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Yevtushenko Evening in Munich

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Forwarded under separate cover are copies of the item TPLINGO broadcast in the program of 28 January about YEVTUSHENKO's appearance in Munich together with some comments from TPLINGO Russian staffers who attended.

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(TRANSLATION AS BROADCAST: January 28, 1963)

(#26803 THE YEVTUSHENKO EVENING IN MUNICH Petuansky)

CORR.: The evening of January 21. The Sophien-Saal in Munich is packed. Journalists, German students and university professors have assembled here. Some of them have come because they are really interested in poetry. Others - and they are perhaps in the majority - have come simply out of curiosity. After all, one of the representatives of the modern generation of Russian poets and, moreover, one who is famous for his rebellious spirit is to make an appearance.

And then the "rebel" appears on the podium - in a grey sports shirt that he wears outside his very narrow trousers. He might be taken for a Western-type "zoot-suiter." In his short introductory address Yevtushenko says that "The hope set on diplomats has now been lost" and that all hope should now be set on writers. The more they travel in the world and honestly talk about what they have seen, the more the threat of war will recede. Then he says that there should be no preconceived opinions, that the pen should be in honest hands, etc. In short, his speech is standard propaganda which is being repeated in different ways in the speeches of other Soviet writers and delegates visiting foreign countries.

Then Yevtushenko starts to read his verse. His delivery is of the affected, public meeting style, accompanied by gesticulation and howls, probably more suitable for Mayakovsky Square than for a comparatively small hall. Living in the West as we are, we have perhaps grown out of overdramatization. Here verse is read calmly, without "hamming," it is simply read. I may say that Yevtushenko's behavior on the podium gave rise to quite a few ironic remarks in the press. The influential Bavarian Sueddeutsche Zeitung, for instance, mentioned in its feuilleton that in the current carnival season, in contradistinction to the preceding one when "rock'n roll" and "twist" were in fashion, a new dance, "Yevtushenko," which requires gesticulation, fist shaking and bodily contortions, would be a success.

Yevtushenko read his poems Tenderness, Hail in Kharkov (of which he somewhat playfully said that it was "formalistic"), The Tinkle of Slender Icicles; then the poem Conversation, an excerpt from Station Winter, the sensational Stalin's Heirs and a new, supplementary version of the poem Babiy Yar. This new version speaks of a simple Russian woman, Old Katya, who hid a Jewish girl from the SS-men in 1941. Tastes and opinions vary, of course, but I personally think that the original version of his Babiy Yar is better.

Well, the verse reading comes to an end and a discussion ensues. Yevtushenko makes an expansive and sustained effort to prove that no one forced him to rewrite the poem Babiy Yar and that he decided to add the story of the Jewish girl because it had "shocked" him.

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We would remind you that the Party critics pounced on the poem Babiy Yar when it first appeared in the press. Despite this fact, Shostakovich composed a symphony on Babiy Yar. Rumors have lately circulated in the West that this symphony has been banned, since the CPSU leadership saw both in the symphony and in the poem itself a hint that anti-Semitism is taking root in the USSR. Yevtushenko was asked to rewrite his poem, and he agreed to do so in order to give Shostakovich's symphony a chance to see the light. In his speech in Munich Yevtushenko denied these rumors. His chief argument was that his character was known in the Soviet Union and that therefore no one could make him rewrite anything.

Yevtushenko was then asked whether he intended to touch in his works on Stalin's concentration camps which Solzhenitsyn had so vividly described in his novelette A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. Yevtushenko replied that he had not happened to be confined in Stalin's camps and that therefore he preferred to leave this topic to other writers. Someone in the audience said that this argument did not hold water ~~,~~ after all, Yevtushenko had written about the horrors of Batista's prisons, although he had never been in these prisons, and had also written about Babiy Yar where no one had shot at him.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that in his December 26 speech Ilyichev said that many writers had drawn false conclusions from the criticism of the personality cult and that some of them had focussed their attention only on the negative aspects of that period. At the same time he made it plain that the CPSU leadership would impose certain restrictions on the use of the concentration-camp topic.

Yevtushenko's answer to the question about socialist realism was interesting. He said:

> Many theories of socialist realism have been spread in the Soviet Union. I, for instance, believe that I'm a socialist realist and the dogmatic writers believe that it is they who are socialist realists. God alone knows which of us is right.

Yevtushenko also said of socialist realism:

> There was a time when the absurd viewpoint prevailed in our country that life there was so good that a conflict between bad and good was out of the question and that the only conflict which could arise was one between good and still better. These critics, however, were themselves an example of the bad in our life. We, the young writers, have proved the possibility of conflict between bad and good, and we have won.

