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A Personal Remembrance of Vasily Aksyonov

By John Freedman

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A portrait of the participants in the "Metropol" miscellany taken from the edition published legally in Russia in 1991. Aksyonov is top row center.

I received the news that Vasily Aksyonov died Monday evening about an hour after the event was made public. My wife, Oksana, heard the news on the radio and called to tell me. I spent the next few hours in a state of agitation. You see, few people are more respected than Aksyonov in our home. Oksana was brought up by parents of the Yunost generation &mdash these were people who matured in the 1950s and early 1960s and entered adulthood reading the popular journal "Yunost" (Youth), and, of course, reading Aksyonov's fantastically popular stories and novellas that were published in the journal.

I have my own connection to Vasily Pavlovich, coming from another angle, another era, another country.

Vasily Pavlovich entered my life at one of the most dramatic periods in his own, around 1981. By then, he was a world-famous author of several of the most important novels in Soviet literature. To the world he was a voice of integrity, a symbol of dignity. In 1979 he had organized and published the controversial "Metropol" miscellany that got him and many other Soviet writers in serious trouble for sidestepping the censor. Aksyonov's trouble was so big that within 18 months, he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship. I don't know how or why it happened, but one of the first institutions to give him a place to hang his hat was George Washington University in Washington, D.C. I happened to be a grad student there working on a master's degree. Consequently, Vasily Pavlovich became one of my professors &mdash unlike any I have ever had, before him or since.

Throughout most of my shady career as a Slavic scholar-to-be, the notion of "contemporary Soviet prose" meant anything dating from shortly before the Russian Revolution. Suddenly I was being taught by one of the most influential figures of the last two decades, someone who knew who was working on the latest poems and prose almost before they were published. Instead of a curriculum consisting of a colorful but fading rainbow of writers spanning from Pasternak to Solzhenitsyn, we were reading and hearing inside stories about Andrei Bitov, Yury Trifonov, Fazil Iskander, both Viktor Yerofeyevs, Sasha Sokolov and a host of other important writers of the day.

Aksyonov brought the real world and the real word to those of us in his seminar. For anyone, like I, who has spent too much time in academia, this can be a jarring, liberating experience.

Courtesy of John Freedman
A postcard Aksyonov wrote to the author in 1984, suggesting "Literary Courier" as a place to publish an article about Andrei Bitov and Sasha Sokolov.

Courtesy of John Freedman
Title page of Yevgeny Rein's samizdat book "Caesar's Coin." The inscription to Aksyonov reads: "Yours with a sober tear. Don't forget. Your Ye. Rein."

Vasily Pavlovich had a sharp, ready sense of humor. He rarely shirked from aiming barbs at those he had conflicts with. What set him apart was that he had a highly developed sense of justice and fair play, at least insofar as it concerned other writers. This was the writer in him, that voice of artistic logic that always speaks with an understanding of all sides of an argument. It might also have been the doctor in him &mdash like Anton Chekhov, Aksyonov began adult life as a medical doctor, a calling devoted to caring for people. In any case, throughout the course of two semesters of seminars I never remember Aksyonov attempting to even scores with any colleague, no matter how much he may have wanted to in his heart.

The Soviet authorities and the cultural bureaucrats &mdash now that was another thing altogether. I rarely have been as entranced as when Aksyonov told of being present as Nikita Khrushchev and other high state officials called Yevgeny Yevtushenko and other popular writers on the carpet during an official meeting in the early 1960s. Here he didn't mince words. The harrowing experience of those writers was transferred in whole to all of us who were present. We knew that by the hairs standing up on the nape of our necks.

Another thing too was humor. Vasily Pavlovich never passed up a chance to have a good laugh. He was particularly mirthful about the Russian émigré community in Paris, which was split into warring factions led by Andrei Sinyavsky and Vladimir Maximov. I asked if he had any preferences and, with a twinkle in his eye, he said, "If I had to spend time with one of them, it would probably be Maximov. But if I had to read one, I'd rather it be Sinyavsky."

For someone of such fame, Vasily Pavlovich was extraordinarily personable &mdash I would even say "down home." He put on no airs whatsoever. He was courteous and friendly and when speaking with someone, he always looked the person in the eye. A seminar with him was hardly what you would call a "seminar." They were chat sessions. Naturally, Aksyonov did most of the talking, but he fed off questions. I remember, in the ignorance of my greenness, wanting one afternoon to prove something, although I'm not quite sure now what

it was. I interrupted Aksyonov as he spoke and asked some silly, not to say insolent, question about moments he might be ashamed of in his dealings with the authorities. Aksyonov, understanding that ignorance isn't the worst of sins, didn't bat an eyelash. He talked at length and in great detail about the tightrope everyone in his position had to walk.

By the time he finished, I remember feeling equally chastised and enriched.

At the urging of Vasily Pavlovich I wrote a seminar paper comparing Andrei Bitov's novel "Pushkin House" and Sasha Sokolov's novel "School for Fools." The professor liked it enough to suggest I publish it and, indeed, he later actually helped me place it in a Russian-language émigré publication.

The point here, of course, is Mr. Aksyonov's generosity. He exhibited this again one afternoon when he spoke to us about the poetry of Yevgeny Rein. He knew we could not be familiar with Rein because he essentially had never been able to publish in the Soviet Union. So the professor brought in three samizdat collections of Rein's work that Rein had given him prior to Aksyonov's final departure from the Soviet Union in mid-1980. He read from them, discussed their content and passed them around for us to hold and see. After class I asked Vasily Pavlovich if I could somehow obtain copies of these extremely rare, handmade books. Aksyonov said, "Sure. Here. Xerox them &mdash but don't lose them, please. They mean a lot to me." And he turned and went off down the hall.

When I moved to Russia in the late 1980s, I left my enormous personal library with a friend in the States. Those three Xeroxed books, however, are still with me.

When the semester came to an end, Professor Aksyonov was nonplussed. The university had informed him that seminars must conclude with a final exam. No ifs, no buts &mdash university regulations. The last thing Aksyonov wanted was be a test monitor. Showing ingenuity worthy of a great writer and a fine human being, he found a way out of the predicament.

"I can't give people exams," Aksyonov told us on the last day of class. "So here's what we're going to do. We're all going to meet in the café at the Watergate Hotel. You have to be there. It's an exam. I'll buy oysters and you all get A's for coming."

Vasily Aksyonov was a giant of a man in an era that had a way of making mincemeat of people. We are richer for the books he left us and the covenants he kept. Those of us who had the honor to cross paths with him personally, even briefly, know well the deep and lasting impact he had.

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