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WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?

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Dissident Russian painter Alexandr Zhdanov is not a happy camper. Five years in America - expelled from his native country on the eve of its collapse - this enfant terrible of the Russian avant-garde is still living like a pauper in a small one-room apartment in Columbia Heights, on a peculiar block where fellow emigres are packed into boarding rooms like beluga caviar shipped into a Black Sea port.

Bad timing and diamond-hard luck, it seems, have conspired against him. The end of his five-year struggle to leave the Soviet Union coincided with the earliest stages of glasnost and perestroika. But by the time the avant-garde was finally recognized in Moscow, Zhdanov was gone, "expelled" - as he'd asked to be - for "artistic incompatibility with the Soviet Union" in 1987.

Ironically, after coming here, his work has been displayed at Moscow's famous Tretyakov Gallery. Says Norton Dodge, who recently donated his huge collection of Russian underground art - including many Zhdanovs - to the Zimmerly Museum at Rutgers University, "To Zhdanov and the other underground artists of that period, it {Tretyakov} was the big stamp of approval after years of official nonrecognition."

Greet Zhdanov outside his shabby apartment building in the noontime heat and he spits on the ground. His shirt is unbuttoned, his gut hanging over his belt. Idle men shuffle in from Malcolm X Park at the end of his block. Across the street, the Pitts welfare motel is living up to its name. Zhdanov sweeps a hand across the scene, a surreal shard of his shattered emigre dream. It's not what this Russian expected of America, where, he thought, every artist is free to be free - and to strike it rich.

"Only a bastard knows how I am," he finally sputters.

It's not surprising that he's a little hot around the collar. To the very day he left the Soviet Union, he fumes, he was "hounded by the ideological watchdogs. And here in America, there is nothing. Who gives a damn about an old Russian artist?"

Zhdanov came here expecting to be discovered like a starlet at a soda fountain, but has found nothing but grief. (He emigrated first to New York City, but soon moved to Washington, in part to be close to his stepdaughter, Vassa, who lives in Virginia.) Yet if there were a hall of fame somewhere for Soviet dissidents, he would be there, in the visual arts section. Beside his name and that of his wife, Galena Gerasimova, would be an asterisk noting that they were, in effect, political trapeze artists, the first relatives of a defector ever let out by the authorities. (His stepdaughter, a member of the Soviet Olympic swimming team, defected in 1982.) Zhdanov may lack the status of a Solzhenitsyn or a Sakharov, but for sheer goading and bullying the Soviet authorities into submission, this man had few equals.

When finally pink-slipped from the republics, he was forced to abandon a lifetime of work that he has never recovered. Now, his only link to his paintings is file after file of photo slides: There are portraits that evoke the long suffering of the Russian people, and the mysticism of figures in flight across the vast landscapes Zhdanov once roamed in Russia and, particularly, Siberia. There are victims of Chernobyl, hauntingly portrayed in stark, horrific colors. Throughout all of his pieces there is a choking claustrophobia, a crowdedness that seems to lay all of his motherland's misfortunes in one common heap.

Zhdanov's signature is black-and-white tones that seem to absorb a rainbow of color. But he is an artist grounded in the oldest classical school of Russian European culture, a base he uses as a springboard for the exploration of archetypal themes through experimental techniques.

Collector Norton Dodge calls Zhdanov's paintings "absolutely superb." Paul Goldberg, an Alexandria resident and coauthor of "The Thaw Generation," a book on Russian dissidents, labels him a "brilliant artist." And Alla Rogers, whose eponymous Capitol Hill gallery was the site of Zhdanov's first area show in 1991, praises his "aggressive, muscular style of painting."

And so it rankles Zhdanov when he hears of foreigners, mostly German and French, swooping into Moscow or St. Petersburg, snapping up the occasional lost Zhdanov, while the artist himself is lost in America, profiting nothing from these sales. From where he sits now, like a piece of deadwood torn from a rotting tree, the move to America has made barely a speck of difference in his quality of life. He has, in many ways, traded one prison for another. And he can't help but wonder, since he first landed on this alien shore, if he didn't leave Russia a little too early.

But for Zhdanov to go back, it will always be too late.

Still hearty if not hale, he is going on 56, old enough to have come of age at the height of Soviet repression. Soon after his stepdaughter defected, Zhdanov made up his mind to leave. When he refused the authorities' demands that he call publicly for her return, he says they tried to bribe him with offers of a summer dacha and a studio in Moscow. "I didn't want privileges from those scum," he says, spitting again. "I only wanted to paint, or to be heaved out with my art. Worse than taking me out and shooting me, they spit on me."

