Alla Verber, retailer and Russian style icon, dies at 61

By Godfrey Deeny - 8 August 2019

Alla Verber, Moscow’s most famous fashion buyer, noted Russian style icon and legendary retailer, has died suddenly on August 6 in Forte Dei Marmi, in Italy. She was 61.

Verber died as the result of anaphylactic shock, according to early reports. Apparently, Verber had an allergic reaction to seafood dishes at dinner while on vacation in Forte dei Marmi, Tuscany.

“It is with deep sorrow that we report that Alla Verber, Mercury Vice President and TsUM and DLT Fashion Director, has passed away. It is impossible to find words to describe the depth of loss that every person who knew Alla Konstantinovna feels,” read a statement by Mercury, where she was a senior executive at their two department stores TsUM and DLT.

Some Russian media sources claim that the cause of Alla Verber’s death was a heart attack and organ failure due to an anaphylactic shock, others – the consequences of a long illness. About ten years ago, the top manager was diagnosed with blood cancer, but a few years later this went into remission.

Her most recent posts on her Instagram, where she had 465,000 followers, are dated August 5. They show Verber cycling and relaxing in Forte dei Marmi, the Italian seaside resort, a favorite destination for vacationing Russians.

A supremely self-assured retailer, Verber was a permanent front-row fixture at fashion shows in Western Europe and New York for the past two decades. No Dolce & Gabbana Alta Moda weekend was complete without the presence of Verber, who told FashionNetwork.com that she had grown this house alone to almost $100 million in annual retail sales in Russia.

Verber was the public face of Mercury, Russia’s leading importer and retailer of high-end fashion and luxury. She worked for that group for 25 years, the final 15 as Vice-President of Mercury and Fashion Director of TsUM, a dusty old Soviet department store near Red Square that she revolutionized as a haute gamme and fashion forward 70,000 square-meter megastore – retailing Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent, Céline, Dolce & Gabbana, Alexander McQueen, Givenchy, Chloé and Stella McCartney. In many ways, Verber was more famous and far more feted that any Russian designer.

Remarkably, even as the Russian economy suffered under sanctions imposed by the West after Vladimir Putin’s illegal annexation of Crimea, Verber continued to grow the business. In November 2017, she invited a slew of friends from Europe to celebrate Tsum’s 110th anniversary, a crowning moment in a brilliant career.

She also injected new energy by adjusting the store’s prices to match European prices; and by creating a “China Friendly,” policy that saw Chinese consumers account for 20% of turnover in Tsum’s St Petersburg store.

Recently, Alla Konstantinovna (using her patronymic name) began to lead a more active lifestyle: she went to work on foot, rode a bicycle, and, as always, attended many social events, where she looked as young and fresh as ever. The news of her death will shock not only Russia, but also the entire fashion industry.

Verber was the godmother of the luxury industry in her country: it was thanks to her that clothes from the most
Verber was the godmother of the luxury industry in her country: it was thanks to her that clothes from the most famous global fashion houses first began to be sold in Russia in the 90’s and the transformation of the biggest department stores TSUM (Moscow) and DLT (Saint-Petersburg) took place. She was friends with everyone - world famous designers, politicians, show business and artists. The name of Alla Verber became a household word in Russia. Her famous quotes - “Going to a fashion show” (prounced “Faah-shion”), “Guess where I am?” - inspired several collections of T-shirts.

Back in 1976, she first left her hometown of St Petersburg to study in Rome; then Montreal and finally to New York. Returning to Russia to begin a meteoric rise in fashion.

“When I joined TsUM 15 years ago, I knew that this austere, monumental department store could be on par with the world’s top department stores,” the multi-lingual Verber told FashionNetwork.com in an exclusive interview at the 110th anniversary.

Verber began her career in fashion as a part-time sales assistant. She was also a merchandiser, worked with the factories in the 80s and was very proud to have “grown from the floor” (in a department store) helping her to predict what clients wanted.

Alla Verber spoke fluent English with the brainy tone unique to Russian women, and cut a swathe through the fashion houses of Paris and Milan with her unerring eye and giant chequebook. Fashion will not see her like again.

Requiescat in pace.

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