

INTA EZERGAILIS. 9/11/1932 - 1/1/2005

Dear Andy and Anna, friends of Inta, I'm truly honored to be invited to speak on this occasion.

There's a line in one of Inta's poems that expresses amazement at how fast a life can be summed up. No one will believe it except the writer for whom it is true at the moment of writing. What you will now hear, therefore, is no attempt to do justice to a life that lasted beyond the biblical three-score-and-ten but, rather, Impressions, Vignettes, connected only by the fact that they all relate to Inta whom I've known since 1965, the year we both came to Cornell, she as a graduate student, I, as a newly minted associate professor.

Andy first thought that I might say something about Inta as a student. I discovered I couldn't. According to my records she had taken 4 grad seminars with me in 1965 and '66 but, being only 2 years younger than I, she never registered in my mind as a student. She was of my vintage, an instant colleague.

She had come to us with an undergraduate degree in the social sciences, some years of work experience in NYC, a few night courses in economics at NYU, and was now a temporarily unemployed area studies woman since Andy had taken a position at Ithaca College. She wanted a graduate degree in German, and being accepted into the program was all the initial boost she needed - Inta lifted off and soared. She was clearly brilliant, and a gifted writer. I remember an extraordinary presentation -- most likely on Thomas Mann in a Novelle seminar -- that made me quote a sentence at her, half silly/serious, from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that I'd been reading and that a woman like Inta seemed to confirm: "If I were asked" he writes, "to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of [Americans] ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women."

I was a member of her graduate committee and became its chairman when her main advisor, Burton Pike, left Cornell for NYC. Her dissertation was nearly finished by then and eventually became her first book, *Male and Female. An Approach to Thomas Mann's Dialectic*. "I will stress one dialectical opposition above all others," she writes in her introduction, "that of male as against female principles." "It is the attitude to individuation that remains the main theoretical point of distinction between the male and female principles" she concludes 180 pages and a stupendous wealth of material later. Since she treats nearly all of Mann's work, including his essays, she needs to adopt Mann's panoramic view of German and European culture, and she does so with a flair.

I was now departmental chairman and could think of no better replacement for Burton Pike than Inta. My senior colleagues were persuaded to go along with the appointment of Inta to be the first woman on the departmental faculty ever, soon to be joined by another woman, Lucy Collings, an Old Norse specialist. She too is dead now - of leukemia. They were friends, sharing an office, got together to gossip and eat while their two children used Inta's bed as a trampoline. They got together again in a poem Inta wrote, wishing "that we could meet and eat together once more - pork and spinach, why not, and a glass of wine, white or red ..." A moving and down-to-earth remembrance of those heady days of easy camaraderie, when the world was young, and we in it, indestructible.

I had little money for Inta's initial salary. Make sure she doesn't feel exploited, advised Fred Kahn who was dean at the time. Inta agreed to a precarious strategy: taking the low salary now, then using it as an argument for a substantial increase the following year. It worked. The dean pretended not to notice. He liked her. Where'd you find her? he exclaimed after encountering her on a committee she had agreed to join. She was easy to like. Highly articulate with an apologetic giggle in her voice --

she never lost it -- when she knew that she might be right but wasn't sure whether the rest of us knew it too; a sober intellectual with, back then, the dress code of a gypsy, or a peasant, deliberately, mind you, Carmen and Anna Bronski Koljaiczek, eccentric, energetic, vivacious, a wondrous blend of womanhood. She had style, though she refused to be elegant. Her mother was, even in the early phases of her mental decline. She had presence, though not of the kind that takes up all the air in the room.

Lucy returned to England, Inta stayed and became one of our most successful teachers. In her seminars, Thomas Mann and Robert Musil remained her favorites. When the English department under the legendary Ep Fogel decided to relinquish their monopoly on Freshmen English and to share it with those departments in the Arts College that could reasonably be expected to do a decent job, Inta designed and taught a most successful freshmen seminar based on German folklore and folk tales. It was offered for many years in multiple sections, undergraduates and TAs alike loved it and took to the woman who organized it.

She was accessible and easy to talk to. And that made her, for a long time the only woman of professorial rank in the department, an indispensable presence. Said one former graduate student upon hearing of her death, that she could always be relied upon for a non-judgmental hug, an uncritical embrace. I cannot think of a greater compliment. And another, writing from abroad, has fond memories of the times when, during an extended crisis in his life, she invited him to her place for cross-country skiing in the fields behind her house.

Speaking of skiing, she took up downhill skiing too. She was NOT a natural, but whatever she lacked in control she made up in courage, on the slopes she appeared to be absolutely fearless. Then, suddenly, from one winter to the next, she seemed to lose interest. Later, she pumped iron. Feel her biceps, said her friend Julia Wagner, they were intimidating.

