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Venedikt Yerofeyev

A Recovered Interview with Daphne Skillen

Transcribed, introduced and annotated

by Ilya Simanovsky and Svetlana Shnitman-McMillin

Translated from the Russian by Seth Graham

In 1969-1970, life in the Soviet Union was going through a period, later described as “stagnation.” In real terms, it was rapid deterioration. The economy was in decline. My family lived in Murmansk, the biggest fishing port in the north of the Soviet Union, where no more fresh fish was sold in the shops. A variety of four cheeses was reduced to one, and the same cheese, something similar to Gouda, was renamed several times, acquiring ever fancier names, with a simultaneous increase in price. People had to queue long hours to buy basic goods. The official ideology was like glass, cracked all over the surface: it may be that the millions of people did not know of an alternative, but nobody really believed anymore in the stale dull language of communist propaganda.

As young intellectuals, we were extremely sceptical of communist discourse, mocking and despising its slogans and telling anti-Soviet jokes, but our perception of this whole Soviet system was deep repulsion combined with certain recognition of its, as it seemed, strength and durability.

At the beginning of 1970, a manuscript called “Moscow-Petushki” began to circulate in Moscow samizdat (underground circulation). The name of an author – Venedikt Yerofeyev was completely unknown to any readership. The book describes the train journey of an alcoholic Venichka Yerofeyev – the hero’s name replicates that of his author – from Moscow towards the small town of Petushki. The consumption of alcohol on the way takes Rabelaisian proportions. The journey plays out on two levels: physical, from a morning hangover to delirium tremens, and metaphysical, from a dubious resurrection to a horrifying vision of mystical crucifixion. The book is hilariously funny, and one cannot stop laughing until the last stage when the narrative, moving at huge speed, derails into horrendous

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nightmares and a terrifying ending. The rich tapestry of the text is weaved with direct and indirect quotations, allusions, parodies, travesty, references to world cultural heritage and as well as brilliant mockery of Soviet slogans and cliché. The mastery of the Russian language was breath-taking. This book not only contributed to a complete destruction of the Soviet myth in our minds: it liberated our language or as Josef Brodsky, last Russian Nobel prize laureate said about Yerofeyev: “He released voice.”

In 1988-1989, the manuscript of *Moskva-Petushki* was published for the first time in the USSR by the journal *Sobriety and Culture* – under the unlikely pretext of warning Russian alcoholics against the excesses of heavy drinking. This and the next publications in 1989-1990 made Venedikt Yerofeyev an instant classic, the most loved and admired author of his time and generation. But for him, fame was short lived.

His death from throat cancer in 1990 strangely and disturbingly mirrored the last nightmare of his hero, death at the end of his journey by four apocalyptic assassins: “They stuck their awl deep into my throat. I did not know pain like that was possible in the world... And since then I have not regained consciousness,

and never will." Yerofeyev lost his voice after the operation in 1985 and spoke during his last years with the help of a Western European-made mechanical device. Those who met him before his terrible illness always remembered his voice as uniquely beautiful. There exists one recording of his reading of *Moskva-Petushki* and some of his other oeuvres. But such a reading does not fully account for a voice with its individual manner of speech, unique intonations, lively vibrations and humorous tone. With his death in 1990, it seemed that Venedikt Yerofeyev's voice was lost forever.

How the Tape Was Discovered

ILYA SIMANOVSKY: Working in collaboration with O. Lekmanov and M. Sverdlov on a second expanded edition of the biography *Venedikt Yerofeyev: Out- sider*,¹ I noticed that in one of his diary notes Yerofeyev mentions "a taped inter- view" which in summer 1982 he gave to an acquaintance whom he called "the British woman Daphne." But I knew nothing of such a journalist or her interview – clearly, if this interview survived it had never been published. The thought of seeking the cassette excited me, especially because there was the possibility that it could be digitalized, preserving the real voice of the writer, recordings of which there remained virtually none. I called it "real" not by chance. Proposals for interviews showered on Yerofeyev only in the last two years of his life, when, sick with throat cancer, he had already lost the baritone voice that had charmed his contemporaries. Thus, if the cassette had been preserved after almost forty years, it

1 O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, and I. Simanovsky, *Venedikt Erofeev: postoronii* (Moscow: AST, 2018).

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was priceless. But what interested me no less was how could I find the owner of the cassette? In our age of the internet, it turned out to be very simple, thanks to the diary of Yerofeyev I found the real name of the "British woman Daphne": Daph- ne Skillen. I found her e-mail address and immediately sent her a letter. Slightly embarrassed by my sincerely emotional tone, I wrote that if the cassette of the interview had been preserved, by publishing it Daphne would be performing a great service to the huge culture of Russia, and that I should very much like to make an interview with her for our book about Yerofeyev's biography. The reply came quickly and Daphne gladly agreed to speak with me and we soon arranged a time for a meeting on skype. Daphne promised to look for the cassette. And now the story's action moves to London.

SVETLANA SHNITMAN-McMILLIN: I made the acquaintance of Daphne Skillen in autumn 1983 when Arnold McMillin my (then, future) husband, the Professor of Russian Literature in London University, offered to introduce me to his postgraduate Daphne Skillen who had met Venedikt Yerofeyev. At that time, I had only recently begun work on a dissertation which later became a mono- graph *Venedikt Erofeev "Moskva-Petushki" or "The rest is silence."*² We met in a London pub "The Lamb", loved and attended by Charles Dickens. I immediately liked Daphne who was full of life, humor and interesting stories. Over a gin and tonic, she told me about her acquaintance with Venedikt Yerofeyev in 1981-1982 and some of her stories I included in my book. Then we did not see each other for many years, but more recently met at some lectures in the university and other establishments.

On May 29, 2019 I received a letter from Daphne in which she asked me to return the interview which she had given me thirty-six years before in "The Lamb" pub. Completely astonished, I replied that not only had I not received a tape from her, but that I did not even suspect of its existence. I was amazed and begged her to look for it in her archives, as the importance of such an interview could not be exaggerated. Spending the next day in a state of great anxiety, I finally saw in my post a letter: Daphne had found the cassette at home! It turned out that after our first acquaintance, she had intended to give me the interview, but in her busy life this intention somehow had turned into conviction that she had given me the recording. In great joy and excitement, I immediately told Daphne that it must be published. She quickly agreed, understanding the importance of the interview for the writer's literary heritage. But first she wanted to listen to it, although she no longer possessed a cassette player. We agreed that a few days later Daphne would come to the university where I was organizing a roundtable dedicated to the fif- tieth anniversary of the writing of *Moskva-Petushki*, and would give me the cas- sette, which we could listen to together on our ancient cassette player. She asked

