A TRIBUTE TO
ALEXANDER TRIFONOVICH TVARDOVSKY
(1910-1971)

During my first stint as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Southern Illinois University, the Chairman who had invited me, Dr. McLeod, asked if I would like to come to a special prisoner concert at their local state penitentiary, Menard, Chester, Illinois. As I had never witnessed such a concert, I was very interested to go. It appeared that SIU was one of the most pioneering in instituting rehabilitation through University training inside the prisons. This means that any person likely to get out on parole can already take a good deal of his first B.A. exams and training in the prison and then finish it outside. I can say that this is one of the best methods of rehabilitation and I have been personally responsible for the parole of three convicts (including the one I am writing about), two black and one white, who have done very well, I am happy to say, in completely rehabilitating themselves, thanks mainly to the atmosphere of Southern Illinois University.

However, this occasion was unique. A large percentage of the prison inmates were black, and most of the performers in music were black. What was my surprise, however, when the announcer, who was black, said, “Now, Mr. S ... will recite a poem from the Russian.” and out stepped a black prisoner, who proceeded to recite beautifully an English translation of Tvardovsky’s famous war poem, “Vasily Tyorkin.” It was the section called “The Soldier and Death,” and was a universal theme, in this epic poem about the Russian “G.I. Joe,” the Russian “Tommy Atkins,” who became famous as Vasily Tyorkin by Tvardovsky.

My Chairman of course was highly pleased, and arranged a meeting with the prisoner on the spot. It appears he had read it in an American magazine—I think the “Atlantic Monthly”—in translation, liked it, and decided to recite it.

I think that in itself is a wonderful tribute to the art of Alexander Tvardovsky.

Although I knew most of the leading Soviet poets, I never met Tvardovsky to talk to and only saw him at a distance. He seemed more of a recluse than many others. But all of us had for him the greatest respect as the most liberal of the leading Communists and certainly the most liberal of editors. He it was who championed Alexander Solzhenitsyn, undoubtedly the greatest novelist since Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. As editor of the monthly Journal, “Novyi Mir,” Tvardovsky became a symbol of the struggle for creative freedom within the Soviet Union since de-Stalinization. He fought back to the very end when he was forced to resign, after all his liberal editorial colleagues had been thrown out by the Party, who in their place substituted Party-hacks and yes-men.

Tvardovsky had already said his say about Stalinism and the guilt all honest men in the Soviet Union felt at the part they had played in this terrible tragedy. He expressed it first of all in his poem “Beyond the Beyond” of which two extracts I publish here. But he was not satisfied with this and it appears that nearing his end, he wrote another poem “Po praci pamiat”, which I might roughly translate as “The Right to Remember”. During his funeral, which the great Solzhenitsyn came out of his internal exile to attend, a girl shouted out that they had still repressed some of the parts of his last poem “The Right to Remember” in which he re-evaluated the whole of his Communist path and not just that of Stalinism.

I find translating Tvardovsky poetically very difficult. I can tackle Mayakovsky, Voznesensky, Yevtushenko but I find Tvardovsky as a poet is not my cup of tea. However, I have done my best, as no one else has attempted it, and I feel that Alexander Tvardovsky deserves at least an attempt to pay him tribute.

Here are two extracts from “Beyond The Beyond” one about the blacksmith scenes where Tvardovsky was born and grew up, and the other his tragic evaluation of Stalinism.

Herbert Marshall

BEYOND THE BEYOND
by ALEXANDER TVARDOVSKY
(EXTRACT NO. 1)

TWO SMITHIES

In a far-away farm’s old courtyard,
in the shade of a smirched silver birch
stood a blacksmith’s forge in Zagoreye,*
and alongside I grow up from my birth.
And reflections of heat from that smithy
beneath that old ceiling, smoke-grimed,
and the freshness of earth from the flooring
and the smoke-smell of pitch and pine—
were habitual to me from those days
when, joining Dad at dinner-times,
my Mother—not twenty years’ old—
took me always along in her arms...

