

An Exile's Dilemma

To return to the Soviet Union or not to return? That is the question now facing one of Russia's most popular novelists. On August 15, 1990, the citizenship of Vladimir Voinovich—as well as that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, and other Soviet artists-in-exile—was restored. But going home poses problems. Voinovich describes his dilemma.

by Vladimir Voinovich

If you want something good to happen in Russia, said the Russian writer Kornei Chukovsky, you have to live a long life. Chukovsky took his own advice—he lived 87 years (from 1882 to 1969)—but the good thing never happened. My generation had better luck. Without even reaching old age, we have seen changes that our predecessors could not have imagined.

Normal Westerners cannot understand the heady excitement of buying a ticket to visit the place where you were born and raised, where the people closest to you live and the people related to you are buried. We Easterners, anything but normal, think it the very pinnacle of happiness. Until recently, we who were born and raised in the Soviet Union were divided into two categories: those who could not be let out, and those who could not be let in. The privilege of two-way traffic was granted only to those few people who had won the regime's confidence by demonstrating the ability to deviate from all accepted standards of morality.

Since my service to society had always received negative ratings, I belonged to the first category for the first 48 years of my life and to the second category for the next eight. Then came perestroika, and in time the Soviet border became more permeable, even to types such as me.

In the last two years I have visited my

country twice, though both times as a foreigner. A Soviet newspaper suggested that I stayed only long enough to turn up my nose and stomp off. American newspapers also carried accounts of writers who had returned to Russia to give talks and readings and then decided not to stay. But most accounts neglected to mention one point: The writers in question were not given the choice of staying.

And then on August 15, 1990, that changed. After a decade of exile, I am now permitted to live in the Soviet Union again. Something I have dreamed of ever since I boarded the plane that took me from Moscow to Munich in December 1980 is now a real possibility.

Even back in 1980, I was all but certain that in five years the Soviet Union would undergo major changes. When in June 1981 Leonid Brezhnev signed a decree depriving me of my citizenship, I wrote an open letter: "Being moderately optimistic by nature, I have no doubt that your decrees depriving our poor country of its cultural dignity will eventually be revoked."

With Brezhnev's death (November 1982), I wondered whether the changes wouldn't come sooner than I expected; with Yuri Andropov's (February 1984), I decided, no, not yet. But when Konstantin Chernenko was buried (March 1985), I returned to my original prognosis. Five years after I left the country a new man came to

power, a man I immediately trusted as much as Margaret Thatcher did. (Although, in truth, I trusted the situation more than I trusted the man: The Soviet Union had come to an impasse, and the only way forward was radical reform.)

Before long, political prisoners were released, although not in the way I would have liked. Instead of being legally rehabilitated, they were simply pardoned, just as common criminals might have been. At least it was a step in the right direction, I thought. Gorbachev had enemies galore; he needed to move carefully. Rehabilitation would be the next step and not only of "politicals" but of all those writers, artists, and musicians who had been deprived of citizenship.

How it would happen I didn't know. Perhaps at some stage of perestroika someone high up in the hierarchy—the Soviet ambassador to Germany, the minister of foreign affairs, even Gorbachev himself (why not?)—would invite me to Bonn, Moscow, the embassy, the Kremlin, a restaurant, and there he would say, "Well now, Vladimir Nikolaevich, we've been thinking, pondering, debating, wrangling... and, well, to come to the point, we've concluded that you have been done an injustice. Of course, Brezhnev and company are to blame, but we are sorry it happened, and we feel it's time for you to come home." At this point, he would read a decree restoring my Soviet citizenship.

So I sat waiting and ready for more than five years—sat, as we say in Russia, with my neck already washed. And now, a little tardily, it has happened: The president has signed his decree, the foreign

minister has issued his order, the Soviet ambassador has carried out his instructions, the cultural attaché has phoned to say I can come to the embassy to pick up my Soviet passport. This seems the opportune moment to put on a dark suit and a black tie and to retrieve that precious document with its red cover.