me not to listen to the recording before she came to our home. We were all very worried that the cassette could be damaged. Before Daphne's arrival I twice tested the player. It worked. But when, after a convivial lunch, we sat on the couch and I put in the cassette the player gave up the ghost. Arnold and Daphne took this with British stoicism. My disappointment was unlimited. Quickly taking my laptop, I ordered on the internet a new cassette player that was delivered to me at 10.20 in the evening of the next day. I switched it on, put in the cassette and a few seconds later there rang out in the room the amazingly beautiful baritone voice and sweet laughter of Venedikt Yerofeyev. Not letting go of the recorder and without a break I listened to the interview twice with the feeling that in the London night I was experiencing a real miracle. That same night I wrote two letters: to Daphne to tell her the happy news of the tape's survival. And to Ilya Simanovsky, with the same news, asking him to take part in the publication of this interview. This phenomenal document came to the surface thanks to his indefatigable work on Venedikt Yerofeyev's legacy. And, of course, I understood how his profound knowledge of the biography of Yerofeyev would be of inestimable value for the writing of notes and commentaries to this publication. I was very pleased that Ilya Simanovsky immediately agreed.

In the university media-center I asked our technicians to digitize the cassette. Two days later I received the sound file with the recording we are now putting before the reader. The full transcript of this extraordinary recording with our introduction and comments was published in the October issue of the journal *Znamya* in 2019.³

And I would like to say some words about remarkable journalist who took the initiative to conduct this interview.

Daphne Skillen was born in Shanghai. Her mother came from a Russian-Ukrainian family of Russian émigrés, coming from Vladivostok. Her Greek father came in search of a new life in the most dynamic and quickly developing city of the Far East. The family spoke English, and Daphne attended an American school.

In 1949 the People's Liberation Army led by Mao Zedong was advancing towards Shanghai, and foreigners and rich Chinese were leaving in a hurry. Daphne's parents hesitated until the very last moment but finally decided to emigrate. But by that time, passenger air traffic had been suspended. But her father persuaded the pilot of a British cargo plane flying to Australia to let the family on board. The pilot unloaded a splendid grand piano and put in the plane the parents, two daughters and their Russian *Babushka*.

Daphne graduated from the University of Sidney with a degree in Politics, Psychology and Philosophy. Later, she received a second degree in Russian lan-

³ The text is available online: <http://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=7406>

And the recording itself is also available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT95C2J19Qs> / <https://imwerden.de/publ-8781.html>

guage and literature at SSEES, London University, having spent a year in the USA at the University of Boulder, Colorado, where she wrote her master's dissertation on the work of Andrei Siniavsky.

By 1985 Daphne had completed her PhD on "Concepts of myth and utopia in Russian revolutionary literature" at SSEES, London.

Earlier in 1981-1982, having come to Moscow for a language course, she began to work at the Novosti Press Agency, editing translations of Soviet colleagues into English. During this period, she became friendly with representatives of various intellectual circles, dissidents, artists and writers.

In 1984, Daphne working for several British TV companies, was announced to be persona non grata, and for the next four years her applications for a visa were rejected. Only in 1988, she could go to Moscow again, filming documentaries for British TV. In the 1990s and in the first years of twenty-first century Daphne was living in Moscow, working as a consultant for various international projects in the area of mass media and international help to Russia and former Soviet republics as well as countries of South-East Asia.

In 2017, she published a book *Freedom of Speech in Russia. Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin*.⁴ Daphne Skillen lives in London and continues with her research, and is currently writing a new book about Russia.

Having made Venedikt Yerofeyev's acquaintance in 1981, and visiting him in Abramtsevo and in Moscow, Daphne Skillen as a professional journalist conducted this interview with the writer.

A few preliminary remarks. It is well known that Venedikt Yerofeyev often added lines and colors to his own apocrypha. Among favorite myths, which he spread was, for instance, that of his uninterrupted childhood in the North. In such cases we usually produce only one source of credible information. The interview was conducted in a very relaxed way, and Yerofeyev did not know the questions in advance and so did not prepare his replies. It took place in the evening of a tiring day and in his replies there are occasional grammatical inconsistencies and slightly broken syntax, as are found in spontaneous speech. But these moments also convey a feeling of his living language in personal communication, and for that reason we decided to print the interview with absolutely minimal editorial changes. On the tape there are breaks and omissions, and Daphne no longer remembers their cause.

We should like to express our delight to Daphne Skillen who made such an interview. From those known to this day, this is the earliest made with Venedikt Yerofeyev, and the only one in which may be heard his living voice, later lost as the result of a terrible disease. We wish to thank Daphne cordially for her trust and her permission to publish this recording.

⁴ Daphne Skillen, *Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

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This publication in its current form would not be possible without the help of Anna Avdieva, Mark Grinberg, Alexander Dymich, Galina A. Yerofeyeva, Alexander Lavrin, Oleg Lekmanov and Evgeny Shtal, to all of whom we both but Ilya especially would like to express our sincere gratitude.

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The interview was conducted on July 12, 1982 in the apartment of Galina and Venedikt Yerofeyev, 17/1 Flotskaia St., no. 78, Moscow. It began at approximately 7pm.

DAPHNE SKILLEN: Where were you born?

VENEDIKT YEROFEYEV: Go ahead, ask away. Where was I born? In 1938, in the Arctic, on the Kola Peninsula. In the Murmansk Region.

SKILLEN: And where did you go to school?

YEROFEYEV: I spent all ten years, from first to tenth grade, in the comprehensive school in the town of Kirovsk, Murmansk Region. That's in the Khibin mountains. Have you heard of them?

SKILLEN: No, I haven't.

YEROFEYEV: Well, there are such mountains on the Kola Peninsula. From first grade to tenth. It wasn't until I was in tenth grade, seventeen years old, that I crossed the Arctic Circle for the first time, from north to south.

SKILLEN: Why?

YEROFEYEV: Well, I never had an occasion to, because [laughs]... I was born there, and never travelled anywhere else.⁵ The first time in my life that I went anywhere was after I finished school with my useless gold medal...

SKILLEN: You graduated with a medal?

YEROFEYEV: Yes. And then I went to study at Moscow State University (MSU), which had just opened its new high-rise main building.⁶ That was the first

5 Before moving to Moscow, Yerofeyev had actually crossed the Arctic Circle several times with his family and in summer camp. O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, and I. Simanovsky, *Venedikt Erofeev: Postoroni [Venedikt Yerofeyev: Outsider.]* 3rd ed. (Moscow: AST, 2020), pp. 36-39, 48, 61.

6 The high-rise main building of Moscow State University (Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet) was opened in 1953, but the Philology Department, where Yerofeyev studied, was located at 9-11

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time I crossed the Arctic Circle, and the first time I saw a real live cow and all the other exotica of central Russia. There were no entry exams then. I just passed an interview and enrolled in the Philology Department. But I only studied for a year and a half. I was eighteen years old, so naturally I made a mess of things. And I was overcome by all sorts of crises, too, from the highest sort to the lowest [laughs].⁷

SKILLEN: What kind of crises?

