

Dear Boris



Boris Pasternak's flowing script and colorful stamps, overlaid by a Moscow postmark, highlight a priceless keepsake.

Sixty years ago, an OU student wrote the author of Dr. Zhivago. Surprisingly, the author wrote back.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Like so many others, this story starts with a beautiful girl and a broken heart. But few other tales involve the author of “Dr. Zhivago,” a 22-year-old University of Oklahoma student and the FBI.

Ronald K. Jones was smitten. The objects of his affection were an intellectually gifted OU homecoming queen and Boris Pasternak’s novel, which had recently created a geopolitical firestorm when Pasternak won the 1958 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Jones knew the homecoming queen was a great fan of “Dr. Zhivago” and read it to impress her. When she asked his opinion of the book’s symbols and themes, he froze like sea ice in Siberia.

“So, I read ‘Dr. Zhivago’ three times,” says Jones, 85, a retired entrepreneur and Dallas banking executive originally from Lawton, Okla. “She was a straight-A student and very bright. I wanted her to think I was on the same level.”

Prepped for questions and now fully engrossed in the novel, the OU business senior was counting down the days until a mid-April date with the homecoming queen at the Phi Delta Theta spring dance. His hopes were crushed when she canceled shortly before the event. Once fraternity brothers started adding to his misery by poking fun, Jones sought an emotional escape.

“I grabbed my manual typewriter, a bottle of booze and some paper and made up a little sign,

‘Commode Not Working,’ and put it on the outside of the fraternity house’s downstairs ladies’ room,” he says. He began typing out a letter from the restroom floor, addressing the envelope simply, “Mr. Boris Pasternak, Peredelkino, Russia.”

“I can’t tell you why I wrote to Boris Pasternak, but I was very sincere,” Jones says. “I wanted to know more about the book and asked about the characters’ intentions. I also felt empathy for Pasternak. I was certain that he would never see the letter or respond to me; he’d just won the Nobel Prize.”

Jones’ empathy and doubt were both valid. After all, Pasternak was one of the most celebrated poets from Russian literature’s “silver age,” says Emily Johnson, a Brian and Sandra O’Brien Presidential Professor of Russian in OU’s Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics.

“He also wrote this amazing, experimental, challenging novel, ‘Dr. Zhivago,’ which sparked an international scandal,” she says. During early manuscript reviews, the novel’s criticism of the Russian Revolution was labeled “malicious libel of the USSR” by the Soviet state. The book’s publication—as well as any future Pasternak writings—became strictly forbidden.

“Nonetheless, Pasternak had the manuscript smuggled to Italy and published,” Johnson says, adding the author was fully aware that hundreds of Russian writers were executed or died

I thank you for your greeting,

imprisoned in the years following the revolution.

“Pasternak was threatened and denounced by his colleagues. It was incredibly painful. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize, Pasternak was told by authorities that if he didn’t refuse it he would be forcibly expelled from the Soviet Union and lose all contact with his family.

“He was older at this point and in failing health,” she says. “Pasternak declined the prize publicly and spent the last period of his life in isolation. His house was watched by Soviet secret police and his correspondence was checked.”

Pasternak’s stand turned “Dr. Zhivago” into a must-read, international sensation, and he was flooded with fan mail, Johnson says. “And since he was persona non grata in the Soviet Union and many of his old friends weren’t talking to him, he wrote letters back.”

On a May 1959 evening in Norman, Ron Jones was eating dinner at the Phi Delta Theta house when he heard that two men in suits were asking to see him.

“I went out to the lobby and one of the men said, ‘I’m an FBI agent and this is a captain from the Norman Police Department.’ I thought something had happened to my parents.”

After reassuring him, the men asked Jones to follow them to the police department. “I wondered if they believed I was a criminal. When we got to the police station, they asked, ‘Do you know someone in Moscow?’”

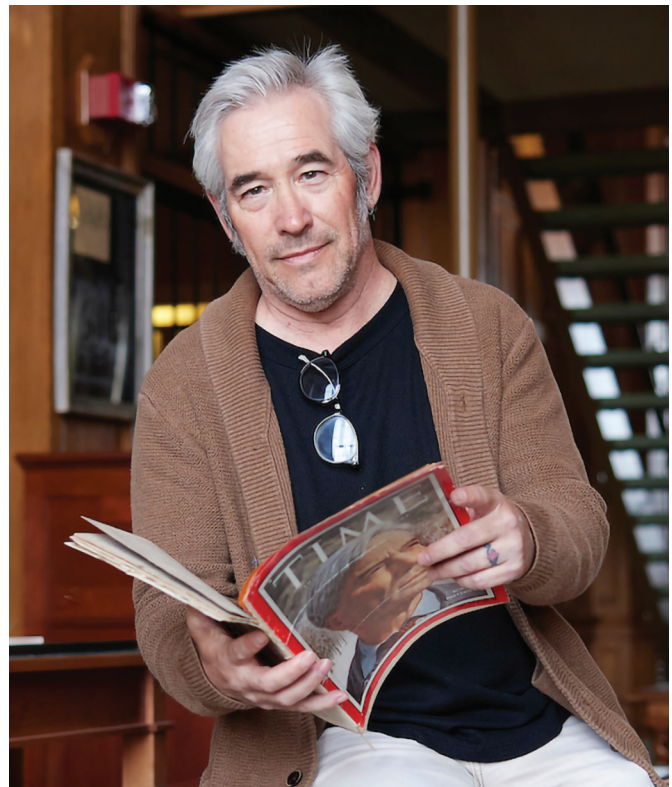
“I don’t know anybody in *Russia*,” spluttered Jones, an American raised during the height of a very hot Cold War.



