



BEHIND EVERY POEM A STORY

By Chris Brockman

I told my 6th graders last week that reading your own poetry out loud increases your satisfaction as a poet exponentially. I also told them that relating the story of how you came to write a poem takes it up another notch. This was by way of introducing one of my own poems to illustrate a poetic device they were about to put into practice. That's the way it goes in this class: I refresh their sleeping memory of, say, alliteration; I read some examples by myself or others; they write their own; and they read what they've written.

I believe it's satisfying all around. I get to read something I've written and relate how and why I came to write it. In the process, I model the satisfaction of being a poet. This helps motivate them to trust my sales pitch that we all are poets, long enough to take it for a test drive. Once they're in the driver's seat—sometimes with a little persuasion—they know I didn't misrepresent the get up and go of this baby. Sure, some of them will prefer to remain pedestrian, but they know the ride is there for them if they want to take it.

On any given day I am amazed at the results from ten minutes' writing time in class, and even more so from their homework poems. My 11 and 12 year olds write about lightning licking the ground, a sky like a giant swimming pool for dreamers to play in, friends that are glue, rainbows that are crayons, stars that are lanterns. One girl tells of a chair seat

that takes umbrage at being sat upon; one boy congers up a TV watching its watcher. This lesson is working.

My best satisfaction with poetry this year, however, was probably with my 8th graders (I teach 6th, 7th, and 8th Language Arts). I gave them the assignment of writing an epic poem of no less than 100 lines. We talked a bit about what an epic poem entails and I read them examples from Kipling, Longfellow, Benet. Then I read them my own epic poem, "Ode To Victor Herman," preceded by the story behind it. I was able to relive and share some wonderful times from my writing life. In the process, I believe I was also successful in getting across the very special satisfaction of poetry. Oh yes, I was able to show the movie version as well, a definite plus in middle school.

"Ode To Victor Herman" started with reading Victor's book, *Coming Out of the Ice*. I had ordered the book used from a book service that specialized in books on liberty. It turned out to be so much more than just the shocking story of an American who spent ten years in the Soviet gulag and actually survived to tell of the horrors. It was the ever-so-subtle tale, aside from all the horrors, of a street fighter from Detroit who passed through the Communist crucible and came back a gentle philosopher. It was the testimonial of a man whose love of freedom compelled him to repeated superhuman efforts to survive, where hate of his tormentors would have fallen far short. It compelled me to write my poem.

I was working in construction at the time, mostly as a one-man "crew," and I wrote that poem, as I had to, over a period of weeks, during coffee and lunch breaks. I had never written anything in verse this long. I had a degree in Philosophy (which explains why I was working in construction), not English. I pretty much invented my own form and ended up with 151 lines when my need had run its course. I have to say that the initial rush of finishing was great, but there was more to come.

Knowing that I had written "Ode" and reading it to my long-suffering wife (who doubles as my reluctant editor) was

far from entirely satisfying. Though I continued to tinker with it, that wasn't why "Ode" was a work in progress. (I tell my students that poetry is always a work in progress.) I wanted Victor Herman to know that I understood what he had written and why he had written it. I wanted him to see what I, in turn, had written so he would know that I understood. I wanted him to feel my admiration for him. The only way I could think to accomplish this was to send a copy of my poem to him in care of his publisher, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, in New York.

I did this, as I recall, with no further expectations, feeling relieved that I had done all that I could do. One Sunday morning, eons later, my wife called to me out in the garage. "Telephone for you" and shrug of the shoulders as to who it was.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, this is Victor Herman." I can't *quote* any more of that conversation; I was completely overwhelmed. As it turned out, however, Victor was living about 25 miles from me, in Southfield, Michigan. I made arrangements for my wife and me to visit the next Saturday.

It was the first of many visits. Galina, Victor's beautiful Russian wife who shared significantly in his struggle to be free, served us pierogies and smiles. Victor was soft spoken and philosophical. He had to lay flat on the floor before long to relieve the pain in his back, the reminder of the night after night of kidney punches during "interrogation." Still, he retained a bit of the fighter, the tough kid from Detroit. Over a period of time, I learned that his passion now was to bring home from the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union the many American Ford Motor Co. workers and their families who had been abandoned there, he said, in the 1930s. They had gone, as had his own family, to build a truck plant for Stalin in Gorky, and had not been allowed to go home.

Victor, himself, had been sentenced to ten years in the gulag for refusing to sign a paper to claim the world record he had set in a free-fall parachute jump. The paper listed him as a Soviet citizen. Victor's insistent "I am an American" is

echoed in the refrain of my “Ode.” He now had, he said, the names of the trapped Americans, many of whom he had visited during the twenty years it took him to arrange his own exit from the Soviet Union. He had financial backing, he told me, from a certain Texas billionaire to start a foundation to bring these people home at last. He asked me to be his public relations person. Then he died suddenly.

“Ode To Victor Herman” was published in *NOMOS: Studies In Spontaneous Order*, for which I subsequently became an associate editor. But that is not the end of the story. It continues in my classroom. In my classroom, I discover that few of my 8th graders had even heard of the Soviet Union, much less of Stalin and the millions he murdered. They needed to know. We all need to never forget. Victor Herman, through my words, in my classroom, implored them to love freedom so much that what happened under Stalin will never, ever happen again.

My 8th graders’ epic poems were terrific. Kids who responded to the original assignment with “100 lines; you gotta be kidding!” had little trouble finding something important to say. When I read their poems, I was wishing that they all had chosen freedom as their topic. A few did; there was one on the civil rights movement, another on an American Revolution patriot. The others were about a range of things from love of family to love of boyfriends.

Then it struck me: freedom was there; these poems were a demonstration of freedom. None of these 13 and 14 year olds had any trouble expressing thoughts and feelings exactly as he or she wanted to. None of them felt intimidated to write anything but the truth as he or she sees it. Free expression? They have it. And who knows, maybe some years from now one of them will be preparing to read some of his or her verse out loud, telling the story of where it came from, and Victor Herman will come up. There’s surely satisfaction in that.