YEROFEYEV: It doesn't really matter now. That's a topic for a special something... They were very well described in an extravagant style in my "Notes of a Psychopath," which covered the years 1956-1958. An acquaintance of mine had that manuscript for a long time.⁸ But then he gave it to a friend of his, and it disappeared without a trace when that guy moved to a new flat. They probably threw away any old papers they didn't need, including my text. I saw it for the last time in 1960 and haven't set eyes on it since. Quite a big loss, actually...⁹ The writing was highly immature, but I could've reworked it completely, into something really interesting. Especially since I wrote most of it when I was eighteen years old. And after that — this is all mostly accurate¹⁰ — I worked in construction. They were building the Cheremushki district in Moscow. Then I worked as a stoker, also in Moscow. In 1958 I said to hell with the capital and went to Ukraine to work in a geological exploration party.¹¹

SKILLEN: I didn't know you were such a fit guy.

YEROFEYEV: [laughs] A geological exploration party, I think that's what it

Mokhovoi St.

7 Yerofeyev studied at MSU from September 1955 to January 1957. See: Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 74-82, 89; V. Kataev, *Kak doekhat' do Petushkov? Vremia, ostavsheesia s nami. Filologicheskii fakul'tet v 1955-1960 gg. Vospominaniia vypusknikov [How Do You Get to Petushki?: The Times that Stayed with Us. The Philology Department 1955-1960. Graduates Reminisce]* (Moscow: Maks Press, 2006), p. 168

8 Yerofeyev misspoke here. The title of the work was not "Notes of a Psychopath" ["Zametki psikhopata"] but "Diary of a Psychopath" ["Zapiski psikhopata"]. The manuscript was kept by Vladimir Muravyov and published after Yerofeyev's death. V. Erofeev, *Moi ochen' zhiznennyi put'* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2003), pp. 491, 576.

9 This line is from Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem "Tamara and the Demon," in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957), vol. 6, p. 74. For an English translation, see Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. by James H. McGavran III (Northwestern UP, 1979), p. 101: "So this is the Terek / that has poets / in hysterics. / And I hadn't seen it. / Big loss, I'm sure."

10 Daphne doesn't recall what Yerofeyev meant by this, but it could be that she had brought him a copy of a foreign publication with biographical information about him.

11 According to other sources, the dates and places in this list of jobs is not completely accurate. There is no mention of many of these jobs in Yerofeyev's official work documents. V. Erofeev, *op. cit.*, p. 7; I. Avdiev, "Erinii i dokumenty," *Index on Censorship* 4-5, 1998, pp. 238-42; Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

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was called. Then I went back... No, wait, there was another one before I left Moscow: in 1958-59 I worked in a bottle-return point in central Moscow.

SKILLEN: What's that, a factory?

YEROFEYEV: No, it's a special center where they take empty bottles. You've never seen one?

SKILLEN: No...

YEROFEYEV: People would drag whole sackfuls of empty booze bottles there and get 9 kopecks for a small one and 12 kopecks...

SKILLEN: Yes, yes, of course. I see.

YEROFEYEV: Now all the prices are standardized and you get 20 kopecks for any bottle, but back then.... I collected loads of writing material. I've never had a job that gave me as much interesting material as that one, my four-month stint at the bottle-return center.

SKILLEN: Why?

YEROFEYEV: Oh, it was very interesting, very interesting indeed. And after that what did I do... In 1959 or late 1958 I said to hell with the capital and went to Ukraine to join the geological exploration party. I worked there in 1959. In 1960 I said to hell with Ukraine and got a job in a police station in the town of Orekhovo-Zuevo. Then they kicked me out of Orekhovo-Zuevo¹² and I went to Vladimir, *nach Osten* [laughs]. In Vladimir I worked as a librarian¹³, and later as a road worker on the Moscow-Beijing highway, which was being built at the time. It went right through Vladimir. So I built that road. Remember that line by Nekrasov? "Daddy! Who built this road?" "Count Petr Andreich Kleinmichel, sweetheart." And then I enrolled at the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute. They threw me out six months later...

SKILLEN: Why?

12 From September 1959 to October 1960 Yerofeyev was a student in the Philology Department of Orekhovo-Zuevo Pedagogical Institute. He was expelled "for academic delinquency and systematic violation of working discipline." See: "Vypiski iz prikaza No. 415 po Orekhovo-Zuevskomu pedagogicheskomu institutu ot 18 octiabria 1960 f.," *Arkhiv Gosudarstvennogo gumanitarno-tekhnicheskogo universiteta (GGTU) goroda Orekhovo-Zuevo*, delo No. 13, "Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev" ["Excerpts from Order no. 415, Orekhovo-Zuevo Pedagogical Institute, 18 October 1960," *Archives of the Orekhovo-Zuevo State Humanities-Technology University (GGGU)*, case no. 13, "Venedikt Vasilevich Erofeev"] 13 In the "Brief Autobiography" (p. 7) and in the interview with I. Bolychev (p. 518) in V. Erofeev, *op.cit.*, Yerofeyev mentions Bryansk as the city in which he worked as a librarian.

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YEROFEYEV: The expulsion order read as follows: "For the ideological, disciplinary, and moral corruption of the student body of the institute." Even though I didn't get a single B and was the only one there who got the top scholarship. It was called the Lenin Scholarship by then, not the Stalin Scholarship, or Prize,... or the Lebedev-Polianskii Scholarship,¹⁴ something like that. But they asked me to leave, even though I got all top marks the first term. Moreover, the law-enforcement agencies demanded that I leave the city of Vladimir and the Vladimir Region within forty-eight hours and never come back. I really don't

know what my crimes were... All I did, it seems to me, was lounge around swilling vodka from the bottle [both laugh], and surround myself with a group of people who were doing approximately the same thing, and reading poetry and maybe also the Gospels.¹⁵

SKILLEN: Were you writing then?

YEROFEYEV: That was when I wrote... Oh wait, no, after getting kicked out of Vladimir Pedagogical Institute I worked as a porter, and briefly as a stoker, in Vladimir. And after I got kicked out, in 1961... or actually, in 1962, after getting kicked out of Vladimir, I moved to Pavlovo-Posad. I got a job there on the production line in a brick factory. And then, let's see, let's see... I worked as a porter in a meat factory in Kolomna, also in the Moscow region.¹⁶ That was when I wrote *Good Tidings*, which is also lost now.¹⁷ It was popular among the Vladimir youth. They would copy it by hand, and I even knew some enthusiasts who learned it by heart, even though it was pretty long...

SKILLEN: And you didn't think to keep your work?

