



IN MEMORIAM

Viktor Markovich Zhivov
Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures
UC Berkeley
1945 – 2013

When Viktor Markovich arrived in Berkeley to teach for a semester in 1993, it was something of an experiment for both him and the institution. He was a distinguished Russian scholar, a professor at Moscow State University, with an international reputation as a preeminent linguist, philologist and cultural historian. He did not have experience teaching American students or lecturing in English. It was clear that he would offer Berkeley's graduate students virtually unmatched knowledge about the development of the Russian language and early Russian culture. Russian linguistics, however, was a small field in the United States, and the Berkeley Slavic Department was updating its program to encourage its graduate students to venture into newly expanding areas of intellectual endeavor – such as gender studies, film studies, cultural studies, and new historicism. But the match proved to be made in heaven; in fact, it was so intellectually productive that a large number of scholars outside Berkeley would later claim it had been their idea.

The arrangement, which continued for the next eighteen years with Viktor Markovich teaching every spring in Berkeley, succeeded so well because, for all his erudition about the past, Professor Zhivov was profoundly fascinated by the present, by political events, the life of an American university, and intellectual developments in areas of the humanities that had little direct bearing on his field. Although he first trained as a linguist and was an active member of the Tartu School of Semiotics from its earliest days, his field of interests widened so that by the time of his death he was seen as a pioneer of a new interdisciplinary approach that combined linguistics (morphology, phonology), philology, literary scholarship, cultural history, and “the history of concepts.” Starting with internal, formal changes in language, his scholarship moved to consider the place of language in culture more generally, investigating how linguistic changes could be used to understand popular mentalities. His path-breaking monograph, *Language and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (1996, English translation 2009), one of the twelve books of which he was author or co-author, established a pattern of influential inquiry later characterized by an admirer as “the relentless search for macro-meanings in micro-phenomena: the particular flavor of Professor Zhivov's writings derives from the constant interplay of two apparent extremes: minute and systematic observation, and systemic general interpretation.” At times his study of linguistic practice provided the keys to phenomena more traditionally the province of cultural anthropologists and historians. He investigated not only the language of early Russian legal codes and the place of sentimentalism in the rise of Russian nationalism, but also the practice of infanticide, the cultural meaning of lechery and the historical evolution of Russian notions of salvation and sin. By the end of his life, he had established a remarkable record as a scholar who had written with great insight and tremendous originality about the history of Russian language and culture as they had developed over the course of an entire millennium.

Viktor Markovich brought this curiosity about diverse aspects of literature and culture to his work with graduate students and colleagues, which made him an extraordinary mentor and interlocutor. However,

although he recognized the importance of innovation, encouraging those features to a degree unusual for Russian academics – “great scholars always get carried away” he once said in an interview – he always insisted on the rigorous, meticulous grounding of conclusions in textual evidence, often dug up during painstaking archival research, a trait which helped produce original, thoroughly convincing work. He also proved to be a charismatic teacher, lecturing engagingly in English in his undergraduate classes. One student, who confessed that he had known nothing about medieval Russian culture at the start of the semester, said that in his classes Professor Zhivov made pre- modern Russian culture so rich and fascinating that it “burst at the seams”. His ability to hold the attention of an audience can be seen in his numerous appearances on Russian television over the past few years. Paradoxically, this specialist in medieval Russian culture was completely at home in front of a camera, establishing an immediate, authoritative but relaxed rapport with talking heads in the studio and with audiences at home. (As one of his friends put it, “Nobody’s eyes dance like Vitya’s.”) He wrote articles on current politics, advocated a radical reform of the Russian education system, publicly opposed legislation aimed at protecting the linguistic purity of the Russian language which, he maintained, had always been open to foreign influences – Pushkin’s poetry, he pointed out, had been none the worse for this – and spoke forcefully against corruption in the Academy of Sciences and beyond. He was a public intellectual, as well as a scholar, but neither role seemed to impede the other. In his final five years, the time of his greatest cultural prominence, he published 27 substantial articles about the history of Russian language, literature and culture and not only edited two volumes of the collected works of the eighteenth century poet, theoretician and philosopher, M.V. Lomonosov, but also three volumes of selected scholarly essays by himself and others.

Over the course of the past twenty years, Viktor Markovich changed his Russian institutional affiliation, moving from MGU to the Institute of Russian Language of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he chaired the Department of the Russian Literary Language as well as discharged his duties as Deputy Director of the Institute. For three years he served during the fall as Director of the UC Education Abroad Program in Moscow. And every year he would return to Berkeley for the spring, occasionally teaching additional courses at Stanford, where he was also in demand. The past decade was particularly fruitful, witnessing the completion of five scholarly monographs, including *Explorations of the History and Prehistory of Russian Culture*, *Studies of the Historical Morphology of the Russian Language of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, *From the History of the Church in the Time of Peter the Great*, *East Slavic Orthography from the Eleventh to the Thirteenth Centuries*, and *Studies of the Historical Semantics of the Russian Language in the Early New Time*.

Viktor Markovich was an expert on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church, a faith to which he had converted as a young man. He was also deeply knowledgeable about the history of Christianity in general. His religiosity, however, did not disturb the historian’s detachment and an appreciation of the pleasures – chief among them friendship and family – offered on this earth. He accepted change readily but was sober about the continued impact of the past on present life. He was one of the least doctrinaire people imaginable, critical of the present- day Russian Orthodox Church and its growing intolerance. His attitude toward life and work was both critical and accepting; he had neither a tragic nor an apocalyptic view of life, and his reluctance to close off discussion, his unwillingness to insist on simplistic, binary oppositions carried over into his life with colleagues and daily interactions.

In his final days, Professor Zhivov continued to work even while in great pain, pushing forward with his book, teaching and correcting papers until the last week of his life. He managed to complete the magisterial study on which he had been working for the past twenty years: a history of the Russian language from the origins of writing to the present day. For all his engagement with life, he faced death stoically, a personal as well as a scholarly model for his friends and colleagues. His death, at a time marked by his great scholarly productivity and cultural influence, is a tremendous loss for the intellectual community at Berkeley, for the field of Slavic studies throughout the world, and for Russian culture in general.

Prof. Zhivov is survived by his wife Mariia Konstantinovna Polivanova, his children Margarita, Stepan and Angelina, who were also frequent visitors to Berkeley, and his grandchildren, Nina, Arina and Mark.

Eric Naiman