

From Leningrad to Omaha

By Craig Pugh

The temptation to cast winter as a snow-enrusted villain is great this year, what with the record snowfall and incessant cold we've had. Metro medians are still piled high with snow – have been for weeks – and neighborhood streets more often than not resemble crude skating rinks rather than residential roads built for the orderly conveyance of traffic.

Yes. It's bad. Ironically, it doesn't matter to me how much snow falls or how far the mercury drops. Why? Because I've had the good fortune to be reading the Russians these past few years, a literary journey that had me barricaded in my fortress with Harrison E. Salisbury's "The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad," this winter. Leningrad, where for three awful years during WW II almost a million Russian men, women and children starved or froze to death while the city was cut off, shelled and besieged by three million troopers fighting under Hitler's Nazi banner.

Leningrad, where people could not get enough food to live; Leningrad, where diamonds and other precious stones were eagerly traded for bread on the black market because after all, a diamond will not keep a starving person alive. No heat. Brutal winters where temperatures would fall into the minus 30s, 40s and 50s Fahrenheit.

So why read accounts of all this misery?

For context – to get a perspective of my own life and times.

The Russians. Have you been as seduced by their literature as I have? I came late to their genre, in spite of a lifetime of hearing about it. It's not that I didn't read: I always have; it's just that I read different stuff – Western lit mainly, all the dead white European males (DWEMs) who

were banished from university English departments nationwide years ago by man-hating feminist professors. I always liked reading those guys – Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Steinbeck come to mind – and since I'm a blue-eyed, white European male who will soon be dead, relatively speaking,

I have a lot in common with the DWEMs: They are my peeps and I'm sticking with them.

But far be it from me to get pigeonholed in a DWEM category; so, curiosity gaining the best of me (as it invariably does) I cast my literary net upon Russian waters a few years ago and began hauling in some writers. What joy!

As with many males, my heroes come principally from the military. But I have literary heroes, too – word warriors who, like military men, were willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause, people like the incomparable Mikhail Bulgakov, who threw his surrealistic masterpiece "The Master and Margarita" into the fire just as Stalin's

secret police were smashing the door down lest he be cast into a camp, Bulgakov who later uttered the defiant and immortal words that inspire any writer: "Manuscripts do not burn." So yes, he wrote it again from memory and on the sly away from the secret police, thank God, because "Master and Margarita" is one of the most delightful novels ever written, in my view. Please . . . get this book and read it!

And let's not let Bulgakov's "Heart of a Dog" go unmentioned since we're talking about this Russian literary genius who died all too young (1891-1940). "Heart of a Dog" has one of the most clever openings of any in literature I can think of save Georg Buchner's "Danton's Death," the brilliant play about the French Revolution that is at the heart of German repertoire theater. Bulgakov presents his readers with a dog who thinks, whose mind the reader gets inside; in fact, the narrative is from the dog's viewpoint. He has been scalded by a cook while rooting for scraps behind a restaurant and is lamenting his fate. Clever. Very clever. And jaw-dropping delightful. Pure genius. Bulgakov spent many years on the outs with Stalin, the brutal dictator who oversaw everything in Russia—even the theater. But Bulgakov died before reaching fifty, no doubt escaping Stalin's wrath.

Not so lucky was Pinhas Kahanovitch (1884-1950), who wrote as *Der Nister*, "The Hidden One." Born in Berdichev, a city under both Polish and Russian rule, depending on the year, Kahanovitch was rounded up by Stalin's secret police along with other Yiddish writers – Lvitko, Bergelsen, Markish – in 1949 and simply disappeared a year later. The laws of probability tell us one of two things happened: worked to death in a gulag or shot.

How brave these artists must have been! Kah-

prison, trying to get the whereabouts of his "The Family Mashber" manuscript?

According to a Professor Khone Shmeruk, it went like this: "Forgive me gentlemen, that matter is none of your concern. It was not for you that I wrote them, and my manuscripts remain in a safe place." Indeed. Only in 1986 was "Mashber" translated from the Yiddish; prior to that it lay dormant for years, a literary tour de force of magic realism that sweeps readers away, dragging them, happily, into the incredible world only writing can create.

Der Nister's story, being Russian, is layered with a final tragedy, for "The Family Mashber" has one of the saddest dedications I have ever come across arguably, in literature: *My child, my daughter, Hodele, tragically dead. Born July 1913 in Zhitomir, died spring 1942, Leningrad. May your father's broken heart be the monument on your lost grave. Let this book be dedicated as an eternal and holy memorial to you.*

Leningrad. There's that word again. Was Hodele one of the starved stick figures found dead and frozen under a pile of blankets in the morning? Perhaps she was among the bodies stacked like cordwood in the streets, or else trundled down on sleds to the frozen lake and unceremoniously dumped along with all the others. So tragic . . .

But at least reading about such tragedy makes me grateful for what I have – makes me realize that things could be a lot worse, even though times are tough in America for many people. Our political system is broken and dysfunctional. National unity is thing of the past; America has become Balkanized into warring factions. No one agrees on anything. There's no national conversation – only one big rolling argument. Tens of millions of working Americans have no

health insurance. In our public schools, almost 20 million students nationwide get free or reduced-price lunches on a typical school day. Snow day cancellations mean these low-income children get deprived of the only decent meal they would have had that day. This is not the America I grew up in or care to subscribe to. These are the symptoms of a dysfunctional country.

Of course we are nowhere close to Leningrad during the city's incredibly awful war years. For that I am grateful. And yes, most everyone agrees: our gov-

ernment's broken. But at least secret police aren't lining people up against the walls and shooting them.

These are the things I think about when I stand at my kitchen window at 6 a.m. watching the snow fall. I give thanks that I can feel heat pushing up from the floor vent, that I have coffee – good coffee – and a piece of toast to eat with a pat of butter – real butter. And suddenly the size of my house or the newness of my car mean absolutely nothing to me; suddenly I feel wealthy and fortunate. All because I am blessed with the gift of reading.

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**"Are your treasures, like mine,
not of silver and gold but of good literature?
If so, give me a Shout! and let me know
where your magic carpet ride
of reading takes you."**

anovitch's wife said when the NKVD came for her husband he greatly irritated them with a broadly mocking smile and the question: "Why are you so angry? I am happy that you've come." Among the last of the Jewish writers to be rounded up by Stalin, Kahanovitch in the end simply wanted to be with his literary brethren in the camps, so great was his solidarity with his fellow writers.

Talk about speaking truth to power: By all accounts Kahanovitch was delicate, refined, modest, quiet and handsome, an attentive and friendly listener. And what did he tell his NKVD interrogators as they beat him to a pulp, no doubt, in the basement of Moscow's infamous Lubyanka