YEROFEYEV: Someone kept it. I gave it to my friend Tsedrinsky.¹⁸ Tsedrinsky

14 The Lebedev-Polianskii Scholarship was established at the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute in 1948 in memory of the literary scholar P. I. Lebedev-Polianskii (1882-1948), whose name it bore until 2008. 15 Yerofeyev enrolled at Vladimir Pedagogical Institute in 1961 and was expelled in January 1962. In addition to questions of academic discipline, the Institute's leadership was concerned by his "moral profile," and by the fact that he held Bible readings and distributed Bibles among the students. V. Erofeev, *op. cit.*, p. 512; E. Shtal, "Moskva-Vladimir-Petushki: Universitety Venedikta Erofeeva," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 Aug. 2004; Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-38.

16 Yerofeyev studied at the Kolomna Pedagogical Institute in 1962-63. According to Kolomna legend, Yerofeyev had a side job as a porter in the Ogonek grocery store, in the former building of which is now housed a museum called "ArtCommunalApartment: Erofeev and Others." Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-61.

17 Several chapters of this work (in a different version titled *Gospel*) were discovered when Yerofeyev was still living. *Good Tidings*, compiled from several different sources, including reminiscences by Yerofeyev's friends, was published after his death, by various publishers. V. Erofeev, *Short Prose* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), pp. 25-37; V. Erofeev, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019), pp. 239-54.

18 Vladislav Tsedrinsky (1940-2010) was a friend of Yerofeyev who is mentioned in *Moscow-Petushki* 57

sky gave it to some other friends to read. One of his friends gave it to an auntie of his, and God only knows what the auntie did with it, or where it is now. I haven't seen it since 1962. But then, in 1963, I got lucky and found a steady job in the "Cable..." what did they call it? Whatever it was called, we built and installed telephone cable lines. We covered the whole of Russia with phone lines. I spent exactly ten years doing that, from 1963 to 1973, or even a bit more than ten.¹⁹ I worked all over the place, in different regions: Moscow, Vladimir, Ivanovo, Gorky, Tambov, Lipetsk, Smolensk, Chernigov, Gomel, Mogilev, Tula, Bryansk, and even in Lithuania...

SKILLEN: And how did you feel about the journey? YEROFEYEV: What journey?

SKILLEN: This "going to the people..."²⁰

YEROFEYEV: This "going"? Well, it didn't do me much good, but given my situation – I didn't have a passport, or a residence permit, or a permanent roof over my head²¹ – at least while working on the road we always lived in trailers. You know those little trailers where builders are squashed together?

SKILLEN: Yes.

YEROFEYEV: We hooked all those trailers together and trundled around in them, the way old-time circus folk used to take their caravans from place to place. It was easy for Théophile Gautier to write *Captain Fracasse* – everything seems so enticing in that book, but in our case there was nothing like that. Just filth and more filth... In a word, nothing but spitting everywhere.

SKILLEN: You couldn't stay in hotels?

YEROFEYEV: What hotels? We were working in field conditions, out in the fields... It was great for my notebooks, though. I filled notebooks to the brim. During those trips I wrote a few poems for... My son was born in 1966.²² I would

in the chapter "Orekhovo-Zuevo – Krutoe."

19 The exact dates of this employment were May 1963 to January 1973. I. Avdiev, *op. cit.*, p. 239

20 "Going to the people" (*khozhdnie v narod*) refers to a practice that arose in the 1870s in which socialist members of the urban intelligentsia relocated to Russian villages to live with the peasants and encourage them to revolt against the Tsarist government. The movement was unsuccessful, and harshly repressed by the government.

21 Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 85; V. Berlin, "Venedikt Erofeev i 'Voprosy Leninizma,'" *Novaia gazeta*, 20 October 2010.

22 Yerofeyev's son, Venedikt, was born on January 3, 1966.

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read them for him...

SKILLEN: Tell me about it, it's interesting.

YEROFEYEV: I wrote all sorts of poetry in the early 70s, in different genres. From Catullan verse, or imitations... through the Sapphic stanza and all the way up to contemporary *vers libre*. All the genres.

SKILLEN: Are they preserved?

YEROFEYEV: Some are, but my mother-in-law, my first wife's mother, used some of them to light her oven.²³ I stored everything in the Petushki District, where my son was living at the time. I used to visit him every month.

SKILLEN: When did you first go to Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: To Petushki... I took a girl with me when I left the Vladimir Pedagogical Institute, and in 1966 we had a son together. I had to marry her quickly, because you have to give a baby a patronymic and a surname within a month of the birth. We got married on the very last day before the month was up. After she graduated from the pedagogical institute, my wife was assigned to work in the Petushki District, in the village of Karavaevo, a bus ride to the north from Petushki. So no matter where in Russia I was trundling around, every month or so I had to go to Petushki to see my son and bring him presents...

SKILLEN: How long did you live in Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: I didn't really live there, I just visited. I'd go see my son for three or four days and then disappear for another month. I did that until 1973.

SKILLEN: And when did you write "Notes of a Psychopath?"

YEROFEYEV: Like I said, I wrote "Notes of a Psychopath" when I was in my first year at MSU, and a bit after they kicked me out and I had started working as a builder in Moscow.

SKILLEN: So you didn't go back to MSU...

23 Yerofeyev's first wife was Valentina Vasilevna Zimakova (1942-2000; she used the surname Yerofeyeva during the marriage).

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YEROFEYEV: No, and I never intended to.²⁴ In 1972, two years after *Moscow-Petushki*, I had nearly finished writing *Dmitri Shostakovich*, which was about the same size, or a bit longer.²⁵ But I lost it. Someone swiped it.

SKILLEN: What does that mean?²⁶

YEROFEYEV: What does it mean? [both laugh loudly] Good question! I was on the train one night with a huge hangover. In my net bag I had two bottles of wine that were sticking right out of the bag. Next to them was a packet with my notebooks, including all the drafts of *Dmitri Shostakovich*. I just needed to sit down and make a clean copy of it.

SKILLEN: Was it a novel? Or a novella?

YEROFEYEV: Well, I don't know... I'm not good at naming genres. Call it whatever you want. I can't stand all those labels: "narrative poem," "novella," "nov- el," or... Essentially, what's the difference? It was just called *Dmitri Shostakovich*. Although it hardly mentioned Dmitri Shostakovich at all. There were probably about three pages where his name appeared. He didn't matter at all to the plot, or the setting, or the time.

SKILLEN: Then why did you call it *Dmitri Shostakovich*?

