

Nobel nominee

**Storyteller
Josef
Skvorecky
not optimistic
about future
of the West**

By WILL KOTEFF

Josef Skvorecky speaks of the dangers of communism and the commitment of Russian ideology to global domination at a time when the western public is inundated with scare stories about "Red" supremacy in everything from hockey to nuclear weaponry.

He also speaks of these dangers as a man of letters exiled from his native land and purged from its literary history. He and his books do not and never have existed, according to the party line.

As such, when you listen to this tenured Erindale Campus professor, you are tempted to suppress the anxiety (fear?) his ideas generate in your average, complacent, Canadian outlook that the universe will unfold as it should with the guys in the white hats winning out in the end. You are tempted to suppress those feelings, lump the author-teacher in with the rest of the "scare mongers" and agree that, yes, exiles from communist countries do tend to exaggerate.

REPUTATION

But it is not that easy to do. If you dismissed all else — his incredible international reputation; the quality of his writing; the major literary honors he has already been accorded, plus the fact he has been nominated for this year's Nobel Prize for literature — Skvorecky still has an ace to play as proof of the validity of his ideas. That proof is quite simply the fact his native compatriots are willing to risk what little freedom they have, and possibly death, to read his books.

"They can compare what I say about the Czech reality. If I were lying," says Skvorecky, "they wouldn't want to read me. Maybe I could pass it off here but not there."

Most citizens eligible to vote in next month's municipal election won't . . . because they aren't interested in or don't understand politics, or can't be bothered. Disinterest, ignorance and laziness are luxuries communist-controlled people don't have.

Politics, as Skvorecky experienced it in his homeland, is a process which affects day-to-day living in a very real way. The authorities there create situations which create problems for the people. The 58-year-old exile describes his in-

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volvement in politics as "involuntary", but necessary.

His first clash with party ideology occurred over his first novel, *The Cowards*. That book deals with a seven-day period at the end of World War II, when the Nazis were leaving and the Russians coming in. The party line was, if a Czech writer wanted to describe that period he had to describe the young people of Czechoslovakia as totally committed to fighting the Germans with any other interests being only of a secondary nature.

INTERESTS

But the young novelist — the war ran through most of Skvorecky's teenage years and he was only 24 when he wrote this first novel — saw and wrote about the youth of that time as they were, with normal primary interests of socializing, love, sex and music. He also violated the taboo of using the language of the street, slang and profanities, in his story.

For nine years, *The Cowards*, and most of Skvorecky's work, made the rounds of underground literary circles. Until 1958, when the state censor allowed that first novel to be published . . . for all the wrong reasons.

At that time there was a struggle between the Stalinists and the non-Stalinists in the party. Explains Skvorecky: "(The Stalinists) allowed *The Cowards* to be published as proof that if they didn't watch out, everyone would be writing like these decadents."

Skvorecky's novel was kept in bookstores for one month before reviews slamming the work began appearing in the state-controlled press, at the rate of one per day for two weeks. One short, favorable review did somehow slip through, but the next day an apology for that favorable review ran and the reporter was fired. Everyone connected with the publishing house which handled Skvorecky's book was fired, as was the novelist from his job as editor of the magazine, *World Literature*. Attempts were also made to have him arrested.

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"I'm basically a storyteller," says Skvorecky, between classes in his non-descript Erindale Campus office. Political statements, he insists, are not a prime motivation for his writing.

"I'm one of the practitioners of this old-fashioned art."

Skvorecky's three decades-plus of storytelling has led him from a precarious place in the underground of Czech literary society to a firm position of international recognition and the doorstep of the Nobel prize for literature.

While his main writing continues to be the serious fiction on which he has built that reputation, the soft-spoken professor of American literature mixes his work with magazine reviews, articles, and less serious fiction.

"When I was young I thought detective novels were trash." But an extended stay in hospital with infectious hepatitis provided Skvorecky with an opportunity to revise his opinion of the genre. Since no books brought into his ward were permitted to be taken out again, the author's friends were only willing to part with detective novels, a total of about 150.

"I developed respect for the genre if for no other reason than it helped take my mind off my illness. Then I studied it and saw there was a considerable art to it."

TRANSLATED

A Canadian citizen now, who has lived here since 1968, Skvorecky continues to write his fiction in his native language, then have it translated. He finds writing fiction difficult enough without trying to do it in anything but the Czech language.

A new novel, *A Swell Season*, will be published this month. It is basically a humorous story about the amorous efforts of a teenager trying to get himself a girl. It, too, is set against the background of the war years, with all its inherent dangers and contradictions.

A historical, biographical novel — the first novel he has written which doesn't draw primarily from his own experiences — is scheduled to be published next spring.

The major change in his writing since coming to Canada is that he no longer has to worry about a state censor.

Skvorecky says he never lied about the things he wrote while in Czechoslovakia, "but you learn to avoid things or write it in such a manner the censor doesn't see it."

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Skvorecky believes North Americans, for the

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most part, are politically naive. Naive about their own politics and the political reality of communist countries. He sees no evidence to indicate the Soviets have ever abandoned their goal of global domination. And he believes the nuclear disarmament and anti-nuclear power groups are playing into the hands of the Soviets.

The race now, he explains, is between the Soviet and the American economies. His appraisal of the outcome is not optimistic. On one side: "I don't think a dictatorship can crumble just from the economy," and on the other: "People here are not used to deprivation."

