

Exiled Poet Joseph Brodsky Dead at 55

By Patrick Henry

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Joseph Brodsky, the Russian poet sent into exile by Soviet authorities in 1972, died in his sleep Sunday of heart failure at his New York home. He was 55.

In Moscow, the literary world mourned the loss of the 1987 Nobel laureate, many considering him the finest and most influential of the post-war generation of poets.

"In any century, there are five or six names that define it. Joseph Brodsky was undoubtedly one of them," Kirill Kovaldzh, a poet and editor in chief of Moskovsky Rabochoy publishing house, said Monday.

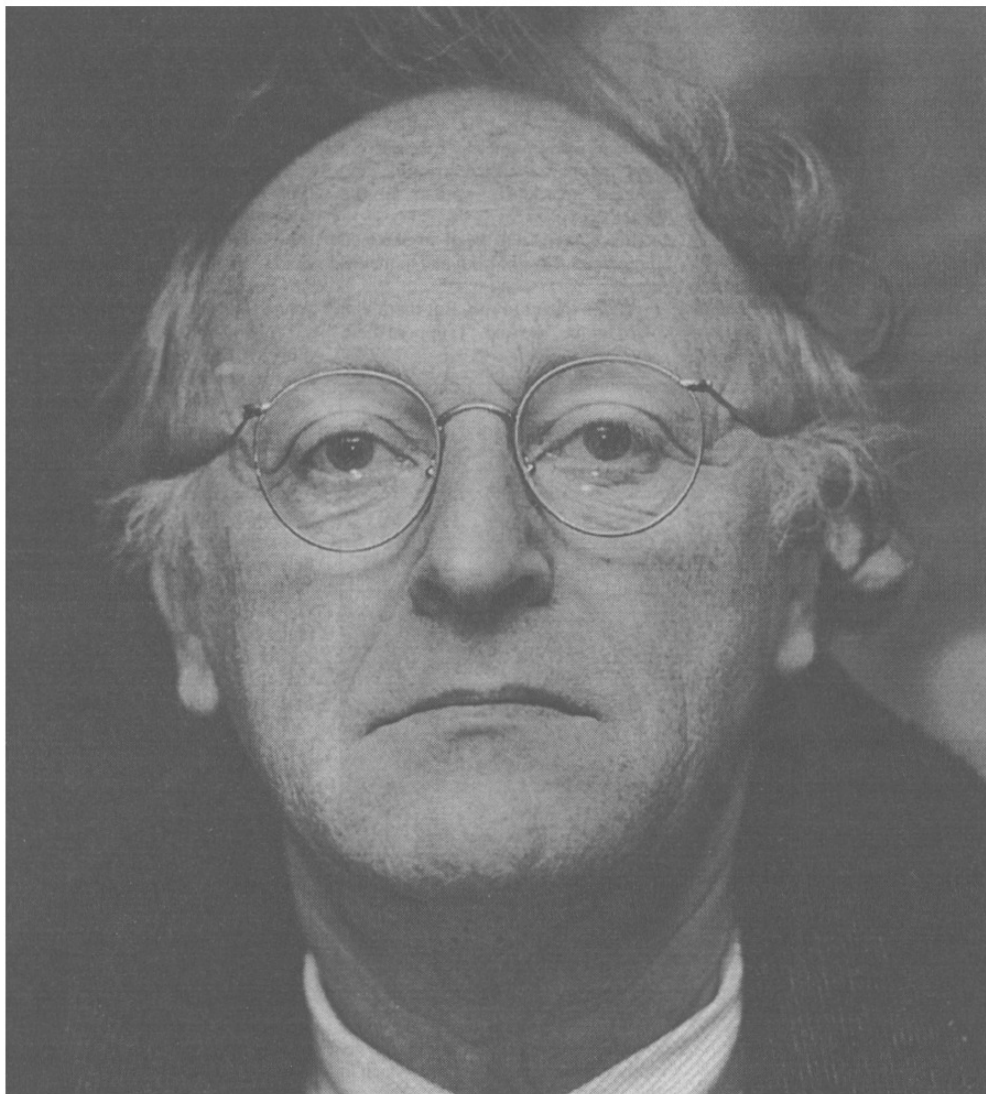
"He was Russia's greatest contemporary poet. He opened a new page in Russian poetry, he renewed it and discovered a new intonation. Such poets are always few. In this century we had Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Mandelstam, and Brodsky can be included in this company."