YEROFEYEV: Because there were scenes in it that were not exactly suitable for print. So instead of describing things that were too obscene to write down, I started to talk about Shostakovich. About how Shostakovich was a prize-winning blah-blah-blah, honorary commander of the Legion of Honor, honorary member of the Italian Academy of St. Cecilia, and so on. I would just talk about Shostakov- ich until the indecent scene ended. As soon as it ended, the narrative continued. It was a very funny narrative. But when it came around again to scenes that were not appropriate for a refined ear, and even less so for the Soviet ear, although that was not the target audience, I had to resort to talking about Shostakovich again, but this time about his symphonies, one after another [both laugh]... It was a fun piece. With a sad ending. When I lost it, I just... It was stolen along with the bag. I had fallen asleep on the train. It was a Sunday night, when everyone is dying for a drink but it's too late to get anything, because all the shops close by eight at the

24 According to V. Kataev, Yerofeyev unsuccessfully tried to re-enroll at MSU in the early 1970s. Kataev, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-70.

25 The manuscript has not been found, and some friends and researchers of Yerofeyev doubt that it ever existed.

26 The interviewer does not immediately understand the slang term Yerofeyev has used for "[some- one] swiped it" (*svistnuli*)

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latest. And I was on the train after eight, in an almost empty car. When I woke up, someone had been tempted by that bag. They didn't need all those manuscripts and drafts, they didn't need *Shostakovich*, so they threw them out the train win- dow.²⁷ All they needed were those two bottles of wine... If I had wrapped them up well in paper, it wouldn't have happened.

SKILLEN: What a pity...

YEROFEYEV: That was 1972. When I got off the train and saw what I'd lost, I fell onto the grass and wept like Pechorin after he said farewell to Princess Vera or whoever it was, I don't remember...²⁸

SKILLEN: How awful...

YEROFEYEV: Yeah. Later I tried to recreate it, since I really did like it a lot. I made a few valiant attempts to recreate the story, but it wasn't the same... It was uninspired, flat. So I decided to give it up. A lot of eminent people tried to con- vince me not to, but I gave it up. For a long time I gave up writing in general. If I did write something, it was just a tiny story or an essay about someone, or a short article on commission about early-twentieth-century Russian poets.

SKILLEN: Were they published?

YEROFEYEV: No, they weren't. I gave them all to whoever commissioned them. And they just pasted them into their albums. I only wrote those kind of small, made-to-order pieces. Someone would ask me to write, say, three pages on Sasha Chorny.²⁹ So I write the three pages and he gives me a book that I've longed to read. He doesn't ask me to pay for the book, or to swap it for one of mine. He just asks me to write something. All that writing is still in the albums of the people who asked me to do it. Other than that, I didn't write anything serious. I've been incubating a piece called "Jewish Melodies" for a few years now. But I still haven't found, as the shashlik sellers say, a skewer to put it on... I have pages and pages of material. I have so much material that I'll have to cut about 90% of it, and keep only the best stuff, the funniest stuff and, on the contrary, the darkest. I also want to carve out a play from it, where everyone dies, like in Shakespeare.³⁰ But it's ba-

27 "Sunday night" does not correspond to the date of the theft of the manuscript indicated by Yerofeyev in a notebook entry clearly written soon after: July 19, 1972 was a Wednesday.

28 The word "Princess" here is clearly a reference to Lermontov's Princess Mary. M. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1957-58), vol. 4, p. 142.

29 Yerofeyev gave his 1982 essay about Sasha Chorny to Anatoly Ivanov, who was researching the poet's work. V. Erofeev, *Maloe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019), pp. 390-91.

30 Along with the finished play *Val'purgieva noch', ili Shagi komandora [Walpurgis Night, or the Steps of the Commander]* (1985), Yerofeyev was working on a play called *Fanny Kaplan*. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 411-13.

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sically about Jews exclusively. Just like Petushki was exclusively about alcohol, and seemingly nothing else, this is exclusively about Jews.

SKILLEN: What's it called?

YEROFEYEV: "Jewish Melodies."³¹

SKILLEN: Someone told me it was called "Seven and a Half Jews."

YEROFEYEV: No, that's nonsense. I did have a plan to write something called "My Seven Jews" for the journal *Bronze Age*,³² at their request. Short biographical sketches of the seven Jews who have influenced me the most. Or have shaken me a bit. The most memorable ones.

SKILLEN: Venia, what books have had the biggest influence on you?

YEROFEYEV: That depends on when... One of the earliest ones... In my youth, it was *Crime and Punishment*, which I read when I was sixteen years old. When I was eighteen, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* and *Mysteries* made a strong impression on me. For a few weeks after reading him, or even longer, I walked around in a complete daze and couldn't read anything else. Then, when I was nineteen or twenty, my Ibsen period started. Especially *Brand and Peer Gynt*, but also his later plays. Basically, I read all of Ibsen from beginning to end. Later, let's see, which writers... there wasn't anything stronger than Ibsen. Ah! Then there was Sterne, of course.³³ But that was when I was already 22 or so. Then Thomas Mann fell on me with his heavy, learned, [...] mass. Thomas Mann crushed me for about three years. I was already 25-28 years old by then.

SKILLEN: That's all foreign literature, except for Dostoevsky...

YEROFEYEV: Yes, other than Dostoevsky it was all foreign. Russian authors never had a lasting influence on me, I guess. I also read poetry, of course, mainly Russian poets. And some overseas poets in good Russian translations. I probably read more poetry than prose. Pretty much everything from the syllabic verse poetry of the seventeenth century to Nikolai Zabolotsky, that's more or less it.

31 "Inserts for 'Jewish Melodies'" is the title of one of Yerofeyev's notebooks. The title "Jewish Melodies" is most likely taken from George Gordon Byron ("Hebrew Melodies," 1813), although it is also possibly a reference to Dmitri Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry* (1948). V. Erofeev, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2008), vol. 2, pp. 385-390.

32 Bronze Age was the unofficial name used by members of the intelligentsia for the journal «*Neue Russische Literatur*» (NRL), ed. V. Len, G. Mayer, R. Ziegler, Universität Salzburg, Salzburg, 1978–1982. 33 On Sterne's influence, see V. Erofeev, *Moskva-Petushki*, with commentary by Eduard Vlasov (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 123.

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SKILLEN: When did you write Moscow-Petushki?

YEROFEYEV: It was in the autumn of 1969, when I was travelling around in my trailer. ³⁴ We were laying telephone lines from Lobnia station towards Sheremetyevo Airport via Dolgoprudnaia. It was a totally chaotic time...

SKILLEN: But how could you write, living out in the fields in trailers?

YEROFEYEV: It wasn't easy, in a trailer out in the fields. There were eight of us mugs in one tiny trailer. And it was impossible to write when they were there, since all of the residents of the trailer would constantly kibitz [butt in]: "What're you scribbling over there?" So I had to scribble at night. And even then, they would say, "Isn't it time to turn out the light?" or "Are you studying for entry exams or something? You won't get into any colleges anyway. The only way to get in nowadays is if you have connections." They would go on and on with poppycock like that and I had to listen to it...