Yevtushenko noted that in the West he had frequently been asked about the "borders of socialist realism" and added:

> I would repeat once again that it is up to our generation to push back these borders and that's what we'll do if we deem it necessary.

Yevtushenko was then asked about the underground journals published in the Soviet Union and especially about the journal Feniks, a copy of which was received in the West and reprinted in the Russian emigre journal Grani. Yevtushenko admitted that such journals did make the rounds of Moscow and that, as editor of the poetry section in the journal Yunost (Youth), he had read Feniks, Koktevl (Cocktail), Tvist (Twist) and a number of other handwritten anthologies. Asked why poems from these anthologies did not find their way into the official press, Yevtushenko said that they were "inferior from an artistic point of view." The West German press did not fail to note that this argument, too, was unconvincing. The critic Werner Horst, for instance, wrote in the Sueddeutsche Zeitung:

> Feniks is one of the illegal journals of the Moscow literary underworld... Its compilers, who are far younger than Yevtushenko, would not get onto the pages of the official press even if every one of them were a literary genius. Their poems are by no means worse than Yevtushenko's political poetry, but they are too radical.

Asked which West German writer was now the most popular in the USSR, Yevtushenko named Heinrich Boll. "But you must keep in mind," he added, "that your books take a long time to reach us. For instance, we now read Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, The Three Comrades and Arc de Triomphe."

Incidentally, the Western press reports that in a private talk Yevtushenko put it more figuratively. "It takes as long for Western books and journals to reach us as it does for the light of remote stars," he said.

Yevtushenko also discussed the various poetic styles in the Soviet Union. As examples of the multitude of the styles enjoying particular popularity he quoted the poetess Bella Akhmadulina and the poets Andrey Voznesensky and Bulat Okudzhava. As for Akhmadulina, he said that she continued the traditions of Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva.

Let's make some sort of resumé. Yevtushenko's speech was propagandistic, of course. In his "criticisms" he kept within the limits of what is permitted by the Party and the government - i.e., only criticized the Stalin era and scolded Stalin's "heirs." As for the post-Stalin period, however, he tried to present it as a model of freedom and democracy. He could not refrain from posturing either. We have already mentioned that he said: "My character is too well known in the Soviet Union for anyone to try to force me to do anything."

The real state of affairs is probably better reflected in the poem Conversation which Yevtushenko read at his appearance in Munich's Sophiensaal:

I am told,
"You are a brave man."
Nonsense.
I have never been brave.
I simply considered it an unworthy affair
To stoop to the cowardice of my colleagues.
I have shaken no foundations.
I have simply laughed at what is false and artificial.
I have written, and that is all.
I have written no denunciations
And have tried to say everything I think.

He concludes this poem as follows:

Our descendants, making short work of loathsomeness,
Will recall with bitter shame
The very strange time
When simple honesty was termed
courage.

At his appearance in the Sophiensaal Yevtushenko by no means "shook" the foundations, either. Neither in his verse, nor in his replies to questions was he particularly courageous. Perhaps he has not always been "simply honest," either. After all, the CPSU leadership still does not let the "shakers of foundations" and the really "brave" go abroad. Yevtushenko, however, is touring the wide world as a "plenipotentiary representative," so to speak, of this leadership.

In conclusion one must regret that not enough time was allotted for discussion, so that some questions remained unanswered. The following, for instance:

Even if we admit that relative freedom now exists in the Soviet Union, what guarantees are there against the appearance one fine day of another "personality cult" with all its repercussions? And so on...

For me personally the interest in Yevtushenko's appearance lay in tracing the structure of his "introduction" and "reading" to determine the real purpose of his appearance. The Soviet poet's very first introductory words showed that his trip enjoyed the blessing of the top government circles. If I may take the liberty of a little fantasy, I would say that before starting out on his trip he had a hear-to-heart talk with Adzhubey.

Analyzing his performance, one may reach the following conclusion. Yevtushenko had been assigned two main tasks. The first of these was to arouse the West Germans' sympathies for a representative of the Soviet Union and, consequently, for the Soviet regime too. The second task was to dig a pit between the German and the American peoples and arouse in the Germans distrust of American policy on international affairs and sympathy for Soviet international policy. Here are some specific examples.

At the beginning of his performance Yevtushenko said: "I am the first legal Communist in Western Germany." (Applause) Then the poet stressed: "In my opinion, the poet is the voice of the people." (Applause since, in itself, the idea is quite sensible) Yevtushenko then went on to "praise" the American press and compliment American journalists but right here, in passing, stressed that the American press had unfortunately not yet learned to speak the truth and, side by side with truthful information, slanderously alleged of Yevtushenko that "Yevtushenko had to rewrite his poem Babiy Yar upon orders from the Soviet government." As proof of the fact that he did not rewrite Babiy Yar Yevtushenko explained that he had merely rounded off his poem by adding 20 lines. But any literate person realizes that with these 20 lines he gave his poem a completely different essential meaning and, by consequence, actually did rewrite it!