The significance of Brodsky's death was evident in the least detail: Most of the writers and critics contacted for this article learned of his death not from the Sunday evening news, but earlier, through the literary grapevine in New York and Moscow.

The Jewish writer had been ill for about a year and spoke frequently with his friends about dying. His wife and child were reported to have been at his deathbed, and his mother from Russia was flying to join the family.

Joseph Brodsky was born in Leningrad in 1940. He was arrested in January 1964, charged with "parasitism" — that is, writing without official sanction — and was sentenced to five years hard labor on a state farm in the Arkhangelsk region.

After a campaign of protest in the Soviet Union and abroad, the author-



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A portrait of Joseph Brodsky taken in New York on Dec. 27. Brodsky died of heart failure Sunday at his New York home.

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ities released Brodsky in November 1965, after which he returned to Leningrad and continued to write. His first collection of verse, "Stikhotvoreniya i Poemy" (Poems and Narrative Verse), appeared that same year in New York. Until the late 1980s his work would be published only abroad.

In 1972, Brodsky was all but forced to emigrate to the West, although, to his own mind, he never actively opposed the Soviet system. "The authorities were at best a theme for jokes and anecdotes," he said in an interview to be published in the journal *Novaya Yunost* next month.

"It was clear that [Soviet power] was the incarnation of evil. Neither I nor my friends had the slightest doubt about this. If my generation had any illusions, this was only before 1956. Then all became clear," Brodsky said.

For his contemporaries, however, Brodsky's defiance of the system proved inspirational. "He was persecuted and pursued both here and overseas, but he remained a free and unrestricted poet," said Alexander Tkachenko, editor of *Novaya Yunost* and director of the PEN-Center in Moscow. "For him there were no obstacles."

Brodsky's greatest legacy was not his non-conformist politics, but his highly serious, often melancholy verse, which in the words of Moscow poet Yevgeny Bunimovich, "swept all of Russian poetry along behind it, especially the poetry of St. Petersburg."

Unlike his fellow emigré Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky never made opposition to the Soviet regime his main concern, focusing instead on common human experiences in his writing.

Brodsky said in his Nobel lecture: "If art teaches anything (to the artist before all others) it is precisely the particularities of human existence. Being the most ancient, and most literal, form of private enterprise, [art] freely or involuntarily encourages in man his sense of individuality, uniqueness, independence, transforming him from a social animal into a person."

In his work, divided between short lyrics and the longer *poema* form, Brodsky shunned political engagement and socialist realism. His themes were universal, his outlook quietly pessimistic. In his Nobel lecture, Brodsky cited five central influences on his work: Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, Robert Frost, Anna Akhmatova and W.H. Auden, the latter a good friend in exile.

Before his exile, Brodsky was read by a small circle of intellectuals in samizdat,

and was best known as a dissident. After leaving the Soviet Union, ironically, he emerged in his homeland as a mature and authoritative poet.

"His poetry was brought from overseas and distributed in typed and handwritten copies. The intelligentsia retyped these poems on typewriters, read and discussed them. It was normal to ask, 'Have you read the new Brodsky work? Would you like a copy?'" said Alla Latynina, a critic at *Literaturnaya Gazeta*.

Brodsky may never have been a popular poet for general consumption, but among the two generations of Russian poets who followed Brodsky, his influence and popularity are inestimable. "Over the past 15 years or so, Brodsky has more strongly influenced new poetry than any other writer," Tkachenko said.

"As for my generation," said Bunimovich, now in his 40s, "everyone thought they had gotten over him like a childhood illness, so they think he doesn't influence them. But this isn't so. Even people who say they don't like Brodsky know some of his poetry by heart."

Brodsky settled in the United States, becoming a citizen in 1980 and poet laureate 11 years later. He taught literature at several universities. In addition to the Nobel Prize, he received the MacArthur Award in 1981 and the National Book Award in 1986.