There were crises in her life. Being uprooted by the war, fleeing west ahead of the Red Army. Having to resettle many times in Europe and the US. A totally unwarranted career crisis, caused by one administrator and finally resolved with the help of another. Bouts with depression took their toll too, but she could joke even about those and blamed some erratic behavior on too much prozac or too little of it. Truly hilarious were her accounts of quitting cigarettes. The craving for a smoke would make her race late at night to Meyer's Smoke Shop to buy one last pack, take one and light it and throw the rest out of the window, then retracing her steps trying to find the pack (this was getting rather expensive) and, when found, hiding the content in cookie jars around the house where Andy would discover them. She provided entertainment and reassurance with these agonies and embarrassments shared, at least for those among us who knew all about them too.

There's so much to say. About her poetry, for instance, and the intimate world she recreated in it. The animals, wild and domesticated, the bird song, the dog's dream, the hammering sound of the pileated woodpecker; the dread, barely hidden beneath the patina of quiet melancholy; the dead; her last companions; the loneliness, the friendships; the fruits of the earth and the trees, and the appetites they inspire -- the tomatoes cheek to cheek in a basket; two grandmothers staying behind on the Baltic shore; making plans for a future which, however, must not be farther away than dinner. The unpretentious phrasing. The monosyllabic description of the diaspora for the quintessential DP, the displaced person: Our church has no church. The rich vocabulary, the startling combinations. The occasional wit, the absence of irony. And again and again: the dogs, and the cats.

All of it a searing affirmation of a basic yearning, "am liebsten alles behalten fuer immer" is how the poet Rilke phrased it (would we could hold on to it all, forever-- IX Duino Elegy), accompanied by the troubling knowledge that it cannot be.

Then there's the insight into the nature of mother-daughter relationships in her role both as daughter

and mother. She knows how easy it is, because of love contaminated by anxiety, to cross that invisible threshold from service into servitude. And, once there, as every parent knows, we all resort to those absurd, cleverly designed lunacies that embarrass everybody, including ourselves, and put off those we mean to shield. Insight comes eventually. There's a telling line in John Updike's In the Beauty of the Lilies (293) "Essie", it reads, "Essie, I'm sorry if I loved you more than was reasonable." And there are places in Inta's poetry that echo the sentiment. And yet "reasonable", my foot ... What love is "reasonable"? But it's expected of us, particularly in our relationships with some one so much younger than we.

She told me about the recurrence of her cancer a few days before we left for Europe in June of last year. I did not see her again until two days before her death. It happened like this. Andy had brought her home from the hospital when all hope for a cure was gone. I asked to visit her. Of course, said Andy. What to bring? It so happened that on one of the book shelves in the office we shared, myself now newly retired, there was a large mounted newspaper clipping featuring their very young daughter Anna holding a small violin, the text reading that the local Suzuki group was already looking ahead to the next concert. Hordes of parents, myself among them, will forever associate Suzuki music lessons with childhood in Ithaca. They began as simple rhythmic exercises on the a-string, One-two-three-four / One--Two. Those who needed a real text for their music were told it was "Mis-sis-sip-pi / Hot -- Dog". The children learned posture, bowing, sustained rhythm and playing from memory, all at the same time. It took forever, and it was unnerving. The noise of Mississippi Hot Dogs was everywhere, even when no one was making it. It was now in the walls of the house, in the air, in the rhythm of your heart beat, in how you walked and breathed. But then came "twinkle, twinkle, little star" -- Inta quotes it in one of her poems, and then that lovely, bouncy, tender melody from the Note Book for Anna Magdalena Bach, tam tata tata tam ta ta, and before you knew it the whole group of tiny musicians was playing a Vivaldi concerto, by heart, and beautifully, with all the casual concentration that children have at their disposal. All of that came back as I looked at little Anna's newspaper portrait. I thought Inta needed to have the picture near her.

Her bed was in the living room. She was alert. I showed her the picture and described what it was, just in case. She recognized it at once, and now, the unexpected, a miracle ... on her face, marked by illness and chemo-therapy and near-death, there appeared a tiny smile, tiny but glorious, it was stunning. The eyes, focused at first, drifted off, the smile remained. The impending loss of everything, including this precious moment: "And nevertheless, blindly, the smile ..." this is now Rilke speaking, of a similar smile, in his Fifth Duino Elegy, "that small-flowered herb of healing" to be gathered and preserved by an immortal, the Angel.

What did she see? Hear? Vivaldi, Bach, Mississippi Hot Dog, or a different music altogether, made of memories that now created their own momentum, a present totally made of past sensations but so vivid and intense and absorbing as to fill up all available space and claim all available energy? Hearing another language and comprehending the message, and maybe even able to translate it into our understanding, had she lived?

I'll leave you with a stanza from John Dryden's Song for St. Cecilia's Day (1687) that speaks of this special language:

What passion cannot Music raise and quell! / When Jubal struck the corded shell, / His list'ning brethren stood around, / And, wond'ring, on their faces fell / To worship that celestial sound: / Less than a god they thought there could not dwell / Within the hollow of that shell, / That spoke so sweetly, and so well. / What passion cannot Music raise and quell!

This is the Roman farewell for their dead: Ave, Cara Anima.

[Words spoken at the Memorial Service on March 13, 2005, Sage Chapel, Cornell University.]