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FIRST MEANS THE BEST

Igor Podberezsky has been awarded Philippines Presidential Medal

On June 3, 2009 President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, on a visit to Moscow, awarded the Presidential Medal of Merit to Igor V. Podberezsky, a citizen of Russia, D.Sc. (Philology), and a leading research fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences. I cannot recall any of Russia's Southeast Asia experts, at any rate those studying ASEAN's founding members, having been thus honored.

The citation describes Igor Podberezsky as the first specialist in the study of Philippine culture. Was he really the first, chronologically speaking? Apparently not. In the year 1937, the same year in which Igor Podberezsky was born in Bryansk, the future Academician Alexander Guber and Olga Rykovskaya published a biography of Jose Rizal (1861-1896), whose poetry, novels and journalistic writings are revered in the Philippines as the highest manifestation of the national spirit.¹ Some twenty-five years later, when Igor Podberezsky was nearing graduation from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Georgy Levinson edited a collection of Rizal's articles, a gift for the centenary of the Philippine genius.²

In short, the Philippines and its culture had been studied well before Podberezsky's time, with one important reservation. There was an aspect of drama in the work of such pioneers as Guber or Levinson, those highly



enlightened and creative men; the drama lay in the fact that, the conditions in this country at the time being what they were, they could not visit the Philippines. Neither of the men had the good fortune to study that country's languages in live communication with native speakers of those languages; to absorb knowledge of an unfamiliar culture from the culture itself, not from books in Spanish or English. This may have been the reason why Guber and Levinson, with their lively interest in Philippine culture, mostly worked on themes in political and socio-economic history. Their follower, a young intellectual of the 1960s, entered the world of scholarship under somewhat different circumstances, and he did not waste the chance offered by the fates.

True, his prospects did not appear too bright at the start, either. Having achieved independence in 1946, for a whole 30 years the Philippines refused to enter upon diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. Not only membership in the banned Communist Party, but even brief trips beyond the Iron Curtain were viewed in that country as "subversive activity."

Understandably, it took a long time to find a Filipino teacher for a Tagalog language group of students, the first at MGIMO. Eventually a political émigré named Manuel Cruz was found who had arrived in Moscow in 1956 and stayed on in this country for eleven years.* He went back to his native country (incidentally, with the permission of President Marcos himself), having first educated quite a few students here and published a Tagalog-Russian and Russian-Tagalog dictionaries.³ It was from Mr. Cruz that Igor Podberesky basically absorbed the knowledge that enabled him, while still an undergraduate, to teach Tagalog at his alma mater, then defend a dissertation for the scholarly title of Ph.D. (Philology), and later publish a textbook of Tagalog for university students, the first ever in the Soviet Union.⁴ Communication with enthusiastic colleagues who had also mastered that language, such as S.P. Ignashev, V.A. Makarenko, G.A. Rachkov, L.I. Shkarban, contributed to his professional achievements.

More importantly, beginning in the early 1960s, official Manila's attitude toward the Soviets began to soften. More and more frequently and daringly, Filipinos traveled to this country while Soviet people, to the Philippines. "People's diplomacy" by journalists, athletes, artists and, naturally, translators, paved the way for contacts at the highest political level. Podberesky's linguistic skills were a pleasant surprise for the Filipinos he met in those days. He listened keenly to the way they spoke, took note of the popular idioms

* His real name was Teodosio Lansang. For a story of his life and activities in the U.S.S.R. see: T.A. Lansang, *In Summing Up: A Personal and Political History*, Quezon City, 1999, pp.37-55.