During the subsequent short discussion Yevtushenko began to grow nervous, expecting provocation or "awkward" questions. I was one of the first to put a question to him. I asked whether he was thinking of writing a poetic work on the same topic which Solzhenitsyn chose for his novelette (Soviet concentration camps). Yevtushenko gave a devious and stupid answer. He said that he would very much like to write on this subject but, unfortunately, had had no practical experience of the Stalin terror and therefore could not write better than Solzhenitsyn. Another proof that Yevtushenko's appearance was meant for the Germans (and not for the Russian emigration) was that the poet asked for all questions to be put only in German. This move simply bordered on caddishness toward his compatriots in the audience.

Fi Finally, the last thing. I had presupposed that nothing would come of the promised discussion and therefore prepared a poem for Yevtushenko. I thought that the poet would be interested in the work of emigre poets and, taking advantage of the verse of an emigre on a current topic that would be handed up to him, would answer it and say something. Unfortunately this did not happen. Yevtushenko simply put my verse in his pocket. I am personally convinced that he later read it out of curiosity, but this does not alter things. He virtually declined discussion; he did not want to overshadow the first effect which he had made on his German admirers.

Knowing that Yevtushenko likes to compare himslef with Mayakovsky and Yesenin and knowing that Yevtushenko likes to pose (perhaps only for publicity reasons) as an anti-Stalinist champion, I wrote him this verse:

For love there are not enough boulevards and roses,
For love there are not enough gateways and porches.
This very simple youth problem
Couldn't be solved by any "Party congresses."

We were born on the Volga, the Kama, the Klyazma.
Through travel passes we grew up by the Siberian Lena.
We floundered and drowned in the promised happiness;
No "plenums" could help us.

Cars dart to and fro about the Lubyanka --
They are "Chaykas", not "Black Marias".
My father's field shirt hangs in the hall;
No "quorums" will bring him back to me.

Mayakovsky, Yesenin and you, Yevtushenko,
Have read us verse on this and on that.
Perhaps, if people delve deeper into life,
Poet-heroes will soon appear?

But Yevtushenko, unfortunately, did not reply to the last question expressed in my verse. I can express my over-all impression of Yevtushenko's Munich appearance as follows: he is a splendidly trained propagandist. His aim was by no means to bring Russian poetry to the West; his aim was to put over Soviet policy, lightly and imperceptibly, to Western fools and drive a wedge (albeit a small one) between the West Germans and the Americans. It was splendidly and cunningly contrived but also, in my view, for fools.

I was left with the oppressive feeling that the Germans (I mean those who attended his reading) took the hook. As a corollary I might say that we should, nevertheless, learn to propagandize as the Communists long since learned to do. "The public is a fool and gobbles up everything it is given", wrote Chekhov.

Mr. Yevtuschenko was very well received by the public, one could feel the warm sympathy which apparently everyone felt for him.

In the beginning,I,too, was fascinated by him, his personality as well as his performance. The poems which I liked best I had already read before, but it gave me great pleasure to hear him recite them. I was particularly impressed by "Lyudi, Baby Yar, etc.

As the evening went on, I, unfortunately, felt more and more embarrassed by Yevtuschenko's obvious conceit, one might almost say arrogance. This spoiled the picture I had previously had of him.

The almost fawning admiration on part of some of the audience was quite annoying, I thought.

S/C Encl #3

Yevtushenko is no Mayakovsky capable of arranging turbulent and interesting disputes after his performances. But neither did Yevtushenko's audience prove capable of conducting an active polemic with the poet. When Yevtushenko began by stating that he was the only legal Communist among the assembly and thereby was flagrantly meddling in the GFR's domestic affairs, he was applauded for his "wit". But I felt like shouting to him that he wasn't a real Communist. After this a dispute would undoubtedly have started up and Yevtushenko would have been forced to try to prove that he was a real Communist. Here one could have reminded him of Khrushchev's words to the effect that Stalin was a real Communist and that he, Khrushchev, would like to be such a Communist as was Stalin. He said that after Stalin's death.

When Yevtushenko said that, in his opinion, the word "Communism" rhymed splendidly with the word "humanism", it would have sufficed to have shouted from the audience that that was only as far as words went, and Yevtushenko would not have proved an incontrovertible authority in the dispute. As for Yevtushenko's poetic work, in most cases I liked it. Bold and witty publicistic poetry - that, I feel, is what the anti-Communist camp lacks.

