

## **How I was Chief - Russian - Poet - Abroad**

*One of the famous Izya's stories*

When I was young I used to write poetry. At that time I lived in a Kibbutz where I gathered avocados together with a serious girl. When she asked why I worked so slowly, I answered "because I'm composing verses". She was impressed and decided to publish them in our small printing office. She made about fifty books which were immediately given away to my friends.

Years passed and I became a scientist. I was no longer writing verses but I didn't forget them. For a while I lived in Grenoble where I would sometimes visit the city sauna. A person who would keep me company there was a plumber from Moscow, "sanitation engineer Serezha".

The story about that plumber is a special one. There was a young French girl mad about Russian literature. One day she went to Moscow dreaming about Dostoevsky, Tchekhov and the mysterious Russian soul. The first mysterious Russian soul she met was the hotel plumber Serezha. They got married and went to Grenoble, where she began to work in the city Town Hall for the department of Culture. And Serezha began taking steam bath with me.

We did it Russian style, drinking a lot of beer. After a few drinks I would feel like a Poet again. The plumber, however, having a mysterious but a very simple soul, could not decide, based only on my declamations, whether I was a serious poet or not. "If some well-known poet would tell me that your verses are the real thing, I will acknowledge definitely that you are a REAL POET"

Eventually, he brought this idea home to his energetic wife. Could she, being an Assistant for the Councilor of Culture, invite some Russian poets to Grenoble? And thus a brilliant idea was conceived: she would organize a Russian Poetry Conference in Grenoble, where well-known poets from the USSR and the émigré community would meet together. The chief poet of Russian emigration was to be Brodsky, of course.

This Conference was the first cultural happening organized by Serezha's wife, and she planned it as the main cultural event of the year. The leader of the Soviet delegation was to be Voznesensky. His book had already been published in two languages (French and Russian in parallel text) and his translator, a professor from Sorbonne was going to present him to the French public. Stendhal University of Grenoble had previously prepared different Conferences on The Silver Century Poetry, Modern Poetry, Poetry Abroad, and so on.

As for me, at this time I was doing science, not poetry, and not paying much attention to all this. But just before the Conference was to begin, it was discovered that neither Brodsky, nor anybody else from émigré poet community made plans to come and meet their Soviet colleagues. It was a catastrophe. Serezha reminded me that this entire vanity fair was organized to evaluate my verses and my duty was to become Chief Russian Poet Abroad. If I failed to comply, Serezha's wife would lose her job in the Town Hall. What could I do? I had to agree, but I was waiting to be exposed and shamed.

A few days later, when the Soviet delegation arrived I honestly told the whole story to Voznesensky at the welcome meeting. "I see", he said, "It's a problem... But you can count on me. I know how to hold the audience. You just sit on the stage, smile, read something, and I'll do all the rest. Don't worry, my friend!"

Slightly eased I went back to my laboratory. On that day one of my colleagues brought a keg of homemade wine to celebrate his future marriage among the boys and to say goodbye to his bachelor life. Everybody happily drank wine but not me. When they asked me why I'm so gloomy and sober, I answered that nobody could enjoy life at an hour of approaching shame. So, soberly, I departed to the Conference as they continued drinking up.

At the conference all the participants sat on the stage. Voznesensky recited his poem in Russian. The Sorbonne professor read the translation by the book. My poems were also translated by the Chair of Russian literature of Stendhal University. He pursued his own aim of demonstrating to these arrogant Sorbonne guys a high ability that went along with being Chair. So he did not only do his best with the translating, but also read it by heart in a truly artistic manner, especially in comparison with the tedious academic style of the Sorbonne translator.

But first I had to appear on the stage myself. I got up, and at that very moment a jolly crowd entered the hall. My colleagues finished with the homemade wine and fairly warmed came to support me. When they saw me standing in front of the audience, they uttered a roar of delight.

The remaining public inspired by their enthusiasm also began applauding before I even had a chance to say a single word. I read a little, then the Stendhal Chair read the translation and we both were taken very warmly by the public.

At the end of the evening Voznesensky said: “You know, I’ve really believed in your joke that you are not a poet at all. But you are well-known here. The public loves you very much! ”

During the banquet a famous Moscow literature critic asked me, where I was published. After my unbelievable triumph I couldn’t answer frankly “nowhere”. But I also didn’t want to lie. So I modestly explained that there had been small edition published long ago by [...]. And I mentioned the name of the serious girl from the Kibbutz.

“Ah”, he exclaimed, “Professor N !!! I’m going to visit her in Oxford soon. I’ll ask her for a copy!”

*Written down by Olga Mineeva*