow literature and popular fiction.

Needless to say, I am most grateful to CSWS for the opportunity it has afforded me to acquaint myself with the unlikely success story of this woman writer and her *Family*. Among the many pleasures this project has given me was the chance to reflect on my own beginnings in Slavic Studies, when I first cracked open her eldest son's magisterial history. At the time, as a first-year college student on the East Coast, I had no inkling of the tome's dramatic backstory. Were it not for CSWS, it is doubtful that I would have been able to adequately explore this fascinating chapter in Russian-American literary and cultural history. ■

Jenifer Presto is an associate professor of comparative literature. She received a 2020 CSWS faculty research grant for this project.