

Vladimir Gross (February 9th, 1933 - January 23rd, 2006)

Nora Holdsworth writes:



When I came to the Slavic Department in the 1960's, Vladimir Gross was already there.

As I think of Volodya, it comes to my mind now that his persona was considerably bigger and more luminous in the eyes of those whom he was teaching than many of us realized during all those years that he was among us in the halls of the Slavic Department. Interestingly, it is from Volodya's former students who attended his memorial services on Friday evening, January 27th, again the following morning, and later at a reception following his burial, that I had an opportunity to learn something of special significance about Volodya which has considerably impressed me and has been on my mind since then.

What I learned from Volodya's grieving ex-students who came to pay their last respects to him, decades after they had graduated from the University, was how much more they had learned from Volodya than had been officially included in the syllabus. What one after another of his former students were telling me was how much Volodya had taught them, along with the Russian language, about some very important human values.

Into his communication with the students he injected special warmth, a special humor, a spirit of generosity, as well as love for the Russian language and culture, and a love of life itself. It was when observing the grief in the faces and voices of Volodya's former students, at least one of whom had traveled all the way across the country to attend his memorial service and his burial, that I realized what an inspiration Volodya had been to so many young people. What those mourning ex-students were expressing was their appreciation of human values that Volodya had instilled in them by his own example. He had made the Russian people and Russian culture so much more attractive to them by projecting his own generosity and kindness into his interactions with his students, even when supposedly chiding them during their inevitable slips with the language, and they hated to disappoint him. So, as a result, in regard to imparting the academic subject at hand, Volodya appears to have excelled more than many of us might have noticed back then.

What is more to the point and of definite significance here is that I was also pleasantly amazed to hear a number of Volodya's former students speak excellent, fluent Russian. Those students had never lost their zest for mastering the Russian language and for learning all that they could about the Russian people and Russian life. Some had held interesting jobs in Russia.

And now that he had left us, his former students let it be known to us just how much and in what important ways Volodya had contributed to their overall education. It was not just the academic material presented to his students, but his total persona that contributed to his success in teaching his students, a number of whom came to honor him at the end.

James West writes:

I remember Volodya as one of the most decent, loyal, charming, thoughtful and life-affirming people I have known. As a colleague in the business of teaching Russian, he was always serious and conscientious, strict but patient: his standards were high, he expected the same of others, and he would not give a good grade to a student he did not think deserved it. Combined with his unflinching good nature, this produced a classroom climate in which his students worked hard, and learned, and came to love him for caring enough to insist that they did.

What drew me most strongly to Volodya, though, was his adventurousness, both mental and physical, his curiosity and his sense of humor. The most rewarding times I spent with him were outside the halls of the academy. It might be discussing language teaching problems over a coffee on The Ave, but it was more likely to be talking about everything under the sun on snowshoes somewhere back of Kachess Lake, in country too steep for skis. Volodya was very attached to his dogs, and sometimes they came along on these outings, and became part of the conversation: he would talk fondly and endlessly both about them and to them. I particularly remember the hairy, good-natured but short-tempered, almost humanly talkative brute he called Taras (Bul'ba, of course), and loved through thick and thin. Skilled and resourceful, Volodya could fix anything, from outdoor shelter to indoor plumbing to his favorite foods, and he had an astonishingly wide range of physical prowess. Throughout his life he was an all-season, all-terrain hiker, and before he retired he learned to fly, but in what this agelessly energetic man called his 'youth' he was an expert canoer and kayaker. Sometimes his passions intersected: when one of those *Lassie* films involved a daring escape in a canoe down a raging river, it was shot in the Pacific Northwest. Few people knew that the anonymous hero whose skill and strength brought the canine star safely through the rapids was Volodya. It irked him but amused him that in the most dangerous



scenes the producers, not wanting to risk a life, made him carry Lassie's 'stunt double', a product of the local taxidermist.

Whatever the circumstances, Volodya loved to immerse himself in the outdoors and become a part of nature. But, Russian to the core, he also loved to hunt. His quarry ranged from grouse to mushrooms, and at day's end, nature often became a part of Volodya, and whoever was lucky enough to be his dinner-guest. Volodya lived well, but not in the usual American sense: he knew how to live well 'on what God sent', and take pleasure in every detail of the world around him, and he taught that skill, too, by example. Most of all, he knew that we take from life in the measure in which we give to it. Volodya took a lot from life, and it was all richly earned. We miss him.

Jack Haney writes:

I first became acquainted with Volodya in 1959. Over the years I came to know him as a valued teacher in our department and a trusted colleague, and as a friend as well. As a teacher he was among the best we ever had, as his class enrollments testify. Behind a somewhat gruff exterior there was a genuine desire for students to succeed in learning Russian, and to this cause he gave everything, despite the lack of support he often felt from the 'senior' faculty members whose indifference to the language program was too obvious to all who cared to note it.

Volodya, Joyce, and my family shared many happy social occasions, lasting right through this past year: hiking and skiing from his cabin on the Twisp River, games of monopoly until late at night by kerosene light, and delicious food prepared by Joyce and Barbara. All the Haney's -- Barbara, Gillian, Andrew, and I -- were deeply touched by Volodya's life and his generous spirit, and we will always miss him.

Allan Mustard writes from Moscow:

Volodya Gross was many things, but first and foremost he was a teacher. I only studied formally under Volodya for one quarter, in the intensive Russian course, but continued to learn from him throughout our friendship. Some of the lessons will be familiar to his other friends: to adhere to matters of principle, to be tough when toughness is called for, to show mercy when mercy is in order. When we first became acquainted I wondered at his self confidence and willingness to buck the system. After learning of some of the trials Volodya had survived (the arrest of his father when Volodya was only three, which he remembered vividly; the Stalinist purges, then the war, a Displaced Persons camp, and much, much more) it became clear: when you have lived through all that, the small stuff really seems small. That was perhaps his most important lesson for us.