For a more objective appraisal of this evening I must c first say a few words about the audience. In my opinion, the vast majority of the people who attended this evening were representatives or devotees of literature and art who set more store by the form of Yevtushenko's verse than its content. They were therefore more or less delighted by Yevtushenko's talent and paid little attention to the content of his verse. There were also spectators, unfortunately few in number, who were well aware of the gist of Yevtushenko's readings, but they could not affect the course of the performance as much as one would have liked.

Yevtushenko himself is undoubtedly a talented poet and, in my opinion, strongly imitative of Mayakovsky. However, the difference between them is that Mayakovsky was the better writer and really wrote what he believed, while in his political verse Yevtushenko writes what fits in with Khrushchev's policy. It goes without saying that this does not preclude the possibility that he also shares Khrushchev's political views.

All the same, such appearances are to be welcomed. With time they will improve the relations and understanding between young people in the USSR and in the West. We may also expect future Western audiences to pay more attention to Soviet political verse and its content of covert Communist propaganda.

The Sofiensaal was overcrowded and many people could not find seats. I am under the impression that one whole section of the hall was occupied by fellow-travellers who applauded loudly any statement that Evtushenko made -- even when the rest of the audience remained quiet.

Evtushenko set the tone for his performance by declaring that he is probably the only legal Communist in the hall and even in the whole West Germany. He then stated that one should not be afraid of the word "communism", and added that for him personally, "communism" rhymes best of all with the word "humanism."

After these opening remarks, Evtushenko read a number of his own poems. His style is, in my opinion, too dramatic for a regular concert hall, and would better suit a large open-air meeting. As to his statements, most of them contained a large dose of arrogance.

During the questions and answers period, Evtushenko more or less footed the official line. For example, answering the question whether he intended to write about concentration camps of Stalin's times, Evtushenko said that this is a very serious theme, but because he himself has never been an inmate of such camps, he was unable to write about them. (I was reminded of the statement by Soviet propaganda chief Iliychev in which he said that the subject of concentration camps is a delicate one and should be treated carefully).

Also Evtushenko was trying hard to create the impression that in the Soviet Union there exists now complete freedom and democracy.

Some of Evtushenko's statements seemed to depart a little from the official party line (for example, his statements on socialist realism), but it is my impression that this was done on purpose in order to add credence to his other statements.

As to his personality, he certainly has a great deal of charm and it may well be that he was quite sincere in some of the things he said. However, this, I think, increases the propagandastic value of his appearances (from the Communist point of view).

In his introductory speech and in comments on his verse, Yevtushenko ventured many expressions which, from the viewpoint of Communist Party orthodoxy, were downright heresy. I wrote down verbatim such expressions:

"If the state will be preserved." This is no Communist expression. According to the CPSU program, the state must wither away.

"There are all sorts of Communists - good and bad ones." This is an anti-Party expression which may mean that a bad Communist is worse than a good non-Party man.

"I will read my formalistic verse," said Yevtushenko as if boasting and challenging Ilyichev's latest statements (against formalism).

Yevtushenko concluded one of his poems (with indignation) as follows:

"Simple honesty is called courage." It is his verse that people say is courageous, and the poet believes that future generations will be surprised that in our time being honest required great courage!!! A bad compliment for the Khrushchev ear.

"Is there anyone who doesn't drink now?" Also not a very good characterization of Soviet reality abroad.

Yevtushenko said that poets should engage in bringing nations closer to one other, not diplomats who have done nothing. This, too, is a fairly bold criticism of Soviet diplomacy.

"My verse may be used against the political system but not against my people." This is also an over-bold expression.

Did Yevtushenko speak on instructions from the CC of the CPSU or did he freely express his own thoughts? I think that Yevtushenko had been given no instructions. However, the CC of CPSU probably feels that in Yevtushenko's ideas Party pluses outweigh the heretic minuses and that these minuses may create abroad the impression of a certain measure of freedom in the USSR. Moreover, Yevtushenko deliberately made assertions in which he does not believe himself. For instance, Yevtushenko tried to explain Khrushchev's and Ilyichev's speeches against formalistic art as unimportant and not affecting the state of affairs. To substantiate this he said that after his attack on the sculptor Neizvestny at the art exhibition Khrushchev had embraced Neizvestny and gone to lunch with him. That prompted me to write Yevtushenko the following note:

> Comrade Yevtushenko! It is good that Khrushchev embraced a formalistic sculptor. It is bad that Ilyichev forbade all formalists to engage in creative work (made their work impossible). After all, what counts is freedom of creative work. Without such freedom even the most sincere socialist realists

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will be unable to work, because the toadies and careerists will gain the upper hand and stifle the creative work of sincere socialist realists, too.

Signed: "I.M."

I saw Yevtushenko read my note and then put it in his pocket. I believe that what I wrote was in conformity with Yevtushenko's views, although it repudiated his statement that there was no persecution of leftist art in the USSR.