After investiture of Philippine awards to Igor Podberezsky. In the foreground – Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, President of the Philippines in 2001-2009. On the left and right of the awarded – his granddaughters

they used, and got rid of the bookish and obsolete phrases that sometimes amused his interlocutors. That was the way Francisco Sionil Jose (b. 1925), a venerated prose writer and journalist, author of a famous series of novels known in the Philippines as the *Rosales Saga*, remembered him. Their first meeting in Moscow in 1967 was the start of half a lifetime of friendship.⁵ The fruit of their mutual attraction was three novels and numerous short stories by Frankie (the jocular, familiar name that perennially young and indefatigable Sionil Jose is known by in the Philippines) published in this country in Soviet times in Igor Podberezsky's translations.⁶ Incidentally, these texts were the source of later translations into Lithuanian, Latvian, and Ukrainian.

In 1969 the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship invited to the U.S.S.R. a politician who made no secret of his ambition to run for the post of Philippines president. He was thirty-seven-year-old Benigno (Ninoy) Aquino. A better interpreter than Igor Podberezsky simply could not be found for such a visitor; by then the man had been to the Land of Seven Thousand Islands and had a grasp of realities there. Apparently Aquino realized that it was no amateur he was dealing with. Also conducive to closer rapport between them was the fact



that the Senator's manners were quite unaffected and he was only five years older than the companion with whom he traveled all over this country.⁷

The relationship continued in 1970-1971 when Podberesky, the first of Soviet nationals, was lucky enough to take an internship course at the University of the Philippines. Ninoy, by then already the opposition leader and a very busy man, found him in Manila and took him to the Province of Tarlac to his family estate. Who in Podberesky's place could have imagined that his cordial host's future held a prison term, emigration and death from a bullet when he tried to return to his home country, and that the state would eventually be headed by his spouse Corazon? At the time she seemed shy and self-effacing, hardly ever joining conversations among men. But the Senator's only son, 11 year-old Noynoy, was already being coached for a career in politics, as it were. Once the lad, who was an anchor in a children's TV show, invited "Uncle Igor" to the studio and talked to him on camera, completely unembarrassed, about what the Soviet capital looked like, if there were many cars in the city, and about Moscow ways generally. Incidentally, he was doing all that sitting on the floor.⁸ Does the incumbent president of the Philippines remember that episode?

At Aquino's house Podberesky was merely an occasional visitor, while in the home of another politician, Congressman Carmelo Barbero (whose daughter was at one time a student at the Patrice Lumumba University of Peoples Friendship in Moscow), he was staying permanently throughout the year. To live with a strange family, however hospitable, is something of a trial. When the culture is also alien, this is doubly difficult.⁹ To understand and accept it, and through that to represent one's own culture with dignity, is a matter of honor. Having passed that test, Podberesky got two rewards at one go. First, a closer acquaintance with him gave the Barbero family the idea of adopting the man. Second, he learned to see things through Filipino eyes, thus becoming a practicing culturologist. As for a writing culturologist, he became that as he worked on his book *Sampaguita, Cross and Dollar* (1974).

Its subject matter is the origins of the mode of life that evolved in the Philippines in the 20th century, the islanders' daily conduct and psychology. The three token words on the cover* represent the three tiers of national culture. The first one, that had come into being long before any contact with the West, is related to the unshakeable values of the family and mutual help within small groups. The basis of the second one was laid not only by the

* While the cross and the dollar are unlikely to puzzle the Russian reader, sampaguita is a species of jasmine officially named the national flower of the Philippines.



Spaniards who converted Filipinos to Catholicism, but also by the neophytes themselves who managed to adjust the world religion to the local conditions. The third tier covers everything that the Yanks introduced in the archipelago, from American English to noisy election campaigns, to the uninhibited press, to mass culture, etc., and that the Filipinos, while enthusiastically accepting the form, have transformed into something substantially different.¹⁰

How do cultural layers so utterly dissimilar go together in the minds of the individual and society at large? What kind of conflict did and does their cohabitation produce? What opportunities does their synthesis hold? Pondering over these issues, Podberzsky examines a multitude of specific instances, looking for inner logic and meaning where an outsider will see none, and translates into Russian not just the words and phrases of another language, but the mindset of the people that speak that language. And he writes in such a way that this conceptually complex book makes delightfully easy reading.

