

Joseph Brodsky on a Boomerang

By [John Freedman](#)

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As the saying has it, what goes around comes around.

What prompts this small outburst of folk wisdom is a letter that arrived in my Facebook mailbox a few days ago. It came from upstate New York via an editor's desk in Moscow, a response to a blog I originally published in this space a month ago about the scholars and publishers Carl and Ellendea Proffer and the poet Joseph Brodsky. That blog reached some readers by way of a supplement called Russia Beyond the Headlines, which is published periodically in numerous newspapers around the world, including the New York Times. Various stories from The Moscow Times, including my blogs, are utilized in these supplements, and an editor for RBH was kind enough to track me down and send me the letter.

That is the "how" of this little tale. The "who" is the authors of the letter, Gene and Gloria Donen Sosin.

Gene is the former Director of Broadcast Planning at Radio Liberty and the author of "Sparks

of Liberty: An Insider's Memoir of Radio Liberty." His wife Gloria is a writer, teacher and translator whose books include "Red Letter Year: Munich 1950-51," a memoir of a year she and her husband spent interviewing Soviet immigrants for the Harvard Refugee Interview Project, and "A New Life Is Coming Soon, The Story of My Father, Isaac Donen."

I am particularly touched by the fact that Gene and Gloria met while attending a Columbia University course on Dostoevsky taught by Ernest J. Simmons, one of the founders of Slavic studies in the United States, and an author without whom I could not have completed my own graduate work.

All of which brings us to the "what" of what I am up to today. The Sosins wrote to me about one particular encounter they had with Brodsky after he arrived at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1972. It captures a single moment of discovery and calls to mind a vivid and very human picture of the great poet sitting on the edge of his bed, dumbfounded by what he has just learned.

Here are the relevant excerpts from the letter signed by both Sosins, but evidently written by Gloria.

"John Freedman's article about Ann Arbor, the Proffers and Joseph Brodsky caught our eye today. Shortly after his arrival in the United States my husband and I had the pleasure of meeting him and talking with him at length when he was teaching in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan, my alma mater, and also that of sister and both our children....

"At our first meeting we recall a fascinating exchange of ideas and incidents. He was delighted to converse with us in Russian although his English was excellent. When we entered his small dormitory room he was reading a letter from the Soviet Union. I asked to see the envelope, tore it open at the seam and showed him a tiny numerical imprint, the mark of the censor, something he had never seen before. I told him that I correspond with relatives in Russia and that a Russian emigre friend had pointed out to me the censor's mark on the envelope — an imprint or stamp. We showed him the censor's imprint embossed on the inner flap and visible only when the envelope is torn open. He could not believe his eyes.

"The next day the room was filled with cigarette smoke, and Brodsky was sitting on the bed surrounded by countless envelopes. He looked tired and disheveled. He'd spent the whole night searching for those minute numbers and suspected that even in exile he was being monitored..."

For anyone else hungering for more on Brodsky, I direct you to Gloria's anecdotal [account](#) of hunting for the poet's books in New York bookshops shortly after he received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1987.

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