

The Lost Art of Samizdat

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YouTube, CD burners, blogs, file hosts and cloud sharing have made it laughably easy for anyone with anything to say to say it right here and be heard right now.

That's great. No. That's absolutely fabulous.

It wasn't always that way, however. Especially during the Soviet years.

I happen to own three very cool, slim books. That is to say I own Xerox copies of them, but more about that in a moment. First let me briefly describe how these copies came into my possession.

Many moons ago, that is, in the early 1980s, I was a student in one of Vasily Aksyonov's graduate seminars on contemporary Russian literature at George Washington University. Aksyonov had just been "asked to leave" the Soviet Union in connection with the famous samizdat MetrOpole miscellany — one of the first major attempts to publish an anthology of current Russian literature inside Russia, but outside of official avenues.

Aksyonov's "lectures," as one might surmise, were extended tete-a-tetes riddled with anecdotes, jokes, comic asides and personal reminiscences. He didn't have to rely on anything but his memory to "lecture." Aksyonov had been a participant or a witness to everything about which he spoke.

On the day that Aksyonov spoke about contemporary poetry, he brought in material evidence to bolster his argument — three slim, dog-eared volumes of poetry by Yevgeny Rein published in samizdat in the 1970s.

Aksyonov said with authority that Rein was one of the finest living Russian poets. It was fascinating to hear things like this because none of us had any inkling of the existence of such a poet. This morning we woke up ignorant; tonight we go to bed knowing about a major writer.

It could have been no other way. With extremely rare exception, Rein's works were not published officially. He was not — could not — be discussed in the official press, unless it was something about the screenplays or children's works he wrote. Like many others, he toiled in virtual obscurity. Aksyonov knew him, as did Yevtushenko and Voznesensky and others, but virtually none of that reached those of us living beyond the borders of the Soviet Union.

That's all different now, of course. Rein was awarded the Russian State Prize in 1997. A publisher called Bloodaxe issued a collection of his work in English translation in 2001. He is revered as one of the most important living Russian poets who, according to the superb encyclopedia "Russian Writers of the 20th Century," "descends from the Russian Acmeists" and "urban poetry of the 1980s," but is also connected in spirit to "intellectualism and philological culture."

Who knew in 1980 that all that was to come? In my world, at least, only Aksyonov did.

I have admitted in this space from time to time that I am an incorrigible pack rat. I grab things and I don't let them go. Maybe that is my protest against the darkness moving in ever closer on me. Whatever it is, that little quality of mine convinced me to ask Aksyonov if he would mind my making photocopies of his books. The writer generously pushed the books into my hands and said, "Just don't lose them, OK?"

The three collections — "Return," "Prophecy" and "Caesar's Dinarius" — were all typed and handbound in Rein's hometown of Leningrad.

From there, by the law of samizdat, they would have been handed on to people, some of whom would have typed up their own versions and passed them to friends, and some of them would have done the same. Thus could a book reach hundreds and, perhaps, even thousands of readers.

Moreover, through the technological magic of carbon paper, each time someone typed a single page of a future samizdat book, he or she was actually creating anywhere from five to 10 copies at once. I'm assuming that people with the muscle and fury to hit the keys the hardest were considered the best samizdat "publishers."

Aksyonov's copies of Rein's three collections were of varying quality. His copy of "Prophecy,"

printed in Leningrad in 1970, most surely was a combination of various stages in the printing process. Page one, presenting the poem "Half a Life," is quite clear, while page nine, featuring the beginning of a long poem entitled "Vita Nuova," is hard on the eyes indeed. Some letters fade into white, others huddle in black bundles. But all the texts are still readable.

"Caesar's Dinarius" was clearly an original. The letters are crisp and clean, with no distortion whatsoever. Another hint that this was a "clean copy" (I can only guess based on the evidence at hand because I no longer recall details of the originals — I had them in hand for just a few precious moments.) is that even the corrections of typos are clear. This, of course, could only be true on the first page. Typeovers in the carbon copies were invariably a mess of ink that left you guessing at what the poet actually had in mind.

Each of the three volumes was signed by the author with a personal dedication to Aksyonov. On the title page of "Return," Rein wrote, "To Vasya, in memory of everything and with longstanding love. Ye. Rein. 14.XII.70." "Caesar's Dinarius" he signed, "To Vasya, with a sober tear. Don't forget. Your Ye. Rein." This dedication bears no date, but I remember well that Aksyonov said it was given to him shortly before he left the Soviet Union after the MetrOpole affair blew up in his face. Rein had been one of the writers whose works were published in the miscellany.

The dedication to "Prophecy" is reproduced above, alongside the first page of the Rein section in the official 1991 Russian publication of "MetrOpole." On the first page of "Prophecy," Rein wrote, "To a great man of the 1950s from a contemporary in remembrance and in search of lost time. With love, Ye. Rein. 10.77." In the left margin Rein added the note: "Uncorrected edition!"

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