That *Sampaguita* was an unorthodox work of outstanding merit was immediately apparent to people at the Oriental Literature Section of Nauka Publishers. At first they put it on hold, doubting that it was entirely up to the ideological canons prevailing at the time, but then did publish it with a print run of 12.5 thousand copies. The result was a scholarly best seller that came out right on the eve of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Philippines in 1976.

Anything Igor Podberzsky has ever tackled since, he did in the manner he had learned from *Sampaguita* – with passion and originality, permanently in quest for heroes and plots. While working on his doctoral thesis, and later on a monograph about the evolution of Rizal's writing (1982), he emphasized over and over this point: the founder of modern Filipino literature had not sprung out of nowhere. A barren soil unready for the event will never yield this kind of fruit.¹¹ Incidentally, we also owe to Podberzsky new (and more importantly, accurate) translations of the titles of Rizal's novels into Russian. The first one bears the title *Noli me tangere*, literally *Do not Touch Me* in Latin, and the conventional Russian translations carried something like *Touch Me Not* on their covers. But in the 19th century doctors used the phrase from the Gospel to refer to certain types of cancer.* Putting it on the title page, Rizal,

* The Gospel according to St. John quotes the resurrected Jesus as saying to Mary Magdalene: "...Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" (John, 20:17).

** Thirty-five-year-old Rizal was executed by a firing squad in Manila on December 30, 1896, on a frame-up by the Spanish military tribunal.



who had medical training and was once in charge of a cancer ward, warned that he would speak about a terminal illness that affected his country under foreign domination. Hence the translation of the title into Russian that literally means *The Malignant Growth*, suggested by Podberezsky.¹² The name of the second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, is unimaginatively translated in this country as *The Filibusters*, as though that was a thriller about the adventures of Caribbean pirates. Meanwhile, the Spanish colonizers branded *filibustero* anyone who had the temerity to oppose them. Mental ferment, capable of leading straight to revolution, is what occupied Rizal's mind, and the Russian title literally meaning *The Mutiny* suggested by Podberezsky fits the book nicely.¹³

In the Philippines, where Rizal is a Christ-like figure, and the day he died for the cause of national liberation is marked as a sacred date,** the works of Podberezsky were duly noticed and appreciated. Such gestures as an invitation to give the annual Rizal lecture in Manila and admission to the elite Order of the Knights of Rizal speak volumes.¹⁴

Each new visit to the archipelago (and there have been ten in all) brought Podberezsky more friends and acquaintances. The list of them is nothing if not impressive – from Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos to Jaime Cardinal Sin, from “Leftist deviationists” at the University of the Philippines to Jesuit fathers managing another educational establishment of prestige, Ateneo de Manila. But perhaps the most memorable were his meetings with Sionil Jose and Nick Joaquin (1917-2004) whom Igor Podberezsky believes to be a Nobel-caliber writer.¹⁵ Translations of two novels by Joaquin and a series of his essays that made up a separate collection became yet another milestone in Podberezsky's work.¹⁶ In actual and imaginary conversations with these authors, who philosophized on the subject of national identity, he sought ideas for a new monograph dedicated to culture studies in the Philippines.¹⁷

By the time this book came out in 1984, Igor Podberezsky had been working for several years at the Southeast Asia Department of the Institute of Oriental Studies, the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences. That section (as indeed the whole of the Institute) boasted many major scholars and outstanding personalities, and it was these people who made the general atmosphere of the place – informal, with a touch of patent academic mischief. While the country was commonly believed to be plunged in “stagnation,” Soviet research work on the Philippines displayed something entirely different. Books by G.I. Levinson, O.G. Baryshnikova, Yu.O. Levtonova, I.V. Podberezsky came out in quick succession.¹⁸ Papers and dissertations by junior colleagues were discussed in a lively fashion; afternoon tea sessions grew into heated debates. Undoubtedly, the period



between the early 1970s and the late 1980s was a true Golden Age for Philippines studies in this country.

