

# Remembering Joseph Brodsky<sup>\*1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present article is a memoir that recalls the author's friendship with the Russian poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky. The author first met Brodsky in Leningrad in 1969 while a graduate student on the US-Soviet scholarly exchange, and they remained friends until Brodsky's death in 1996. The memoir is chiefly devoted to the author's encounters with Brodsky himself, but also offers a portrait of his parents and some of his friends within Russia. Brodsky emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1972, after which he took up residence in the United States. The memoir discusses the challenges that emigration posed, the ways that Brodsky met them, and finally the significant influence that Brodsky had on American literary culture.

## Keywords

Joseph Brodsky, the Brodsky trial, Russian literature in the 1960s, Joseph Brodsky's family, Russian emigration, US-Soviet academic exchanges, literature in exile, Frida Vigdorova, Carl Proffer, George Kline, Andrei Sergeev, Romas Katilius, Mikhail Mil'chik, Anna Akhmatova

I clearly recall my initial encounter with Joseph Brodsky, or at least with his name. It was the fall of 1964, and I had just entered the graduate program in history at Columbia University. Late one afternoon I wandered

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<sup>\*</sup>) A slightly different version of this article, adapted to a Lithuanian readership, will appear in Lithuanian in the volume: Romas Katilius, ed., *Josifas Brodskis: lietuviškosios sąsajos* [Joseph Brodsky: Lithuanian Connections], Vilnius: R. Paknys Publishing House. The author thanks Raimondas Paknys Publishing House for kind permission to publish this English version.

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into the periodicals room of Butler Library. While browsing the shelves, I noticed a magazine entitled *The New Leader*. I wasn't familiar with this publication, but its cover advertised an article about the recent trial of a young Russian poet named Joseph Brodsky. The heart of the article was the unofficial transcript of the Brodsky trial that the courageous Moscow writer Frida Vigdorova had taken down in the courtroom. To judge from the transcript itself, the trial's overall atmosphere was grotesque. But the young poet's simple and trenchant responses to the prosecution's abusive questions and the judge's browbeating made a strong impression on me, so that both the trial and Joseph's name stuck in my memory.<sup>2</sup>

Four years later, in August 1968, I set out for Leningrad, where I would spend a year doing research for my doctoral dissertation as part of the academic exchange program between the United States and the Soviet Union. I arrived only a few days before the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The invasion marked a stressful point in the Cold War, but its reverberations did not affect me directly in Leningrad, where public discussion of such events was severely constrained. During that fall semester I met Elisabeth Robson, a graduate student in Russian literature from Oxford. She had been studying in Leningrad for over a year, during which time she had acquired a circle of friends in the city. At some point in late November or early December, she invited me to join her in visiting Romas and Elia Katilius. Romas was a Lithuanian physicist who had received his Ph.D. at Leningrad University. While studying there he had met and married Elia, a woman who had matriculated to the physics department at Leningrad University from her native Uzbekistan. So on that wintry evening Elisabeth and I made our way to the communal apartment on Chaikovskii Street that Romas and Elia shared with their infant son Andrius.

I don't recall this original meeting with Romas and Elia in much detail, but I distinctly remember liking them immediately. Their portion of the communal apartment was a large room with high ceilings. A series of

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<sup>2</sup> "The Trial of Iosif Brodsky," *The New Leader* (August 31, 1964). For documentary materials as well as perceptive analyses of the trial and Brodsky's early career see Efim Etkind, *Protsess Iosifa Brodskogo* (London: Overseas Publication Interchange, Ltd, 1988) and Iakov Gordin's more recent *Rytsar' i smert'; ili Zhizn' kak zamysel: O sud'be Iosifa Brodskogo* (Moscow: Vremia, 2010). For an illuminating recent biographical study see Lev Losev, *Iosif Brodskii: Opyt literaturnoi biografii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), in English as Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, tr. Jane Ann Miller (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011).

shelves effectively divided the room into two separate halves. Early in the evening Elia put Andrius to bed on the far side of these shelves and sat with him until he went to sleep. Afterwards, we all sat around their dining table and drank tea and ate bread, butter, cheese and sweets until late in the evening, speaking *sotto voce* so as not to awaken Andrius. I had no way of knowing on that evening that my meeting with Romas and Elia would result in a lifelong friendship.

I knew from conversations with Elisabeth that Romas and Elia were close friends of Joseph Brodsky's, but during my initial visits to their apartment he was never there. At this time it had been roughly three years since Joseph had returned to Leningrad from the exile in the Russian north that followed his 1964 trial. He was someone whose trial and exile had become part of his public identity. I was aware that he was a poet who enjoyed a considerable following despite the fact that virtually none of his poems had been published in Russia. But at this point I had not seen any of his poems myself, and certainly I had very little notion of what he was like as a person. One evening in February 1969, I visited Romas and Elia on my own. (Elisabeth had returned to England in January). Late that evening, Joseph showed up more or less out of the blue after calling from the street to make sure it was convenient for him to drop by. What I remember most vividly is that neither his personality nor his physical appearance corresponded to my mental picture of what a poet (or a political martyr) would look like. For some reason, I had anticipated someone who was tall, rather thin, and taciturn if not outright severe in his demeanor. (Where this vision originated I can't say, since the only serious poet I had known personally in the United States was not at all like this). In any case, Joseph confounded whatever preconceived image I had not only of his appearance, but of his overall bearing. He was burly, of medium height, and conveyed an impression of physical strength and agility. He spoke rapidly, so that I could not always understand his colloquial Russian, and he had a generally lively manner. He greeted me warmly, said that he had heard a lot about me from Romas and Elia, and seemed genuinely happy to meet me. His energetic conversational style and his constant recourse to humor made a strong impression upon me.

When it came time to leave, Joseph offered to accompany me to the nearby Chernyshevskii metro station, mentioning that he lived only a couple of blocks away. The streets were deserted at this hour, and we made small talk on the way. At the entrance to the metro, he said: "Here's my telephone number and address. Call me and come around." He said this

almost insistently, leaving no doubt that he was sincere. I wrote his coordinates down and called him a few days later. He was out, and I didn't call back immediately.

Some days later I was crossing the intersection of Srednii Prospekt and the First Line on Vasil'evskii Ostrov, a site made noisy by traffic and trams that screeched as they turned the corner. Suddenly I heard a voice shouting "Sam!" which was certainly unexpected. I looked across the intersection and saw Joseph, who was motioning for me to come toward him. When I got there he asked: "Sam, why haven't you called?" I told him that I had called once, but that he had been out. To which he responded: "Look, let's fix a time. Why don't you come over tomorrow night at seven?" So we met the next evening, and fairly frequently thereafter for the rest of my stay in Leningrad. I've often marveled at this fortuitous encounter on Srednii Prospekt, coupled with Joseph's insistent invitation: they initiated a friendship that might otherwise not have happened.

My initial hesitancy in looking Joseph up deserves some explanation. The Leningrad of 1968 was a society in which literature, at least for the educated population, still occupied a central position in everyday life. In part, this was the legacy of literature's social as well as aesthetic prominence within the culture of the Russian intelligentsia, something that mass culture had not yet seriously challenged. Despite the extent to which revolution, war and Soviet rule had scarred Leningrad's physical appearance, both the city itself and the intelligentsia's very way of life seemed much closer to patterns of the early twentieth century than anything imaginable in the United States. For someone interested in the history and artistic work of that earlier intelligentsia, this lingering centrality of literature and the printed word was a welcome thing, a palpable link with the world I had come to study. In addition, literature – and particularly poetry – had played a central role in the revitalization of a Russian intelligentsia that took place in the post-Stalin era. During the late 1950s, for example, poets such as Evgenii Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesenskii had been the most highly visible representatives of a new, post-Stalin culture. The publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in 1962, which opened public discussion of the Stalinist concentration camps for the first time, seemed to presage a new and relaxed political as well as cultural environment. In the Leningrad of the late 1960s, however, the poets I heard most widely discussed were Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandel'shtam. They were representatives of an earlier generation, of course, but many of their poems and essays were either

unpublished or still not readily available.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Brodsky's poetry, which circulated almost exclusively in samizdat, had been well known in literary circles prior to 1964, but his arrest and trial catapulted him to a position of international renown as well. To a student who had come to Russia hoping to attain a deeper understanding of Russian history and society, getting to know someone of Joseph's stature was inviting for obvious reasons. At the same time, the prospect of such meetings was initially intimidating for me; this, in part, was the reason why I had not called him more insistently.

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The conversations I had with Joseph during the spring of 1969 ranged over many different subjects. I wasn't certain at the outset just what we would talk about. But conversation with Joseph turned out to be both easy and pleasant. He was curious about my background and what had brought me to Leningrad. In turn, I asked him questions about his own life experience: how he had survived the blockade, for example, or what his exile had been like. In speaking about his exile, he unfailingly emphasized the positive: he had been given a small cabin in which he could live independently; the people in the village to which he was assigned had been good to him; the farm work he had done was not so burdensome; finally, and perhaps most important, he thought it had been one of the most productive periods of his life as a poet. Joseph's almost principled refusal to register any complaint will not surprise anyone who has read his essays or knew him personally. But such a generally positive memory of his exile was also rooted, I think, in his determination not to allow others – whether the authorities or anyone else – to define his inner perception of his external experience. I could not help but be impressed by his responses, which suggested an unusually strong individual with a stoic vision of life.

