

In Memoriam

Maurice Friedberg, who died on August 15, 2014 in Washington, D. C., belonged to the generation of scholars who following World War II established Slavic and Russian studies as a major campus discipline in the United States and had a notable impact on government policy toward the Soviet Union and its allies during the cold war. A Polish-born Holocaust survivor and life-long opponent of political tyranny of every hue, Maurice believed that novels and poems matter because they exalt the human spirit and help us make sense of ourselves and the world we live in, so that all those who banned, distorted, or falsified literary texts were, for him, beneath contempt and fair game for the crusading public intellectual, which is precisely what he was.

As the Head of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1975-2000 and a one-time Director of the campus Russian and East European Center, Maurice was a prominent national presence in the academic and wider worlds and was frequently interviewed by the print media, radio and TV about US-Soviet relations, the dissident movement in the USSR, Poland, and elsewhere, and a plethora of other current-affairs topics. He was a Fulbright Scholar (1965-66), a Guggenheim Fellow (twice, in 1971 and 1981), and a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1990-91). In the course of his four decades as a professor and scholar he accrued numerous other awards and honors, several of them at institutions overseas. Maurice's investigations covered Russian and Soviet literature, cultural transactions and transfers among the Western, Slavic, and Jewish worlds, the ideological competition between the Soviet Union and the West, and the methodologies of literary translation. His study *A Decade of Euphoria: Western Literature in Post-Soviet Russia* (1977) became a standard work on the subject as soon as it was published. It was an assigned text in Russian and comparative literature programs across the English-speaking world — I recall poring over it myself as a student — and, incidentally, brought down on its author the ire of Soviet propagandists, for this book showed how government censors bowdlerized the novels of foreign writers, quite without a by-your-leave or even knowledge on their part. Some of the American novelists whose works he discussed severed relations with their Soviet publishers, which pleased Maurice no end. He was able to visit the Soviet Union only after perestroika got rolling, for he had been a persona non grata across the Soviet Bloc: testimony to his effectiveness as an investigative scholar of the communist repression of culture. I should add that he was a wonderfully thoughtful and supportive mentor to his graduate students and junior colleagues. As a very young and callow Assistant Professor at Illinois in the 1980s, I benefited tremendously from his guidance and advice, as did a number of others among my contemporaries on this campus.

That much-used phrase, "larger than life," was eminently applicable to Maurice. Effortlessly switching from language to language, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, French, German, he was the life of the party or the seminar. He carried with him an inexhaustible and constantly updated trove of political jokes — he was even suspected of inventing some of them himself — which he joyfully shared with

colleagues and students and indeed anyone he engaged in conversation, be it in between sessions at an academic conference, at the dinner table, or during a flight. Some of his interlocutors were exalted in the affairs of state: he was a frequent visitor to Washington D.C., where he sat on a number of committees and enjoyed mixing with the high-and-mighty. As Maurice had it, it was he who told President Ronald Reagan, in the Oval Office no less, the story of the Russian houseguest whom his village host suspected of amorous designs on the lady of the izba: «Доверяй, но проверяй», trust but verify. This phrase, delivered in an atrocious Russian accent by the Chief Executive to all who would listen, became a leitmotif of the warming relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Maurice had the knack of speaking to a fellow Slavist or a lay person about his work and interest in all things Soviet and Russian in the same terms and tone, an ability few members of the academy possess. His thousands of students at Illinois and before that, at Hunter College and Indiana University, and his colleagues across the country and abroad will always remember him for his intellect, warmth, good humor, and compassion for those who fight against political and cultural oppression.

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