

Stanford's Dostoevsky biographer concludes acclaimed series

December 4 2009, By Cynthia Haven

Everything was silent in St. Petersburg's Semenovskiy Square. On the cold December day in 1849, the snow fell softly on the soldiers, on the crowd and on the ragged prisoners who unexpectedly found themselves blinking at the bright, beautiful sun shining through a haze of thick clouds.

"Nous serons avec le Christ" [we will be with Christ], said one of the prisoners, a young writer.

"Un peu de poussière" [a bit of dust], muttered his companion, a confirmed atheist.

The men were called forward and tied to stakes, with hoods over their heads, as the soldiers took aim with their rifles ...

"No, no," corrects Professor Emeritus Joseph Frank, author of the thousand-page *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*, published last month. He points out that the prisoners on that distant day had been divided into groups. The young writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, was in the next group of three slated for execution by firing squad. "They were all waiting for their chance, as it were - waiting for their number to be called."

It's typical give-and-take during an afternoon with the 91-year-old professor emeritus of Slavic languages and literatures and of comparative literature (who is still on "active duty" teaching); he is one of the world's preeminent scholars on Dostoevsky. His new volume is the

capstone in an effort of more than 30 years that has produced five previous (and equally hefty) volumes, the first in 1976.

Called "an intellectual biographer"

Novelist A. S. Byatt, writing in the *London Observer*, called Frank "that increasingly rare being, an intellectual biographer, and his real concern is with the workings of Dostoevsky's mind," especially in his portrayal of "the violent ideas of the time in living suffering individuals."

Frank was born long after the Russian author was buried. But Frank and his wife, Marguerite Straus Frank, a former visiting member of the mathematics faculty, talk as if Fyodor will be walking into the room any minute, to join them in a glass of the pinot noir they have just poured.

At the top of the stairs at their Stanford home, visitors are greeted by framed photographs and posters of the author of *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and other novels.

The subject at hand this afternoon is the Russian author's *The Idiot*, which Frank describes as "a dramatic clash between the human and divine" and "in a way, the deepest of his novels."

The book exemplifies Dostoevsky's "fantastic realism," according to Frank. Dostoevsky had claimed, "I have a totally different conception of reality and realism than our novelists and critics. My idealism is more real than their realism." Dostoevsky pointed out that newspapers are filled with far-fetched events that any novelist would reject as improbable, yet they are "reality because they are facts."

One "reality" that stands out in *The Idiot's* hundreds of pages of fiction: Prince Myshkin, the "idiot" of the title, tells a drawing room of ladies what he heard from a man who was within minutes of execution: "His

uncertainty and his repulsion before the unknown, which was going to overtake him immediately, was terrible." The prisoner wondered: "What if I could go back to life - what eternity! ... I would turn every minute into an age; I would lose nothing."

Frank said that the novel, published in 1868, is the only one that harkens back to that pivotal experience in Dostoevsky's life - his arrest and imprisonment for his involvement with the Petrashevsky Circle, a literary discussion group that toyed with opposition to autocracy and serfdom and which included revolutionaries, communists and atheists in its ranks.

A life of extremes

His life clearly exposed him to extreme: the direst poverty, epilepsy and a Siberian prison in Omsk - and yet the author of best-sellers was at home in the salon; he was even a guest of the tsar. "The country shivers, and the convict from Omsk / Understood everything, and made the sign of the cross over it all," wrote the renowned 20th-century poet Anna Akhmatova.

Joseph Frank's own rendezvous with the convict from Omsk began around 1950 in France, when he was one of the very early Fulbright Scholars. His influential essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," had already put him on the map as one of the most influential critics in the postwar era. Frank, who began his career as a Washington, D.C., newspaperman in the 1940s, was writing "Paris Letters" for the *Partisan Review*. Then he discovered Dostoevsky, who was beginning to find his way into English translation.

Frank was so impressed he began to learn Russian - Marguerite recalls him walking around in the mid-1950s with a Russian grammar and lexicon. (They were married "a century ago" in 1953, she said.)

What intrigued Frank about the Russian author? "The problems he writes about are really eternal in Western civilization," he said. "He makes the fundamental issues of belief and the religious problems exciting - and contemporary. He poses questions in such a way that, whether you agree or not, it makes you think about them. That's why I was so much taken with him. He writes exciting novels, with detective techniques - and raises it to such a level! The mystery of it is the mystery of the meaning of life."

In his acknowledgements, Frank praises Marguerite as "a sharp and discerning critic of all my volumes."

"Nothing I can say will adequately express what every one of my books owes to her participation," Frank wrote. In particular, he incorporated her views on "perhaps the most complex of all the female characters in Dostoevsky's novels, the beautiful and ill-fated Natasya Filippovna of *The Idiot*."

"Joe's not interested in Natasya - he's interested in the 'Idiot,'" Marguerite explained. Like many of the great writers of the period, Dostoevsky was fascinated by fallen women. But she insisted Natasya is no fallen woman: "She's an absolutely pure victim."

Dostoevsky knew something about victims. What happened that day in 1849? In a grim and cruel charade, the soldiers lowered their rifles and untied the stunned [prisoners](#). Tsar Nicholas I had granted a pardon. The men, their sentence commuted to Siberian labor, were shackled. One of Dostoevsky's shakier comrades went mad that morning.

"Yes! ... Yes! ... Really! ... How could I not recognize it," the by-then-famous author said when he was invited to a St. Petersburg window overlooking the infamous Semenovskiy Square decades later. He was surrounded by a drawing-room crowd, according to a witness, who

described him as shriveled, short and *vinovaty* - "that is, as if he felt guilty about something," Frank wrote in his description of the incident, included in his new book.

The horror and freezing cold of that December morning tumbled out of the aging author in broken, spasmodic sentences that kept the guests spellbound: "It could not be that I, amidst all the thousands who were alive - in something like five to six minutes would no longer exist! ... Everything seemed insignificant compared to this last terrible minute of transition to somewhere, ... to the unknown, to darkness ..."

"Well, all this is past and gone," his host gently reassured him.

"Is it really gone?" Dostoevsky whispered.

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