

**A Journey from Wrocław to San Francisco:
Memoir of a Bookstore Owner**

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ABSTRACT

This memoir tells the story of how Veronica Ahrens-Puławski came to America, settled in San Francisco, California, worked in the business of importing books and periodicals from the Soviet Union, and became the owner and manager of the Russian bookstore, Globus, for 34 years (from 1984-2018). Ahrens-Puławski describes the challenges she faced in learning how to run a business, adopting to new computer technologies, and adapting to changes in the Soviet-Russian book trade brought about first by *perestroika* and later by the information revolution and the internet.

KEYWORDS

Globus; Znanie; bookstore; San Francisco; Russian-Soviet book trade; émigré publishers; books; journals; newspapers

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In 1974 my husband, Wojciech Puławski, an entomologist and expert in solitary wasps,¹ won a prestigious award – a one-year fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution. While working at the Smithsonian he saw with his own eyes his colleagues' amazing opportunities: the best binoculars, scanning microscopes, copy machines, expeditions, etc. I was stunned by the selection of "banned" literature in the Kamkin bookstore. Later, while I lived in Poland, my American friends would send me the collected works of Akhmatova, Gumilev, Mandel'shtam, edited by G. P. Struve² from this store.

We returned home "infected" with America. Every year Wojciech would apply for a permanent position as an entomologist. In 1981 he was offered just such a position at the California Academy of Sciences, and on Friday, the 13th of February, we flew to California. By that time I had graduated from Wrocław University's Department of Philology. My senior thesis was dedicated to the works of Anna Akhmatova and was entitled "The Lyrical heroine in the early works of Anna Akhmatova." The literary scholars Emma Grigor'evna Gershtein and Anatolii Genrikhovich Naiman, with whom I met many times at Akhmatova's dacha, "Budka,"³ in Komarovo, and in Akhmatova's city apartment, helped me choose my topic and search for sources.

In San Francisco I could not find any work at all related my field. I attended lectures as a non-degree seeking student at the University of San Francisco, where I got to know Liudmila

¹ Also known as mason wasps, mud wasps, mud-pot wasps, or potter wasps.

² Gleb Petrovich Struve (1898-1985): Russian poet, literary historian, and son of political economist, philosopher, and editor, Peter Bergardovich Struve.

³ The literal meaning of budka [будка] is small cabin, but the term is also used to refer to a dog house.

Ershova, Kseniia Zabelina and Ivan Burkin, as well as Gleb Struve's students—Norik Tash'ian, and later Ol'ga Astromova. Ol'ga Petrovna Raevskaia-Hughes helped me get a job as Gleb Petrovich's secretary. I would visit him in Berkeley, at his and Maria Semenovna's more than modest home, and would read newspapers to him, mainly *Novoe russkoe slovo* and *Russkaia mysl'*, as well as Solzhenitsyn's *Krasnoe koleso*.

For a short time, I worked in childcare and taught Russian language in the Berlitz school, where my first student was Robin Williams, who was preparing for shooting of the film "Moscow on the Hudson." I gladly accompanied my husband on entomological expeditions throughout America and to Mexico. In 1983 Liudmilla Ershova introduced me to Nina Andreevna Sapelkina, owner of the famous large bookstore Znanie. Nina Andreevna's sister, Elena, was married to [Victor] Kamkin.⁴ Nina Andreevna and her son Kirill gave me a job. When I asked Kirill what my responsibilities would be, I remembered his answer for the rest of my life: "EVERYTHING." That's where I learned to use a typewriter (the latest word in technology) to type up invoices in three copies and sort them out by color (white would go with the order, yellow – to the accountant in numerical order, and pink – in alphabetical order); then gather up the orders, weigh and calculate how much to charge for shipping, call buyers and invite them to come and browse the new books, or inform them about the arrival of the latest volumes of collected works. Once Kirill asked me to "calm down" a furious subscriber, and I explained why newspapers arrive late and what we can do

⁴ Victor Kamkin was the owner and operator of the Kamkin bookshop, for many years the almost exclusive U.S. distributor of Soviet books in the United States of America.