What came afterward is best left unsaid, at least here and now. It is lamentable that so fine a professional as Igor Podberezsky, member of the U.S.S.R. Union of Writers, had to shelve his manuscripts. Translations of two of the five novels that make up the *Rosales Saga*, and two of the three parts of a fascinating book about faith healers based on field research¹⁹ are still awaiting publication.

Does Igor Podberezsky find this depressing? He probably does. Does he feel lost? Not in the least. The proof is success with the readers of his work entitled *Vostok – delo tonkoye. Nablyudeniya i razmysleniya, kur'yozy i paradoksy* [The East is a Subtle Matter. Observations, Thoughts, and Things Amusing and Paradoxical (2003)]. A collection of quotes, the author assures his readers in the foreword with a straight face, is a “favorite form of Oriental literature.” What could he be referring to? Not to Chairman Mao’s little red book, by any chance? You said it, I didn’t, Podberezsky tells imaginary interlocutors with a sly wink inviting them to partake of his collection. In it are “true and fictitious accounts of Oriental and Orientalist plots, funny stories, direct quotations, and even prophecies and poetry. They can be read in any order – front to back, or the other way round, or starting from the middle. Precise references to sources are lacking, as is the Oriental wont.”²⁰ That Igor Podberezsky has an excellent sense of humor has been known before, but here he is positively scintillating. Go on, read it, feel consumed with envy and have a good laugh. However... In this entertaining book, too, one occasionally comes across such reminders of the world’s imperfection that one feels in no mood for laughing.

Podberezsky revealed himself as an expert in cultural studies on more than just a regional scale at the World Economy and International Relations Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences where he took on a job in the late 1990s. There he became an active participant in the Project for Studying Civilizations in a Globalized World (supervisors V.G. Khoros and Ye.B. Rashkovsky). Year in year out he speaks at inter-institute forums on the civilizations of China, India, Latin America, the Islamic World, and of course Southeast Asia, understood as a civilization community in its own right.²¹ So far only part of what he has done within this project has seen the world. We will eagerly await publication of the rest.

But how about the Philippines? Don’t you believe Igor Podberezsky if he complains that his feel of the country is not what it used to be; he starts every morning with a review of the Philippines press on the Internet.



It is gratifying to know that neither have people in the Philippines forgotten him. Responding to his old friend being decorated with the Presidential Medal, Francisco Sionil Jose (People's Artist of Philippines) does not spare words of praise: "It is such a trite cliché but it has to be repeated – that I don't have the words to express my personal gratitude to Igor for introducing me to the Russian people, my country as well, and most of all, our national hero, Jose Rizal. But more than these, what Igor has done was to explain myself to me, us to ourselves. He defined our literature in English as the unique achievement that it is, different from the English literature of the English speaking countries. He positioned our national hero in a manner that we could appreciate him more, imbibe him in our very marrow. And most of all, for me at the very least, he confirmed my faith in our creativity and perseverance – all of these in spite of the mountains of rubble that impede us."²²

Any questions still about the wording of the citation? Is this Expert Number One in Philippines culture studies in Russia? Sure he is the first, meaning the best. ■

NOTES:

1. A. Guber, O. Rykovskaya, Jose Rizal, Moskva [Jose Rizal. Moscow, 1937].
2. Jose Rizal, *Izbrannoye*, Moskva [Selected Works, Moscow 1961].
3. M. Cruz, S.P. Ignashev, *Tagalog-Russia Dictionary*, Moscow, 1959; M. Cruz, S.P. Ignashev, *Russian-Tagalog Dictionary*, Moscow, 1965.
4. I.V. Podberezsky, *A Textbook of the Tagalog Language*. Moscow, 1976.
5. Jose F. Sionil, "Igor Podberezsky" [Unpublished essay, 2010].
6. Jose F. Sionil, *Selected Works*. Moscow, 1977 (translated into Russian); id., *The Tree. My Brother, My Executioner*. Moscow, 1983 (translated into Russian); I. Podberezsky, "Translating F. Sionil Jose into Russian," *Frankie Sionil Jose: A Tribute*. Singapore, 2005, pp. 192-201.
7. See more in V.V. Sumsky, *Fiyesta Filipina, Reformy, revolyutsii i aktivnoye nenasiliye v razvivayushchemsya obsbchestve* [Fiesta Filipina. Reforms, Revolutions and Active Non-Violence in Developing Society], Book 2. Moscow, 2003, pp. 13-14.
8. The author's interview with Igor Podberezsky. Moscow, August 26, 2010 (in Russian).
9. Ibid.
10. I.V. Podberezsky, *Sampaguita, Cross and Dollar*, Moscow, 1974. A prelude to that work was the first, "trial" monograph by I.V. Podberezsky, *Strana semi tysyach ostrovov* [The Land of Seven Thousand Islands], Moscow 1970.



11. See, I.V. Podberezsky, *Evolyutsiya tvorchestva Khose Risalya. Zarozhdeniye sovremennoy filippinskoy literatury* [Evolution of Jose Rizal's Work. The Emergence of Contemporary Filipino Literature], Moscow 1982, pp. 16-63.
12. Ibid., pp. 143-144.
13. Ibid., p. 209.
14. The author's interview with I.V. Podberezsky (in Russian).
15. Ibid.
16. N. Joaquin, *Izbrannoye* [Selected Works], Moscow, 1988; N. Joaquin, *Chetyre dnya v nachale goda tigr* [Four Days at the Start of the Year of the Tiger], Moscow, 1992.
17. I.V. Podberezsky, *Filipiny: poiski samobytnosti* [The Philippines: In Search of Identity], Moscow, 1984.
18. See, e.g., O.G. Baryshnikova, *Sel'skoye khozyaistvo Filippin* [Agriculture in the Philippines], Moscow, 1972; id., *Ekonomika Filippin v nastoyashchem i budushchem* [Economics of the Philippines Today and in the Future], Moscow, 1986; G.I. Levinson, *Filipiny na puti k nezavisimosti* [The Philippines on the Road to Independence] (1901-1946), Moscow 1972; id., *Ideologi filippinskogo natsionalizma* [The Ideologues of Filipino Nationalism], Moscow, 1983; Yu.O. Levtonova, *Istoriya obschestvennoy musti na Filippinakh* [A History of Social Thought in the Philippines], Moscow, 1973; id., *Istoriya Filippin: kratkiy ocherk* [A History of the Philippines: A Brief Outline], Moscow, 1979; id., *Evolyutsiya Politicheskoy sistemy sovremennykh Filippin* [Evolution of the Political System in the Present-day Philippines], Moscow, 1985; I.V. Podberezsky, *Jose Rizal*, Moscow, 1985; id., *Katolicheskaya tserkov' na Filippinakh* [The Catholic Church in the Philippines], Moscow, 1988.
19. It is fortunate that at least the first part of the work has been published. See, I.V. Podberezsky, *Filippinskiy fenomen: mistifikatsiya ili meditsyna budushchego?* [The Philippines Phenomenon: A Mystification or Medicine of the Future?], Moscow, 1995.
20. I.V. Podberezsky, *Vostok – delo tonkoye. Nablyudeniya i razmysleniya, kur'yozy i paradoksy* [The East Is a Subtle Matter. Observations, Thoughts, and Things Amusing and Paradoxical], Moscow, 2003, p. 3.
21. I.V. Podberezsky, *Region Yugo-Vostochnoi Azii kak Tsvilizatsyonnaya Obschnost'* [The Region of Southeast Asia as a Civilizational Community], *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya*, Moscow, 2005, # 4, pp. 53-59.
22. Jose F. Sionil, "Igor Podberezsky."