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Upstate Quest for a Russian Soul

By SUSAN SACHS

HANCOCK, N.Y., May 1 The literature of the new Russian avant-garde is hatched here in a ramshackle house just a yard from the railroad tracks that run by the Delaware River.

Parked outside, under green tarps and camouflage netting, are three disabled military jeeps that first saw service in World War II. Inside, an aristocratic-looking Russian wolfhound the size of a small pony sprawls like a fluffy carpet outside the hand-built sauna.

The house belongs to Konstantin K. Kuzminsky ÷ poet, teacher, linguist, geologist, former dissident and, now, mentor to a coterie of aspiring Russian-American artists. But it's less a home than a pilgrimage site. Each weekend, Mr. Kuzminsky's young admirers arrive at the Catskill retreat by the carload from Brooklyn and Queens, bringing loaves of his favorite brown bread as tribute and offering up their poems and drawings.

The collaboration between the grizzled Russian writer and his fresh-faced acolytes is the driving force behind much of the experimental poetry, performance art and video work in the Russian immigrant community in New York City. The latest example of their symbiotic efforts is the magazine *Magazinnik*, which appeared in March as the city's first all-Russian collection of avant-garde writing by Russian-Americans.

Still, for all its creative fecundity, it is a somewhat odd coupling. Mr. Kuzminsky brings an encyclopedic knowledge of literature, a naturally fatalistic disposition and a lifetime of artistic hard knocks in the former Soviet Union and the United States. He calls himself a "Russian patriot," meaning he is fiercely defensive of the singularity of Russian culture, and is equally loyal to the Russian Orthodox Church and anarchism.

The young immigrant artists, including the editors of *Magazinnik*, are balanced between two cultures, raised during the waning days of the Soviet empire and transplanted to New York City in the early bloom of their careers. They all have day jobs that have little to do with poetry or with soulful artistic suffering. And they find inspiration, they say, in the tension of dual identities.

They also liken themselves to the Russian avant-garde artists of a century ago. "I feel the same kind of new beginning, like we have a clear start just like at the beginning of the 20th century," said Igor Satanovsky, one of the magazine's founders and a poet who writes in both English and Russian.

Meetings of the two generations take place weekly at the house in the woods that Mr. Kuzminsky shares with his wife of 40 years, Emma Podberiozkina. The two live frugally; despite the poet's prolific output, his poetry has not paid the bills. They have no working means of transport ÷ the old jeeps are nearly as old as Mr. Kuzminsky ÷ so a neighbor shops for them. A farmer brings fresh eggs.

Mr. Kuzminsky invariably greets visitors to his home in the woods dressed in nothing more

than a belted bathrobe, slippers and a silver necklace with a large cross. He is 62 and short of breath from years of chain smoking. But he talks for hours at a stretch ÷ about his activist youth and disaffected middle age in Leningrad, about his tempestuous relations with fellow poets like Allen Ginsberg and Joseph Brodsky, and, finally, about the essential tyranny of literary form and the symphony of a well-structured verse.

"I'm like a sponge," he said during a meandering afternoon-long conversation, during which he consumed a cup of tea, a cup of a fizzy antacid drink and dozens of cigarettes. "I collect energy and information from others and, when necessary, I distribute it to those who need it."

He is not at all surprised that he has become the muse and master to so many "chipmunks," as he calls the young admirers. The same thing used to happen in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) before he immigrated to the United States in 1976. And it was happening when he lived in Brighton Beach, before he moved upstate in 1997.

"I am teaching those chipmunks, those Americanized monsters," he said fondly, as his wife glided silently around him, recording his gestures and words on videotape. "They are talented but they are ignorant."

Mr. Kuzminsky's own poetry sometimes consists of artfully combined strings of words or near-words culled from different languages. His contribution to the first issue of *Magazinnik* is one such piece, written partly in Russian and partly with Latin letters, and inspired by readings about cannibalism.

The poem, "Kai-Kai Kanaka Tripela Meri," or "The man who ate three white women," begins in Russian, which translates to: "I eat. You eat." Across the page is the equivalent in Mr. Kuzminsky's creation, which he said is based on a Polynesian language: "mi kai-kai. yu kai-kai." Nevertheless, when Mr. Kuzminsky reads his poems out loud, they sound like music.

Scattered around his house are plastic skulls, rifles, felt boots, a Maxim machine gun, an old scuba-diving vest, gardening catalogs, a Lenin ashtray, a red tarboosh and a battered teddy bear that Mr. Kuzminsky says he was given as a child during the siege of Leningrad. His shelves are crammed with books, including the anthology of banned Russian poets that he compiled in part from memory when he first came to the United States.

The seat of one old wooden chair has been replaced with a plaster cast of a naked woman, the contribution of one of the rotating weekend guests. "Sit," Mrs. Podberiozka said at one point, motioning to the chair. "It's art, but you can sit."

Mr. Kuzminsky said he had despaired of seeing many of his cheerful young "chipmunks" find the dark part of themselves that inspires good poetry. "A happy poet is not a good poet," he said.

Many of them, he added, also mistakenly try to reach an American audience with their poetry and art. "I tried to deal with the natives in the beginning," Mr. Kuzminsky said. "But the natives didn't need me."

That is why he pushed the young people to forgo the English-Russian magazine, *Koja*, that they started a few years ago and start an all-Russian art magazine. "They were ashamed and afraid of their Russian language skills," Mr. Kuzminsky recalled. "But I said, O.K., make

mistakes. It doesn't matter."

A lot of him has rubbed off on the young people. The old poet is a presence in their gatherings, even when he is not physically there.

The Kuzminsky circle introduced *Magazinnik* to the world (in print and at www.magazinnik.com) in mid-March with a party at an East Village bar thick with cigarette smoke. Video screens along the wall showed shots of Mr. Kuzminsky, edited to make him endlessly jab at the same word like a woodpecker, along with stylized Bollywood movie clips.

Dmitry Romendik, editor of the new magazine, appeared in a long purple caftan, Central Asian beanie and sunglasses. Mr. Satanovsky read his poems in thick goggles reminiscent of those worn by the cartoon Rocky, of Rocky and Bullwinkle.

Another poet insisted on doing his reading while seated on a toilet in the bar. A ponytailed Brooklyn cabdriver who plays jazz tuba improvised a duet with a Russian opera singer wrapped in a black feather boa.

The young poets and artists said they hoped to mine the artistic possibilities of their dual identities as Russians and Americans. "The idea is to stay oppositional," said Zhenya Plechkina, the design editor of the magazine. "To be avant-garde is to move things forward. And New York ÷ it's about renovating things, about pushing things further." In that vein, she admires the American Beat poets of the 1950's as much as the original Russian avant-garde artists of the previous century.

Back in the Catskills, though, Mr. Kuzminsky has his doubts. In his experience, he said, Russian immigrants cannot, and maybe should not, meld their two identities. In his view, there are, sadly, just two choices.

"Some people come and they try to adjust, to become Americans ÷ like my Americanized monsters," he said. "And others come and remain forever outsiders."

Photo above taken by Barbara Alper for The New York Times (From left to right: Zhenya Plechkina, Dmitriy Romendik, Magazinnik) Members of Magazinnik's staff around a table at the Russian Samovar restaurant in Manhattan. The editors of the magazine liken themselves to the Russian avant-garde of a century ago.