

ESTONIAN TUNES BY SERGEI DOVLATOV

“Tallinn is called artificial, puppet-like, and showcase city. I lived there and know that it is all real. It means it is natural for Tallinn to be artificial a little...”

Sergei Dovlatov.
“Craft”.

REHEARSING EMIGRATION

Sergei Dovlatov, one of the most popular Russian writers, lived and worked in Tallinn from September 1972 to March 1975.

“Why am I going to Tallinn and not to Moscow? Why not to Kiev where I have influential friends? There are no reasonable explanations. There was just a car driving in that direction. I was deadlocked in debts, family problems, and a hopeless feeling.”

I believe Dovlatov is slightly sly. However it is literature and the game of words suggests sly.

But reasonable explanation also existed. Resettlement to Tallinn offered a transfer to another world.

Each respectful resident of Leningrad would early or later have friends in close and European-style Tallinn. Besides, the city was also changing with its narrow paved streets with dark bars nested in the stone coolness of basements and cozy cafes where they served coffee and warm rolls with whipped cream.

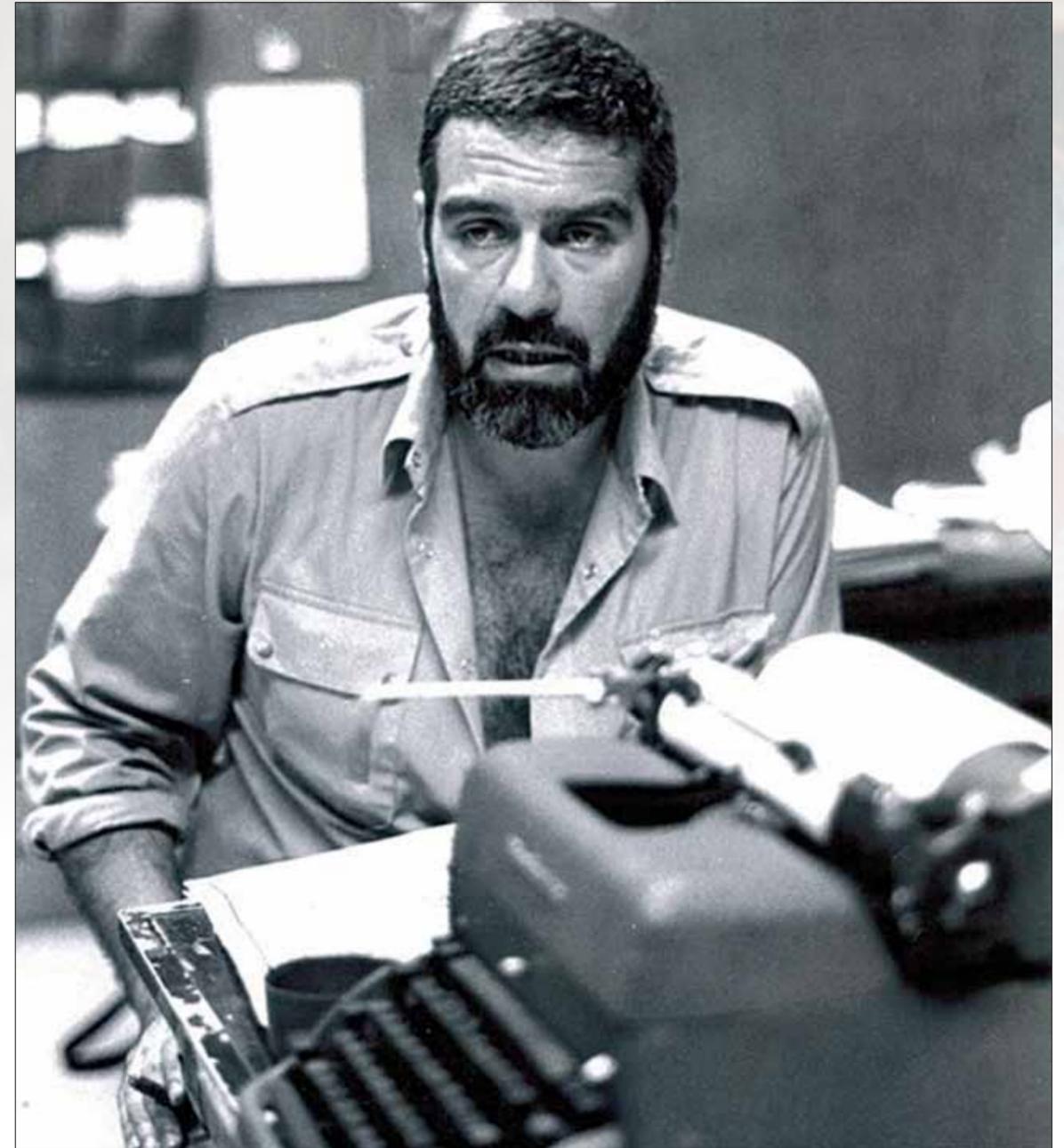
It breathed easier in Tallinn.