about it. Nina Andreevna would order books from catalogs of Mezhdunarodnaia Kniga,⁵ which she would receive from Moscow; she was the one who set the prices. My co-workers and I sorted and prepared the books for distribution. Since I could drive, I would transport the bags of catalogs, which had been sorted by zip code, to the main post office in the industrial district. The first few times Kirill showed me how to get there and explained how the bags, labeled by zip code, should be submitted to the postal workers. They checked some of the bags at random to determine whether the codes were sorted properly, and if not, then they had to check the entire batch again. By the way, Kirill drew my attention to one of the buildings with the inscription “Karkar” and said that this firm belonged to the husband of a Russian prima-ballerina, Natal’ia Makarova, a regular customer of the store. And after Znanie closed down, she started coming to Globus. Likewise, my responsibilities included waiting upon customers, accepting their checks, and learning how to process payment by credit card.

In general, it was work not at all connected with literature, except for when I could sometimes recommend one book or another to customers. Although the books in the store were only Soviet imprints, there was one stack of shelves with books from émigré publishers. And at that time a mass of interesting novels, memoirs, and research studies were coming out from the publishers Ardis, Ermitazh, Tret’ia volna, Serebrianyi vek, Posev, Sintaksis, YMCA and others. All of them were considered anti-Soviet, and Nina Andreevna almost never worked with anti-Soviet publishers.

⁵ During the Soviet period, Mezhdunarodnaia kniga was the all-union association responsible for the import and export of books, periodicals, and audio and video media from the Soviet Union.

Working in the store, Znanie, I discovered the existence of a small store, Globus, on Balboa street (Figures 1-2), where I could get an uncensored copy of Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*, Vladimov's *Vernyi Ruslan*, Zinov'ev's *Ziiaiushchie vysoty*, Solizhenitsyn and Shalamov, Aksenov and Voinovich, Brodskii and Gorbanevskii, Viktor Nekrasov and Sasha Sokolov, the journals *Novyi Zhurnal*, *Kontinent*, *Grani*, *Posev*, *Russkoe Vozrozhdenie*, *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia* – everything that was banned in the Soviet Union.



Figure 1. The Globus storefront, 332 Balboa Street, San Francisco circa 1985-1986.



Figure 2. Close-up of the Globus storefront.

On the wall of the storefront hung the Andreevskii flag,⁶ and in the middle was a framed portrait of General Vlasov, whom the Soviets considered to be a traitor, as I later found out, while the shop owner considered him a hero. In the store hung an enormous portrait of the last tsar [Nicholas II]. If, upon entering Znanie, Russian souvenirs drew attention to themselves (nesting

⁶ The primary flag of the Russian Imperial navy, adopted during the reign of Peter I, the Great, Andreevskii Flag, Bol'shaia rossiiskaia entsiklopediia (online), https://bigenc.ru/domestic_history/text/1822851, 2019.

dolls, Palekh boxes, gzhel' ceramic dishes),⁷ then at the Balboa shop there was a different mood. Upon entering the shop, the first things that caught one's eye were the book jackets of all the books published by Globus, hanging along the wall in plastic frames, as well as books, journals, and newspapers of all the possible Russian language imprints outside the Soviet Union (Figure 3). The shop owner and publisher of Globus was an imposing, tall gentleman, Vladimir Nikolaevich Azar, who was born in Yugoslavia; and as a young man, he had served as one of the adjutants in General Vlasov's staff, as I was told by Azar's employee, Emma Koronotov. In the garage of the house, painted a dark blue color, stood the enormous typesetting machine, with all its accessories for printing books (Figure 4).

⁷ A style of Russian pottery and porcelain, most notably blue and white, produced by artisans in and around the village of Gzhel', Russia. For a brief overview of Gzhel' pottery in English, see "Gzhel'," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, November 17, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gzhel>. For a brief history and description of Gzhel' pottery (in English), including illustrations, see Igor Vasilyev, *Gzhel' Pottery*, trans. Frith Maier and Natalia Rogovskaya (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1987). For an in-depth history of Gzhel' pottery in Russian, see Tat'tiana Iosifovna Dul'kina and Natalya Grigorieva, *Keramika Gzheli XVIII-XX vekov* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1988). Watch a brief video about the modern production of Gzhel' porcelain at the Gzhel' Porcelain Factory in Gzhel', Russia, <https://youtu.be/d6lG0ZAuZ8M>.