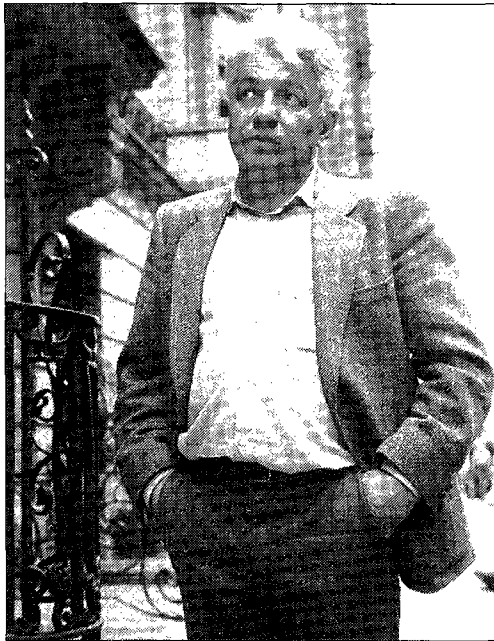
But I'm in no hurry. Before taking advantage of a Decree from the Almighty, I'd like to ask its author a few questions. I would like to ask the president what sort of conditions for my return he has in mind.

Will all my books be published, or only certain ones? What size will the editions be? Only big enough to give to Party delegates in the Kremlin and to sell to tourists in the dollar shops, or enough to satisfy demand? And, while I'm asking, I'd like to know whether I get an apartment, and, if so, where and what size? (I'd like a big one, please, in the center of town.)

Such questions may strike the Western reader as odd, if not impertinent. After all, in the West the housing problem is a money problem. If you have the money, you live where you please; if not, you revise your

expectations. But in Moscow money is not yet the main factor. True, a few apartments have come on the market lately. But most are still allotted according to age, health, occupation, number of years employed, length of residence in Moscow, military record, professional accomplishments, distinguished service to the State, Party affiliation, or membership in prestigious organizations.

And that poses some problems. For one, I never joined the Party. I was *once* a member of the Union of Soviet Writers.



The Exile's Dilemma. Voinovich inspects the cityscape of New York—one of many cities he has visited since 1980 but not called home.

Once, but never again. It has committed too many crimes against literature, writers, and me personally. To set foot in the same old offices with the same old men who made my life miserable and drove me from my country—no, not on pain of death.

But why, the Westerner may wonder, is this a problem now? It is because every Soviet citizen is required not only to work, but also to have a “certificate” proving that he does. If I refuse to return to the Writers’ Union, who will give me that certificate? No one. And every citizen without a certificate is a “parasite,” subject to criminal proceedings. I was considered a parasite for nearly seven years after my expulsion from the Writers’ Union, that is, from March 1974 until my forced departure in December 1980. During that period a policeman by the name of Ivan Sergeevich Strelnikov would come regularly to my door. Scraping and bowing, he would say with an idiotic smile, “Can you tell me where you work, Vladimir Nikolaevich?” I’d say I worked right where he saw me, at my desk. And he would ask, “Tell me, what do you do for a living, Vladimir Nikolaevich?” And I’d answer, “I’m a writer.”

“Can you show me the ‘certificate’ that proves you’re a writer?”

“I can show you the books that prove I’m a writer.”

After leafing through the books with great curiosity and respect, he would sigh and tell me that books were insufficient documentation. He needed a document that said that such and such a citizen worked at such and such an enterprise.

Times have changed. I may be able to come up with a certificate declaring that it took a certain amount of work to write my books. Or to apply for one of those new licenses, just as taxi drivers or tailors do, and go into business for myself. Then I could live there on my own—except that I wouldn’t be *on my own*.

Which reminds me of an old Jewish

joke. One day the *shtetl* matchmaker pays a visit to Rabinowitz and offers to marry his daughter Sarah to Count Potocki. Rabinowitz is indignant: “Marry my Sarah to a goy? Nothing doing!” The matchmaker pulls out all the stops. He describes the Count’s riches, the life Sarah will lead, the carriages, the jewels and fine clothes, the balls with magnates and princes. Finally Rabinowitz gives in. “All right, so let her marry your goy.” The matchmaker runs out of the house, wiping the sweat off his forehead. “Phew!” he says. “Now all I have to do is persuade the Count!”