But what could I do? By then it had already overpowered me, completely taken me over, so I kept going. It didn't take much of my time, about two months, even though I was writing in spurts, at night. And fast. I had to write *Dmitri Shostakovich* while working as a warehouse guard outside of Moscow. I was guarding all of that cable and equipment, with rats practically running all over me [laughs]. I had a shed, which was about as long as I am tall, and as wide as I am wide. Just big enough for a cot, and nothing else. There was a tiny little bench next to it, which was my writing desk, [laughs] let's call it my *secrétaire*... And now, for my sins, since settling in Moscow in 1974, with a residence permit since 1977 and all the necessary comforts and conditions for writing, it is more difficult to write. The devil knows why. I mean, there's no pressure, I'm in no hurry. "I have nowhere to hurry to," as the great Azeri poet Samed Vurgun wrote. He was a Soviet poet, by the way. ³⁵ But we'll see. I hope that my trip to the north will shake me a bit out of this routine... ³⁶

SKILLEN: And then you're going to work on a play?

34 In a letter to Svetlana Gaiser-Shnitman (Shnitman-McMillin), Yerofeyev gives the following dates for the writing of *Moscow-Petushki*: 18 January – 7 March 1970. See S. Gaiser-Shnitman, *op. cit.*, p. 21. However, Igor Avdiev claims that he read a portion of the book in November 1969. See I. Avdiev, "Neskol'ko monologov o Venedikte Erofeev" ["Some Monologues about Venedikt Yerofeyev"], *Teatr* 9, 1991, pp. 107, 109.

35 S. Vurgun, "I'm in no hurry...", translated by K. Simonov. See K. Simonov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1966), vol. 1, p. 535.

36 In July 1982, Yerofeyev took a boat trip down the Northern Dvina river from Veliky Ustyug to Arkhangelsk with Nikolai Boldyrev, his sister Tatiana Boldyreva, and Vladimir Krivtsun. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-48.

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YEROFEYEV: I want to carve out some of the "Jewish Melodies" into a play. A tragedy, of course. In three acts, all of them set at a bottle-return center. ³⁷

SKILLEN: Did you like talking to the working-class guys...

YEROFEYEV: Not really, no. I mostly avoided that crowd. Or not exactly avoided, I just didn't really fraternize with them.

SKILLEN: But did you drink with them?

YEROFEYEV: Oh hell yes! And how! And how! We drank everything from triple-strength cologne to anti-dandruff lotion.³⁸

SKILLEN: You actually experienced all that?

YEROFEYEV: Of course, and sometimes I even set the tone. I broadened the horizons of many unenlightened people in this respect.³⁹

SKILLEN: Were you bored with them?

YEROFEYEV: No, not exactly bored... Of all the workmates I ever drank with, probably five or six thousand people – I consider someone an acquaintance if I've drunk with them at least once – and that's about five or six thousand. Out of all of them I only found five or six examples of good people. Or if not exactly good, at least more or less solid. But they're mostly... Talking with them did nothing at all for me. Occasionally some of their random hints or little stupidities... give me an inspiration for some whimsical turn of phrase or silly thought... But otherwise there is no point spending time with them. This isn't the nineteenth century, when people studied the Russian speech of the peasants and so on. But now...

SKILLEN: Although in your writing you can sense a lot of sympathy for the common people.

YEROFEYEV: Well, how could you not have sympathy for them, the poor wretches, my God! Who else is going to sympathize with them? God has abandoned them, and the government has too, in fact, so...

SKILLEN: Have you ever tried to publish your work officially?

37 The unfinished play *Fanny Kaplan* was set at a bottle-return centre. See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

38 See Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-30.

39 This is a self-citation from *Moscow-Petushki*. See V. Erofeev, *Moi ochen' zhiznennyi put'*, p. 138.

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YEROFEYEV: No, never. Not for a single second of my life has the idea of publishing something here ever entered my mind. Not once. In this respect, I am...

SKILLEN: Is that just because you knew it was hopeless?

YEROFEYEV: Not exactly hopeless. I never wanted to. In this regard I'm a completely sterile being. Not for a second have I ever thought of getting published. It's too ridiculous to even consider...

SKILLEN: Did you write *Moscow-Petushki* only for your friends?

YEROFEYEV: My target audience was around a dozen people. And I never imagined that, within eight years, it wouldn't be a dozen people reading it, but a dozen countries publishing it⁴⁰ [both laugh]... Speaking of mysterious ways...

SKILLEN: Venia, when did you start drinking?

YEROFEYEV: Drinking? Well, my mum carefully kept me away from all that until my last year in school, since my late dad was the most famous alcoholic in town.⁴¹ He was never home. He just went from boozier to boozier... He only earned money by having no possessions... He had just come back from the Gulag, where he did seven years for who knows what.⁴²

SKILLEN: Was he a broken man?

YEROFEYEV: Not really. He was also known for his voice. He would wander around the town, always half-drunk, even though he had no money... singing something, like "I bless you, forests, vales, cornfields, mountains, and waters...// Tam-pram-pam-pam.//And the lonely little path..."⁴³ Or something from "Faust":

40 By this time, *Moscow-Petushki* had been published in Israel (in Russian) and in six European countries (in translations).

41 All of Yerofeyev's comments about his father, including his employment and his song repertoire, should be taken with caution: according to Yerofeyev's sisters, Nina Frolova and Tamara Gushchina, their brother's claims about their father's alcoholism are greatly exaggerated. They remember Vasily Vasilyevich Yerofeyev, before his sentence in the Gulag, as a man who was full of life, loved to sing optimistic Soviet songs, was always tidy, and behaved in a dignified manner. He received several awards and promotions for good work in his job as a railroad worker. O. Lekmanov, M. Sverdlov, I. Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

42 Vasily Yerofeyev was convicted of violating Article 58.10 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union in 1945 and imprisoned until 1950. A year later he was convicted a second time, but exempted for health reasons. E. Shtal, *Venedikt Erofeev v Kirovske* (in press); Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-42.

43 A romance composed by P. I. Tchaikovsky to a poem by A. K. Tolstoy.

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"All hail, thou dwelling pure and lowly,//Home of an angel fair and holy." That was his repertoire. I wasn't allowed any contact with him... If I ran into him on my way to school, for instance, even when I was already grown-up, in the ninth or tenth grade, I wasn't allowed to say hello or to shake his hand if he offered it. Mum wasn't afraid of his influence on me, she was afraid of simple heredity. So the first time I ever took a swig of vodka, or any alcohol at all, was at our tenth-grade leavers' [graduation] party.

SKILLEN: How old were you?