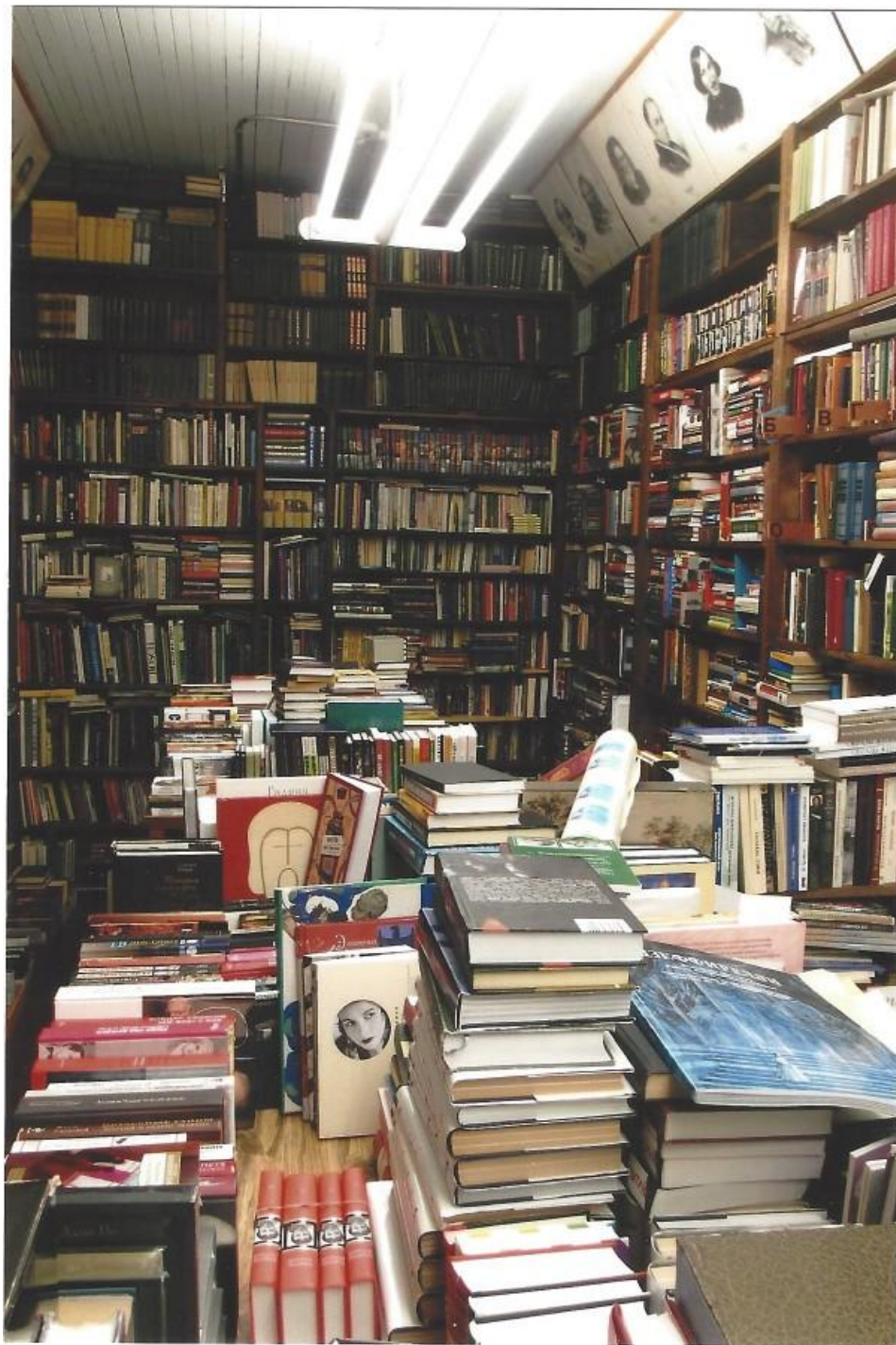


Figure 3. Main hall inside the Globus bookstore.