My case is more or less the same. Let’s say someone persuaded me to go back; let’s say I persuaded myself. That still leaves two other people: my wife and my daughter. My wife and I could probably come to an agreement, but with my daughter things are a bit more complicated.

She had just turned seven when we arrived in Germany. In the Soviet Union she hadn’t even started school. Her formal education began in a foreign country in the middle of the year. We were very worried. Needless to say, the teacher took her by the hand, walked her to the classroom, and said to the class, “This little girl’s name is Olya, children. She comes from Russia and she doesn’t know a word of German.” The children were so taken by the introduction that contact between them and Olya was established on the spot.

Within three years little Olya was at the top of her class in German. Now she speaks perfect German, excellent English, and decent but accented Russian. You can tell at once she’s a foreigner. Where would I be taking her, then? To her “motherland?” Why? To wait in endless lines for bananas, pantyhose, laundry detergent, batteries, and just about everything else? To join the Komsomol and study Marxism-Leninism, or refuse and turn dissident? In any case, things will be different when she’s older. She’ll go off on her own, no

Vladimir Voinovich, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is considered by many to be Russia's greatest living satirist. Voinovich was born in Dushanbe, the capital of Soviet Tadzhikistan, and his formal education—interrupted by war and the need to work—consisted of the first, fourth, sixth, seventh, and tenth grades. Since his first novel, We Live Here (1961), he has earned his livelihood as a writer, publishing among other works The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin (1975), Moscow 2042 (1986), and The Fur Hat (1988). He lives in Stockdorf, West Germany.

matter what. Then my wife and I will decide where to live. And Moscow is a distinct possibility.

But for 10 years there was no hurry to make a decision. The cultural attaché didn't call; no telegram arrived. Until August 15 of this year, there was nothing but official silence. But silence has a history, too, and at different periods that silence took different forms.

During the years of stagnation, it consisted of the Soviet press leaving us unwilling émigrés alone—indeed, making us believe that we had ceased to exist. I grew used to it. I had been ignored long before I was forced to emigrate. At one time there was an unwritten rule that any expulsion from the Writers' Union merited at least a brief mention in the Union's newspaper, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. I believe I was the first writer whose expulsion went completely unmentioned. The authorities did everything in their power to make my name sink into oblivion. Not only did they say nothing positive about me—the usual treatment—they said nothing negative. My books were removed from libraries, individual pieces cut out of back issues of newspapers and magazines; even references to my name in reviews or surveys were carefully crossed out.

Once a foreign critic in Moscow asked a Writers' Union boss what he thought of me. "What was that name again?" the boss inquired. "Voinovich? A writer, you say? Just a minute." The boss reached for a directory of Soviet writers. He found the right page and ran his finger down it. "Give me the name once more, will you? Let's see—Vinogradov—Volkov. Look, there's even a Voinov. But Voinovich?" He looked up. "Sorry, there is no such writer."

And when I left the Soviet Union, I vanished into thin air.

With the coming of perestroika and the first bold efforts to tell the truth about Soviet life, you would think there would have been a kind word for those who had earlier told the truth and paid for it with their freedom or with exile. But no. Instead came vicious attacks. The press version of the recent past ran more or less like this: We have just come through a terrible period of great trial; some unable to withstand it left the country; they left volun-