“I loved it for unexpected indifference to me,” Dovlatov wrote in one of his first letters from Tallinn. Valery Popov commented in his “Dovlatov” book that came out two years ago: “Dovlatov has definitely invented Tallinn’s indifference to him to boost his austere and heroic image.”

But I would disagree and say Dovlatov’s observation was very precise as Tallinn is truly an indifferent city. A feeling of all-round orphanhood hits anyone who needs emotional communication or at least a fugitive glance. You can walk naked in Tallinn and nobody would turn the head at you as you are of no interest to anyone. You are acquainted with your neighbor not more than with the cashier in the nearby supermarket: you automatically smile, nod, and say “Hello!” That is all. It may last for ten or twenty years or as long as you live in the house. It is hard to get used to it, but when you do you cannot but appreciate it. Tallinn is the best city for those who really dream and want to be left in peace.

It was easy for a gifted journalist to find an employment in Tallinn and make a career. However Dovlatov had his own path and wanted to be a writer.

Soon after arrival he worked in the Soviet Estonia newspaper. His colleagues appreciated him for the subtle style and outstanding gift of a storyteller. He strictly denied any manifestation of platitude. Some people disliked it, specifically



those who did not understand the problem and could not explain his reaction therefore.

In a word Dovlatov was loved by everyone who was capable of comprehending his extraordinary nature and disliked by those who the nature irritated. It was an unbecoming luxury to differ from others. Dovlatov allowed it to himself, but some people around did not. Three years after the arrival, in March 1975, he left Tallinn where he spent his first “emigration.”

They say Dovlatov was compelled to leave the “slightly artificial city.” That is only partially

true. In August 1974 he wrote to Lyudmila Shtern: “I will finally return to Leningrad not later than in May 1975. Much depends on my book affairs, but only in time, not in principle. Even if all my hopes come true here it is not what I wanted to. The status of a published writer in Estonia is not higher (objectively) than that of non-published writer in Leningrad.”

The writer likely breathed easier in Tallinn in the beginning. However he nevertheless lacked air anyway. “Estonian culture is called outside. Okay, thanks for that. I believe they



curse the outside culture because the guests of the Estonian capital city lack it," he would write later in New York.

However to live and be a guest are different things. Dovlatov lived in Tallinn. The absence of external irritants, including discourtesy which always painstakingly offended him, was pleasant, but did not improve his personal situation.

And then followed the well-known story described by Dovlatov about the peril of a book that was ready to come out from Eesti raamat publishers. It was nothing but fate which we cannot change.

THE DOVLATOV BRAND

The Days of Dovlatov in Tallinn were included into the program of the European cultural capital which Tallinn became in 2011. The city currently lives according to the motto of the year – Culture Calls. 250 projects in the calendar of cultural events include an international literature festival devoted to the 70th birth anniversary of Sergei Dovlatov. It will be held on August 25-27.

The Days of Dovlatov in Tallinn were initiated by a man who not long ago did not honor the writer whose books are read in the whole world. He even did not know his name.

Three years ago Olivier Loode, the head of the Consumetric Tourism Company, traveled by car with friends in a Russian region that borders on Estonia: Pskov, Mikhailovskoe, Novgorod. "During the trip my friend, who knew the Russian literature better than me, constantly spoke about Dovlatov and quoted the Compromise and the Reserve. He spoke so eloquently and enthusiastically about the writer that I could not but read his books after we returned home. It all began from that," Loode recalled.

Olivier Loode is a territorial marketing expert. In ordinary language it means raising aware-

ness of a country, city, or province where it is scarcely known. As an expert in the sphere he knows that God ordered to promote Tallinn and Estonia through culture.

"Writer Sergei Dovlatov lived and worked in three countries, but nobody has ever thought to use him as a brand that brings the countries closer. Dovlatov is one of the most read and respected modern Russian writers in the world. He united literature admirers in our city regardless of their age, nationality, and even political convictions. His name can strengthen cultural ties between Tallinn and St. Petersburg.



“Dovlatov, who united Estonians and Russians, offers a nice possibility to make Tallinn which is known for its Middle Age beauty more attractive specifically for the Russian-speaking world. The funny and memorable *Compromise* by Dovlatov is major literary work for Tallinn. No other Russian writer has ever brought the Estonian capital to the forestage of a literary work which has been read, discussed and re-printed for many years. Dovlatov is likely the best story teller about Tallinn. It is the reason why the city has no right to forget the writer whose works made it unforgettable,” Loode said.

