

Kuzminsky, A Poet

Stuart Heady

“Look, man,” this Rasputin look-alike in a thick brown robe lectured, as he held up the little rubber spider that he had ordered, and which had just come in the mail along with belly button brushes and whoopee cushions. “These will destroy the police state more surely than missiles.”

He mimicked a Soviet customs guard. “‘And what is this?’ A joke. It’s funny.” He mimicked the facial expression, the contempt. The dismissal. “‘Move along. Move along.’” Returning to himself, he pressed his point. “KGB has no sense of humor. They cannot imagine and this gets past them. But a child understands.”

Konstantin Konstantinovich Kuzminsky was born in November 1941, just before the siege of Leningrad. He was a poet’s poet. He passed away May 2, 2015. He was a warrior of the human spirit and advocate for the truest freedom for the mind and heart and soul. He survived the worst that the police state and the twentieth century could inflict. He taught all those around him to be free in their minds. He inspired many.

He was noted for memorizing poems and stories by many of his generation’s best “unauthorized” poets and writers. He became a repository for the underground poets and artists who were still in the Soviet Union after he emigrated in the mid-seventies. Packages would arrive at his little house next to a beer garden on the east edge of the University of Texas pretty frequently. He had a definitive collection amassed, which became organized as an academic collection under the title, “The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Russian Underground Art and Literature.”

He came to the West through the intervention of Robert and Susan Massie, who were in Leningrad researching their book and movie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*. Kuzminsky served as a tour guide and consultant, as he knew the city intimately and spoke perfect English.

They published his biography and work in a volume featuring five important young Russian poets. This was his ticket out. Kostia was recruited for a teaching position at the University of Texas at Austin. He taught comparative Russian and American literature. His wife Emma had been an architect. Her English was not so good, and she had to work at UT as a janitor.

I spent a lot of time during 1977 and over the next several years visiting and interviewing Kostia. I also produced some poetry video featuring his performance. His most powerful work, I thought, was a blenderized mixture of many languages, musical sounds, and alliterations (see “Wazamba Mtuta” on this page).

One video employed a talk show format featuring Kuzminsky and Allen Ginsberg. Kostia had glommed onto the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg as a student, and he was inspired to be a Russian beat poet. Their work, Kostia explained to me, gave him and his peers a model, a way to be free of all the constraints that Soviet writers were constantly pressured to conform to. A whole generation of young writers was searching for intellectual freedom, and Ginsberg had been a big inspiration. The interview did not go well, however, as Kuzminsky—who had been harassed and nearly killed by the KGB secret police and who had friends who had been killed—insisted on lecturing Ginsberg on anti-communism. The two tried to find a cordial thread, but mostly this revealed how different experience can be.

During those years he suffered from severe culture shock. He was deeply, bitterly disappointed with the lack of passion in most Americans, their failure to test the limits of freedom, to try to

get away from what he termed “mediocrative” living or thinking. “You have Soviet Union in your heads,” he would say.

He consumed huge quantities of anything alcoholic and even remotely drinkable. When he was sober he was brilliant. When drunk he would be in a deep melancholy or powerfully, biting-critically. He was interested in helping anyone understand and could be very good at teaching.

One time when I came over he was waiting for me. He laid out a copy of *Pravda*, a newspaper famous for being state propaganda, and a copy of the local daily, *The Austin-American Statesman*. He gave me a detailed tutorial on each story and feature, comparing both newspapers. It was brilliant and chilling. I was stunned to realize just how similar the media environment in both countries was for the average citizen. The true nature of the dissident is to be mentally strong, and it may require enormous courage.

I was deeply moved by how passionate someone could be about art and life and still have the intellectual honesty to see through what otherwise is just given for us to see. I am a much freer American for having known this salty fish of Russia.

His favorite metaphor, one of hope, was that of the single blade of grass found growing up through a crack in concrete paving.

He really was, himself, a blade of grass. Das Vidanya and Nostrovvia Good Buddy!

Wazamba Mtuta

Konstantin Kuzminsky
in memoriam Henry S.

Twijanzi janzi o katakiro
Kabaka kadzi Uwuma mtiro
Uzoga gamba mga Muiwanda
Kagahi Manwa Uchambi chongo
Bambara Njaza a’ngo Ukimba
Masai sorgo tarenga bwana
Kabasa simba mungwai Mpapa
Kiluzu a-i bwan!

Tongo-tongo
Kacheche zuna
Liwumbu mganga
Liwumbu tjana
Liwumbu w’ana
Mombitu tembo

Aija-marumbu hihja-ehihju
Sengoro mtezu a’zumba kwiha
Bekumbi njero bataty taro
M’baro m’baro

Aruujuni Kilima mtambwa
Tumba marambo
Kanja marambo
Arja kutimo
Sambo masimbo
Amba!
Ugogo!



Kuzminsky would perform this as if he had a drum beat that moved faster and faster until the final syllables. It is an example of using words in a musical way, abstract like a painting. This form of poetry very much upset Soviet censors who wanted to see only concrete meaning. Thus, it was a minor act of rebellion to write in a musical mode, nonsense to the literal-minded. He said the “language” of the poem came from Zanzibar.