In talking with Joseph it quickly became obvious that he was a born teacher, so I decided to ask him about poetry. On several occasions he had mentioned how much he liked the poetry of Gavriil Derzhavin. I had

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<sup>3</sup> As Vladislav Zubok has pointed out, the literary achievements and personal example of figures such as Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, who were surviving members of an earlier liberal and humane intelligentsia, were vital to the rebirth of a liberal intelligentsia in Russia during the post-Stalin era. See Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-33.

written a fairly lengthy paper on Derzhavin while studying Russian at my university. But writing this paper in Russian had been a mechanical exercise for me, more of an overview of his life than a close reading of his verse, and I had never acquired any real feeling for Derzhavin's poetry itself. Rather than conceal this, I told Joseph: "Look, you obviously like Derzhavin's poetry a lot. As a senior in college, I wrote a research paper on Derzhavin and read many of his best-known poems. I wish I could share your taste for Derzhavin's poems, but his poetry left me cold." Joseph turned to me at once and asked: "Have you ever heard Derzhavin's poetry aloud?" I told him that I had not. I could mouth the words of his verses, obviously, but I couldn't imagine how they might sound when read properly in Russian. Joseph pulled a copy of Derzhavin's poems from his shelf and proceeded to read "On the Death of Prince Meshcherskii" aloud. I didn't grasp all of the nuances of Derzhavin's poem in his verbal rendering, but I instantly sensed within it a power that I had never suspected.<sup>4</sup>

This was the first time I had ever heard Joseph read poetry aloud, period. Reciting poetry, for him, was more of a performance than anything I had previously witnessed, and it had an impact upon me that was greater than the meaning of the words alone. Just hearing Joseph read Derzhavin suggested something about the place of poetry within Russian culture that I had not seen before. It was the first of many instances in which Joseph, out of his own enthusiasm and desire to share the miraculous with his friends, would open up the poetic world of a particular writer in a way that I could never have imagined on my own. His capacity to convey the essence of a particular writer's achievement to listeners in clear and accessible language was one of his greatest gifts. When he arrived in America, he would meet a host of people who yearned, more than they fully recognized, for the kind of cultural inspiration that his own profound as well as intensely personal engagement with literature could engender.

Anna Akhmatova's poetry, together with the example of her personal strength and dignity, was a palpable presence in Leningrad even after her death in 1966. I knew that Joseph had known her, so on one occasion I asked him to tell me what it had been like to be around her. He understood correctly that I was not asking for an analysis of her poetry, but rather for his impressions of her as a person. Most accounts of Akhmatova's life

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<sup>4</sup> Years later, upon reading Joseph's poem "On the Death of Zhukov," I recalled this evening. "Joseph," I told him, "the 'Zhukov' rhyme scheme is pure Derzhavin!" He knew this, obviously, but he seemed pleased that I had noticed the kinship.

experience are understandably suffused with tragedy. Joseph would hardly have challenged this tragic dimension, but he chose to emphasize something else. He thought for a moment, then responded in a nostalgic tone that Akhmatova had the heartiest laugh of anyone he had ever known. He clearly derived a lot of pleasure from the very memory of her laughter. This wasn't a long discussion, but it was a revealing one for me.

On another evening, after we had known one another for some time, Joseph opened a box of typed manuscripts which I could see were poems. He handed me one of these poems, which was in English, and asked me what I thought of it. This particular poem was entitled "A Halt in the Wilderness". There was no indication on the page to suggest the author, or even whether the work was a translation. I suspected that the poem was his, and it was. The translator was George Kline, with whom I later became close friends, and George's translation of this particular poem still strikes me as a great achievement. Even in translation, the poem was a haunting meditation that posed an implicit challenge to much of what we regularly celebrate as progress. In reading it, I began to sense that Joseph was a much more gifted poet than I had imagined. But I learned something else here that hadn't been obvious to me before. I could see from the way that he cared for these manuscripts that, when it came to his own poetry, Joseph was both organized and deadly serious. The care with which he approached his craft would be obvious to me on numerous other occasions, but here, for the first time, I began to understand how central poetry and literary creation were to his sense of his own identity.

A number of other meetings with Joseph in the spring of 1969 remain vivid in my memory. One was a small gathering at the apartment of the literary scholars Leonid Chertkov and Tanya Nikol'skaia. Romas and Elia Katilius were also there, and the season of the white nights had already begun in Leningrad. Late in the evening, with the sun still bright outside, Joseph recited a poem that he had just finished. This was the first time that I ever heard him read one of his own poems. I don't recall which poem this was, but his reading, even while sitting at the table, was once again dramatic, almost a chant. Joseph was particularly interested in Chertkov's reaction to this new poem and clearly anticipated some judgment from him. Chertkov thought for awhile before speaking, then confessed that he found it difficult to respond. (Here I remember his exact words: "Я затрудняюсь сказать.") I don't remember what followed, but the intensity of Chertkov's concentration at this juncture suggested how seriously he regarded any poem that Joseph might have written.

On another afternoon, at Joseph's apartment, I witnessed a brief but acrimonious dispute between Joseph and Chertkov over the well-known line in Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* in which she whispered to a woman standing with her outside a prison that yes, she could describe the reality of this prison line. The main passion in the argument came from Chertkov, who found the verse repulsive. What it meant, in his view, was that Akhmatova, while standing in line to learn something about the fate of her own son, was thinking not only about her son, but about how she would translate this experience into art. However much Chertkov may have appreciated the ultimate poem, he thought the moral price too high. Joseph found himself in the unusual role (for him) of *mirovoi posrednik*, or mediator. He responded in a soothing way that the artist has a responsibility to depict such tragic realities, but it was clear from his tone that he very much understood and to some extent sympathized with Chertkov's argument. His respect for Chertkov's view was doubtless reinforced by his awareness that Chertkov had done real time in a Soviet prison as punishment for taking part in the student protests at Moscow University that followed the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. I was struck that a poem as generally sympathetic as Akhmatova's could generate such a passionate disagreement between friends. I mention it here because it revealed an important but often overlooked dimension of Joseph's personality: his ability to maintain his own position, dispassionately, but seek at the same time to calm a friend.

My memory of Joseph during the spring of 1969 is less of a narrative than a collection of isolated snatches, literally of moments. But we obviously talked about a lot besides poetry. One evening stands out for its comical misunderstanding. Someone had given Joseph two tickets to a variety show at the Malyi Theater on Arts Square (Площадь Искусств). He asked whether I would be interested in going, and I was happy to do so. Early in the show a group of ballet dancers took the stage. In the midst of their performance, which was not very graceful to begin with, one of them actually fell to the floor. It quickly became clear that most of the acts in the show would be mediocre at best. I could see that Joseph was bored and irritated with the performance, but I also sensed that he was in a bind: having invited me to the theater, it was awkward for him to declare, abruptly, that we should leave. He couldn't simply assume our responses were identical; after all, perhaps I was enjoying it. For my part, it was awkward for me to suggest that we leave, since I was his guest and didn't want to offend him. He seemed restless, but I couldn't be sure what he was thinking. Finally, he

turned to me and asked, with hesitation, whether I was enjoying the show. I responded that, well, yes, it's fine. But I managed to say this without a lot of enthusiasm. Somehow it became obvious, fairly quickly, that neither of us was anxious to stay. So we left before the intermission, emerging onto an Arts Square that was deserted. As we walked away from the Malyi Theater, Joseph looked back and remarked with a laugh: "You know, Sam, leaving the theater after the performance is under way is a great way to get rid of a tail (слезка)."

Politics was not a prominent subject in the conversations I had with Joseph during 1969. By word as well as gesture, however, he made it clear that he had no love for the Soviet political system. When we first met, he expressed some consternation as to why anyone would choose to spend a year in Russia. I answered that since I planned to teach Russian history, it was useful both to work in Leningrad's libraries and to get a sense of Russian society from the inside. His response was that "a weekend would have been enough." He said this in a half-serious fashion, but it was clear that he thought that everything important about Russia was immediately visible. My response to him was that, well, maybe, but over a weekend I wouldn't have met you. For once, Joseph didn't have an immediate reply.

In the late winter, as we were leaving his apartment through his parents' room one day, news of the Czech hockey team's victory over the Soviet team came over the television. Joseph turned to me, flashed a broad smile, and gave me an emphatic thumbs up. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of the previous August, one didn't have to inquire just what he meant. But the strongest impression I got was that he was indifferent to the Soviet leaders of the day, regarding them almost as part of the weather. In his poetry, as I would later discover, he studiously avoided references to current affairs and leaders, recognizing that such references would limit a poem's meaning as well as lasting significance. But more important, certainly, was the deeper conviction that he expressed in the line that "freedom is when you forget the tyrant's patronymic."

