Samizdat or Underground?

In collaboration with the International and Area Studies Library, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois has acquired a special collection of samizdat literature. On March 2, 2015, the book dealer who facilitated the sale, Mr. Jonathan McNamara, brought the collection to campus. As part of this special occasion, Mr. McNamara introduced the collection and presented on what he called the “problem of samizdat.”

After introductions by Mr. Joe Lenkart and Dr. Valerie Hotchkiss, who both worked with Mr. McNamara on the acquisition, Mr. McNamara began his presentation by describing the criteria for an item to be considered samizdat. First, it needs to have provenance, or some direct association to a person or group producing samizdat literature. More importantly, in order for something to be called samizdat rather than an “underground” publication, the text needed to have been banned by the state. With the end of Stalinism after Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev loosened some of the repressive controls over Soviet society. Although the Khrushchev years were a time of relative creative freedom, the government still monitored and controlled much of society. Many of the underground publications were writings the government did not know about. Once something was banned, it became a huge risk for anyone associated with producing it as samizdat. Often a large number of people could be at risk because creating samizdat was a time consuming and laborious process. A single person could not draw attention to himself or herself by collecting the materials necessary to produce samizdat. Frequently, different typewriters were used to create one book or item. Since copy machines were under lock and key, people worked together to make and distribute samizdat.

Samizdat ranges in its presentation, from pieces of fragile paper to lovely bound books. In fact, the library’s new collection represents this wide range very well. One item in the new collection is part one of Evgeniia Ginzburg’s *Krutoi Marshrut*, which was found buried on the grounds of a state asylum outside of Moscow. The paper used for this samizdat was much thicker, almost resembling linen, helping it withstand the ravages of time and of burial. In contrast, the Russian translations of Agatha Christie’s writings are bound beautifully in black and red binding.

In his lecture, Mr. McNamara also addressed the question of who created and read samizdat literature. There were people who produced and engaged with samizdat as a political act against the government. The intelligentsia was another group that wanted to access these banned writings for personal interest and edification, as well as a way to dissent politically. Finally, some groups of people created or distributed samizdat for personal gain and motivations, despite the risks.

The history of the lack of access to information due to political repression is not unique to Soviet Russia, but it exemplifies the lengths people will go to speak and read freely. Our new collection of samizdat is available for use in the Rare Book and Manuscript library. For more information about visiting and requesting items, consult their website: http://www.library.illinois.edu/rbx/.
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