I remember well the orphaned tone
of our anvil in the quiet woods,
so sad and tired it seemed to moan
towards the evening, as if it would
tell all around our life of drudgery,
about the meagre earnings of the day
in that modest, unfrequented corner,
where our poor little backwood lay,
where between bushes, marsh and forest
the busy highways lost their way;
where all the iron a peasant owned
under his arm he could carry away;
where customers were accidental guests
who came to the smithy one year in ten,
like to a doctor, only from crying
need, when nothing else was left to them.

And that voice of the hammer on anvil,
the squeak of the bellows, the roar of the fire
from those far-off days of beginning
in my ears seem never to die.
Nor dies the memory of a poor man’s life,
painful, bitter and god-forsaken,
Though it vanish without a single trace,
with my Dad to his rest long-taken.

Let it never again be repeated,
but with it my life I began,
and I must never ever, as they say,
let its goodness be forgotten by man.
For all my childhood impressions
I brought with me to maturity,
that blacksmith’s forge ‘neath the shadows
of the old smoke-grimed silver birch tree.
For that little particle of the earth
was for everyone around those parts
their club, their newspaper of the day,
their academy of science and art.

And the passing carpenter with his axe,
and—breast-full of medals—the old soldier husky,
and our local martyr-hunter
with his ramshackle rail-loading musket;
and the surveyor, and the brazen deacon,
the second-hand dealer,—dashing伊zy-the-poor,—
and with the harness gleaming, the local vet,—
and goodness knows how many more:

There was shelter for judgements daring
about the not-so-distant past,
about the former light-hearted gentry,
about the food and wine of their repast;
about foreign lands and Russia,
about the harvests of fairy-lands afar;
about God, about evil powers,
about be-medalled Generals and Tsars;
about the needs of the rural world,
about Leo Tolstoy’s testament,
about the eclipses of sun and moon,
and the oppression of the State . . .

There you learned, to human nature
rarely did much joy befall,
to be at home with your people,
to forget that life’s not merry at all.
To sit down, settling in the coolness,
smoking others’ shag-made fags, and then
groaning, and sighing—not from boredom—but simply for the company of men.
As if each was then his own boss,
and to hurry home there was no need . . .

And for those youthful habits of mine
to those days I’m grateful indeed.
Grateful, that there, as a little child,
I learned what miracles and myths
are made by the union of metal and fire
according to the will of the smith.
I saw then that marvel revealed,
how, under his heavy hammer blows,
is born everything by which fields are tilled,
forests uprooted and houses grow.

At that I was eternally proud,
that a master could, I knew already,
with his very blacksmith’s hammer
forge such another hammer, heavy-headed.
I knew, not by hearsay only,
that to his labour great respect was paid,
that without an iron instrument
even bast shoes could not be made.

From that time I was accustomed
to the threat’ning flame of seething steel,
to the pent-up blowing, the bracing roar,
and under blows the bursts of steam.
And the heavy beat of that ancient sledge-hammer,
with hauty melancholy soaring,
rang out in the depths of the village,
like an echo of factory glory . . .

More than half a life has passed me by,
when fate gave me a chance to see
the mightiest hammer of the Urals
working furiously at full steam.

And though I was safely far away
from those waves of threatening heat,
under that hammer of a thousand tons
the very earth shuddered beneath my feet . . .

It seemed as if from every blow
under everyone’s heels it rocked
and—grimly groaning, down it slammed,
shaking the entrails of the rocks . . .

And though that thunder universal
was at first a most deafening thing,
in it I heard the familiar sound
of my village sledge-hammer’s ring.
I breathed the long accustomed smell
of fire and cinder’s smoke and foam,
although I knew this was the Urals,
in that great forge, I was at home.

The Urals! Of the past a legacy,
and—a portent of the future as well,
and into our spirit, just like a song,
its mighty ground-bass swells—
The Urals! Strong point of the State,
its blacksmith and mineral excavator,
co-eval with our ancient glory
and—of our present glory—creator.
BEYOND THE BEYOND
by Alexander Tvardovsky

THUS IT WAS"

When life from the living was cut off by Kremlin walls, like a spirit of terror he ruled us—we knew no other names at all.

In city and village we speculated how to praise him even more, for nothing can be omitted or added—thus it was in this land of ours.