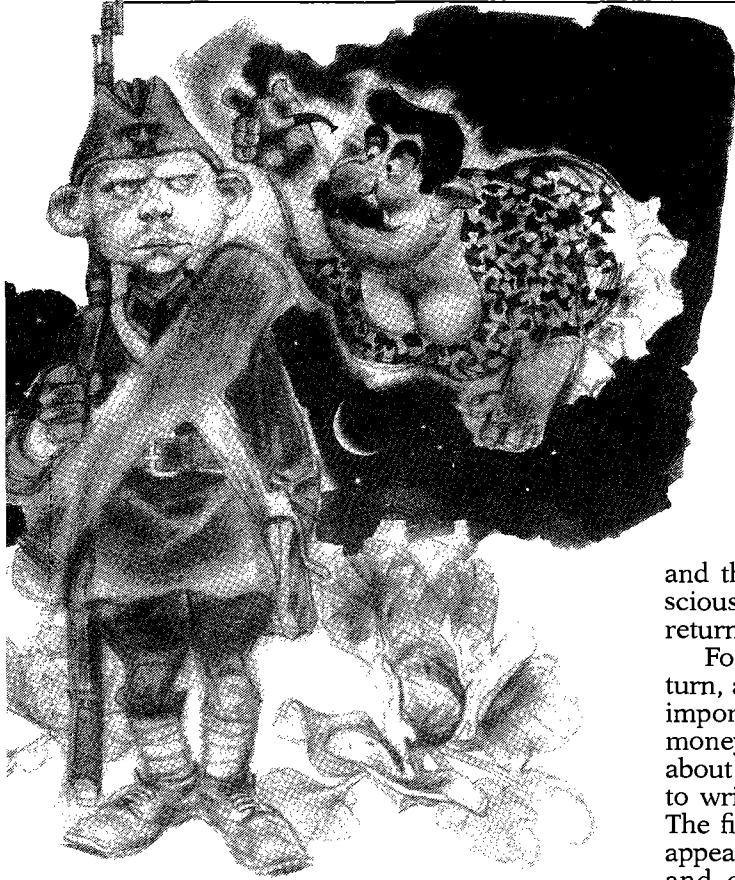
tarily either out of weakness or for economic gain, for the gin and jeans of *la dolce vita*. Now that we have perestroika, they regret having left and fear becoming useless, so they hate us more than ever.

In the early days of perestroika, in 1986 and 1987, Soviet newspapers condemned us as a group. Later they switched to individuals. First on the docket was the old-timer Victor Nekrasov, author of *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (1946), the most famous Soviet war novel. One article gloated over how the "unscrupulous traitor" was completely ignored in the West and at the age of 75 was living off "the refuse of Paris high life" under a bridge on the Seine. Next to be attacked were Vassily Aksyonov, Vladimir Maximov, and Georgy Vladimov. Finally my turn came as well.

Literaturnaya Gazeta broke its usual silence on the subject of exiled writers to say that virulent anti-Soviets like me had never believed in anything before perestroika and so could not be expected to believe in perestroika itself. What is more, I had publicly denounced perestroika. (Completely untrue: I had come out in favor of it.) Even perestroika's vanguard organ, *Moscow News*, depicted me as an enemy of change. By referring to "those Voinovich types," it promoted me to a category.

If all this had been written by Party hacks and the KGB journalism department, I wouldn't have minded so much. But my return to Russia and to literature, like that of other exiled writers, was opposed even by fellow authors. They had their reasons. The first was fear of competition. Too many writers had gotten used to an artificial world in which the most interesting books went unpublished, and what was published was chosen not by supply and demand, but according to who was in favor with the higher-ups.

In the Soviet Union, you must understand, there is something that might be called "bigwig literature," written by the Writers' Union bigwigs, who until recently enjoyed extremely privileged positions. They received enormous royalties and prizes. They lived in apartments and dachas luxurious by Soviet (and sometimes not only Soviet) standards. They traveled abroad as they pleased and were chauffeured about Moscow in official limou-



Private Ivan Chonkin has become a folk figure in Russia. In the novel Chonkin is haunted by a nightmare of Stalin as a woman in a dress.

sines. All Soviet newspapers reviewed their works in the most glowing terms, comparing them to Shakespeare's tragedies and Tolstoy's novels. Then, suddenly, with the dawning of glasnost, their books stopped being published, their royalties dropped, invitations from abroad fell off and critics began passing them by or dismissing them with a few pejorative remarks. The resentment of such "writers" thus makes a sort of sense.