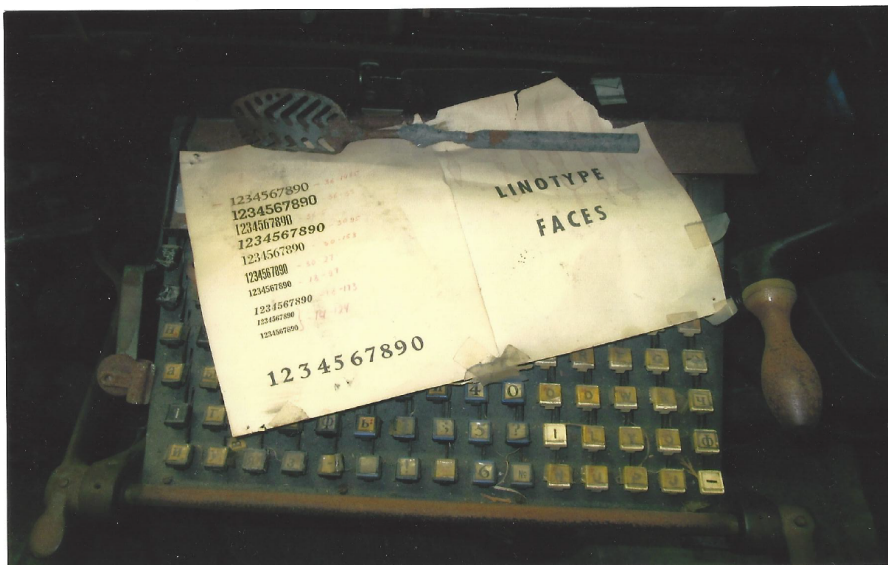


Figure 4. Linotype faces.

In July of 1984, the elderly employee of Znanie, Vladimir Leont'evich Modlinskii, who prepared and packed the parcels, was visibly upset as he informed me that the owner of Globus had died from a heart rupture.⁸ And then and there he whispered: “Ver-O-nichka, buy the store from his widow. Send your husband, since he speaks French, and they will work it out!” Because of my youth and sense of adventure, I was certain that everything would work out for the best – since, unlike Znanie, I would continue to cooperate, as did Mr. Azar, with all the publishers in America, France, Germany, England, Belgium, Argentina, Australia, Canada, and Israel! It was rather easy to persuade my husband to take this risky step, since Wojciech was completely happy doing what he loved, while I just couldn’t seem to find my true calling. The money from

⁸ A heart rupture, or myocardial rupture is a “tearing of one of the walls of the heart. It usually occurs immediately after a heart attack.” See “Myocardial Rupture,” *Medical Dictionary of Health Terms*. Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, Accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/medical-dictionary-of-health-terms/j-through-p#M-terms>.

our meager income and our lucky, low-rent apartment, that we had set aside to purchase a house, was used for the initial down payment on the store. Azar's widow, Elisabeth, agreed to a long-term repayment of the debt. Taking into account our financial difficulties, Elisabeth set a more than reasonable price for the store property, which had no heat, so we had to purchase portable space heaters. I received authorization to continue distributing books published by Globus, on commission. I wisely declined to continue Globus' publishing operations. And thus, at the end of October 1984, I became the owner of the Globus bookstore.

Emma Koronatova, who had worked for Azar, agreed to work for me, and having demonstrated a vast knowledge of the entire "kitchen" of orders, helped mail out journal subscriptions and customers' books and took orders for books by authors that I had never even heard of. Her help in compiling catalogs was invaluable.

For the first time I was the owner of a store, and I needed to learn everything from the very beginning: my work experience at Znanie turned out to be a drop in the sea of issues that I encountered. The kind, sympathetic manner of all my assistants, though they came and went fairly often, was a real support to me. These were people who understood what a difficult job it was – to run a bookstore (Figures 5-6).



Figure 5. Early years at the Globus bookstore circa 1985-1986.



Figure 6. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski taking orders from a customer circa 2001.