As it often happens the time and place successfully coincided. When Loode read Dovlatov’s books the Tallinn – European Cultural Capital-2011 Fund was accumulating projects to include into the official program of the year and the upcoming 70th birth anniversary of the writer was a good reason to hold the Days of Dovlatov in Tallinn. The Fund backed the idea.

“In any project a team of interested people is the most valuable thing. The Union of Writers of Estonia became our major partner. The Estonian consulate in St. Petersburg helped establish the necessary contacts, in particular, with the Lermontov Central Library. Writer Yelena Skulskaya agreed to be the creative expert and project head in the framework of the Days of Dovlatov,” Loode said.

READ AND RECOLLECT DOVLATOV

Dovlatov’s Days in Tallinn will open with the Estonian-Russian exhibition *Dovlatov’s 70s* organized by the National Library of Estonia and the Lermontov Central Library in St. Petersburg. The exhibition is organized in such a way so that a person who has not read Dovlatov and is unaware of his works will be encouraged to read the books. On the same day a retrospective show of the *Bigger Petit* documentary by Nikolai Sharubin from Estonia will follow. And the Tallinn University will hold a literary symposium on Dovlatov’s works in which Russian and Estonian experts will participate. The Russian Theater in the Estonian capital city will stage *Read Dovlatov* show performed by leading actors from Estonian theaters. “It will be a mosaic of Dovlatov’s works united by one lyrical thread,” said project manager Yelena Skulskaya. “For many years I worked in the same Press House. I have never seen Sergei Dova-

latov as I arrived in Tallinn a year after his departure. But I found myself among people who Dovlatov so vividly and brightly described in his books. I want to specify: colleagues from the Press House are different from characters described by Dovlatov. The writer gave real family names to his characters however many of them can in no way be called a prototype. They were much more prosaic in real life. They were absolutely denied acute characters and paradoxical statements and deeds which Dovlatov assigned to them. Yes, we really regularly met in the bar of the Press House to drink coffee, tell curious stories, and chew the rag of superiors and those absent. It was routine life full of sense which was comprehensible only for those who lived it.”

Thus, life went on with editor’s assignments and typewriter chirping. Only an obtuse person may think that Dovlatov has seen or heard something and said himself in the bar of the Press House, saved the story in his memory and then wrote it down. It is a major art to switch from life to literature. So it is important for the reader not to confuse a character called Dovlatov in Dovlatov’s books with real writer Dovlatov whose 70th birth anniversary we shall mark this year.

RIGHT TO BE IMMORTAL

The Dovlatov’s Trace in Tallinn tour will open the third day of the festival which will end with a commemoration event called *About Dovlatov Hobnob* in which his friends from St. Petersburg and Tallinn and actors from the Russian Theater in Estonia will participate.

Guests from St. Petersburg will include Andrei Aryev, Samuel Lurie, Valery Popov. Dovlatov appreciated the people and called Popov a young talented writer, one of the best. He said he would be a well-established writer had Lurie written at least several lines about him as a literary critic. He was proud of Aryev’s comments which were the first verdict to his books. It is hard to say which relations Dovlatov would maintain with the readers had it not been for the many-year publishing business of Andrei Aryev who did more than any one else in the world to popularize Dovlatov’s works.

Dovlatov described his life as a path to literature. All the periods of his life which he considered important – Leningrad, Tallinn, New York – were related to literature.

He wrote in 1984 in the foreword to his *Craft* story: “I took up pen in hand thirty years ago. I wrote a novel, seven stories and four hundred short stories (it seems more than Gogol!). I am convinced that Gogol and me have equal copyright (obligations differ). At least one inalienable right – to publish what we wrote. That means the right to be immortal or to fail. What for do numerous agencies, people, and institutions of a great country suppress my ordinary, honest and single disposition? I have to understand that.”

Today Dovlatov is not only published but also constantly re-printed because his books are in demand. They are read even by those who do not read anything at all. It is strange but people who never opened Dovlatov’s books use his intonations and phrases. The banality about the right to be immortal thus wants to be put to paper.

Organizers believe the possibility to learn Dovlatov will remain after his days close in Tallinn. The exhibition which is to give the first impulse for acquaintance with him will be open for a month in the National Library of Estonia, will then travel in Tallinn and Estonia and further on to St. Petersburg.

It is already known the project initiated by marketing expert Olivier Loode will attract hundreds of tourists in Tallinn, mostly from St. Petersburg and also from other cities in Russia, the United States, Israel and various countries where admirers of Dovlatov live.

Will the Days of Dovlatov develop into a tradition in Tallinn? Organizer and project head Loode believes the name of the writer can be a reason for regular meetings of culture workers, including from Estonia and Russia. Today the main thing is to successfully hold the international literature festival to get convinced that Dovlatov’s Days in Tallinn have become a significant cultural event of the year.

By Ella Agranovskaya
Photos by Nikolai Sharubin