YEROFEYEV: I was sixteen, going on seventeen. Five of us sneaked off into the bushes and illegally shared a whole bottle of vodka! And I felt like a brave hussar, such audacity! But later, at MSU, because of some troubles... including some troubles with women, but that's more or less clear... One time I was in a very dark mood, and I just went and on my own initiative bought a "little quarter," thank God they had those... "Little quarters" – you know, those small, quarter-liter bottles?

SKILLEN: Of vodka?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, of vodka. I just took it, locked myself in an empty classroom one evening, and drank it all straight from the bottle. And then two weeks later, another bottle. Later on, after I had been kicked out of MSU... I wasn't kicked out for that, of course. But when I began working as a builder and a stoker and so on, I started drinking every day.

SKILLEN: Did it start when you began spending time with working class people?

YEROFEYEV: Not at all. They had nothing to do with it. On the contrary, I had to lead too many young working-class guys astray, and even not so young, older than me. My drinking started with an urge inside myself, completely from within. By God's will...

SKILLEN: And you've been drinking ever since?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, I drink, well, it depends how you look at it... Sometimes I take breaks, ranging from a few hours to a few months. And it's okay. Actually, in 1982 I've drunk less than ever,⁴⁴ I haven't had as little to drink as I have this year

44 Yerofeyev's extended sobriety in 1982 was largely the result of his stays at P.P. Kashchenko Hospital No. 1 in Moscow, where he was admitted for alcoholism. Lekmanov, Sverdlov, and Simanovsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 345-46.

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since I turned eighteen.

SKILLEN: And how do you feel?

YEROFEYEV: I feel fine, except for the occasional morning after having drunk the night before. Who knows what will happen next. Maybe I'll go on another drinking spree. Or maybe... Recently I've had to talk about this so much with my psychiatrist friends, who are too "ready for anything," as the Mayor says to his daughter in Gogol's play.⁴⁵

SKILLEN: Sinyavsky said somewhere that people drink for their souls.

YEROFEYEV: What souls? That Sinyavsky of yours is full of nonsense. I really didn't like his book *Voice from the Chorus*. Not at all.

SKILLEN: Why not?

YEROFEYEV: I don't know, it has a kind of bombastic style. That can be forgiven, since it is addressed to his wife, and from a prison camp and so on. But I don't know what he wrote the thing for. Except for a couple of short lines that he heard in the camps. And Sinyavsky himself... *Strolls with Pushkin* is absolutely charming, of course. I read it in one sitting, or rather in two sittings, since I re-read it immediately. But when Sinyavsky talks about that side of life, about Russian drinking, he's just a dilettante. Even though he was close to them, living in the camps, in my opinion he still doesn't understand much about it. He shouldn't have stuck his nose in...

SKILLEN: Do you like music?

YEROFEYEV: Music? Oh, yes. Probably even more than Russian poetry.

SKILLEN: Do you play the piano?

YEROFEYEV: No, I don't play any instruments. When I was younger, I tried to, but I could tell that I was shit at it, so I quit.

SKILLEN: You have a piano here...

YEROFEYEV: Because I have too many friends who are pianists. Every third person who comes through my door plays. So it's almost never quiet, that piano.

45 From a letter written by Khlestakov, the main character of Gogol's play *The Government Inspector*. N. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1962), vol. 2, p. 87.

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Let people enjoy themselves.

[Pause in recording. The next question is missing from the tape.]

YEROFEYEV: It was written with inspiration, to use an old-fashioned term. I had already reached Orekhovo-Zuevo, halfway through the book, and I still didn't know if I would actually get to Petushki. I

didn't know what was going to happen to me at the next station. To use Konstantin Fedin's term, I had absolutely no over-arching plan at all, no forethought from start to finish. Everything came naturally. And it was written in a single draft.

SKILLEN: Really? In one draft, just like that?!

YEROFEYEV: No rough drafts at all.

SKILLEN: And you didn't have any books with you, in the conditions you were living in...

YEROFEYEV: What books could I have had out there? During the day, when I was digging in the ground and laying that cable, I would form a rough idea for a chapter, and then in the evening back in the trailer I'd put it down in the notebook right away, almost without lifting the pen from the page.

SKILLEN: When you were writing Moscow-Petushki, did you read it to the workers you drank with?

YEROFEYEV: Oh no, God forbid! They wouldn't have understood any of it. Not a word.

SKILLEN: You called it a "poema." Is that from Gogol?

YEROFEYEV: No! I have no idea who got it into their head to call it a "poe- ma," a word that I never used. As I say, I'm completely indifferent to genre distinctions. You can call it whatever you like... Or even better, don't call it anything at all, since some say it doesn't fit into any category or genre.

SKILLEN: How do you know the Russian common folk's language so well? YEROFEYEV: Well, you get to know it without even trying...

SKILLEN: Blat and mat [foul language] and all that...

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YEROFEYEV: Well, blat and mat, that was easy... [laughs] too easy, it was always close to hand, or not close to hand, but close to ear. And all the rest, well, I've been writing since childhood, thank God. I wrote my first thing when I was five years old. It was only two pages, written in childish handwriting. That was two years before I even started school. I myself don't remember it, but my late mother told me, the last time she visited, that my first work was written at the age of five and was called "Diary of a Madman." I don't know now what it was about...

SKILLEN: Do you know the Bible well?

YEROFEYEV: Well, not word for word, but I think I do know it... I think I do. SKILLEN: Are you a religious person?

YEROFEYEV: Not really. I have the deepest respect for religion. In general I think... [long pause] I mean, my God, if not the Gospels, well, you know, really... it seems to me that no other salvation is possible. It's not that I'm completely de- voted to the Gospels themselves, but more to their ethical principles...

SKILLEN: Venia, you really like to listen to the radio and follow the news...

YEROFEYEV: Oh yes, definitely! I speak to people who also listen to the radio every day, but for them it just serves as background noise. I just got back from the hospital where I visited my friend. She also listens to the radio, since they always have it turned on. She asked me "So what's going on in El Salvador?" I explained that some Honduran units have crossed the border into El Salvador.⁴⁶ And how the King of Spain embraced President Pertini on the field after the third Italian goal and so on.⁴⁷ About what's happening on the Hanoi-Beijing front.⁴⁸ About ev- erything, basically...

SKILLEN: What do you think about what's happening in the Falklands ...?⁴⁹

YEROFEYEV: I was very, very happy for Margaret Thatcher. I applauded every one of her speeches, and even every bodily movement she made.

SKILLEN: But why?

46. 46 Units of the Honduran army occasionally took part in the Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992).
47. 47 The 1982 soccer World Cup was held in Spain. Italy beat West Germany 3-1 in the final.
48. 48 There were military conflicts between China and Vietnam from 1979 to 1990.
49. 49 Great Britain and Argentina were at war from April 2 to June 14, 1982, after Argentina occupied

the British-owned Falkland Islands. It ended with a British victory. Port Stanley (called Puerto Argentino by the Argentinians) is the capital of the Falklands.