Thus it was—for a quarter of a century—the call to labour and to war sounded the name of a human being equal to the name our Motherland bore.

It knew no lesser measure, and already came into its own, that which people of deep belief—attribute to God directed alone.

And thus it became merely habitual that he, through tobacco smoke dun, saw the whole world as something personal and like God directed everyone.

And those hands of his stretched out to all important things on earth: all production, every science and art, the heavenly bodies, the very sea's depths;

And all accomplishments uncounted—who should do what—he predetermined; And even for posthumous glory all heroes were indebted to him . . .

And those who marched alongside at the start, knew prison and exile, the underground, and took power and fought and fought—into the shades, one by one, went down.

Some to the shades, some to sleep—the list is long—in the category of premature senility.

Kalinin no longer humoured petitioners by invitations to Kremlin tea.*
So many in general were under interdiction, and so many had long ceased to be.

Thus he lived and ruled in this land of ours, holding the bit with stubborn hands, and who, to his face, didn't glorify him, didn't laud him? Find such a man!

He wasn't a son of the East for nothing. To the end those traits he preserved by that stubborn, that ruthless, justice and injustice he administered.

But which of us can serve as judges? Decide who was right, who was guilty then? For we are talking about human beings—and aren't all gods created by men?

Did not we, singers of honourable themes, in all simplicity proclaim aloud to the world, songs and poems about himself, which he personally put into our mouths?

Did not we, in the hall of ritual, before even the words were out of his mouth, before even he commenced his latest speech, did not we already shout from the floor: "Hurrah! He will be right once more!"?

Whom shall we blame if he was like that? If now in hindsight, experience emerges? Great Lenin never was a god and never taught us to create demiurges.

Whom to blame?: The country, the state, the honour of that name held high in the stern labour of everyday, on every vast construction site.

And by the bravery of Russian warriors it was carried from Volga's shores to the blackened walls of the Reichstag on gun barrels' burning bores.

Did not we, sons of daring feats, sacrifice for the mission of our land? and carry that banner-name in our hearts through all the five-year plans?

And in the labor of that crusade, we knew we were true to that banner: not us alone: but the flower of our folk, the honour and reason of all our country.

We called him the father of our country-family—shall we attempt to gainsay? Thus it was in this land of ours—there's nothing to add, nothing to take away.

He was the father, whose one single word, one slight flicker of an eyebrow, was law. Carry out that ruthless duty. And if it wasn't like that, then how?

And our Odes never sang about the fact that, in tough times, disdaining the law, on whole peoples he could let his supreme anger fall.

And what, at times, such a tempest could cause to the fate of a single life,
in all its real nature—
that you know better than I.

But in the ordeals of our fate
there was, however, always a way:
that inflexible will-power
with which we met, on the battle-field,
the enemy in our bitterest hour.

In labour privation and battle,
before Moscow, and in the Urals,
we trusted that very will-power
no less than we trusted ourselves . . . .

* One-time President of the U.S.S.R. who personally received petitioners in his Kremlin office—stopped under Stalin.

MATHER SCHOLAR OF THE YEAR

Case Western Reserve University of Cleveland, Ohio, chose Professor Herbert Marshall as their MATHER SCHOLAR OF THE YEAR 1972. This important assignment from a high-ranking University is indeed an honour both to the recipient and to Southern Illinois University. The University authorities graciously released Professor Marshall for this winter quarter (January to March) and he and his wife, Fredda Brilliant, are in residence on the Case Western Reserve Campus.

SOVIET JEWS IN ART EXHIBIT

Washington, D.C.

The Center was invited to arrange an exhibition of Soviet Jewish Paintings and Prints at the KLUTZNICK EXHIBIT HALL, B'nai B'rith Building, 1640 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. from 20th March thru 25th April. A parallel a selection of the sculptures of Fredda Brilliant will also be exhibited. A special pre-view opening will be introduced by Dr. Vincent Melzac, Director of the CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, followed by a talk by Professor Marshall on "SOVIET JEWS PERSONALITIES I HAVE KNOWN," including the artists exhibited.