

Happy (Orange) New Year!

The last two months of 2004 were an emotional rollercoaster for Your Correspondent. With the re-election of George Bush in the US in November – and with my American friends prostrate with despair– my emotions hit the basement. With the revival of civic life in Ukraine through its “orange revolution” during November and December, my emotions went through the roof. Then came the earthquake and tsunami in SE Asia, and I struggled to find an emotional repertoire commensurate with the enormity of the catastrophe.

All three events bear consequences that will haunt us for years to come. But I would like to zoom in on the Ukrainian story for now – because it is characterized by something like hope, because I am of Ukrainian origin and for the first time since independence in 1991 I am deeply proud of claiming that heritage, and because the narrative of the Orange Revolution is still being written, in some very bizarre ways, and its anybody’s guess what the final version will look like.

For someone sitting at her laptop in Edmonton while events unrolled in Ukraine, the experience of the “revolution” was an affair of the Internet. In fact, the first real whiff of what was at stake didn’t reach me until I looked inside my Yahoo mailbox at the end of October while I was in an Internet café in Skopje, Macedonia, and found an open letter forwarded to me from friends in Saskatoon from a mutual friend in Kyiv, the writer Oksana Zabuzhko. She had visited Saskatchewan in the late 1990s in connection with a publishing project with Coteau Books [Two Lands, New Visions: Stories from Ukraine and Canada, 1998] so I sat up and took notice.

Zabuzhko’s letter was to prove controversial – and I’ll get to that – but it does give me the way in to talk about the Ukrainian events without sinking under the massive amount of material they generated and which then spun in several rotations through cyberspace. I’m going to talk mainly about writers.

Zabuzhko wrote after the first round of presidential elections which had left each of the two Victors, Yanukovych and Yushchenko, with an insufficient percentage to win; so a second round was announced for November. The tone of Zabuzhko’s letter startled me. She began: “Im writing you from this country, now haunted with the gory prospect of being forcefully turned into one of the most terrible thugocratic dictatorships that Europe has witnessed since Hitler and Stalin.” At first it seemed to me she was hysterical but then perhaps, as she warned, I, in my Canadian cocoon, simply had no idea. I did know something about the state of Ukrainian politics as reported in various presses, not to mention my relatives’ letters – the oligarchs with their unconscionable wealth delivered on a platter from the public purse, the disorder of Parliament, the murdered journalists, the collapse of social programs – so maybe she was right and the situation was even worse? Maybe there would be “an open war launched against the people of Ukraine” by a handful of gangsters who would stop at

nothing to stay in power? Maybe it was already under way with a “disgusting and overwhelming campaign of lies” in the media, cheating with voting lists, threats and intimidations to vote for Yanukovich (Moscow’s favourite) or else?

Then Zabuzhko mentioned something I had never heard of, a grand “orange manifestation” of some 200,000 people filling the central square of Kyiv, and I blinked at the screen and looked at that number again. It was a beautiful sunny day as she wrote, and “joy, hope and solidarity” were in the air. I was incredulous: joy and hope? In Ukraine?

Well, the letter proved controversial because of some of her more frantic claims – that Russia is a “concentration camp,” for instance – and she circulated a revised version later. But I was hooked anyway.

I signed onto an e-bulletin posted from the University of Ottawa which was a kind of digest of the world press about Ukraine and printed off more than I would ever get around to read. But I began to notice a troubling trend: it seemed that many of the West’s more progressive writers and journalists, including Canadians, were not in love with the Orange Revolution (as they once had seemed to be with revolutions in East Timor, South Africa, downtown Seattle, the West Bank) but in fact suspected it of sinister provenance. We supporters who rejoiced in what seemed to be civil society on the move at long last in a historically brutalized society were dupes of a campaign financed by capitalist interests in the USA!.

Of what did that campaign consist? To quote one of its persistent exponents, the *Guardian’s* Jonathan Steele: “US funding has ranged from bankrolling opposition websites and radio stations to paying for exit polls, which play a powerful role in mobilizing street protesters.” Well, my goodness, how conspiratorial can you get? Some of that “US funding” has also over the years gone to subsidize dubious activities such as women’s shelters, independent art galleries and the training of health care workers, and one of the most generous donors to civil society, the billionaire George Soros of New York, had in fact yanked out a lot of his money from Ukrainian projects in order to fight George Bush in the presidential election at home.

