In 1988, when Russia was feverishly catching up with previously hidden literature, and when the West was exclaiming in delight over everything Russian, Vladimir Voinovich in emigration wrote a sad parable based on the life of the astronomer Galileo: “Skazka o glupom Galilee”.¹

Galileo, politically rehabilitated in old age, realizes that his youthful declaration that the earth turns on its axis was a terrible mistake. His lifetime in prison, with the resulting loss of youth, health and family, has been wasted because everyone else has known all along that the earth was not flat: his mistake was to say so at a time when it counted as heresy. What has he gained by being right if he might instead have waited for the earth to rotate until the “right” time to speak arrived, as it inevitably would?

Like Galileo, Voinovich had suffered the consequences of speaking out “first”, rather than at the fashionable time, saying what many others knew but chose not to express. In the late 1980s those things which had previously been unspeakable had suddenly become banalities, and writers by the score were pulling things out of desk drawers to be published and acclaimed. And he, Voinovich, having lost health, citizenship, home, relatives, pension, the right to a living and a voice, sat alone and largely ignored in emigration. In the parable a little boy explains to the astronomer that the wise person is not he who speaks first, but he who speaks at the right time, and Galileo concludes that his life has been in vain: because, having discovered much that nobody knew before, it is only at the end of his life that he has found out “the truth that other people grasp as children”.²

Voinovich comments no further, leaving the bitter conclusion hanging in the air. And we, his readers, look back over the life and extraordinary adventures of this resourceful author who has never deviated from his vocation, writing initially within the Soviet establishment but thereafter always from a position of exile: be that internal ideological exile; or geographical physical exile; or the chronological exile of a man ahead of his time.

Vladimir Nikolaevich Voinovich was born in Dushanbe in 1932, the son of a journalist and a schoolteacher. His education during the Second World War was fragmented: in his early youth he worked as a herdsman, carpen-

². Ibid, p. 142.
ter, factory hand, locksmith, railway labourer and aircraft mechanic. He served for four years in the army, where he wrote poems, had a few published and determined that the zamysel, that is, the purpose and potentiality of his life, was to become a writer. He was denied admission to the Gor'kii Literary Institute, but continued to write undeterred.

In the late 1950s he wrote "My zdes' zhivem", a more or less Socialist-Realist story about a naive young Muscovite writer visiting the virgin lands and failing to understand the life of the locals. It was written, bear in mind, by a naive young writer, Voinovich by name, visiting the virgin lands and succeeding in understanding the life of the locals. If nothing else, this is evidence of his initial self-confidence and belief in his own youthful vision. It also shows his faith in the willingness of the system to welcome his slightly anti-romantic contribution to the post-Stalinist literary "thaw". Operating within the constraints of Socialist Realism, he willed the system to work whilst leaving room for the individual.

In 1960 Voinovich's art was clasped to the very heart of the régime in the form of the song which was to become the unofficial anthem of the cosmonauts. Entitled "Chetyrnadtsat' minut do starta", this tribute to future interplanetary travellers was played frequently on the radio and was eventually crooned by Khrushchev himself from the platform of the mausoleum, an indication of integration and harmony between writer and state which it would be hard to equal.

In the chillier ideological climate of 1963, "Khochu byt' chestnym", the story which Voinovich later called his personal manifesto, was published. Originally entitled by its author "Kem ia mog by stat'" (What I Might Have Been), it focuses on the conflict between individual integrity and the expectations of the collective, indicating a growing internal conflict for the writer, and was criticized for failing to uphold the spirit of Socialist Realism.

From this point onwards, although his self-confidence is not diminished, we begin to see Voinovich take a different trajectory, moving away from the stance of the wryly optimistic insider. A pattern emerges of the writer standing aside from his society to view it more clearly, seeing much that inspires satirical comment, being criticized for this interpretation, and stepping further back for an even clearer view.