
This slim booklet consists of a poem written in 1950; it is the famous prose writer's debut in poetry. It has been known for some time that Solzhenitsyn did compose poetry while in labor camps. Fragments of this poetry have appeared in volume 6 of the Posev edition; he wrote in 1948-50:

"Pisat'! Pisat'-teper'-a ne potom!"

and he goes on to say that he did not take up poetry "for amusement," that he has paid a merciless price for the right to be a poet. Subsequently Solzhenitsyn mocks his wardens who search the inmates repeatedly: "A k chudu Bozh'emu, k neistrebimoi nashei pamiati/ Vy ne dotianne palacheskoi rukil" and he looks forward to the day when in "distant, dark exile" he will "liberate his tormented memory..."

A. Akhmatova disclosed that Solzhenitsyn had read to her an exceedingly long poem (10,000 lines) which he claimed had saved him in the camp; she thought that he had written it down after his release. Her judgment of the poem's merits was rather harsh: "'I told him: don't publish it. Write prose, you are unassailable in prose, while your poetry lacks mystery.' To which he replied: 'Isn't there too much mystery in yours?'" Admittedly, Solzhenitsyn's poem is not the work of a master who works on his lines at leisure; rather it is the ardent confession of a deeply disturbed eyewitness. It is difficult to speak of A. Solzhenitsyn's poetry as poetry. Still, as a poet he is bound to the Russian nineteenth-century tradition, yet he transcends his origin. The poem rings close to the work of such poets as Tvardovskii (Vasilii Terkin) and perhaps N. Nekrasov's works in the popular vein. At times Solzhenitsyn uses true accents of folk songs; the language and occasional alliterations instead of rhymes suggest folk poetry. The title is of course reminiscent of Odoevskii's "Russian Nights." The rhythm and meter are also close to folk poetry and the 4-foot trochaic line at times achieves a light, playful quality. There is, however, one passage where the meter abruptly changes to the slow, sorrow-laden dactylic line: this is the passage hinting at the tragic fate of Russian POWs, returning to persecution and punishment:

K piru ne prosheny, k prazdniku ne zvany,
V mire odni nikomu ne nuzhny,
Budto sklonias' pod topornoe lezvie,
Dvizhutsia k daliam zhestokoi strany.

The Soviet "liberation" of Prussia and the Russian entry into the same area in World War I provide focus for and reflection of the folly and chaos imposed by war on Germany's easternmost province. Structured on brief episodes, sometimes the merest glimpse, a fleeting picture, painted with a few deft touches, it is a first-person narration by a young Red Army officer. The narrator feels compassion, but remains an onlooker, a recorder, involved but passive: a young man who is not sure of himself and who does not yet know right from wrong. In fact he is rather like the "volniashki" (a prjorative appellation of the still free in The First Circle and Gulag Archipelago) who are hardly thought of as having souls.

The locale of the poem—Prussia—has apparently attracted Solzhenitsyn for quite some time. In his "Autobiographical Note" he wrote in connection with his arrest: "This happened in East Prussia, a region which is linked with my destiny in a remarkable way. As early as 1937, as a first-year student, I chose to write a descriptive essay on 'The Samsonov Disaster' of 1914 in East Prussia and studied material on this; and in 1945 I myself went to this area..." The same geographical names appear in Prussian Nights and August, 1914: Allenstein, Neidenburg, Orlau, etc. Reminiscences of World War I are woven into the poem, recalling General Samsonov and "the crosses of Russian bones.

On the other hand, Solzhenitsyn has a play "Pir pobeditelei" (Feast of the Victors) described as "a play written by heart in verse in the labor camp in Kazakhstan" that is set in East Prussia at the end of World War II. The author disowned it on the occasion of its confiscation by KGB agents.

2. N. Struve, "Vosem' chasov s Akhmatovoi" in Anna Akhmatova, Sochineniiia, II (Munchen, 1968), 343.
at the home of his friend Teush: “I myself have long since renounced ["The Feast of Victors"]; I have not even read it for ten years. I destroyed all copies of it except the one that was confiscated and that has now been reproduced.”4 The contents of this play are known partly through the—rather biased—summaries of its Soviet critics. The action involves the plight of some members of the “Vlasov Army” whom a young Soviet captain Nerzhin (echoes of The First Circle) advises to leave and helps to cross the front line to the West. The play was written in 1950-53 and has not been published (in accordance with the author’s decision) except: “A selection of passages . . . in a German translation by René Drommert: “Preussische Nächte,” Die Zeit, 47 (9 December 1969) . . . publication of further passages in Die Zeit was halted by Solzhenitsyn’s lawyer, Fritz Heeb; Burg and Feifer note (see 571, pp. 301-302) that the passages seem to be a compilation (perhaps by the KGB, which had seized the ms. from Solzhenitsyn in 1965) rather than a reproduction of any one section of the play).”5

The main difference between August, 1914 and Prussian Nights (30 years later) is the behavior of the respective “victors.” While the soldiers of the tsarist army are represented in a realistic enough manner as human beings, the Red Army men are a completely different breed of people: wanton destruction, uninterrupted looting, setting fire to buildings still intact make them look like an elemental violent storm rather than a civilized army. Most of the soldiers are in a drunken stupor as they sweep their violent path through the country. Senseless vandalism, unrestrained destruction of property on a vast scale are committed without expectation of gain, perhaps as an illustration to Bakunin’s “Die Lust zum Zerstoren ist eine schaffende Lust.” And a wild melody of Sarasate’s is repeatedly recalled as a refrain. Looting is of course in part explainable by the low standard of living: the “victors of Europe” are putting away everything:

Pylesosy, svechi, vina,
Trubki, iubki i kartiny,
Broshki, priazhki, bliashki, bluzki,
Pish-mashinki ne na russkom,
Syr i krugi kolsbasy,
Meloch’ utvari domashnei
Vilki, riumki, tufli, grebni,
Gobeleny i vesi . . .

The organized looting by supply officers is described, too: they do it in a leisurely fashion, pointing out what has to be packed (and they may be able to get it home, while the soldiers very well know that the weight of packages is limited and they will be thoroughly searched when returning home).

In addition to the all-pervasive themes of looting, shooting, drinking and destruction the poem is built on fast-moving episodes with many realistic, picturesque details. In talking about the military equipment of the Red Army Solzhenitsyn mentions in addition to “domestic” weapons (like the famous “Katiusha”) Dodges, Chevrolets, and “Yankee-autotacks.”

One of the most memorable episodes concerns a German communist, one of the few who remains behind (the population mostly fled before the onrushing “liberators”). He greets the Russians with the traditional “bread and salt” and shouts: “Ich bin Kommunist, Genossen!” (the style in general is sometimes macaronic, interspersed with German words and expressions). Needless to say, with the prevailing lack of trust, he is given short shrift and dispatched to Smersh (the army counter intelligence). In parting the naive Parteigenosse manages to communicate to the narrator his address with the request to visit his wife. Finally, he hopes to return; here the author dryly remarks:

... Vernesh’sia, zhdi . . .
Inostrantsy, inostrantsy!
Oi, po nam mladentsy vy . . .
Oi, ne snest’ vam golovy . . .

The whole affair reminds one of An Incident at Krechetovka Station where Tveritinov is dispatched to a similar institution. In this case even the hapless proletarian’s wife and teenage daughter are made to suffer: the wife is wounded and the girl raped by a whole company or platoon; she begs to be killed. The narrator is helpless: there are no doctors, drugs, or hospitals—everything has

4. Ibid., p. 129.