Instead of conforming, he crawled away in search of some dank darkness and found it in the artistic underground. His work was shown in private exhibits and by the maverick Committee of Leftist Artists in Moscow.

But life outside the conformist circles of social realism - the Soviet Union's only sanctioned art - was not a pleasant one. Zhdanov was accused of parasitism, and in 1986 his apartment was set ablaze and his studio destroyed. Ironically, these troubles resulted, Zhdanov says, in "the best work of my life. When my daughter defected it was a very strong push in my development. I had lots of real masterpieces that came to me through revelations of the spirit. You know, when people live on the edge, they are always very good."

But finally he could no longer live with the mounting tension. In 1987 he and his wife chained themselves to the U.S. Embassy fence in Moscow, and for the next 164 days periodically went on hunger strikes to demand free passage to America. On Oct. 22, 1987 - a day when then- secretary of state George Shultz was arriving in Moscow - the KGB removed this embarrassing blight. The agents unchained the couple, knocking Gerasimova off her feet and breaking her leg. The two were handcuffed together in that feeble condition, dragged through the dirt of Sadovoi Circle to a police car and whisked off to jail. Today, on a wall in their Columbia Heights apartment, the actual wooden crutch that carried Gerasimova to America is preserved as part of a mixed-media still life portraying a jail cell. The piece is titled "Perestroika."

Within 10 days of the arrest, the couple was expelled from the Soviet Union. They went first to Vienna, then three months later received refugee status from the United States. But the artist's work - some 1,500 pieces - was left to collect dust in Russia, and the artist, without his art, to collect dust here in America.

Zhdanov says his arrival here was the culmination of everything he had been taught to believe in since his inauspicious birth in 1938 during the Red Terror, Stalin's brutal collectivization and liquidation of the peasants. As a Cossack, he was never of pure Russian stock. His people were among the greatest horsemen - and freedom seekers - the world has ever known, immortalized in the verse of Gogol as almost congenitally incapable of living unfree.

Zhdanov's father was an artist, too, although he was never able to develop his talents after the government forced him into a military career. His mother was a librarian who, by his account, instilled in him a voracious appetite for classical literature. At age 21, Zhdanov entered the Grekov Art School at Rostov-on-the-Don, graduating six years, and four expulsions later, in 1965.

Already he was chafing under the strictures of social realism. For a while he straddled the line, creating purely representational art in school and nonfigurative art on his own. "I was staggering back and forth like a drunkard," he says of his efforts to discover ways of keeping his integrity without compromising his official good standing. The point of no return came when he painted what he calls a "psychological portrait" of Lenin: a chilling evil expressed in the eyes was not at all what the authorities who commissioned the piece had had in mind.

As a result, his applications to join the Union of Artists were rejected, so he spent several years living the life of the hobo artist, knapsacking between Moscow, Leningrad, Rostov and Kalinin, ignoring the law that required all Soviet citizens to carry internal passports.

Settling in Moscow in the early '70s, he met his future wife, a mathematician and Communist Party member. Day and night Zhdanov worked from her dacha on the Moscow River outside the city. There, he helped fuel an avant-garde movement that was slowly becoming radicalized. Meanwhile, in 1979, he was accepted by the official Moscow United Committee of Graphic Artists. But the affiliation meant little: Few of his works were selected for exhibitions, and many of those that were chosen by curators were removed from exhibit by higher officials.

Zhdanov believes he had been irrevocably marked for exclusion several years earlier when he'd fallen in with a group of artists who organized one of the landmark exhibits of nonconformist art. The artists defiantly appropriated a huge section of wooden fence in downtown Moscow on which to hang their works; when the authorities leveled the show later the same day, the event became famous as the "Bulldozer Exhibit."

Today that 1974 show is remembered as one of the first public scuffles in the cultural war between right and left that rages to this day. What's more, it gave other artists the courage and inspiration to paint as they saw fit, to make abstract art, and to ask the irreducible question: How can we believe in a system that does not believe in us?

Zhdanov is proud of his presence there at the first barricades. "Only we had the courage to speak up," he says. "Outside of a few famous dissidents, everyone else only grumbled under their breath, many of them artists. We were all alone on this limb."

In Zhdanov's case, this willingness to speak out sprang from an inner need. In 1986, for example, months before the explosion at Chernobyl, he had begun having strange premonitions, nightmares of charred victims that he rendered on canvas. Two weeks after the reactor explosion, he risked his life to capture the people of Chernobyl. "Everyone," he says, "was afraid to open this question." He considers those portraits the major loss of what was left behind.