Travis Caperton

ABOVE - Jones, a retired entrepreneur and Dallas banking executive, shares with OU Russian Studies students and faculty members how he became a correspondent with Nobel Prize-winning author Boris Pasternak.

RIGHT - OU Western History Collections Curator Todd Fuller peruses a 1958 *TIME* magazine cover story on Boris Pasternak, just one piece of memorabilia Jones donated to the university, along with his letter from the famed author.



Travis Caperton

Your B. Pasternak

The FBI agent held up a brilliantly stamped envelope with a distinctive return address and said, "Then what the hell is this?" In a flash, Jones realized that he'd become an unlikely correspondent with the world's biggest literary celebrity and knew why he was sitting in a police interrogation room.

"Russia was our dire enemy," Jones emphasizes more than 60 years later. "You didn't get letters from Russia without the local Postal Service notifying the police about it."

During a 2017 interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Oliver "Buck" Revell, a longtime FBI agent who'd served in Oklahoma City, agreed that even an envelope with a Russian return address could set off an investigation in the 1950s. "When a college student wrote a letter [to the Soviet Union] and got a response, that would have been consistent with the counterintelligence responsibility of the bureau."

But Jones knew the letter's interior contents were protected by federal law. When the FBI agent asked him to open the envelope and share Pasternak's message, he bristled. "I said, 'No. You can do whatever you want to me, but you're not getting my letter.'"

"He said, 'All right, son, but I want you to know something—we're going to keep a close eye on you.'"

Alone in his car, a shaken Jones opened two pages of flowing blue script in English that began, "My dear Ronnie K. Jones, may good fortune always and everywhere accompany you in your life ... here is my answer you desired and dreamed of."

"I was so pleased, so honored, so thrilled that Boris Pasternak, the Nobel Prize winner, had written back to me," Jones recalls.

Pasternak also had taken the time to answer his questions. Much of the letter challenges the idea that "Dr. Zhivago" should be understood primarily as a political statement.

"Also, what's remarkable about the letter is that it is very frank about the censorship struggles Pasternak is experiencing," says Johnson. "It's a great guide to his mood and concerns in this very difficult period."

"The letter talks in detail about the way in which "Dr. Zhivago" is being used politically in Cold War battles between the United States and Russia," she says. "It's important to understand that a lot of the publication and translation of banned literature emerging from the Soviet Union was, we now know, financed by the CIA. They understood literature was a tremendous tool for freeing minds and breaking through the Iron Curtain."

Interest in the letter has lasted long since the Iron Curtain dissolved, spurred in part by the fact that Pasternak died just a year after its writing. Over the decades, Jones has been interviewed by national news magazines and, in 2017, Pasternak's grandchildren invited him to bring the letter to

the author's home outside of Moscow, now the Pasternak House Museum.

There, Jones spoke at a small symposium on Pasternak and was treated like a VIP guest throughout his stay ("The military and government despised Pasternak, but the people of Russia love him," he says.) Representatives of the Pasternak museum, major U.S. university library collections and even Sotheby's auction house also have sought to purchase the letter from Jones.

Instead, this two-page chapter from a long, colorful life recently culminated with Jones donating the Pasternak letter and related materials to OU's Western History Collections.

"Ron wanted the letter at OU," says curator Todd Fuller, adding that it will become part of the Western History Collections' extensive archive on the University's past. "We have the ability to take care of the letter and make sure that it is in a safe environment."

Fuller—who holds degrees in poetry and Native American literatures and teaches and conducts research in both fields—was the first at OU to learn of the Pasternak letter and worked closely with Jones to bring his collection to Norman. Fuller found himself entranced by Jones' story and life, which includes brushes with legends from Elvis Presley to race car driver Mario Andretti and even a stint hitchhiking across the country for a book project.

"This is just one of many narratives of amazing things that Ron has done and experiences he's had," Fuller says.

The narrative of Jones and Pasternak's connection is finding new audiences and helping to enrich the education of OU students preparing themselves for a world in which understanding Russia has a renewed urgency. Last fall, Jones shared his experiences during a special OU Libraries presentation attended by an enthusiastic crowd of Russian Studies students. For her part, Johnson plans to use Pasternak's text in teaching an OU course in Soviet Literature and believes the document will be of use to academic researchers.

"Being able to train students with primary sources as undergraduates will help them go even farther and faster in their careers," she says, pointing out OU has a vibrant Russian Studies program that has produced numerous Fulbright Scholars.

"I'm delighted that people at OU take a great interest in the letter," Jones says. "To give something that the university wants and appreciates thrills me to death."

"The only time the letter has ever left my hands since 1959 is when I gave it to OU," he reflects. "I may live in Texas, but I'm 125% Okie, and the University of Oklahoma is my school."

Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.