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Dissident for Our Times

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Russian essayist and philosopher Grigory Pomerants found his voice in a Soviet prison camp. He talks to Peter Thwaites

Periods of national crisis have a way of producing prophetic voices who speak with special sharpness and clarity. In Russia today, such a voice is Grigory Pomerants, one of the country's most original thinkers since the early 1960s.

Now aged 83, Pomerants is an essayist and philosopher, who graduated in 1939 from the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (IFLI) but was never allowed to take a higher degree or to teach at tertiary level. For five decades--until 1990--his work could not be published in his own country.

Born four months after the Bolshevik Revolution, he has lived through the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, three years of frontline war service including the Stalingradcampaign, and four years of political imprisonment. He has learned to walk towards and through fear, and to conquer it. He is a great mind and spirit who has refused to be crushed by what he calls `the reign of inertia'.

In his autobiography, Notes of an ugly duckling, he describes a childhood of sensitivity, introspection, insecurity and loneliness. He was born in Vilnius, then in Poland, and spoke Yiddish and Polish until the age of seven, when his mother and he followed his father to Moscow. His parents divorced when he was 12, and his mother left for Kiev, leaving Pomerants with his father.

He describes his years, from 1935 to 1939, as a student at IFLI as `ugly'. Arrests on suspicion were normal: his father was arrested and banished from Moscow in 1938. `I could not manage without consciously and half-consciously lying,' writes Pomerants. His thesis on Dostoyevsky was judged `anti-Marxist' and he was excluded from further studies.

During his four years' war service, Pomerants was twice wounded and twice decorated. In 1946 he was demobilized and expelled from the Party (which he had joined at Stalingrad) for `anti-party statements'. Three years of aimlessness and depression followed and his arrest in 1949 came even as a release. It was like the slap on a new baby's bottom to start it breathing, he says: he began to learn to make the best of every situation.

In prison, for the first time in his life, he found a society of people who understood him. In Soviet society he had been isolated. In prison everybody, except the actual criminals, was `anti-Soviet'. `I found for the first time an environment of live philosophical debate,' he writes. He describes his fellow prisoners, arrested for `talking too much', as `gasbags' who `philosophized irrepressibly in the evenings, lacing bookish phrases with thieves' language ... I felt like a fish in water.'

When Stalin died in 1953, Pomerants was released. He found work as a school teacher and then as a bibliographer in the Main Library of Social Sciences. `I found my own opportunities in this "failure's job",' he says. `In my lowly position I found a guarantee of freedom: no one could intimidate me by threatening me with the loss of my job.'

All his academic research had to be done in his own time and shared in the informal, unofficial, semi-tolerated twilight world of free inquiry and underground samizdat publications.

In that strange intellectual world behind the Soviet scenes Pomerants became well-known. In 1970 he attended a private seminar with Andrei Sakharov, the physicist and Nobel Peace Laureate, who wrote in his Memoirs: `I was astounded by his erudition, his broad perspective, his sardonic humour and his academic approach ... Pomerants is a man of rare independence, integrity and intensity who has not let material poverty cramp his rich, if underrated, contribution to our intellectual life.' He also locked horns on several occasions with Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who in From Under the Rubble (1974) criticized Pomerants' views but conceded that some of his statements were `strikingly true'.

Because his inability to conform earned him non-personhood in the Soviet world, Pomerants has had to rely even more on his own inner resources. His spiritual strength and personal authenticity sparkle through his writings and conversation, against the grey background of Soviet (and post-Soviet) conformity. This sparkle still captivates the young of Russia today: on my most recent visit, a young ceramic artist told me, `I adore Pomerants.'

Pomerants has survived by facing and reflecting on the realities both surrounding him and within himself, however ugly or distorted they may be. He expresses a deep religious faith that is open to the wisdom of more than one confession but is the fruit of personal struggle and experience. Much of the fascination in his writings is in his vivid accounts of these experiences and the sense that they form one piece with his scholarship and his philosophical reflections.

