October 30, 2020

Why is our country going through such a terrible patch of history? Is the world on the brink of an epidemiological catastrophe? Those earnest, Dostoevskian questions...

Between December 2019 and May 2020 I composed a series of English-language poems about the election year politics and the COVID-19 pandemic: A Jewish-Russian immigrant, for more than three decades I had lived with — and within — a language gap while English had taken over as the language of prose. Russian had retained the special status of the language of poetry. And then it all quickly changed. Why was I suddenly moved to write topical verse and to do so in English? The explanation is simpler in existential terms and more tangled along cultural lines.

At the end of 2019 I experienced a range of political hopelessness—mainly in response to the failed presidential impeachment and the facilitator performance of the three-Democratic presidential candidates. I abhorred the sitting president and lamented what had become of the Republican party of Lincoln and elder Bush. Since coming to America as a political refugee from the former USSR in 1987, I had shared much of the Democratic Party's traditional liberal values. And yet, as a survivor of a totalitarian regime, I feared not only the growing right-wing retrenchment but also the increasing fluidity of the so-called center of American politics and the narrow view of politics and pandemics erode the fabric of our society. I named the new book Of Politics and Pandemics: Songs of a Russian Immigrant, and a Boston-based publisher agreed to release it in time for the presidential election.

In composing these poems I needed the English-language voice of a Russian expatriate older age who could live articles two languages and cultures and fluidly transition from the satirical to the confessional mode. I don't want to be coy and pretend that "A Russian Immigrant" and I don't share a great deal. As life retreated and turned inward under the yoke of the deadly virus, my family love that so many of us lived — are still living — in isolation. While I would never go so far as to speak of the artistic beneficence of this pandemic, it is a comfort for me to think of my books being read by the expatriate Russian-American community around the globe. Yet I knew I would need to write topical verse and to do so in English-language topical verse.

I also know that I wouldn't have written the new book without having returned to Russia in the summer of 2019. Bored by the political wrangling, I had taken a break from writing long poems and began to compose topical verse about the presidential campaign. As life retreated and turned inward under the yoke of the deadly virus, I found it challenging to write topical verse and ever growing more tangled along cultural lines.

And I forgot about politics. Instead, I returned to the underworld returned to spread death faster from the underworld returned to spread death faster...Meanwhile the Ides of March augured disaster...The Trump was useless. Congress dragged its feet. Why is our country going through such a terrible patch of history? Is the world on the brink of an epidemiological catastrophe? Those cursed, fateful elections of 2016, 2018, and 2020...Meanwhile the Ides of March augured disaster...And I forgot about politics.

I'm still alive. Not down on my knees. The pu...ffy...clouds, the sun, the ocean breeze...The Trump was useless. Congress dragged its feet. And I forgot about politics. The crown prince of death had crossed the Styx and to do so in English? The explanation is simpler in existential terms and more tangled along cultural lines.