Toward the end of Volodya's years, I learned of a CD-ROM database available in Moscow containing excerpts from KGB files on people executed during the Great Terror, and shared the news with him. He asked me to get a copy, which I did, and he excitedly wrote back a little later that he had finally learned from the database the hitherto unknown fates of several relatives. This was his last lesson to me: no matter how painful, it is important always to know and to acknowledge the truth. We have lost a great teacher, and not only of the Russian language, as well as a dear friend.



Anne Rathbone Winskie writes:

What good fortune I had to know Volodya for 30 years! Special memories of Volodya include inner-tubing/rafting down the Methow River; hiking & snowmobiling near the cabin he & Joyce lovingly designed & built in Twisp; and sitting in their back yard in Edmonds, enjoying the birds & flowers over a cup of coffee, while discussing Russian language & culture, mulling over the state of the world, or hatching new house & garden plans. I remember his excitement when he took flying lessons, bought a plane, and took friends and family (including Joyce's grandmother, who had never flown!) on trips around Washington and Oregon. We shared a great love of animals, both wild and domesticated, and I remember a parade of felines over the years (Blackie, Mochie, Murzyk, Mr. Ket, and Sunny, to name a few) and dogs of various shapes and sizes (Taras, Lobo, Bobka) who were dear to his heart.

He and Joyce created homes that were filled with warmth and stimulating conversation, that made friends feel truly welcome. Volodya reveled in challenges and was always coming up with ingenious solutions to practical problems. On many occasions he came to our rescue with an item he had squirreled away, knowing that at some point it would be just right for something.

So many of my friends have raved about his language classes and his course on the Russian Bards, and I regret that I never had him as a teacher. However, I feel honored to have learned so much from him outside the classroom. With his multicultural background, he brought a different perspective to life and made me see things in different ways. His energy & enthusiasm were

infectious, and he really enjoyed the details in life. He had that wonderful, Russian appreciation of history and culture that many Americans lack. His generosity with his time and talents were boundless. Even during his illness, which he handled with such dignity, he still had that rare gift of really listening to others. No wonder he had such a wide & varied circle of friends! I miss him greatly, but all he gave me over the years will always be with me, as will his smile, the twinkle in his eye, and his unique voice.

John Winskie writes:

This came to me in the middle of the night on Volodya's birthday. I got out of bed and hastily and groggily scribbled it onto a scrap of paper, and then went back to bed, intending to touch it up later. But I still couldn't sleep - I knew that among my mounds and bundles of disorganized photos and negatives, there was the perfect photo to go along with the text. Finally, I surrendered, and got up to see if I could find it. It was daunting - there were two boxes crammed full, and I had no idea where to start, but I just picked a spot and started leafing through. And through some amazing serendipity, bordering on divine intervention, one might think, in ten minutes I had found it! All the more surprising, since I only had the negative, having given the print to Volodya years ago. So here you go, Volodya! Happy Birthday!

With Love, John

*We flew to the Mountain, the Pilot and I.
Leaving the Field below, we pulled ourselves up
Into the sky on man-made wings of fragile alloy,
And slowly, with all due humble respect, we drew closer -
Not to conquer the peak, nor to coup it, was our intention
But to observe it truly in three dimensions
And to revel in our smallness against its massive size
For as long as lift over gravity would prevail.*

*As we approached, as though God himself found pleasure in our impudence
As though He smiled, just for us, and just for then,
He drew back His veil of clouds and allowed us to gaze
From heaven's perspective upon His pride.
We silently admired what no words could describe -
How the light cast shadows on frozen contortions,
Disclosing colors and textures in near painful detail,
How large became small and far became near -
And time slowed down, as we wished it would,
But didn't stop, as it never does.*

*As the Pilot swung back around the other side,
We held in wordless conversation and steered for home -
We had shared the magic of take-off,
When Earth and gravity lurch away -
The joy of holding course and reckoning,
Of getting there and getting back,
And then we shared the joy of landing,
Self-assured, as the bird we had become.*

*And as we learned again to walk on legs not quite recovered,
Breathlessly we shared in words that failed the task
The joy we always felt from flying,
And the simple, sacred satisfaction that always comes
From trying to get there, and making it.*



Ann Romeo writes:

I loved Volodya. He never failed to make me laugh, feel good about myself, and feel welcome. Other have commented on his passion for life, his range of interests, his perceptive nature, and his bravery...

One summer afternoon I was visiting at Anne (Rathbone) Winskie's house when we had occasion to call on Volodya to help us out of a jam. Anne's husband, John, was out of town on a translating gig, and Anne and I were out in the backyard playing with the dogs, when we heard a strange thump, thump, thump. To our horror, we discovered that a pesky rodent had managed to get itself trapped by its tail in Anne's garage. Disposing of the very alive rat was definitely a 'boy job', but who to call to help? Volodya! In ten minutes he was over to the house, sized up the situation, grabbed the firetongs, did the deed, got rid of the remains, bowed to our cheers, and was off, shaking his head at the helpless maidens. Of course, this act of bravery demanded to be immortalized, and to honor the event Anne composed the infamous *Ode to Sir Vlad*... which is sitting in a drawer somewhere,

waiting to reclaim its place in modern folk literature.

His laugh, the twinkle in his eye, the way he said my name -- Volodya holds a special place in my heart. The way he handled his illness, with dignity and grace, is a model for us all. We've lost a a good man and I've lost a good friend.