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YEROFEYEV: Because I can't stand the Argentinian regime and its hooliganism. That's what it really is, petty hooliganism, to approve the seizure of islands that don't belong to them. I'm firmly convinced that the British had to defend the Falkland Islands. And not only because if they hadn't, it would have piqued the appetites of those who have their eye on Hong Kong, Gibraltar,⁵⁰ and so on...

SKILLEN: You've said that Galtieri repressed someone that you were very fond of, and repressed a political party.

YEROFEYEV: Yes, he repressed absolutely everyone. He wasn't the first. The two generals that came before him did the same thing. I followed the news from the Falklands very closely. Especially when the fleet was approaching the islands; I was counting the days until my beloved British fleet [both laugh] reached those vile Argentinians. Every day I would rage: why are they so slow?! Why haven't they started attacking Port Stanley, Puerto Argentino? Why did they have so many setbacks at the beginning? My darling Israelis have already stormed into Beirut, their tanks are already under the windows of the Lebanese president, Sarkis,⁵¹ but the Brits were still messing about four kilometers outside Port Stanley. I was closely following both of my favorites at the same time, my beloved Tel Aviv and the British fleet.

SKILLEN: Would you say that you like England?

YEROFEYEV: I like England very much. I even like its geographic shape on the map [both laugh]. There's just something about it! Compare it to the ridiculous shape of Iran, for example. Or even Belgium... There's a kind of awkwardness in the very configuration of the country. Britain's very close to my heart, and the Brits generally... The British have had almost too much influence on all of us, if we leave aside the sphere of music. Who is indifferent to the British?

[Side two of the cassette.]

YEROFEYEV: Music's had an even bigger influence on me than poetry or prose. For some reason, many people have seen in this traces of... But not music like it was in the eighteenth century. I don't share the universal obsession with the vivaldis, bachs, handels, albinonis, cimarosas, monteverdis, palestrinas. I only

50 These are former British colonies. Hong Kong was returned to China upon the expiration of its special status in 1997. Gibraltar remains a British territory, in accordance with the wishes of its inhabitants. British sovereignty over Gibraltar is disputed by Spain.
51 In 1982, Israel launched a military operation on Lebanese territory, with the goal of destroying bases held by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The siege of Beirut was a decisive moment in the operation, and forced the PLO to leave the country. Elias Sarkis was president of Lebanon from 1976 to 1982.

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start to get interested from late Beethoven on, and then Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn...

SKILLEN: What about Bach?

YEROFEYEV: I'm completely indifferent to Bach. Not one line by Bach has ever touched me, not a single one. If I had to name my favorites, it would be Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius, to some extent Bruckner, Dmitri Shostakovich... Of the Soviet composers, when I'm in the right mood, I like Prokofiev, and sometimes even Kabalevsky.

SKILLEN: And Stravinsky?

YEROFEYEV: Igor Stravinsky, definitely. But Igor Stravinsky doesn't really enter into the picture, since I'm more partial to the kind of heartfelt music that for some reason is considered banal these days. But I don't give a damn about what people think, and I'm not afraid to be old-fashioned. The most important thing is that the music is emotionally engaging. That's why I don't understand the comparisons or the rambles... I only understand music from early Romanticism on.

SKILLEN: Do you only like classical music?

YEROFEYEV: Yes. And that's why I only listen to contemporary music if I detect even the slightest influence of one of my favorites. Russian composers like Boris Chaikovsky or Alfred Schnittke. Among Western composers, I used to really like Milhaud, especially his early work. Arthur Honegger not so much, but Darius Milhaud, yeah, I was very taken by him... I especially admired "Le boeuf sur le toit," with lyrics by Jean Cocteau and music by Milhaud,⁵² and Poulenc... Oh, and Carl Orff, how could I forget Carl Orff? Shame on me for forgetting someone like him...

SKILLEN: And what do you think about Vysotsky, Okudzhava...

YEROFEYEV: Vysotsky and Okudzhava, oh yes. I have such an intimate, everyday love for them, it's something you don't even talk about. It's a love that's so familiar, like you have for your family and your friends you can't live without. You wouldn't declare your love for Vysotsky or Okudzhava, because you don't need to, just like you don't need to with the most indispensable people in your life... I'm really glad that Russians love them. Some love them for different reasons, but they love them all the same. It makes me so happy when there are still glimmers of hope

52 The libretto of Darius Milhaud's ballet *Bull on the Roof* was written by Jean Cocteau in 1919. It premiered in 1920.

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even in the grimmest flats. Like when you hear Vysotsky's gravelly voice coming from an open window... It warms the heart to know that Russians aren't all that bad, that there is something more to them.

SKILLEN: Have you read folklore? YEROFEYEV: Which folklore? SKILLEN: Russian, or...

YEROFEYEV: Russian folklore itself, the fairy-tales and the legends... I can't stand, especially those silly epics. But the Russian song made a stronger impression on me than almost anything else, stronger than Sterne, Rabelais, Gogol, or musical influences like Mahler... Russian songs even had a stronger effect on me than poets like Tsvetaeva, Fet, and Tyutchev. They are by far my biggest influence. "It hurts to talk about," as Thomas Mann said [both laugh].⁵³ The Russian song is profound, fundamental, and it doesn't have any of those whimsical additions and other things that changed it at the end of the last century, and even more so nowadays.

SKILLEN: I'm not sure what you mean by "Russian song." Do you mean folk songs?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, the Russian folk song... All of them, from "The Ancient Linden Tree" onwards...

SKILLEN: And Russian romances?

YEROFEYEV: Yes, those too, but romances... I don't understand the songs of, say, Medtner or Cherepnin, or Katuar, or Grechaninov. With some small exceptions for Grechaninov. I like art songs in direct proportion to how close they are to real Russian songs. What do you call that, profoundly Russian... The Spanish have a good term for it, from some de Falla, or maybe it was Albéniz, they call it *cante jondo*...⁵⁴

SKILLEN: What about gypsy songs?

YEROFEYEV: Oh, to hell with gypsy music! As soon as I hear the slightest trace of a goddamned gypsy theme, I just can't stand it. That's why I'm crazy about

⁵³ "Thomas Mann, 1942: 'It's such a simple truth that it hurts to talk about it.'" V. Erofeev, *Notebooks from the 1960s* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2005), p. 604.

⁵⁴ Literally, "deep singing" (Spanish).

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the romances of Gurilev, for example, which are essentially Russian folk songs, but I can't stand that contemporary of his, Dubuque, whose songs are like "Kiss me to death, for a death from you is dear" or "Oh why am I not a block of wood" and so on [both laugh]...