On the eve of my departure from Leningrad, Joseph threw a farewell party for me at his apartment. He invited Romas, Elia, and several other mutual friends to this small party. For the guests as a whole he had vodka. He knew that I didn't drink alcohol, so for me he had set two bottles of lemonade aside with a paper band with drawings around the top that read "For Sam Only". The gesture was at once touching and funny. The entire farewell party, and this gesture in particular, was characteristic of Joseph's

ability to make his friends feel special, and it certainly achieved its goal. I had already begun to dread the approaching date of my departure from Russia. The friendships I had developed with Joseph and others, which were deeper and more meaningful than anything I anticipated before coming to Russia, seemed to be only beginning. Given the realities of the late 1960s, it was impossible to know when or even if they would find a continuation.

After my departure from Russia in the summer of 1969, Joseph and I periodically exchanged letters or post cards. The very slowness of the mail and the likelihood that it was censored discouraged any frank or detailed correspondence, but one of Joseph's cards made a vivid impression on me. The protest movement against the Vietnam War had been at the center of American political life for some time, and it reached new heights in 1969 and 1970, the first two years of Richard Nixon's presidency. I was not an active anti-war protester, but neither was I immune to the overall atmosphere of the time. In one of my letters to Joseph I described my own sympathy for this protest movement. Joseph was not at all sympathetic with the anti-war movement in the West, and he was particularly repelled by what he saw as the absence of historical balance in protesters' indictment of the war. I knew this, so I didn't anticipate that my negative portrayal of US policy would be to his liking. Several weeks later I got a post card from him covered with his very characteristic handwriting. His response was succinct, and I remember it verbatim. He wrote (in Russian) urging that the next time I fell into such a critical mood, I should "get on a Boeing, fly to Venice and think of me." I got the point.

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In the summer of 1972 I was stunned to learn that Joseph had been expelled from the Soviet Union. Technically, of course, officials at the Office of Visas and Registrations (OVIR) had called him in to suggest that he accept the invitation to emigrate to Israel. According to the account he gave to me later in the United States, they began by asking him why he hadn't accepted the formal invitation that someone in Israel had sent to him. He responded that he didn't know the person who had invited him, and in any case had no desire to emigrate (whether to Israel or elsewhere). The officials replied that, should he decide to stay in the Soviet Union, things could become difficult for him. The implicit threat was clear: if he refused to leave, then he

would face either exile or incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Taking them at their word, he chose to depart.

Joseph's expulsion was something I had not even imagined. Initially I could only follow newspaper reports concerning his whereabouts and plans. Carl Proffer and his colleagues at the University of Michigan made an admirable decision at this point, moving almost instantly to offer him a teaching position as poet-in-residence in Ann Arbor. (Persuading the Michigan administration to make this move was a major feat on their part, as anyone familiar with academic administrators and their budgets can imagine). Michigan's offer provided Joseph with a variety of crucial things at the time of his very arrival in the United States. It gave him a job and an income. It gave him a place in a community, led by Carl and Ellendea Proffer, which knew and appreciated his work. Most important, it gave him a set of teaching obligations that would both demand a real mastery of the English language and force him to speak in terms that American students could comprehend. At the opening of school in the fall semester, Carl took Joseph to his class, introduced him, and left the room. For Joseph, who had never taught in a formal environment, and whose spoken English was still quite limited, this was a tremendous challenge. In a phone conversation I asked him how his class was going, to which he replied: "Well, I had twenty students the first day, forty students on the next day, and sixty students on the third day. I think it's going all right."

In the fall of 1972 I persuaded student organizations at Tulane University to invite Joseph to New Orleans to read his poetry. He began traveling for such readings almost as soon as he arrived in the country, so by the time he came to Tulane in the late fall he was already experienced in such presentations. Ultimately, Joseph would visit Tulane three times, but this first appearance was particularly memorable. It was a great pleasure to welcome him to New Orleans, something that had previously been unthinkable. At the same time, meeting him at the airport and showing him around the city seemed eerily "normal," doubtless because of our numerous phone conversations since his arrival in the States. For his part, however, Joseph confessed that he was experiencing an ongoing sense of unreality about his presence in the States despite the fact that, at least in practical ways, he had

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<sup>5</sup> Other versions of Joseph's account of this meeting argue that there was nothing implicit about these threats at all. In either case, there was nothing ambiguous about what was at stake.

adjusted well enough to this radical but unanticipated change in his life. As for New Orleans, the only remark he could initially summon was: “I hate palm trees.” (“Ненавижу пальмы.”) For a native of Leningrad, arriving here must have been something like traveling to Batumi.

In 1972, despite the publicity that had surrounded his expulsion from the Soviet Union, Joseph was not yet someone well known in the United States. The turnout for his reading on a Thursday evening was nevertheless very substantial. (I think I must have lobbied hard with my students, urging them to attend). I had heard Joseph read his poems to a small group in a Leningrad apartment. But I had never heard him declaim them before a large and unfamiliar audience. Like others that evening, I was stunned by the chant-like quality of his poems as he rendered them aloud. Not all listeners find Joseph’s dramatic emphasis upon a poem’s rhyme attractive, particularly those accustomed to readings of English-language poems that almost studiously understate rhyme. But for me, and for much of the audience of students and young faculty, his oral rendition of his own poems was mesmerizing. His rhyming cadences and the timbre of his voice transformed his verses into a mixture of song and prayer. As a reading, it was unlike anything that I had ever heard. He recited his poems from memory – there was no text – and he himself seemed to be in a trance.

The student organization that sponsored Joseph’s reading had invited a local poet to read the English translations of his poems. This seemed like a good idea, in principle, and I was therefore stunned when this poet (whom I didn’t know) began to read the translations. Standing at the lectern, his voice and his body language could not have been more listless or indifferent. On several occasions he paused in mid-line to drink from a glass of water. His voice was so quiet that the audience could neither hear nor understand the translations. In a word, he was literally murdering George Kline’s gifted translations of Joseph’s poems. Sitting on the first row, I was horrified by the seemingly unavoidable fact that this reader was going to destroy the evening for the predominantly English-language audience. I shouldn’t have worried: in the midst of his reading of the second translation, Joseph arose from his seat, came up behind him, and rather dramatically asked him to stop reading his poems. He picked up the translated texts, brought them over to me, and asked me to read the rest. I knew the translations well and read them as best I could. My students later reported to me that, as far as they were concerned, Joseph had literally rescued the evening. The lifeless manner in which the first reader had presented the

poems had destroyed them as meaningful translations.<sup>6</sup> Joseph's abrupt and direct response reinforced the sense of seriousness about poetry (and its presentation) which his own reading had embodied.

The next day, in a regularly scheduled English class, Joseph gave an hour-long lecture on Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes." Lecturing in English was still very difficult for Joseph at this point, but he plunged into his task with enthusiasm. Somehow, despite his broken English and the passage of many years, I recall the lecture's general argument and conclusion fairly well. He emphasized the originality of Rilke's contemplation of death. By focusing upon the figure of Eurydice, he contended, Rilke's poem suggested in dramatic fashion that the dead, upon dying, enter an entirely different realm and consciousness. In particular, they would no longer recognize or remember us. It was important to read Rilke's poem, he argued, because later in life, when tempted to embrace one or another clichéd vision of death, the very memory of Rilke's poem would make it difficult for us to do so. On the way out of the room I commented to him: "Joseph, that's more of a sermon than a lecture." To which he responded: "Which do you think that they need?"<sup>7</sup>

Even in this early lecture, Joseph's extraordinary gifts as a teacher were evident. He went on to experience great success as a classroom teacher, and it's worth contemplating the qualities that made his lectures riveting for so many students. In the first place, of course, he had a profound knowledge and feel for literature that only deepened over time. When he discussed poetry, or indeed literature of any genre, he had a way of making his listeners understand that literature was not a decorative art or something designed only to enrich our leisure hours, but rather something of vital importance to the very nature of human existence. His discussion of aesthetics was always closely interwoven with concepts of ethics. He always insisted on the primacy of aesthetics over ethics. Whether he fully

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<sup>6</sup> George Kline's translations of Joseph's poems were vitally important to Joseph at this juncture in his life. From his very arrival in the United States, he could engage in public readings confident that they would convey the meaning of his poems to English-language audiences. Producing such a body of quality translations would have been impossible overnight. George's ongoing contribution to Joseph's entry into American society, as translator and also devoted friend, was enormous. The publication and reviews of these translations in 1973 obviously gave Joseph's work a much wider resonance in the United States. Cf. Joseph Brodsky, *Selected Poems*, tr. George L. Kline (New York: HarperCollins, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> For Joseph's mature analysis and interpretation of this poem, see Joseph Brodsky, "Ninety Years Later," *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 376-427.

persuaded others that this was true is less important than the degree to which he invariably tied the two together, thus providing an ethical dimension to almost any literary analysis. While he was deadly serious in his approach to literature, he was never heavy or boring. His judgments and allusions were laced with humor and the language of the street in a way quite unusual in any department of literature. He spoke not only as a critic, but as a poet who could see, or at least imagine, the tactical moves made by another, earlier, poet. His critical essays on Robert Frost and Thomas Hardy capture all of this very well, and the analytical techniques he employed there can be found in all of his work, from his lectures to the impromptu literary analysis that was never far from his ordinary conversation. Years later, in teaching a writing course in which Joseph was one of the subjects, I was startled by my students' initial hostility to the ethical dimension of his analyses. Upon inquiring, I could see that they regarded his ethical considerations as self-righteous maxims directed exclusively at others. I urged them to look again at the texts that troubled them: if there are either implicit or explicit moral injunctions in his essays, I argued, it's obvious that he directs them first and foremost to himself. In this regard, I remember something that he said in the very last conversation that we had: "Sam, always remember that there are a lot of people who are better than you and me."