War is a sobering, maturing experience, as much for a nation as an individual, and it is something North Americans have not experienced on their own soil. Standing in peacetime lineups for hours to purchase the barest necessities of food and clothing is also something we've never experienced.

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Foreign writers are as popular among the general Czech public as local writers. But in Canada foreign or translated writers receive very little attention from the public at large. While we seem to be preoccupied with ourselves, the Czech people look out to the rest of the world to see if there is anything there to help them.

Skvorecky is no exception; he is almost unknown to the average reader and does not make nearly enough from his writing to live.

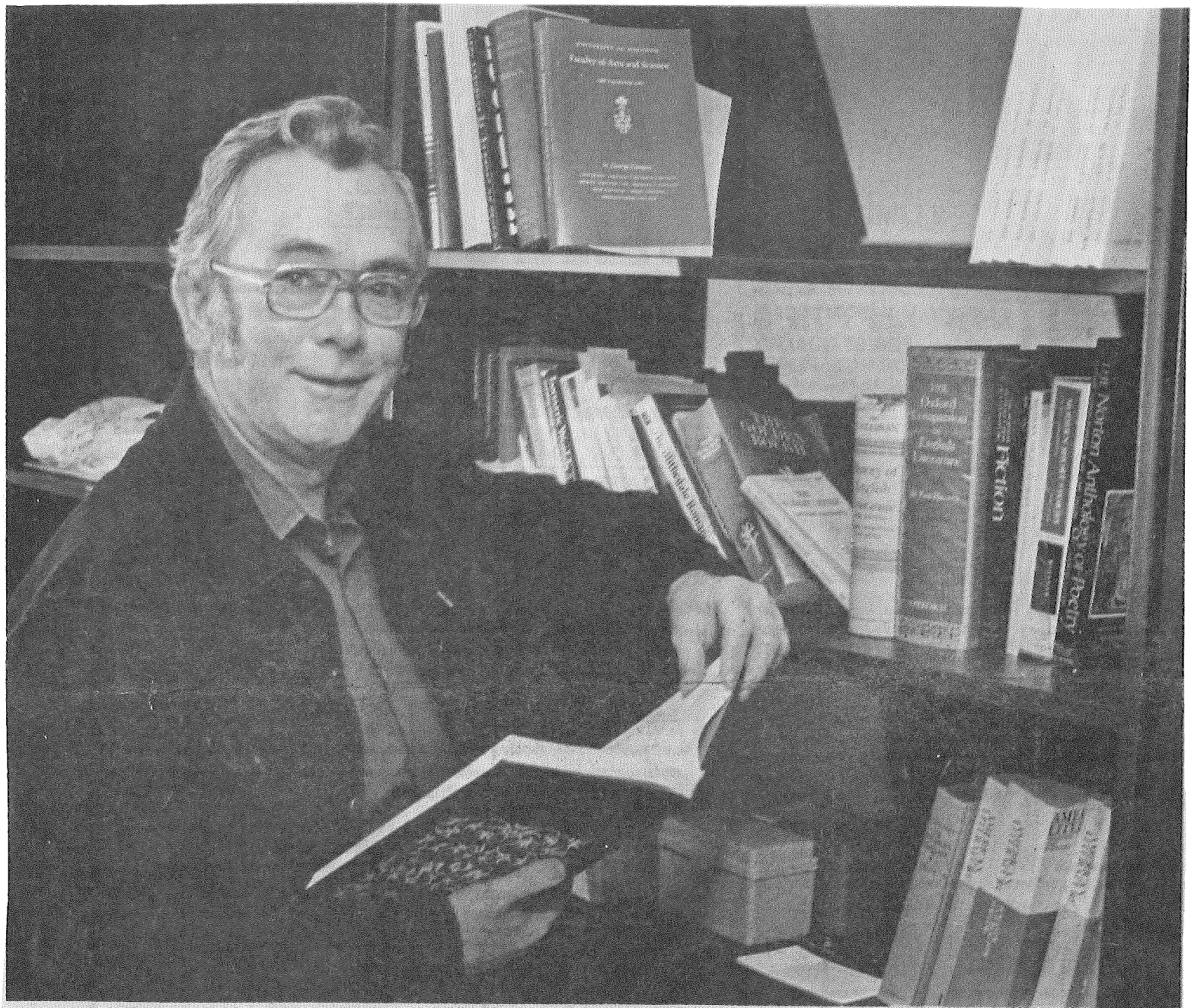
The Nobel nominee says people here see his name (or that of any other foreign writer) on a book, a name they can't pronounce and are frightened away.

EXPERIENCE

And perhaps in that statement Skvorecky captures the essence of the western experience; or lack of it — our willingness to believe exiles at least exaggerate, and to classify detractors of communism as "scare mongers". Change frightens the comfortable, the complacent, the ignorant and the lazy. We have had the luxury of ignoring whatever we chose for a long time; we have never experienced war and oppression in our own country.

And we have never stood in line for hours to get the food needed to survive another day. Joseph Skvorecky has.

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Josef Skvorecky's popularity in his native Czechoslovakia, where he doesn't officially exist, is an indication that his portrayal of life behind the Iron Curtain is accurate. Now a professor at Erindale Campus of the

University of Toronto, Skvorecky still writes in his mother tongue and then has his work translated into English.

(Staff photo by Tim Chevrier)

Tim Chevrier. Dr.

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SKVORECKY, Josef