

Face to face with Voinovich: A Postgraduate's 'Extraordinary Adventure'.

Amongst those wishing to meet the Russian satirist V. N. Voinovich when he came to Nottingham in March, few can have been as eager or as well prepared as I, currently writing my PhD thesis on his works.

I had been trying to engineer this meeting for some years. I had corresponded with Voinovich by letter and telephone and he had been helpful and forthcoming, but our paths had never crossed, not least because he has homes in both Munich and Moscow and travels frequently between them. However, inviting him to Nottingham -- for which grateful thanks go to IRSCEES for the funding and to Dr. Lesley Milne for the organisation -- meant that he could not easily elude me.

Our meeting promised to be a dialogue between very different worlds of experience, and there was every possibility that, Russian apart, we might not speak the same language. This was to be an encounter between East and West; between a man with vast experience of manual labour and a middle-class woman whose most rigorous experience of work was the sausage factory; between a sparkling synthesist of literature and its analyst; between a man with an almost itinerant past and a woman still living in the city where she was born; between an eminent writer and a GTA in obscurity.

When I first embarked on my research I had not fully taken into account the significance of studying the works of a living writer. As it dawned on me that the literary ground could shift under my feet at any moment, fleeting thoughts of assassination crossed my mind! Fortunately for Voinovich, curiosity got the better of me.

Imagine, if you will, how it feels to be studying the works of a living writer who is, moreover, phenomenally versatile and has a history of writing in every possible genre, producing anything from songs to novels to political journalism and even sitcom. Imagine the potential thrills and spills of studying an oeuvre not yet complete, which may change direction and confound every prediction even as I put the finishing touches to my conclusion. Imagine explaining the outline of your thesis to the writer, with the possibility that he may disagree with your line of argument, or even supply new evidence to invalidate it. Imagine further that the writer is a satirist who has been known to amuse his readers with barely disguised cameos of Russianists' linguistic errors -- and the picture is complete.

However, a meeting was desirable and almost inevitable, and Voinovich's visit to Nottingham provided the opportunity for the long-awaited encounter. It gave me the chance to interview him at length on his life and work and to gain new insights into my research. The timing was ideal, since he was in a position to reflect on a lifetime of following his chosen path, and also to look forward to new challenges. As for me, I was able to look back on many hours of studying his work and to draw the threads of my argument together.

There were questions I had long been wanting to ask -- and this is where studying the work of a living writer may lend either a certain dynamism or sometimes deflation to the process. For example, one question produced a previously unrevealed scoop, whilst another, referring to what I had perceived as a recurring motif in his work, drew a complete blank.

So what was it like to meet the creative energy behind the work on which I had focused so intently for so long? In his writing, Voinovich's heroes are people who behave naturally in unnatural circumstances, confounding the usual rules of the game, and the writer came across as true to his ideal: straightforward and unpretentious.

Life as a satirist in the Soviet Union was complicated, as was life in emigration, and Voinovich has lived through many changes and adversities. However, although he bears the scars, he appears to have preserved his independence of thought, spontaneity and drive intact.

It was sometimes hard to imagine that this playful, charming man was the same as the writer who has on occasion almost drawn blood with the sharpness of his pen. While he talked he made several attempts at drawing my portrait, over coffee he sang his early songs, at dinner he told politically incorrect jokes, and walking in the rain in Wollaton Park we shared notes on living with teenage children and talked of how we might spend our next lives.

As a person he seemed completely self-contained and at home with himself, carrying his own universe and frames of reference with him. This solidity of character and purpose in the writer is, it seems to me now, an important element in drawing together Voinovich's work into a coherent whole.

His visit undeniably provided me with much valuable material and gave me a new perspective on my work, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue. It is to be hoped that the trip to Nottingham did not also provide the satirist's pen with much new material!

Rachel Farmer

Books

There is a new version of the Penguin Russian Course available in the bookshop, hot off the presses. Entitled *The New Penguin Russian Course* (London: Penguin, 1996), it has been completely revised by Nicholas J. Brown of SSEES, London. Like the original publication by J. L. I. Fennell, it is designed as a self-tutor, so has limited use for teaching. However, it claims to take the student to the equivalent of A-Level standard and, according to the introduction, was written with university students in mind.

The *NPRC*, as the author calls it, lays less emphasis on translation exercises than the original Penguin course but attempts to make expressions and vocabulary more useful. There are some grammatical tables at the back, as before, and not only are there keys to the exercises, but the texts are translated too. The new book looks much more modern and useful. It's also more expensive -- £9.99.

Voinovich

Vladimir Nikolaevich -- the Natural Man

For Slavonic students at Nottingham University a visit from a writer whose works are studied as part of a current module has to be a rare event. A familiar name to undergraduates on the final year Soviet Comic Prose course, Vladimir Nikolaevich Voinovich, is known principally for his work *Жизнь и необычайные приключения Ивана Чонкина*.

Now a sprightly sixty-three-year-old, Voinovich was born in Dushanbe, the capital of the former Soviet Republic of Tadzhikistan to a Jewish mother and a father of Serbian extraction. After barely five years of schooling he had a variety of jobs, from construction to work on a *КОЛХОЗ*.

In the 1950s he served for four years in the Soviet Air Force as an aircraft mechanic, mostly in Poland -- an episode which without doubt furnished rich material for his creative impulse, resulting in works such as the Chonkin story with its hilarious portrayal of the absurdities of military life. The years of dissident conflict within the Soviet Union, his subsequent exile to Munich and his partial return to Russia, likewise, have made significant contribution to the subject matter of his writing.

Prior to his visit to Nottingham, some considerable time was spent deciding how best to look after this distinguished guest. A programme was finally arranged which would accommodate his academic commitments as well as provide entertainment. At the same time we realised that spending leisure time with him would also help us to understand the motivating spirit of this artist.

After he had given his lecture at the University, we took Vladimir Nikolaevich to the "Trip to Jerusalem", in Nottingham -- a major tourist attraction in the city, said to be the oldest pub in Britain. In the course of a not completely chance encounter with fourth year students from the Department, he showed himself fully at ease.

As two pints of lager rapidly disappeared, it was clear that he was quite 'at home', and, had the programme allowed, could easily have passed the evening there. By a strange coincidence, there was a Bayern-Munich -v- Nottingham Forest match in Nottingham that same evening. Our guest's present home is in Munich, and he exchanged cheery words in the pub with *БОЛЕЛЬЩИКИ* of both teams who mercifully were not at each other's throats.