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During his early years in the United States, Joseph traveled extensively to read his poetry on college campuses. This travel and the meetings he had with hosts and audiences gave him a much more extensive vision of the United States than many natives have. Joseph was nothing if not a social being, so such travel and interactions were by no means unpleasant for him. But he was nonetheless quite conscious of not having successfully defined a new "home" for himself here, and if he missed Russia (whether his parents, friends, or the legendary Marina Basmanova), the ache from this was sharpest in the months closely following his departure. My only evidence for this (aside from the obvious fact that Joseph was human) is a single phone conversation that we had on an evening in either 1972 or 1973. Joseph rarely complained about anything, and he hadn't called me to complain on this occasion. But he opened himself up a bit by saying that only now, here, had he come to understand the full meaning of the word "никогда", or "never". There was no adequate response to this kind of

statement, which was less a complaint than a sober assessment of the facts. Let us recall that, in 1972 or 1973, leaving the Soviet Union meant parting forever from one's parents, relatives and close friends. And indeed, Joseph never saw either of his parents again, despite the strenuous efforts that he made in the late 1970s and early 1980s to gain permission for his mother to visit him here. He made regular phone calls to them, and through intermediaries such as myself he sent them things and tried to look out for their needs. He also sought to reassure them about his own well-being. Thus when I visited him in Ann Arbor in the summer of 1973, he asked me to take a picture of him standing behind the open door of his fully-stocked refrigerator, with the contents clearly visible, so that his mother could see that he was eating well. This seems comical now, and we laughed about it at the time, but he was quite right to anticipate the basic concern for his welfare that he knew his parents would have.

Gradually, during the 1970s, Joseph began to forge a new identity as an exile, an American citizen, a man who drove a car, someone with an apartment in New York and a teaching post in Massachusetts, and a traveler in the world. None of this came instantly, but by the late 1970s he had become *svoi chelovek* in the United States, someone who had begun to participate in American cultural life in an ever more active and visible way. His book reviews and articles allowed him to speak directly to an English-speaking public that may not have found his poetry so easily accessible. On September 13, 1981, he was featured on the widely watched CBS television documentary program "60 Minutes" in a lengthy interview with Morley Safer. In a phone conversation the following week, Joseph recalled his editor's joking remark to him: "Russian poetry in prime time, Joseph. Not bad! Not bad!" One shouldn't imagine that Joseph was curious only about the United States. On the contrary, he took full advantage of his newly-found freedom to travel, visiting Mexico, Latin America, London and Paris, and finally his beloved Venice, which together with Rome and Italy had been one of his fascinations for years. He had always been a person with a tremendous appetite for life and the energy and inner drive to take in all of that life that he could.

Joseph loved languages, which were literally a kind of playground for him. He couldn't resist fabricating bilingual phrases that were nonsensical but entertaining, such as "Qu'est que bloody c'est," or "eine kleine Nachtmuzhik." His colloquial English became so fluent that I rarely spoke Russian with him after about 1980. Here's a short example of his mastery of colloquial English. Sometime in the early 1980s I asked him how he might translate "Veselyi Mexico City," the simple opening line of his "Mexican

Romancero.” It was difficult for me to imagine a good translation of the word “veselyi,” which is a quite everyday adjective in Russian. Neither “gay” nor “merry,” the usual translations, struck me as satisfactory. Both seem archaic in a way that “veselyi” is not. (“Merry” is so closely associated with Christmas that it rarely occurs in other contexts. As for “gay,” it’s no longer widely used as a synonym for “merry.”) So I asked Joseph how he would render this line in English so that it would sound as “normal” and “everyday” as his own Russian line. He thought for a few seconds and replied: “How about ‘Good old Mexico City?’” Others may disagree, but it struck me as a perfect substitute for a literal translation. (It’s the solution that he ultimately adopted himself in his collected poems). Coming up with this phrase on the spur of the moment suggests the remarkable feel he had developed for colloquial English. At some point his ready command of English and the ease with which he seemed at home within American society made it difficult for me to imagine him in Russia at all. Indeed, his American experience caused my memory of what he was like in Leningrad to fade somewhat. Occasionally I would recall with a shock that, had he returned to Russia, he would have been like a fish in water.

In 1975, I returned to Leningrad and Moscow for a second year of research. Joseph drove me to Kennedy airport on the hot August day of my departure from New York. He knew that I would see not only common friends in Leningrad, but his parents as well. My memory of this departure remains particularly vivid. We arrived early at the modernistic TWA airport terminal designed by Eero Saarinen. After I checked my baggage, we went for lunch in an airport restaurant. As the time for my flight approached, Joseph walked me to the base of one of the ascending, tube-like passageways that led to the departure gates. Upon reaching the end of this deserted passageway, I looked back. There I could see Joseph, standing entirely alone, and waving goodbye. There was something terribly forlorn about this scene. The notion that I would soon see his parents and his friends in Leningrad, while he would remain in New York, seemed peculiarly unjust. I could only imagine his thoughts.

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I had not met Joseph’s parents Alexander Ivanovich Brodsky and Maria Moiseevna Vol’pert during my previous stay in Leningrad. On this occasion, however, I went to see them almost immediately after arriving in the city. Joseph himself has written moving accounts of his parents as well as his

childhood in the “room and a half” that he shared with them. Here I would like to recall something of my experiences with them. During the years before their deaths, I got to know them well and became very fond of them. (I was sometimes alone in visiting them, and sometimes accompanied by Barbara Schliffke, a German linguist. Barbara had never met Joseph, but she developed a special rapport with both of his parents).

Alexander Ivanovich and Maria Moiseevna were impressive figures in their own right, and one could see Joseph clearly in each of them. In his mannerisms and gestures as well as his profile, Alexander Ivanovich particularly reminded me of Joseph. He and Joseph were both photogenic – I don’t think either of them ever took a bad picture – and they both managed to look stylish no matter what they were wearing. Maria Moiseevna was an unusually strong, resilient woman. She had a broad face and ready smile that recalled Joseph’s features. In her youth, thanks to her gymnasium training, she had spoken French well. A feminist for whom theoretical justifications would have seemed superfluous, she had a basic sense of gender equality that derived from her own life experience. On occasion she emphasized that a career was indispensable if women were to maintain the kind of independence and autonomy that she regarded as absolutely vital.

Evenings at the Brodskys’ apartment followed a familiar pattern. During the early evening Maria Moiseevna would more or less disappear in the direction of the communal kitchen, where she prepared dinner. Alexander Ivanovich would set the table, feed the cat, pour something for us to drink, and the two of us would sit and talk together. Like Joseph, he was a gifted raconteur, telling stories drawn from a life rich in experiences. Born and raised in St. Petersburg, he had been in the city at the time of the revolution and related numerous incidents from the everyday life he knew in the pre-revolutionary era. (Who could imagine, for example, that when he was sick as a child his parents summoned the infamous Dr. Dubrovin – a notorious anti-Semite and founder of the Union of the Russian People – to treat him? They thought Dubrovin a good doctor; for his part Dubrovin respected Alexander Ivanovich’s grandfather because he had been a cantonist who had served in the Imperial army).

For much of his career Alexander Ivanovich had worked as a photo journalist, and he took pleasure in recalling specific experiences and encounters: his interviews with Academicians Ivan Pavlov and Nikolai Bukharin in the early 1930s, his travels to China and his impressions of Chinese culture (and food), and his service in the Winter War with Finland. He also described in detail his only encounter with Stalin. Working in Moscow, he

had entered the deserted balcony of a hall where an official meeting was taking place. There, to his right, he suddenly saw Stalin, who was sitting alone, observing the meeting. He quietly prepared to take his photograph, but Stalin turned to him and cautioned him against this with a wave of his hand. Alexander Ivanovich didn't simply tell this story, he acted it out, and one could see that Stalin's presence had left an indelible impression upon him. (He was, after all, the *vozhd'*, the leader whose domination of Soviet political life is difficult for us even to imagine).

Maria Moiseevna would eventually appear at the door with serving plates in her hands, and we would sit together as a threesome, with Alexander Ivanovich still doing much of the talking. (Maria Moiseevna was not one to sit silently at the table, and her kibitzing during Alexander Ivanovich's stories was one of the more entertaining parts of being with them). She was a remarkable cook, and I was always overwhelmed at the amount of food she had prepared. After dinner was over and the table cleared, it was Maria Moiseevna's turn to dominate the conversation. She could talk about many things, but she wanted most of all to talk about Joseph. She could see from our conversations that I knew him well, and I tried to provide her with a detailed description of his life in the States. But Maria Moiseevna was no less anxious to share her own memories of Joseph with me. She was a forceful and passionate storyteller, particularly when describing incidents from Joseph's childhood and youth. She spoke with understandable feeling about the terrible first year of the blockade, which trapped her in the city with Joseph, who was just over a year old. Her account of their escape from the city over the ice of Lake Ladoga in the winter of early 1942 recaptured the harrowing difficulties of that journey.