We started before there were computers: bibliographic cards were handwritten, catalogs were typed out; and from the originals, copies were made and sent out to the list of customers and universities. Gradually we smoothed out relations with customers, universities, and public libraries. We received orders for the collected works of Bulgakov, published by Ardis, and for the volume *Krasnoe koleso* by Solzhenitsyn from YMCA-Press. We received subscriptions and mailed out periodicals: the journals *Kontinent*, *Golos zarubezh'ia*, *Bor'ba* from the publisher SBONR (Soiuz bor'by za osvobozhdenie narodov Rossii),⁹ *Vremia i my*, *Posev*, *Grani*, *Sintaksis*, *Feniks* from Australia; newspapers *Nasha strana* from Argentina and *Russkaia mysl'* from France. Our first catalog, professionally done by Emma, attracted the attention of many colleagues at different universities, most notably our neighbors: Berkeley and Stanford. Professor John J. Stephan from the University of Hawaii and Professor John E. Bowlt, IMRC Director, from Southern California came in person to browse our collection of antiquarian books. A portion of the books had been acquired previously by Azar, and the other portion I had purchased already by myself or accepted on consignment. Visitors included collectors of antiquarian books and professors from American universities, from Canada, Europe, Israel, Japan, and China. Professor Ol'ga Bakich, from Toronto, visited often and became a true friend of the store. I would take books to various conferences. A trip to Honolulu provided an opportunity to meet in person with Patricia Polansky (Figure 7), Russian bibliographer at the University of Hawaii. We immediately became friends: we started collecting Russian books published in China. The Congress of Russian Americans and the Russian Center invited me and my books to their

⁹ Union of the struggle for freedom of the Russian people.

festivals and meetings (Figure 8). An important development, although it took place much later, was our collaboration with the Library of Congress.



Figure 7. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski with Patricia Polansky in front of the Globus bookstore circa 1994-1998.



Figure 8. Books and souvenirs on display at the Russian Center circa 2001.



Figure 9. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski working at the computer inside the Globus bookstore.

At long last, it came time to introduce a computer into my old-fashioned shop (Figure 9). I somehow made ends meet, but the funds did not suffice for this innovation. Apparently, my accounting errors played a role: after all, I never had any schooling in how to run a commercial business. Too many copies of some books were ordered; some arrived very late; some were completely lost; market prices were not properly considered, so some books had to be sold at a higher price and others for less. But a computer was becoming simply essential, and I had to sell a book that was dear to me, which I still lament, to this day. I went to a famous book collector at Berkeley and sold him a first edition of Akhmatova's *Chetki*, which she had signed and given to my aunt—Vera Evgen'evna Ahrens-Gakkel'. A new life had begun: once again, my splendid

friends-assistants, who knew how to handle new, rare, old, and antiquarian books, now even began to help purchase software and learn new technology. My long-time assistant, Viktoria Zetilova, learned from Emma Koronatova how to work with antiquarian books and compile the same kind of professional catalogs. Of course, without all of my friends-professionals, who handled the books superbly, including Irina Korniyenko, Mariia Vilenskaya, Irina Valioulina, I could not have managed. My American friend, Niki Dunne, helped fill out bureaucratic forms that were essential for working with public libraries. All of our catalogs were loaded onto our website page: antiquarian books, new arrivals, children's books, rare books, and small print runs.

In the Soviet Union, *perestroika* changed many things. Books from Western publishers decreased in number and were quickly bought up; it made no sense to preorder them since they were fairly expensive, and now it was possible to buy Russian imprints of all previously banned authors at a much lower price. From the very beginning of my work at Globus I would order Soviet imprints from Nina Andreevna at Znanie. By the way, we maintained splendid, warm relations.

During *perestroika* we began having problems receiving catalogs (*Mezhdunarodnaia kniga*) and shipments of books from Moscow. All over the world, Soviet newspapers and journals ceased to be delivered on a regular basis. As a result, the oldest bookstore in Paris, *Dom knigi*, went out of business. Many universities reduced their orders or switched to another system of acquiring books. Many new bookstores appeared, especially in New York, Boston, Chicago, Canada, and here in San Francisco. In addition to books, they offered videos (which very quickly were replaced by DVDs), compact discs, and souvenirs.