Then a number of Canadian friends on the left each forwarded me the same article that had appeared in England’s ultra-Tory rag, *The Spectator*, in which the writer, John Laughland, described the pro-Yushchenko crowd filling up Kyiv’s Maidan (Square) as “drug addict skinheads” pumped up by “nationalist and secessionist songs dating from the anti-Semitic period of World War II.” This bizarre accusation could be dismissed as the product of Laughland’s private fantasies (his accusations against the Orange crowd were neither substantiated nor repeated) but what were my friends thinking – a writer and an alternative newspaper publisher among them – when they forwarded me this stuff without comment? And since when did they believe *The Spectator*?

Okay, all points of view are eligible for circulation, but what I was missing in those of the naysayers was an interest in if not sympathy with the lived, human experience of the “revolution,” that marvellous parade of faces of the young and the old, the hip and the drab, the mischievous and the prayerful that we watched night after night after night on our television screens, Cold War geopolitics be damned! As a poet friend wrote from Toronto, recalling a recent visit to Kyiv: “Hearing some of the stories, seeing some of the footage, reminded me of the great, young anarchist folk I was hanging out with – squatters, zine writers, students. It seems that their (and many other) voices are finally being heard.”

After the results of the second round of the presidential election were contested by Yushchenko and the Supreme Court decreed that it would have to be rerun on December 26, the energy flying off the Internet in the exchange of many thousands of screeds in all languages was electrifying. A “democracy petition” initiated by the Ukrainian-American actor, Jack Palance, and his Trident Foundation, circulated among “members of the media and entertainment industry in Hollywood and around the world” and was signed by people like the director John Badham, actor David Duchovny, writer Janice Kulyk Keefer, PR consultant Michael Levine, actor Luba Goy, TV journalist Victor Malarek and Giller Prize founder Jack Rabinovitch. Normally, not all our paths would cross but this much we could sign on to: “We call on our brothers and sisters in the media industry worldwide to recognize that the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine is embraced by the vast majority of people living in Ukraine, whether they speak Ukrainian or Russian, or whether they are Orthodox, Catholic or Jewish, or whether they live in eastern or western Ukraine.”

Meanwhile, back on the leftish Canadian beat, I waited in vain for something, anything, insightful from our Rick Salutins and Naomi Kleins. Instead, I found Steven Laffoley who “writes from Halifax” on the rabble.ca website. It appears that he confines his gaze on the Orange Revolution - the networks’ “latest reality television program” - to CNN. When the commercials come on, he goes to the kitchen and makes popcorn in a package that promises him “revolutionary new butter flavouring.” The commercials also promise “revolutionary” effects, for erectile dysfunction, heart disease and nagging arthritis. Slumped in front of the tv with his bowl of popcorn, Laffoley regards the “cheering crowds with their orange flags and orange scarves” while flipping through a homestyle magazine. He thinks them witless, dumbly unaware of the reality of their situation: “Do the folks waving those orange flags and orange scarves know that they are part of my cable news/entertainment revolution?” So much for *Ukrainian* reality in homes and schools, factories and shops, buses and subways: what really matters is Laffoley’s cute cynicism about his own television choices.

As a writer friend in Toronto remarked, as we corresponded our despair about the mean-spirited naysayers of Ukrainian democracy: “Would that there had been this kind of people power out in the streets of America protesting the Iraq war, or in the streets of Moscow protesting Putin’s policy on Chechnya.”

Finally, ten days before the December 26 rerun, which would see Yushchenko decisively confirmed in the vote, the Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych, who had come to literary life in independent Ukraine, was invited to make a speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Perhaps there is a kind of genetic code for florid Slavic speechifying, for some of Andrukhovych's language is over the top, like that of his friend, Oksana Zabuzhko. "A universal historic drama is taking place!" "Is it possible to save a cursed land?" "In Ukraine there is not a single drop of water that does not belong to the Atlantic basin."

It is not necessary to make such sweeping rhetorical gestures when the importance of the Orange Revolution is much simpler. Andrukhovych says it himself: in the end it doesn't matter, he argues, whether the people who vote for Yushchenko believe they are voting for "European" (or "American" for that matter) values of democracy and civilized discourse. (And it certainly doesn't matter whether many Western intellectuals are so addled by anti-Bushism they can't think straight.) "It is enough for them that these are *their* values and for the sake of them they are prepared to stand days and nights in the December cold to walk with flowers in their hands...."

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