



## IN MEMORIAM

Yuri Druzhnikov  
Professor of Russian  
UC Davis  
1933 – 2008

Professor Yuri Druzhnikov, born April 17, 1933, a literary scholar and author of numerous novels and short stories, passed away at his home in Davis on May 14, 2008. He was 75. Born in Moscow to a family of artists, Yuri exhibited early on an individualism that brought him into conflict with the Soviet authorities. As a high school student, his reluctance to accord Stalin the “proper” recognition for the latter’s role in the Russian Civil War was sufficient grounds for him to be denied the Silver Medal upon graduation and led initially to repeated rejections of his applications to Russian universities. After having been admitted to a Latvian university where he studied for two years, he eventually graduated from a pedagogical institute in Moscow in 1955 with a degree in history and philology.

Yuri’s younger years were nothing if not colorful. For a while he was an actor in a Russian Drama theater, and later he worked as a photographer editor, journalist, and as a traveling correspondent.

When Yuri joined the faculty of the Department of German and Russian at UCD in January, 1989, none of his colleagues had any idea of the remarkable fifty- five years of his life that had preceded his arrival in Davis. Some of us were aware of the fact that he had been censored for his writing in the Soviet Union, but most, if not all of us, were ignorant of the attack leveled against him in 1974 by the newspaper *Izvestiya*, which accused him of having slandered the Soviet people, or of his having been removed from the Writers Union of the USSR in 1977 and declared “a traitor to the motherland” for his participation in the Samizdat underground publishing movement. In 1986, he was threatened by the KGB with either incarceration in a prison camp or confinement to a psychiatric ward, where he might well have languished had it not been for the intervention of Western writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Arthur Miller, as well as, the International PEN- Club. Yuri was banished from his homeland a year later. He became a leading literary figure among Russian émigré writers while in exile, living first in Vienna, and then in Texas, before coming to California.

His works have been translated into several languages, including English. Yuri was clearly an individualist who early on demonstrated the courage of his convictions. That courage never left him. In his sensational exposé, *Informer 001 or the Myth of Pavlik Morozov*, a product of research carried out clandestinely in the Soviet Union between 1980 and 1984, he demolished the long- standing, “official” Soviet version of the young, thirteen- year old “pioneer” (who never was) and communist martyr – designated, in 1934, a Soviet literary hero at the First Congress of Soviet Writers – who had turned in his father to the authorities for treasonable activity. The boy was subsequently murdered, according to the authorities, by members of his own family. The young Pavlik did, in fact, denounce his father, but, as Yuri demonstrates, he appears to have been put up to it by his mother, seeking revenge for her husband’s infidelity. As to who actually killed Pavlik, Yuri establishes that it was certainly not family members who were hauled before a Soviet court and subsequently executed. No less a literary figure than Alexander Solzhenitsyn hailed the publication of the book in 1987, claiming that it was “through books such as this that many Soviet lies will eventually be

revealed.”

Yuri's best known novel, *Angels on the Head of a Pin*, set against the backdrop of the 1968 revolt in Czechoslovakia, was seized in its manuscript form by the Soviet authorities. A microfilm copy of the work, smuggled out of the USSR in a package of cigarettes, was later published in the United States and hailed by the Warsaw Conference as one of the ten best Russian novels of the twentieth century. It also received critical acclaim from renowned Russian émigré writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Yuri's last novel, *The First Day of the Rest of My Life*, was published just a month before his death in both Russian and Italian. An English translation is also planned.

Yuri was Vice- President of the American branch of the International PEN- Club, “Writers in Exile” section. The international stature that he enjoyed as a writer was underscored when, in 2001, Poland nominated him for the Nobel Prize in Literature. It was a mark of his modesty that this only became known to most of his colleagues after his death.

Yuri's professional life was devoted to his writing, but also to this University. He thrived in this milieu and never ceased to be grateful for an opportunity where he could give free rein to his creativity in comparison to the oppressive situation he had experienced for years in the Soviet Union. He demonstrated that gratitude in his dedication to his students. Yuri was a passionate and consummate pedagogue who gave freely and liberally of his time to generations of students, particularly with a plethora of individual study courses that enabled many to complete their degree in a timely manner. In a period of considerable instability within the Russian Program, his optimism never wavered and his collegiality remained unstained by pettiness and intrigue

We can list the stations of Yuri's life, Moscow, Vienna, New York, Texas, Davis, among them, and enumerate the long list of creative and scholarly works that emanated from his pen, and then his computer, the number of times he was subjected to the threats and chicanery of the secret police in his homeland, but they will always give an incomplete picture of the man. Each of us who knew Yuri personally, as a member of his family, one of his colleagues, a friend, has a separate memory of Yuri and experienced him in a different way. Nonetheless, there is a red thread that links together each one of the encounters that we have had with Yuri, namely, the lasting impression of a human being of extraordinary talent and yet of remarkable humility, of indefatigable creative energy, and yet of selfless dedication to his students and the language and literature program that he served for almost twenty years. Above all, it is the “human” aspect of this profound humanist that remains most poignant in our memory.

Yuri was a superb colleague, a gentleman- scholar in the truest sense of the word, and a revered teacher, who will be sorely missed by students, staff, and faculty. He is survived by his wife, Valerie, his daughter, Elena, stepson, Ilya, and sister, Ella Minuhin.

Winder McConnell  
Gail Finney  
Carlee Arnett