I first met Pomerants in 1992, when I was the driver of a minibus sent to collect a group of Russian scholars from the airport, who had come to attend a seminar on `moral lessons of Soviet history' at the MRA centre in Caux, Switzerland. Some of the group, like Pomerants--a small, wiry man with bright eyes, a beaky nose and receding, tufty hair--were already well-known. Others were from the young, post-Soviet generation. It was just months after the Soviet Union had ceased to exist.

In the distinguished group that gathered in Caux that year he stood out as an acute, and humorous, observer of human nature (including his own). One of his interventions was to point out that silence is an essential part of dialogue. The atmosphere of Caux captivated him and his wife, the poet Zinaida Mirkina, who accompanied him on two later visits. Some of the outpouring of poems she wrote there appear in her recent collection, Moi zatish'ya (`My moments of quiet').

In Moscow's New Times of November 1994 Pomerants described his impressions of Switzerland as a country where `the people do nothing to spoil the beauty'. He dubbed Caux `planet MRA', a place where behaviour normal on planet Earth seemed suddenly out of place because `the spirit of reconciliation reigned'.

He also recognized something familiar. `Action out of silence is an idea that is extraordinarily close to me. I did not know that the ideas given form in the verses of Zinaida Mirkina and in my essays are very close to MRA.... In MRA I easily march in step.'

In 1997 he published a book on MRA: `Running to keep up with God' (echoing a phrase of the initiator, Frank Buchman). Its opening essay--entitled, with wry Russian humour, The spiritual movement from the West--will soon be published in English by Caux Editions, along with two other articles by Pomerants: Russia's spiritual and social crisis and Europe, Asia and Russia--dialogue of cultures.

Later in 1992 I visited Pomerants in his small Moscow flat. He presented me with a copy of his book on Dostoyevsky--his first work to be published in Russia. Parts of the manuscript had been written for his `anti-Marxist' thesis, 50 years earlier. On a more recent visit, last June, my wife and I arrived to find him frying potatoes in the kitchen. He had travelled into Moscow from the dacha, where he and Mirkina spend the summer months, for his weekly `day in the office'. Our conversation was interrupted frequently by phone calls from friends and colleagues in Russia and abroad, who knew the day to reach him.

Before I first met him I had heard one person suggest that he was a figure of the past. Eight years later his inner life and mental activity are undiminished. A lecturer in religious studies calls him `the last of a great generation.... He has outlived practically all the dissidents of his generation and many younger ones'.

Pomerants spends his days speaking, writing articles and books, giving media interviews and publishing. His occasional lectures at the `Muzei Mitsenatov' (Patrons' Museum) are publicized mostly by word of mouth, but when in one television interview he inadvertently mentioned the venue of the next lecture so many people turned up that the event had to be postponed. His aim at these occasions is to bring together young and not-so-young `in the spirit of Caux'; not to talk all the time himself but to give inspiration to the listeners. He and Mirkina answer questions together.

In post-Soviet Russia Pomerants has been given belated recognition as a Member of the Writers' Union and of the Pen Club; a Member of the Academy of Natural Sciences; and as head of the Culturological Section in the Humanities Research Academy. But such status means little to him now. `The most important thing is the effect you have on the soul of the reader or the listener,' he says.

His passion to communicate comes from the belief that he has something vital to say in the present crisis of Russian (and not only Russian) society. He puts hope in the small, unseen groups of people in towns and villages around the country with whom he corresponds. He longs for such groups to coalesce and become more visible. Recently some of his articles on `the crisis of the sacred and the moral order' have appeared in teachers' professional journals which have a wide readership. `Schools must educate the personality,' he believes.

He sees both of the wars in Chechnya as disastrous decisions. But such mistakes cannot be quickly undone--the cure to the problem needs to be deep and long-term. He quoted a song by Alexander Galich: `I don't need "quick aid" (first aid), give me "slow aid" (long-term).'

The themes which preoccupy Pomerants--the wisdom which conquers fear; the embracing of difference; finding authenticity and wholeness as an individual, as a country, as the human race--are timeless. Like Dostoyevsky he is gripped by the

journey of a human soul, its adventures, struggles and discoveries. `Everything I write, I write via myself. I try to approach both God and people through "I", through the depths of myself that I can reach,' he writes.