Through American television coverage of private exhibitions of Chernobyl paintings, the plight of the artist and his work were finally brought to world attention. The spotlight further encouraged him to seek asylum. In America, he believed, he could live free to confront "the great facts of life."

But the America he's discovered has turned out to be another kind of postmodern nightmare, a Wild West where lawlessness holds sway. Last summer, for instance, Zhdanov was brutally mugged for a pocketful of change outside his apartment. For once in his life, he did not resist.

His wife was mugged on the same block but she stubbornly managed to hang on to her money. "This boy come up to me and ask for my money," she says. "I spit on the ground and tell him, 'You give me your money.' He look so confused. He just ran away."

In America as well as in the Soviet Union, Gerasimova has always done a lot of heavy lifting for her husband. Since coming here, the 59-year-old woman has helped support the couple by cleaning houses while Zhdanov works on his paintings. But the emigre experience has only sharpened her determination: With the help of Steven Wilhite, a local actor and director who spent six years teaching Russian at the prestigious Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif., Gerasimova has dedicated herself to finding her husband's lost art. "It's such a bitter irony for Alex," Wilhite notes. "After a lifetime of being on the cutting edge of the Soviet Union's underground avant- garde, he's been tossed into obscurity here in America, just at the time when the guard has changed in Russia. It's also a time when Zhdanov's art and the whole Russian avant-garde is gaining widespread recognition, not only in Russia itself, but all through Europe."

Wilhite has translated hundreds of Gerasimova's letters petitioning the U.S. and Russian governments for help in finding the Zhdanov collection. (Before leaving Moscow, the couple had stored the works in an apartment and deeded them to the U.S. Government as a way of thanking the United States for providing a home for Vassa. When embassy officials went to the apartment, however, the entire collection had vanished.) The campaign and the official responses it has generated are neatly compiled in a bound booklet that would do a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer proud, but to no avail - both governments insist they have no idea where the art is.

Zhdanov has pretty much sat out the letter-writing campaign. For one thing, he is handicapped by his stubborn refusal to

learn English. "Why bother?" he says. "My art will always speak for itself." For another, he adds, by 1990 he had completely exhausted the store of energy that propelled him from Russia. For a time, he says, he could not even paint. "I almost died. ... I was so empty inside."

He says there is no fight left in him to return to Russia to track down his work. "I might die if I go back because I can't hold this suffering. I don't need {the works} now anyway. Finally I've reached the point where all art from the past comes up from my soul."

During his five years in America, Zhdanov has had the occasional minor show in New York, Boston and Washington, but perhaps none was more poignant than one this summer. It was a homecoming, of sorts - the first exhibition of his work sponsored by the Russian Embassy. There at the Russian Information Center on 18th Street, of all places, Zhdanov stood smoking a stogie, humming like a bumblebee in a bouquet of flowers, darting his head this way and that and soaking up the supreme irony of it all. His art was being sponsored by officialdom, with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Vladimir Lukin, acting as his gracious host. Once again for Zhdanov, life had turned oddly inside out.

Zhdanov is now in the midst of what he has called an extremely creative summer. In a little log cabin that his stepdaughter recently rented for him in West Virginia, he has been stretching canvas after canvas and turning out prolific pictures of Pan, a mythical Slavic god of the fields and meadows. Now Zhdanov roams the countryside around his stepdaughter's house, he says, "in search of the same spirits of nature" he once found in Russia.

When he isn't busy painting, he is writing letters back home, stream-of-consciousness diatribes that disabuse friends of any notion that, in America, art and culture are highly valued. Gerasimova has made photocopies of these letters, iconoclastic chronicles of an emigre experience that she hopes to turn into a book. In them, Zhdanov admits to groping not for the old faith but a new one, somewhere between the extremes of capitalism and communism.

And so, in his art-filled Washington boarding room earlier this summer, on the phone with a presumptuous Russian television director who is lecturing him on painting, Zhdanov answers angrily and spits on the floor.

"Excuse me, Volodya," he says, "but you don't understand anything, and thanks all the same but I won't come visit. You come here and go through America's school of life and art!"

[[Illustration]]

PHOTO, Bill Snead; Caption: Alexandr Zhdanov in his Columbia Heights apartment/studio. "Only a bastard knows how I am," he says of his life in the U.S.; Ironically, after years of suppression, Zhdanov's art now sells in Russia.; "Apotheosis of Yeltsin" (August 1991), created after the failed Soviet coup, captures some of Zhdanov's feelings about both Russian and American politics (note the two politicians represented).

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