Large stores offered me discounts for working with them. Globus now had more books from Russia. Only the antiquarian section remained unchanged. Books from publishers outside of Russia, which either went out of business, or, like Posev and YMCA, moved to Moscow, remained on the shelves. In 1989, on October 17th (my name day) we lived through an earthquake. Three bookshelves in main hall of Globus broke away from the wall (Figure 10). Luckily, I immediately turned my attention to the shaking lamps, grabbed the hand of my sister-in-law, who had been helping me sort journals, and the hand of the only customer, and pulled them to the front doors. We stood there, it seemed, for an eternity, hearing the terrible tumult over our shoulders, and watching out the corners of our eyes the primary school globe, samovar, and other decorations fall down from the fixtures in the shop's front window. We felt as if the earth under our feet was shaking and would now swallow us whole. I gripped them by the hands and kept repeating: "stay calm, stay calm." Wojciech came running to the store from the Academy to check whether we were alive (Figure 11). When we finally made our way back to our apartment, what awaited us in the kitchen was a mound of broken glass and porcelain, with an unbroken bottle of cognac lying on top; that's how we celebrated the visit of Wojciech's sister, who traveled from Warsaw to visit us. We had to close the store for two weeks; my friends helped put the shelves back into place; this time they screwed them to the wall, and only then put the books back in place (Figure 12).



Figure 10. Fallen shelves and books all over the floor inside the Globus bookstore after the earthquake at 5:04 p.m. on October 17, 1989.



Figure 11. Inside the Globus bookstore after the earthquake at 5:04 p.m. on October 17, 1989. My husband, Wojciech (pictured right) ran to the store to see whether we were alive.