From other stories she told it became obvious that raising Joseph in the Soviet Union had not been simple. He had clearly not "fit in" easily even as a young boy, and she recalled having taken him to a psychiatrist for an examination following some behavior problems at school. (I can't be sure of this person's professional title, but from her story it was a physician or therapist who specialized in dealing with children). After talking with Joseph for some time, Maria Moiseevna remembered, the psychiatrist took her aside and said, "Don't worry about this child, Maria Moiseevna. He's been touched by God's hand." This revelation was astonishing to me, but in retrospect it's not all that surprising. We forget just how many persons even in Stalin's Russia retained both common sense and a tendency to describe the world in fairly traditional terms. (Skeptics might doubt the veracity of the story itself, but it rings true to me).

The Brodskys had lived in Leningrad since the late 1920s at least. Maria Moiseevna remembered a time when “everyone” went to the Hotel Europe’s rooftop restaurant to celebrate on New Year’s Eve. This was no longer easy to imagine, since by 1976, when this conversation took place, the Hotel Europe appealed primarily to foreigners with hard currency. But what interested me most about her story was the nostalgia with which she remembered at least the middle of the 1930s, something I encountered frequently in the stories of other Russians of her generation.

I would occasionally call and stop by to see the Brodskys after getting my mail at the American consulate, which was nearby. One morning Maria Moiseevna, who was at home alone, welcomed me at the outer entrance of their communal apartment with a particularly determined look in her eye. Once seated inside their apartment, she turned to me with the same look and said in slow, precisely articulated words: “Sam, my son is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.” This was news to me, and Joseph had evidently called her that very morning to share this news. She was understandably bursting with a defiant pride. I often think about just how much Joseph’s external recognition must have meant both to her and to Alexander Ivanovich, for there had been darker days when official Russia was arrayed against them. Joseph himself recalled that his first arrest had taken place at their apartment. As he was driven away in the back seat of the police car, he recalled looking out the rear window at his house retreating into the distance and thinking: “Goodbye, childhood!” But what had it been like for these parents on that night? There was no one who could reassure them that all would be well, that life would go on, that their son would achieve things that no one at the time could imagine. With this in mind, it was easy to share fully in her pride and happiness.

I think that much of Joseph’s own strength in the face of adversity must have come from the example of his parents. For Maria Moiseevna, at least, an uncomplaining fortitude was virtually a developed ideology. In talking with her one afternoon, I complained about some minor physical ailment, forgetting that Maria Moiseevna herself suffered frequently from periodic spells of sciatica (*radikulit*, in Russian) that could keep her bedridden for days. She quickly responded that one shouldn’t complain to others about one’s physical aches and pains. There were only two audiences for these kinds of complaints, she insisted: those who were in pain themselves, possibly worse than yours, who couldn’t therefore spare much sympathy, and those who were not in pain at all, who couldn’t possibly understand. Her advice, which I could imagine Joseph uttering, was very clear, and I quote

her here from memory: “When you’re not feeling well, go stand in front of the mirror, pinch your cheeks three times, and tell yourself: ‘I’m all right, I’m all right, I’m all right.’ And then get on with your life!” Austere advice, to be sure, but it struck me that there was a huge amount of life’s wisdom in her prescription.

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Upon returning to Leningrad in 1975, I also resumed my friendship with Romas and Elia Katilius, and now with their sons Andrius and Ramutis. They had moved to a new apartment on Engels Prospekt, which was about an hour’s tram ride from the center of the city. They had no telephone, which made it difficult to coordinate visits, so they generously invited me to visit them two evenings a week on a regular schedule, and I was happy to do so. I tutored Andrius in English for about an hour on each visit, although I had no idea how to teach English as a second language. One evening I noticed a small crate of apples in their kitchen. The family explained to me that Romas’s parents had sent these to them from Vilnius. I had always known that Romas was Lithuanian, but until that evening I hadn’t really contemplated what that meant in a human sense: that his parents lived in Vilnius, that they had access to an orchard, that they missed and cared for their son and his family, and that the Leningrad in which Romas was so much at home would have been a “foreign city” for them. (Having now seen Vilnius for myself, I can appreciate even more that the apples came from what was in many respects another world).

I don’t think I knew any happiness greater than sitting with Romas and Elia in their kitchen. We all liked to talk, and Joseph was a frequent subject of our conversation. Although he had left Leningrad a full three years earlier, he clearly remained very much a part of their lives. Elia confided to me that Joseph’s departure had been a tremendous emotional blow to all of them, but particularly to Romas, and that it had taken him almost two years to overcome the shock of Joseph’s absence. Here it’s essential to recall just how high and seemingly permanent the barriers of communication between East and West were in those days. Given the real possibility that one had parted with a close friend forever, Romas’s grief was quite understandable. Joseph had particular affection for Elia. He referred to her as “Hanum,” an Uzbek term of respect, and had an intuitive trust in her judgments. Early in my visit, Romas and Elia introduced me to Mikhail (Misha) Mil’chik and his wife Nina. Misha was a gifted historian of early Russian

architecture and culture, and also a brilliant photographer. In addition, he was someone who knew Joseph and his poetry quite well. Nina was a cardiologist in Leningrad, someone who later would understand better than we did just how serious Joseph's heart problems were. All of us were in regular contact with Alexander Ivanovich and Maria Moiseevna.

These relationships obviously developed in a fashion that focused on all of our immediate lives. Misha, for example, had a profound understanding of pre-revolutionary rural life and was tremendously helpful to me in my scholarly work on zemstvo medicine. But Joseph was the presence that had brought us together, and he was often part of our conversation. Nor was this only some vague or generalized awareness that Joseph existed; rather it was an active perception that we were directly linked with him. Two examples may serve to illustrate this. As part of his work as a historian of architecture, Misha was a devoted photographer of the many remote churches that he had visited, particularly in the Russian North. When guests gathered at his and Nina's apartment, he would often show some of his astonishingly beautiful slide photographs of these churches during the course of the evening.

But Misha's historical consciousness and cultural awareness extended beyond churches and the Russian North. On the day of Joseph's departure for the West in 1972, in particular, Misha had understood that Joseph's departure had a historical significance beyond the prospect of permanent separation and personal regrets. Thus when he went to Joseph's apartment on Pestel' Street early in the morning, he took his camera with him. To my knowledge, he was the only person who took photographs on that day. He rode with Joseph and others to the Pulkovo airport, stayed with him until he had disappeared for the searches and departure rituals that preceded his flight, and then returned with other friends to sit with Alexander Ivanovich and Maria Moiseevna in their apartment. He managed to photograph Joseph and his family and friends at virtually every step of this departure, and then to photograph Joseph's empty room on his return. It's fortunate for all of us that Misha understood that this needed to be done.

On numerous occasions I was present when Misha showed the slides of Joseph's departure to guests in his house. The impact that these slides had upon those watching was the same every time that I saw them. There was first a sense of renewed grief and of loss. This might be followed by a more general discussion of Joseph's poetry, or questions about his recent activities. In my own case the slides reminded me of just how privileged I was compared to others in the room: I might share the sense of loss that

dominated the room, but I would return eventually to the States and resume a friendship in normal circumstances.

In the years following his departure from Leningrad in 1972, Joseph's friends and relatives would gather at his parents' apartment to celebrate his birthday on May 24. Birthdays in Russia are serious occasions, and the annual celebration of Joseph's birthday by his family and friends suggests the extent to which, for them, he remained an ongoing presence in Russia. I was there on the occasion of his fortieth birthday party on May 24, 1980. Given the fact that it marked an even decade, the celebration was even more special.<sup>8</sup> In the days leading up to May 24, Elia, Nina, and several relatives helped Maria Moiseevna prepare for this occasion. By pushing furniture together and bringing in some extra chairs and small tables, she managed to create a single table that would seat all of the twenty-four people who were present. Then, again with help, she prepared a full meal of several courses in the kitchen of their communal apartment. Preparing such a feast for twenty-four guests would pose a challenge to any cook. Maria Moiseevna was over seventy at the time, and the evening was a remarkable demonstration of her skill, her strength and her determination to celebrate her son's birthday in worthy fashion. It was a tour de force. At some point in the evening Joseph called to talk briefly with his parents and send his greetings to all present. The room was suffused with his presence, and his parents were surrounded by the many friends who loved and missed him.

Not all of Joseph's friends whom I knew lived in Leningrad, or had known him since childhood. During the winters of 1976 and 1980 I spent several months in Moscow. While there I met the writer Andrei Sergeev, a noted translator of English-language poetry.<sup>9</sup> Andrei was an incredible font of information and insight about Russian literature and society, and we quickly formed a fast friendship. The bond that we felt for one another

<sup>8</sup> For this birthday, Joseph wrote the poem "May 24, 1980," a work that registers his unmitigated gratitude for life itself. It remains one of his best poems, and one that is unusual for its explicit reflection upon his own life.

