

## When the Curator Gets Nervous



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*...It was just another day in the life of a scholar/curator, and at the same time, a transformative experience for everyone present...including myself.*

In any given year I give more than a dozen public talks at universities, museums, and other institutions, in addition to my regular teaching to students young and old. In other words, I'm very comfortable with speaking to the public and in fact get energy from connecting with an audience. I was visiting the Illinois Holocaust Museum to open the exhibition I curated, [Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust](#). There was nothing particularly unusual about this, since the show had opened in New York, Houston, Louisiana, and at my home institution, the University of Colorado Art Museum, where I originally curated the show.

But the Chicago opening would be the first time that the entire show would be in Russian. For the first time ever, the Russian-speaking community would have full access to the show. It had always been my intention for *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* to be a starting point for conversation between American-born communities and native Russian speakers. But only when the show opened bi-lingually did I see the power of translation. The Russian on the walls brought in audiences of people not normally attracted to mainstream cultural institutions. It also reminded non-Russian speakers that the world they were witnessing on the walls of the stunning gallery took place in Russian.

When the Museum's curator Arielle Weininger first told me that the Chicago-based Polsky family had supported the show, hired someone to translate the entire exhibition and slated programs for the Russian-speaking community, I was blown away. This was a dream for me, a curator who had always

envisioned masses of Russian-speakers coming to see the show but never having had either the financial resources or an institution wanting to make this a priority to produce it in Russian.

Recognizing that I could speak Russian fluently, the organizers planned a series of events for me personally to reach the Russian-speaking community of Chicago. It was at this point that I became nervous. I rarely give talks in Russian and generally prefer to present in my native language. My first presentation in Russian was an interview over the phone for Chicago's Russian media outlet, *Reklama*. The printed interview, along with a photograph of me splashed on the cover made me sound smarter than I'm sure I did on the interview.

The next case proved more challenging—a live radio interview on *Reklama* radio, broadcast to Chicago and then streamed live on the internet for Russian speakers around the world. What struck me was the fact that the interviewer was less interested in the history of World War II and more interested in a deep engagement about photography and aesthetics. I stumbled a few times on the air but hope I sounded mostly coherent.

At last the day of the opening arrived, and I gave an illustrated talk to a packed house of nearly 400 people. Because it was a mixed, mostly American audience, I dressed in a button-up shirt and slacks, no coat or tie, given the more relaxed presentation style I normally cultivate in public presentations. The room was electric as I told stories about the images they would see in the exhibition.

That talk was in English. The next day, February 23, better known in the Russian community as “Defender of the Fatherland Day”—what used to be Soviet Armed Forces Day, and still known affectionately as “Men’s Day”—Soviet war veterans and Holocaust survivors from across the Chicago area attended the Museum for a brunch at which I would be the keynote speaker.

I had a choice. Do I prepare a Russian text in advance, or do I speak extemporaneously, in Russian, as is my general style in English? It would have been safer to do the former, but I knew that what I would gain in linguistic precision, I would lose in charisma and connection. So I chose the riskier path and spoke extemporaneously in Russian to a room of 150 Russian-speakers, whose average age was probably 85. For this audience I wore a coat and tie, knowing that not to do so would be read as a sign of disrespect. While my goal when presenting to the mostly American audience was to explain why an exhibition about Soviet Jewish photographers was a central piece of their own history, on Monday, the audience already knew it was part of their history.

During the brunch I spent more time talking about how I approached the material and how I talk about it to American audiences. One woman came up to me afterwards thanking me for the talk and informing me that the name of the city I mentioned near Minsk called “TroSTInets” should be pronounced “TrostiNETS.” I thanked her for the correction, as I recognized that if that was what she was correcting me on, I must have done well! **The overwhelming response I received that morning from 90-year-old war veterans was one of warmth and gratitude that I had taken such a deep interest in their history and told it in such a beautiful way—through the stunning war photographs of their countrymen.**



I left my two-day visit feeling deeply connected to everyone at the Museum and to dozens of veterans and Holocaust survivors. As I remind my students, I could only develop those kinds of deep relationships, because I took the time to learn their language fluently enough to be able to bring my full self to them in that language.

I came back to Colorado with a wallet full of business cards, a job helping produce a short documentary for the local community, and an invitation to return to Chicago on May 9<sup>th</sup> when the Russian community and the Museum will commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory Day. **It was, at once, just another day in the life of a scholar/curator, and at the same time, a transformative experience for everyone present...including myself.**

**Posted by David Shneer | Director of the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder**

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