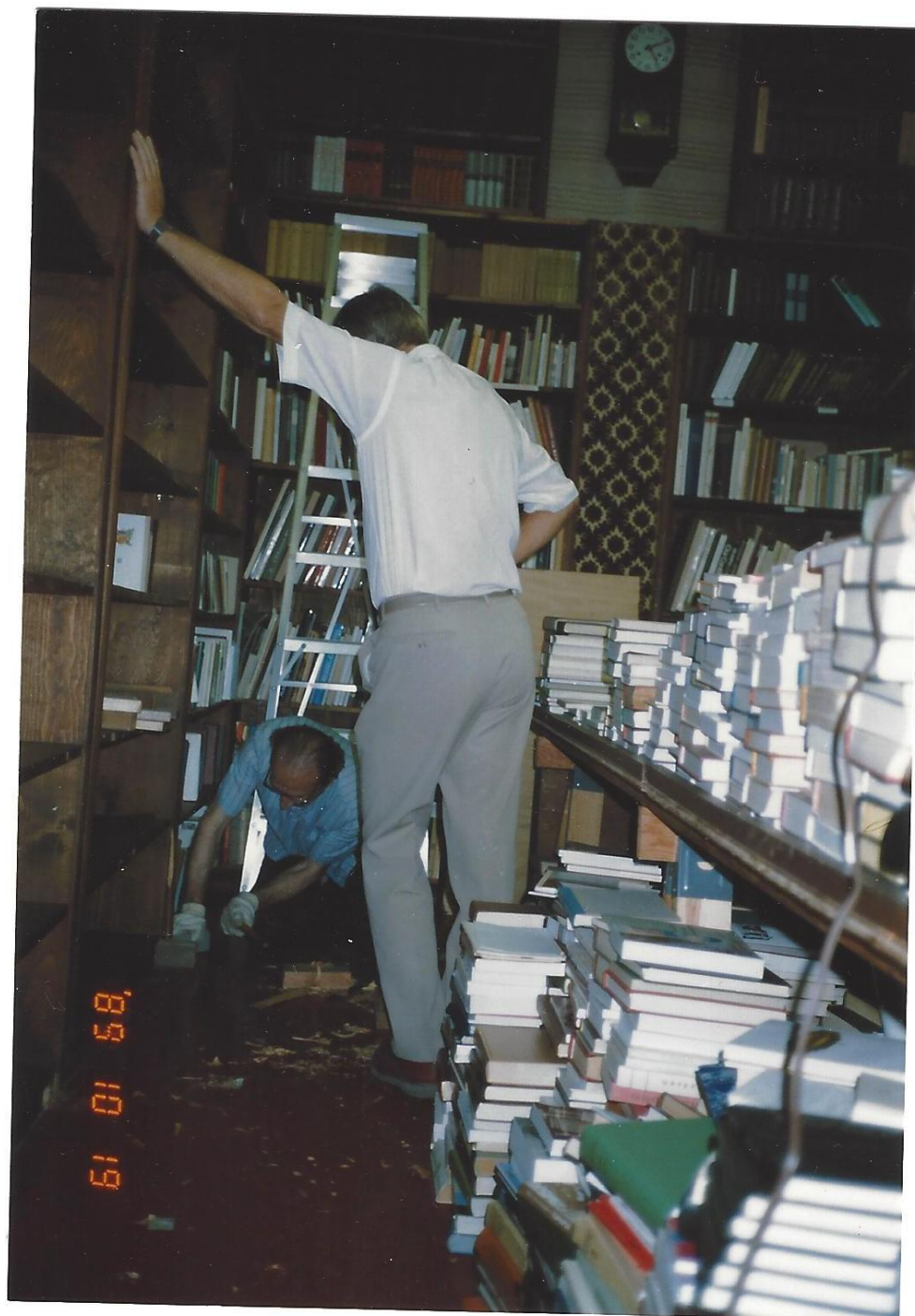


Figure 12. Securing the shelves to the wall after the earthquake.

With the boom of the Internet, we kept hearing about Kindles and other gadgets which could hold an immeasurable number of books. Once we asked one of our regular female

customers why she hadn't come in for a long time. "Well, now I have a Kindle," – she answered. Every year there were more like her. That's how we started to lose customers. Only the occasional connoisseurs of good books remained. Business with collectors of antiquarian books remained active. The young mothers and fathers who would come in, by themselves or with their children, were delighted by the children's books. Grandmothers, who wanted to talk to their grandchildren in Russian, would also come in. They purchased not only *Kurochka-Riaba*¹⁰ or *Kolobok*,¹¹ but young adult classics. They would tell us which translated authors the local children liked. We gladly accepted their orders. We were always pleased with the good taste and excellent behavior of the parents and children.

From the store's very beginning, we supported local authors. We would take their books on consignment; with the appearance of the Internet, we would place an ad for these books on our website in a special catalog. The store had separate shelves for them. That's what the store's operations looked like until recently (Figures 13-15). But as 2017 approached I found

¹⁰ *Kurochka-Riaba* is a popular Russian children's tale about a grandfather and grandmother, whose hen lays a golden egg. Neither the grandfather nor the grandmother can crack open the egg, but it finally cracks when a mouse knocks it off the table. Grandfather and grandmother are sad, but the hen consoles them by telling them that she will lay another egg, not a golden egg, but a regular egg.

¹¹ *Kolobok* is a popular East Slavic folk tale about a little roll or bun who runs away from home and avoids capture by various animals until a clever fox manages to capture and eat the little roll by praising its singing. The tale is reminiscent of the story about the Gingerbread Man in the English tradition. The story is intended to discourage children from running away. Watch a cartoon version of *Kolobok* in Russian at <https://youtu.be/dWa0ctEJ3YA>, or in English at <https://youtu.be/oHLuiHYZ4iE>.

myself in complete despair—it became clear to me that it was necessary to close the store or find a buyer, since my age and limited resources did not allow me to keep up with technological innovations which, admittedly, left us behind. After 34 years from the day the store was purchased, we made the fairy-tale-like acquaintance of Pavel Chepyzhov, who became the owner of Globus, and to whom it still belongs, a successful, young, energetic knowledgeable dealer of antiquarian books and the book trade.



Figure 13. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski working at her desk in the back office.



Figure 14. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski working in a back room of the Globus bookstore.



Figure 15. Veronica Ahrens-Puławski with a young assistant, Nika Korniyenko (now Stewart), December 2013.

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Notes