<sup>9</sup> Andrei was also a poet and a writer whose own memoir *Al'bom dlia marok* would win the Russian Booker Prize in 1996. Cf. Andrei Sergeev, *Omnibus: Al'bom dlia marok* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1997), translated into English as *Stamp Album: A Collection of People, Things, Relationships, and Words*, tr. Joanne Turnbull (Moscow: GLAS New Russian Writing, 2002). In addition to *Stamp Album*, the book *Omnibus* includes a chapter "About Brodsky" in which Andrei describes his own meetings and relationship with Joseph. Cf. *Omnibus*, 426-64.

was all the stronger because of our mutual affection and admiration for Joseph. The two first met in early 1964. Andrei's knowledge of American poetry and his brilliant translations of numerous American poets made him an welcome source in Joseph's discovery of the riches of American poetry, something Joseph himself mentioned more than once. Even before their earliest acquaintance, Andrei – who was seven years older than Joseph – had understood Joseph's exceptional gifts as a poet. He had been in close contact with Joseph in 1964 at the time when Joseph had taken refuge in Moscow from what appeared to be an imminent arrest in Leningrad.

During our meetings in the 1970s, Andrei was very much interested in Joseph's activities and surroundings in the United States, which he could only follow at a distance. His knowledge of American literature gave him an unusual degree of familiarity with American culture, but he freely admitted that he couldn't fully imagine the American world in which Joseph was living. Fortunately, he got an opportunity to see this for himself when the American poet Allen Ginsberg invited him for a long visit to the United States in the fall of 1988. He spent a lot of time with Joseph in New York during this visit. He also visited New Orleans and lectured at Tulane University, a meeting that seemed literally miraculous to both of us.

While visiting with Joseph's friends in Russia, or even with those who only knew his poetry, conversation would often revolve around questions such as: how is Joseph doing "there"? Do you see him often? Is he happy? How is his health? As his poems and essays gradually found their way into Russia, they provoked ongoing discussion and debate. Some of Joseph's close friends were convinced that the poetry he had written after leaving was not quite as good as what he had written during his last couple of years in Russia. Others countered that no, his work had simply found a new context and set of challenges. But always there was an ongoing sense that he wasn't entirely "away". And in a very real sense, he wasn't.

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In 1975 and 1979 alike, I had spent time with Joseph in New York on the eve of my departures for Russia. In both cases, after completing months of research in Russia, good fortune enabled me to see him in Europe for an extended period before returning to the States. In the summer of 1976 I saw him in London, where he was staying with Alan and Diana Myers at their sprawling house in Hampstead. I found Joseph, Alan, and Diana drinking

tea in the rose garden behind the house; the idyllic nature of this scene was as remote from Russia as anything I could imagine. I was prepared to speak with him at length about my visits with his parents and friends, but all he wanted was the answer to a simple question: is everyone all right? Once he heard that, he really didn't want the details, except as they might enter into conversations over time. He had his own ties with Leningrad and his parents, even if only by phone. Too much detail, I suspect, only served to remind him of the absences of close friends, something he could do nothing about. So conversation went to more mundane subjects: where to have dinner, what to see in London, and so on.

In the summer of 1980, I had arranged to spend some time in Paris after departing from Leningrad. I called Joseph in New York to see what his plans were, and he replied that he was also planning to come to Paris. He wasn't yet sure when he would arrive, but urged me stay and wait: "Sam, try to linger." I distinctly recall this phrasing because of the enormous pleasure he seemed to derive from pronouncing the word "linger," which he repeated several times. Thanks to the efforts of Joseph's long-time friend Veronique Shiltz, a French specialist on the Russian and Asian steppe, I had a place to stay in Paris. So I did indeed "linger", and after a short time Joseph arrived. When we met I shared with him Maria Moiseevna's account of her experience with OVIR in Moscow, in which a high-ranking official had informed her with finality that "no one would ever grant her a visa" to visit Joseph. (It's hard to forget the "никто, никогда" phraseology that she reported to me). She had asked me to do this, but I could see that my words were the equivalent of slapping him in the face. Joseph stepped out onto Veronique's balcony in order to mask the emotion of his response. He recovered his normal demeanor quickly, but the image of his mother's suffering and disappointment obviously troubled him greatly.

Another recollection of that summer concerns an evening that we spent with Veronique at her apartment. For some reason we started playing songs by Vladimir Vysotsky. (It was about a month before Vysotsky's premature death, which we obviously did not anticipate). I had always assumed that he knew Vysotsky's songs, but this was the first time that I realized how much he admired and even loved them. He derived a huge, almost physical, pleasure out of listening to them and spoke with unusual enthusiasm about Vysotsky himself. Later in the evening he asked to play the songs of Sarah Leander, who was also one of his favorites.

The memories I have of Joseph during the late 1970s and early 1980s do not always fit easily into a flowing narrative. What follows here are a number of incidents that I hope may enrich the overall portrait of Joseph as I knew him.

During the fall of 1979, while I was spending a semester at the Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C., Joseph showed up one day without any warning. He had come to Washington to meet with various influential senators in the hope that they might be able to persuade Soviet officials to grant his mother a visa to visit him in the United States. At the time, the Kennan Institute was still located in the Smithsonian Castle on the Mall. In order to get to my office, a visitor had to pass first through the outer office occupied by Peter Kenez, a gifted historian of twentieth-century Russian and Hungarian history. So on this autumn Friday, just before lunchtime, Joseph barged into Peter's office and asked, rather unceremoniously, "Where's Sam Ramer?" Peter immediately recognized who he was and showed him the door to my office. Before opening it, Joseph picked up Peter's coffee cup, which was half-filled with cold coffee, and began to drink from it. This kind of brusque manner and almost barbaric partaking of someone else's cold coffee was by no means typical behavior for Joseph, but neither was it entirely exceptional. As Peter himself put it later, laughing, "He was exactly what I expected him to be".

That evening Joseph and I went for dinner at a private home in Washington together with Jutta Scherrer, a historian of Russia from Paris. During the evening Jutta tried to explain, at least to the laymen at the table, why she was studying Lenin's relationship with Alexander Bogdanov, Maxim Gorky and other Left Bolsheviks during the period before World War I. For whatever reason, some at the table found it difficult to understand why such a study might be important. At this point Joseph, to my surprise, interrupted to offer his own explanation of what Jutta was doing. Given his aversion to Lenin and anything related to the Bolsheviks, one might anticipate that he would present a jaundiced vision of Jutta's project. Not at all. His explanation was suffused with empathy, and it made the importance of Jutta's project absolutely clear to every person at the table. I think even Jutta was stunned by the clarity and detail of his analysis; certainly I was. He fully comprehended not only what she was doing, but what historians might find valuable about her study. But it also suggested the empathy which he could muster toward the work of friends even when he didn't personally care much for what they were doing. On this

evening, I think, his personal regard for Jutta trumped his distaste for her subject.

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Joseph's first heart attack occurred in December, 1976. I was visiting friends in New York over the New Year holiday, but had no idea that he was in the hospital. I tried on several occasions to reach him by phone in the hope that we could get together, but he was always out. Eventually, on the very eve of my return to New Orleans, I got through to him, and he invited me to stop by.

When I arrived in the late afternoon, he was with Masha Vorob'eva in her upstairs apartment. (Masha, who taught Russian language and literature at Vassar, had the apartment above Joseph's in the complex they shared with Andrew Blane and others at 44 Morton Street).<sup>10</sup> He asked me whether I noticed anything different about him. I looked carefully, but told him that no, he seemed the same to me. (In retrospect, I recall that he seemed a bit pale, but I didn't notice it at the time). He responded that he had been hospitalized for three weeks following a major heart attack, and that he and Masha had returned from the hospital only two hours earlier. The news stunned me: Joseph was only 36 years old, and I had always thought of him as literally indestructible. We shared a dinner that Masha prepared, but the anxiety and sudden sense of vulnerability that I felt were overwhelming.

So began Joseph's long struggle with heart disease, one that would take him through two by-pass operations and would serve as an ongoing reminder of his mortality. Ultimately, of course, it resulted in his untimely death. In December of 1978, during the break between fall and spring semesters, he decided on the advice of his doctors to undergo open-heart bypass surgery. I was in New Orleans at the time, but somehow I managed to call his hospital room on the very eve of the operation. He was alone, and he was understandably anxious about the forthcoming surgery. I don't remember much of what we talked about. I told him that I would be praying for his recovery, and for this he seemed genuinely grateful. Fortunately, he recovered quickly from his surgery and was able to return to teaching in January.

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<sup>10</sup> Masha was one of Joseph's closest friends, someone who cared for him, and whom he trusted implicitly. The phrase "always there for someone" is overused, but here it's appropriate: Masha was always there for him.

In late December, 1982, I traveled to Moscow and Leningrad to visit with friends. While there I had a chance for a long visit with Alexander Ivanovich and Maria Moiseevna. I had seen them in the summer of 1980, so we did not have a sense of long separation when we met. I had no idea that this would be the last time I would see them. When I left Leningrad, I flew directly to Houston, Texas, where I would teach at Rice University during the spring semester of 1983. Mid-way through the semester Joseph called to tell me that Maria Moiseevna had died. He was quite desolate, and unable to talk. I had not been aware of her illness during my visit. She discovered quite late, I believe, that she was suffering from cancer, and she didn't survive long after the diagnosis. Alexander Ivanovich followed her a little over a year later.