Sadder, perhaps, is the fact that even the talented writers—a much smaller group, to be sure—have misgivings about our return. During the period of stagnation they were published less frequently than were their bigwig colleagues, and their perks were more modest. But they did enjoy a certain prestige. If the press

praised them less unstintingly than it did the bigwigs, the reading public, deprived of other living models, raised them to the heights of the Soviet Parnassus. And like the queen in the Sleeping Beauty legend, they want to make certain they remain "the fairest of them all."

Finally there are Writers' Union stalwarts who, though perfect conformists before perestroika, now claim to be heroes of anti-socialist, anti-Soviet labor. Needless to say, they too are eager to avoid the ironic, reproachful looks of the returnee writer.

In short, nearly all Soviet writers had a stake in keeping us out, and they did everything they could (consciously or unconsciously) to prevent our return.

Fortunately, our books were able to return, and with the market now playing an important role in things, our books made money. Soon, the press grew embarrassed about repeating the standard lies. It began to write about émigrés in warmer terms. The first less-than-hostile references to us appeared in the press only three years ago and consisted of one-line throwaways, oblique remarks, conciliatory but always qualified. They (we) had done certain bad things (left our country, spoken on enemy radio stations), but before that we hadn't been so bad, we were even good at times, and in these days of glasnost, perestroika, and the filling in of the blanks of history, they (we) might be partially forgiven—the good things remembered, the bad things forgotten. The first recipients of this plus/minus treatment were Andrei Tarkovsky, the film director, shortly after his death, and Victor Nekrasov, of whom I spoke above, only days before his. I couldn't help recalling Pushkin's line, "The only ones they love are those who've died."

The first to break the ice among the living was the well-known Soviet filmmaker Eldar Ryazanov. For years, he had wanted to make a film of my novel *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (1975), and he decided the time had come to try. The journal *Youth* also expressed an interest in publishing the

novel. I was skeptical, but things did seem to be moving in the right direction.

They came to a standstill in June 1988, when I landed in the hospital and my doctors announced that I was on the verge of a serious heart attack. I nearly dropped dead on the spot: Was it possible that I would fail to see my books published in Russia, in Russian? Would I be like Tarkovsky or Nekrasov and fail to hold out?

Luckily I was saved by a by-pass operation. Soon thereafter, while I was convalescing, a reporter from Radio Liberty brought me a copy of *Moscow News* with an article by Ryazanov entitled "Magnanimity." Ryazanov used the article to beg the authorities for a generous, open-minded approach to émigrés in general and to me in particular. But to echo one of Pasternak's heroes, I neither expected nor wanted magnanimity from anyone. Based on a false premise, the article had a false ring to it. Yet it was the first time in at least 20 years that my life and work had been assessed in a positive light. The Radio Liberty reporter put his microphone to my pale lips and asked me what I thought of the article. "I'm a bit disconcerted," I said. "I'm told by my doctors that I'm doing well, but the only ones they love are those who've died. The only exception I know of is Nekrasov, and the minute they professed their love for him he died. In other words, they are never wrong."

But time has passed, I have (more or less) recovered, and my books have been published in Russia and read by millions. One has been filmed (*The Fur Hat*, not *Chonkin*) and a number of them staged. And I've been to the Soviet Union twice. Been twice and left twice.

Before my first trip I more or less assumed there would be some official interest in my returning for good. I wouldn't have been surprised if Gorbachev had taken advantage of the occasion to annul Brezhnev's decree and return my citizenship. In fact, something of the sort did happen, but on a sublimely ridiculous level.

Just after I landed, a reporter from Moscow television congratulated me on the annulment of my exclusion from the Writers' Union. I hastened to point out

that I did not consider membership in the Writers' Union anything to be proud of. I needn't have worried: I was no longer excluded from the Writers' Union, but as a foreign citizen with a German passport, I could not be included in it.

A meeting with the head of Mosfilm Studios was particularly memorable. I arrived on the dot, but the secretary told me that I had to wait: "We're expecting a foreign delegation." I was annoyed at being brushed aside; then I realized I was the foreign delegation. I was immediately led into a room dominated by a long table of the type made for important deliberations. As the representative of Western capital (to which I in fact had only the most limited access), I had a whole side to myself. The Mosfilm representatives sent me broad smiles of peace and friendship across the table, but their eyes said, "You won't put anything over on us."

