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Alexandr Zhdanov; Soviet Dissident Artist and D.C. Barfly

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Alexandr Zhdanov, a Soviet dissident artist whose life and work were marked by difficulty, defiance, determination and more than a touch of madness, died July 18 of a heart ailment at Howard University Hospital. He was 68.

In the 1970s and 1980s, he was part of a group of independent-minded underground artists who challenged the authority of the Soviet Union's communist officials and sometimes paid a bitter price for rebellion. His uncompromising stance as an artist and as a free-thinking dissident reached the gates of the U.S. Embassy. Then, two years before perestroika brought an end to the Soviet regime, he was thrown out of his homeland.

In 1989, Mr. Zhdanov settled in Washington, where he made haunting, sometimes grotesque, paintings and built a reputation as a serious artist and an often-drunk bohemian. Known to all as Sasha, he was burly, wore a white beard and spoke only a few rudimentary words of English, most of them profane. He often appeared in Adams Morgan bars with fresh paintings rolled under his arm, then bartered his artwork for vodka, ranted in Russian, leapt on bandstands and left his acquaintances puzzled, angered and charmed by his mercurial presence.

"He was that raw, authentic beatnik species," said Stefan Sullivan, a Washington writer who first met Mr. Zhdanov in Moscow shortly before he was expelled from the Soviet Union.

"He was sort of like a dancing bear," said Bill Duggan, owner of Madam's Organ, the Adams Morgan restaurant where Mr. Zhdanov went almost every night, when he wasn't banned from the place. "He could look like a little kid with a glint in his eye, or he could look like the devil."

As an artist, Mr. Zhdanov adopted an expressionistic style to depict the stark landscapes he knew during his youth in the southern part of the Soviet Union and Siberia. His early works were often dark and earthy, but in the United States he discovered bright acrylic paints, which brought a new light to his work. He had shows in galleries across the country, and dozens of his pieces hang in a collection of Soviet dissident art at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Some of Mr. Zhdanov's work was purely abstract, and he painted rugged, de Kooning-like portraits. But he was best known for his brooding nocturnal landscapes, which featured the moon, leafless trees and mysterious figures lurking in the gloom. He said the figures represented Pan, the mischievous Greek god of the wild, but some observers saw them as veiled images of himself.

"It was as if people were fleeing through the forest at night," said Alla Rogers, a Washington gallery owner who gave Mr. Zhdanov a solo exhibition in the early 1990s but refused to take him on as a regular client because he was so hard to deal with.

"As crazy as he was, he was not a vicious person," Rogers said. "He led a very difficult life, but he was a dedicated artist and he was true to his vision, always."

Alexandr Pavlovich Zhdanov was born Jan. 11, 1938, in Vyoshenskaya, Soviet Union. His ancestors were Cossacks, a group known for its combative independence, and his father was a member of the Soviet military.

Mr. Zhdanov was expelled four times from the Grekov Art School in Rostov-on-the-Don but managed to graduate after six years. In 1973, he moved to Moscow and within a year was part of a group of artists who used a wooden fence as an exhibition until authorities knocked it down. The incident, which became known as the "Bulldozer Exhibit," was among the first overt acts of defiance by Moscow's artistic underground.

In 1982, Mr. Zhdanov's stepdaughter, a member of the Soviet Olympic synchronized swimming team, defected and made her way to Virginia. Authorities offered Mr. Zhdanov a studio and a dacha if he would demand that she return, but he refused.

"I didn't want privileges from those scum," he told The Washington Post in 1993, spitting for emphasis. "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."

During the 1980s, his vigorous artwork was featured on U.S. television news, yet he was not allowed to show his work in official galleries or museums. He and his wife, Galina Gerasimova, staged periodic hunger strikes, and on Oct. 22, 1987, they chained themselves to a tree outside the gate of the U.S. Embassy.

Soviet agents handcuffed them together and dragged them away, breaking Gerasimova's leg in the process. They were banished for "artistic incompatibility with the Soviet Union" and given a month to leave the country.

After living for about year in the Russian immigrant community of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, N.Y., they moved to Washington and eventually settled in a rough neighborhood on North Capitol Street. Gerasimova, a mathematician in the Soviet Union, cleaned houses and looked after children to support her husband as he struggled to restart his career.

After the collapse of communism in 1989, his art was exhibited in prestigious Moscow galleries, and in 1993 his former country gave him a one-man exhibition at the Russian Embassy.

His changing fortunes only left Mr. Zhdanov embittered. He alleged that the State Department, in a conspiracy with the KGB and CIA, refused to turn over 1,500 paintings he left in Moscow. His wife wrote hundreds of letters and once marched with a sandwich board in front of the White House to rally support for her husband. The State Department could find no evidence of an agreement, and many of the paintings were later found intact in a Moscow apartment.

On the open market, his paintings have sold for almost \$50,000, but Mr. Zhdanov had a way of undercutting his best interests. He quarreled with gallery owners, sometimes demanded that collectors return his paintings and often sold artworks worth thousands for a \$50 bar tab.

"He had the arrogance of someone a little bit removed from reality, which he was," said Rogers, the art dealer.

In recent years, Mr. Zhdanov often retreated to paint at a small house near Front Royal, Va., but the rural peace was almost too much for him. Soon enough, he would be back at Madam's Organ with more paintings to sell.

"In the 15 years I've had that bar," said Duggan, the owner of Madam's Organ, "he never bought a drink or a meal -- and he earned every one."

Survivors include his wife, of Washington; his stepdaughter, Vassa Olson of Locust Grove, Va.; and two grandchildren.

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