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From the moment that he arrived in the United States, Joseph was determined to master American culture and carve out a place for himself in American letters. In retrospect, he clearly did so, but it's worth contemplating the ways in which he achieved this. He arrived here not simply as a Russian poet, or apostle of Russian culture, but as someone who was profoundly interested in American literature and American cultural life. He had discovered numerous American poets while still in Russia, and his particular admiration for Robert Frost and W. H. Auden eventually resulted in several of the best interpretive literary essays that he wrote here. Obviously the ultimate and most important dimension of his success and influence was his poetry, which most Americans could read only in translation. But in establishing his identity with a broader American audience, his essays were no less important. Through a steady production of introductions and independent articles, he gradually but markedly enriched our interpretive understanding of a host of writers. Those interested in Russian and East European literature might prize most of all his articles on such writers as Andrei Platonov, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandel'shtam, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, and Czeslaw Milosz. For the broader American public, however, he provided new and arresting visions of the work of such American or English-language poets as Frost, Auden, Thomas Hardy, and Derek Walcott. Deceptively simple and straightforward, his critical essays combine enthusiasm, insight, and understanding in equal measure. Moreover, his articles on these figures appeared in journals that reached a broad audience of educated Americans.

While he was not a predominantly political writer, Joseph also defined a place for himself in the country's overall political spectrum. His principal contribution here was to challenge the comfortable and often self-righteous assumptions of the American academic left. Coming from someone else, such a challenge might have fallen upon deaf ears, but Joseph's personal experience (particularly his trial and time in exile), when joined with his personal magnetism and the force of his arguments, gave him an unusual capacity to influence others. Here his compelling personality and his ability to anticipate and meet the arguments of those with whom he didn't agree served him well. (One shouldn't imagine that those whose positions he opposed necessarily found him persuasive, but he was happy to engage in debate as long as he sensed that those with whom he was speaking were open to persuasion. Where he concluded the opposite, he abided by Pushkin's dictum of "never arguing with a fool.")

For his work, Joseph was certainly recognized by American institutions through prestigious fellowships, honorary degrees, and memberships in learned societies.<sup>11</sup> In 1987, of course, he was awarded the Nobel Prize, a recognition that transcended the United States. Sometime after the announcement, but before the actual award ceremony in Stockholm, I visited him in New York. He had just begun writing his Nobel lecture, which he had to complete in only a few days. For me personally, as the reader can doubtless understand, there was something unreal about the notion that the friend with whom I'd just had dinner needed to finish writing his Nobel lecture. After Joseph returned from the award ceremonies in Stockholm, I asked him to describe his experiences while there. He had obviously enjoyed himself immensely and spoke effusively about the ceremonies themselves and the overall atmosphere in Stockholm. He concluded by describing the banquet and dance held for all of the laureates at the end of the ceremonies. Here he recalled with particular pleasure dancing with Queen Sylvia of Sweden, describing it – among other things – as a powerful linguistic experience. As he put it: "I couldn't get over pronouncing the phrase: 'Your Majesty, may I have this dance?' Could I have imagined that I would ever utter such words in real life?"

Four years after receiving the Nobel Prize, Joseph became the Poet Laureate of the United States, perhaps the ultimate official honor for an

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1976 and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1979.

American poet.<sup>12</sup> Could even his best friends and greatest admirers, on his arrival here, have imagined this appointment as a possibility? Yet such was his stature within American letters that by the time the appointment came it seemed a natural choice. In addition to his writing, I think there is no doubt that the influential position that he achieved within American society also owed a great deal to the personal impact he made upon the many people with whom he came in contact. His personal charisma and his role as an advocate for poetry – and more broadly for the vital role of literature itself – magnified the influence that his writing would have. Here I would like to cite two examples of the impression he made upon American audiences, but they could be multiplied many times over.

Once, on a flight from New York to Tennessee during the 1980s, I fell into conversation with the woman sitting next to me. She introduced herself as someone who taught English in a Memphis university. I volunteered that I was a Russian historian. She mentioned that the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky had come to her campus for a weekend and asked whether I knew him. I replied that I did, and this generated something of an instant community between us. She proceeded to describe Joseph's visit to her university with great feeling, insisting that his appearance there had been, literally, an unforgettable event for her as well as for her students and colleagues. Joseph's formal reading had evidently been very successful. After the reading he joined faculty and graduate students at a party that went late into the night. "I don't know exactly how to convey this," she said, "but we had the feeling that on this evening we were directly engaged with 'culture' in a way that we had all imagined or dreamed about, but never quite experienced with this intensity and immediacy. The informality and yet seriousness of the evening was something I'll never forget. When he left the next day, we had a sense of having been 'orphaned.'" I had no difficulty understanding what she was describing, since Joseph made a similar impression upon many others, and the intensity of engagement that so attracted her was a central feature of his overall personality. But her story suggested that Joseph, at his various readings, had influenced a much broader audience than I had realized.

An analogous illustration of the impact that Joseph could have upon "ordinary" Americans involves my own grandmother. In the early 1980s, students at Vanderbilt University invited Joseph to read his poetry on their

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<sup>12)</sup> The official title is Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. The one-year appointment is made by the Library of Congress.

campus in Nashville, Tennessee. There was an unusual cold wave in Nashville on the evening of this January reading, with temperatures dropping into the low teens. My grandmother Dixie Ramer, who lived in Nashville and had heard me speak about Joseph over the years, saw the announcement of his reading in the local newspaper. Despite the severe weather and her advanced age – she was in her mid-nineties at the time – she and my uncle, with whom she lived, decided to attend his reading. They anticipated an audience of no more than twenty or thirty persons: after all, this was a poetry reading, and one by a Russian poet at that. They were amazed to find that the hall was packed to its capacity of about 250 persons. After the reading, which made an enormous impression upon her, my uncle led her to the podium and introduced her to Joseph as “Sam’s grandmother.” According to my uncle, Joseph instantly responded with enthusiasm, telling her that her presence was the greatest honor he could have received during his visit to Nashville.

Upon returning home at about eleven in the evening, a late hour for her, my grandmother immediately called me to share her experience. As she described the evening, her excited voice was suddenly that of a young woman. I was glad that she had gone, and even happier to learn that their meeting had been so cordial. The next day I called Joseph to thank him for the effusive warmth he had shown to Grandmother. He answered with something approaching irritation: “Sam, your grandmother is ninety-five years old. She came out to hear my poetry on a night with lunar cold. How could I not be moved by her presence? Whatever I told her was absolutely what I felt at the moment: her presence there was a great honor for me.” Joseph’s response didn’t surprise me, and as I’ve reflected on it over the years, I’m struck that it was characteristic of Joseph in two important ways. It suggests the manner in which he reacted intuitively as well as passionately to others, in this case my grandmother. But no less important here is the fact that he wanted very much for his poetry to reach people who were not specialists or academics, but simply human beings. And he could see that, in grandmother’s case, he had succeeded. The generosity of his response nonetheless moved me a lot. Here an elderly Tennessee woman, who in her youth had taught “elocution” in a small country town in West Tennessee, meets a Russian poet who through some twist of fate is a friend of her grandson. But the two are indeed bound together by a common appreciation for language, for beauty, and for poetry as conveyed by the human voice.

The recognition and influence that Joseph ultimately acquired within American society derived primarily from his remarkable talent as a poet and the analytical power of his various essays. Equally important were the ideas, values, and overall sensibility that found expression in his poems, and often more explicitly in specific essays. These attitudes and values were a remarkably consistent dimension of his personality as well as his writing. The authority that Joseph acquired over time derived at least in part from the austere and stoic strength that he communicated to others. His writing repeatedly invokes a number of themes. Time and again his essays emphasize the importance of self-reliance. He was hostile to the competition for victim status that has become such a prominent part of contemporary life. This was by no means an exclusively aesthetic stance; rather, he argued that the psychological luxury of perceiving oneself as a victim made it difficult to improve one's situation. Although the world might be complicated, he insisted that the dictates of one's own personal behavior could be relatively simple. Despite the need for nuance, which he certainly recognized, he believed that many judgments were best rendered in straightforward and uncompromising language. Respect for hard work was also one of Joseph's core values. He joked about this himself, saying he knew how out of place such veneration of work might seem, coming from a "social parasite" (the charge leveled against him in his 1964 trial). While he always seemed to make room for good food and conversation with friends, his writings alone make it clear that he was disciplined worker.