Mosfilm's higher-ups were as high as I got while I was in Moscow. Pretty high, but not enough to affect my situation.

Most of my other encounters with Russians took place in quite different settings. I gave at least 20 readings to packed halls with an average seating capacity of a thousand. There was no reading at which I wasn't asked whether I planned to return to the Soviet Union. A man who had heard me on Radio Liberty praised me for the love I bore my country and said he was certain that, given the opportunity to return for good, I would crawl back on my stomach. I responded that the country worthy of such a return did not exist.

On August 15 of this year, the authorities in effect admitted that forcing its writers and musicians and artists to leave their country was a criminal and barbarous act. Even earlier, Gorbachev had made occasional promises to prevent another such "brain drain." If he dragged his feet about reversing the one his predecessors had caused, I was not surprised. What surprised me was the seemingly utter indifference within Soviet society. A minor affront, such as the demotion of one or another hero of perestroika—Yeltsin, Gdlyan, or Ivanov—created a furor and sent thousands of people into the street. But that certain famous writers had not had their citizenship reinstated and that

others were not allowed to return even for a visit—this seemed to leave them totally indifferent.

I've read in Mayakovsky, "I'd like to be understood by my country, and if I'm not, well, I'll go through my country sideways, like rain in the wind." Will I be understood by my country? We'll see.

I've also read about penguins and foxes in the Antarctic. As long as a penguin is with its herd, its fellow penguins will defend it to the death. But the fox is in no hurry; it tags along after the herd until a straggling penguin lags behind. Then it pounces and tears its victim limb from limb. For all the victim's wailing, the herd fails to react: The penguin that left the herd is a loner. Like me.

How different would it be today if I returned to the Soviet Union—or, better, Russia? And why, anyway, do I think of returning? Because it is the country where I was born and where people think, speak, drink, write, read, and dream in my language. Because it is the country where my adult children live, my relatives and friends, the country where my parents and my sister are buried. It is the country where my books come out in enormous editions and are gobbled up by millions of people. (When I see the chaotic, the alarming conditions under which people live, I am amazed that they still devour books—and in such quantities.) It is a country where I have enough money to forget about money. And there is another important factor: Literature has always been the center of my life, but it has never taken over completely. To live my life fully, I need to take part in my country's life.

The Soviet Union is now undergoing changes I have waited for all my conscious life: the collapse of what was perhaps the most inhumane regime on earth, one that until recently seemed eternal, and, along with this collapse, the dismantling of the

Eastern European empire it held in its thrall. To my mind, this is the most important event of this 20th century, and its epicenter is Moscow.

Each individual has his own answer to the question, What makes you go on living? My answer is curiosity, mostly. I have always wanted to see things with my own eyes and be as much a part of them as possible. I used to dream of giving everything up and rushing back, back into the fray. But then I would think, What for?

History is like an earthquake or a live volcano: It is easier and safer to observe from a distance—on television, say. My life's work is writing books, a profession that requires a certain amount of peace and quiet, comfort, and stability. And the Soviet Union provides none of the above: Life is always seething, nerves are on edge; tension, even hatred, among various groups, classes, and peoples is on the rise. You still can't move from one place to another without a residence permit. You have to ask permission to go abroad. And just about everything is in short supply. Today the country appears to be moving toward democracy; tomorrow there could be a coup, a return to dictatorship.

I used to sit and wonder, Would I be sorry if I went back? Would I want to bolt immediately? Would I be able to? I couldn't sleep at night thinking about these questions. Sometimes I very much wanted to go back, sometimes I very much wanted not to. And now it's a real possibility. During my ten years of exile, not even the millions of people who read my books seemed to understand my desire to go back to them. Perhaps it's because so many of them dream of moving in the opposite direction. "Are you crazy?" many said to me during my visits. "If you miss us so much, just send an invitation. We'll be glad to come and visit."

—*Translated by Michael Henry Heim*