An additional explanation for Joseph's influence upon so many in the United States was the extent to which his own basic values and sensibility coincided with a venerable strand of American values. The entire background of Joseph's life suggested to him that life was a struggle. Faced with that struggle and the challenges it imposed, he argued, the most important thing was not to give up. He spoke plainly about this in his graduation address at Williams College, where he reminded his listeners that "as long as you have your skin, coat, cloak, and limbs, you are not yet defeated."<sup>13</sup> In another essay, he urged that the essence of freedom lies in

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<sup>13</sup>) Joseph Brodsky, "A Commencement Address," *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 391. This text is from Joseph's graduation address at Williams College in 1984.

the assumption of responsibility. For this reason, he was particularly passionate in urging his readers not to think of themselves as victims. Recognizing how tempting it is to blame others for our failures, he explicitly insisted that “a free man, when he fails, blames nobody.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, this insistence upon personal responsibility came up in a discussion we had which is worth recalling in detail. I once related a recent incident from work in which I cast myself as a victim. I don’t even remember what my complaint was, which suggests it was minor. Joseph looked at me with dismay: “Sam, what exactly are you talking about?” I started to repeat my story, which essentially staked a claim on his sympathy, at which point he interrupted me: “Look, Sam. It’s your job to do the right thing. And it’s their job to punish you for it.” What I want to emphasize is Joseph’s expectation, based upon experience, that “doing the right thing” might well bring retribution of some sort. One should expect this “from the threshold,” to use one of his favorite expressions, and one should never complain when it happened. Values such as individualism, self-reliance, personal responsibility, a commitment to hard work, strength in the face of adversity, or a refusal to acknowledge defeat have a distinguished lineage in American thought. Joseph was quite explicit about his attraction to that portion of American culture that embraced the individual autonomy that these values enshrined.

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Joseph often noted that a writer’s legacy was not his biography, but the books that he left on the shelf. Without disputing this in the slightest, it’s nonetheless worth noting that Joseph’s personal presence made a huge impact on many of his contemporaries. It’s not easy to describe the nature of this personal charisma. It sounds exaggerated, but to those who knew him well he was really a force of nature, someone surrounded as it were by a powerful magnetic field. That field didn’t affect everyone in the same way, and indeed there were individuals who didn’t like him. But to me, as to so many others, his vitality, humor and intellectual energy were irresistible. He had an enormous appetite for life that was both visible and infectious. He had an exceptional sense of internal freedom, of emancipation from all conventions (even those he chose to observe), that was inspiring.

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<sup>14</sup> idem., “The Condition We Call Exile,” *On Grief and Reason*, 34.

Joseph also had an unusual capacity to relate to his friends and make them feel special. When you visited him in New York, he took you to his favorite Chinese restaurant. He'd ask you to let him order, and if you let him you wouldn't regret it. He would drive you to his favorite view in the city, and it was (in my case) a panorama that I would not have discovered on my own. He seemed to know that people expected him to lead the conversation at the table. He did so, often when he clearly didn't feel up to it. He was by far most interesting in small groups, where he would often embark upon monologues that were as fascinating as they were unpredictable. His reasoning in these monologues could occasionally lead him to outlandish conclusions. But they also enabled him to come up with original insights that contained an important kernel of truth otherwise overlooked or ignored. Two other factors were crucial here: his inborn determination to discuss virtually all problems *de novo*, analyzing them in his own terms from the very ground up. And second, his visceral aversion to clichés and conventional modes of thinking, both of which made him suspicious of even the most "indisputable" of accepted truths. He understood intuitively that many of these truths were popular conventions which, regardless of their truthful origins, had become worn and frayed through years of uncritical usage.

Joseph challenged the conventional language and assumptions of the left with particular fervor. Often these assumptions were couched in a historical vision of Russia and the Soviet Union that he had reason to dispute. Here it's important to recall the context of American political life in the years immediately following his arrival here in 1972. The Vietnam War was still being waged, and protest of that war was a major issue in public life. Watergate came to the fore in 1973, and within much of the country (and certainly academia) the distrust of government and its policies was at a high water mark. It was difficult in this environment to defend any sort of conservative thought. For Joseph, encountering a body of settled ideas on controversial subjects was like waving a red flag in front of a bull; his intuitive response was to question the very comfort of that shared opinion. If you were to argue that the sky is blue, his response would be, "maybe, but then...."

Joseph was most definitely not someone who wallowed in sentimentality, but he communicated his affection in all sorts of ways. In 1977, while we were driving back from the Gulf coast after one of his poetry readings at Tulane, Joseph turned to me in the car and said: "Sam, tomorrow, in Detroit, I will get my citizenship. When I do, I'll be wearing your shirt and Andrew

Blane's tie."<sup>15</sup> (During these years Joseph had been drawn to wearing the second-hand shirts of friends, and I had given him some of mine). This was a remark and a gesture that made me feel very special. Joseph related a different but analogous incident to me about a meeting he had had with an old friend in Paris. After dinner in a restaurant, they set out to walk about the city. Suddenly the friend discovered that he had forgotten his new Nikon camera at the restaurant. Upon returning to retrieve it, they found that the camera was gone. Losing the camera understandably upset Joseph's friend enormously, and it suddenly became the focus of the evening. Joseph, who valued the friend and treasured the evening with him, pulled out his checkbook, wrote him a check for the price of the camera, and insisted: "Forget the camera; let's return to our conversation." This was generosity, of course, but more importantly it was Joseph's refusal to be captured by things and his recognition that the friendship and the moment were more important. (I should emphasize that Joseph was relatively indifferent to money and to material things. Certainly they were essential to anyone living in our society, particularly in New York, but money and material things never seemed to matter much to him).

Joseph also seemed to feel that he owed it to his friends and acquaintances to be in good spirits in social situations, whether over dinner or sitting around in the evening. In the years following his heart attack, this could be physically as well as psychologically difficult. In Paris, during the summer of 1980, I joined him to spend an evening with friends in the suburbs. As we stood on the street and tried to hail a taxi, he was suddenly seized with pain in his heart. He grabbed his chest and then reached for the nitroglycerine pills that he carried with him. The pains on this particular occasion were so severe that I was afraid that he might literally die right there on that busy Paris street. The stabs from this kind of severe angina were painful, no doubt, but each one carried with it the threat of imminent death. Eventually we found a taxi and made our way to the suburbs. During the course of the evening the pain abated, and his mood lifted. Whether it was the nitroglycerine or the company of friends which did this, I don't know. But he did not disappoint those gathered that evening by withdrawing into a shell. I distinctly remember two things about that evening. The first was his conversation, which was lively as usual. Later in the

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Blane was Professor of History at the City University of New York, and also on the board of directors of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation. He lived across the patio from Joseph at 44 Morton Street.

evening he pulled out a typed copy of his poem *Winter Eclogue*, which he had just completed. While I couldn't fully comprehend Joseph's poems when hearing them for the first time, there was a lot about *Winter Eclogue* that was readily apparent; I can still hear him pronouncing the poem's repetitive refrain: "zhizn' moia zatianulas" ("my life has dragged on").

Nowhere was Joseph's courage more evident than in the long battle he waged against the physical deterioration of his heart. His refusal to give in to what he knew to be an increasingly mortal threat was part of his overall stoic attitude toward life. I can only guess that he found further moral support in this from the ancients whom he read and revered. He led a life filled with friends, teaching, writing, travel, and the enjoyment of good food and conversation. But he never lost sight of his major mission, which was to write poetry. Once during the 1980s I was at his apartment on Morton Street on a Sunday afternoon. For reasons I can't recall there was an unusual number of friends visiting on this occasion. At one point, we nonetheless found ourselves alone in his living room. Clearly frustrated by the professional and social obligations that had begun to pile up (including the presence of so many friends at his apartment on this Sunday), he began to reflect on how he saw his own life. "Look, Sam, in a literary encyclopedia of the future, somewhere between Blok and Briusov, there's a small spot for me.<sup>16</sup> My job now is to polish and improve that little place as best I can. That's it." At our very last meeting on an evening in the early 1990s, I asked him whether he was pleased that there was a younger audience of people in Russia who read and really loved his poetry. His answer was that this really couldn't be his concern. His task was to write poetry, and he did this to please himself. If others liked it, then of course he was glad. But he didn't write poetry for that purpose. It's important to note that he took an increasing interest in young poets in Russia; thus his stance here was by no means one of indifference.

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In March of 1996, forty days after Joseph's death, I flew to New York for the service that was held in his memory. My flight was delayed, so I arrived at LaGuardia airport at around midnight on the eve of the memorial.

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<sup>16</sup> In the Cyrillic alphabet, unlike the English, "Brotsky" does fall between "Blok" and "Briusov".

The night sky was clear, and the weather was unusually cold. Riding through deserted streets on the way into Manhattan, I noticed that the trees were all covered with hoarfrost. The effect was unusual and startling, almost as if the city had arrayed itself in its most brilliant wintry finest precisely for Joseph. At the memorial ceremony the next afternoon, his friends and admirers filled the cavernous nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to capacity. As I looked around the church, I could see friends from many parts of his life: former students, academic colleagues, Russian specialists, and also many of the best known public figures in American cultural life. Most of those assembled were either Americans or Russian émigrés who were long-time residents of the United States; many, however, had come from Russia or other parts of Europe. I remember thinking: How could one person, in only one lifetime, have touched the lives of so many people? But there they were, and I knew that Joseph had cultivated some kind of personal relationship with virtually everyone in the hall. The ceremony began with the performance of some of the chamber music that Joseph loved best. There was no eulogy. Instead, a number of his friends read from his poems, and also from poems by his favorite Russian and American poets. The very austerity of the program, with its emphasis upon music and poetry, would have appealed to Joseph. The ceremony concluded with the organist playing “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again,” which Joseph regarded as the quintessentially American song: “A merry song, in a minor key,” was how he put it.