

Memorial Minute for Maria Banerjee

Written and ready by Thalia Pandiri at the April 13, 2022 Faculty Meeting

Maria Němcová Banerjee was born in Prague on November 22, 1937 and died in Northampton on October 31, 2021. As a child she experienced the horrors of both the Nazi Occupation and Stalinist rule. On Christmas eve of 1949, she fled from Communist Prague with her mother and three siblings by walking through the woods to West Germany--an experience she recounts in *A Lime Tree in Prague*, the vivid and subtly lyrical memoir of her early years. After immigrating to France, the family moved to Canada and settled in Montréal, where Maria attended Montréal High School and simultaneously earned her French Baccalaureate from the Lycée Marie de France. She went on to the Université de Montréal for a Master's degree in Études Slaves (Slavic Studies) before coming to Radcliffe College and then to Harvard for her doctorate.

In 1960, a fellowship took her to Rome, to work in the family archives of the Russian poet Vyacheslav Ivanov. There she met the Indian poet and Renaissance scholar Dibyendu Kumar ("Ron") Banerjee. They were married in 1961. Theirs was an intense and indissoluble union of hearts and minds. They loved to argue--about politics, literature, ideas, but there was never any doubt of their devotion to one another. They were partners in everything, and often collaborated on translations of poetry from Czech, Slovak and Russian. Most recently (in 2017) they published a co-authored translation of Vyacheslav Ivanov's *Roman Sonnets*.

Maria was a polyglot. Czech and French were native to her from childhood, and English became another native language. Her other languages were Russian, Slovak, Polish, Bulgarian, Italian, German and Spanish. She was erudite, but always modest to the point of self-deprecation. Above all, she had an insatiably curious and original mind. Her first book, *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera* was published in New York, London, and in Paris as *Paradoxes*

Terminaux.. She published widely on Russian, Czech and Comparative Literature, including a book on Dostoevsky, *Dostoevsky: The Scandal of Reason*.

Maria came to Smith as a young Assistant Professor in 1966. She retired in 2018 after a long and distinguished career as Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature. Over the years she received a number of prestigious fellowships; a frequently the invited guest of embassies in Washington D.C., New Delhi and Prague, she was a respected friend of eminent authors on several continents. But her most lasting legacy is as a teacher and mentor.

Students remember her as "not only one of the most brilliant professors I ever had but one of the most special people I've met in my life. It is impossible to describe the beauty and uniqueness of her expansive spirit." Another former student recalls "To me it wasn't that she lectured but that she was channeling from another world." Her lectures on Tolstoy for the course on Western Classics from Homer to Tolstoy she taught for many years made a lasting impression. A colleague recalls her yearly lectures on *War and Peace*: "They were completely new and different every year, always with brilliant insights into the novel, and always given without using a single note, not to mention a written text." I still remember vividly an illuminating lecture she gave on *Anna Karenina*. Without notes, let alone a written talk, she combined a deep knowledge of historical and social context with very close reading of a work she obviously both loved and knew intimately. It's no wonder that Maria's courses on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were hugely popular with students. Maria conveyed her passionate love of literature to her students, her voracious curiosity, her genuine enthusiasm about their ideas and their minds. Her interest in what her students were thinking and discovering never waned. After so many decades of teaching, she still had the openness and fervor of a young instructor. She loved her students, and respected them as individuals. She fostered community both within the

classroom and in her home, where she and her husband Ron often hosted students, engaging them in lively conversation and debates over high tea or dinner.

The memories of two of her students convey something of what made Maria so special. One writes: "She was the most luminous person, someone who radiated light despite or perhaps because she had witnessed the darkest days of the 20th century. I first met her in the fall of 1998, when I signed up for her year-long course on Western classics. It was an introduction to Homer and Virgil, Dante and Tolstoy, but really, it was an introduction to Professor Banerjee, a woman who wore her learning so lightly, who infused every intellectual discussion with heart and gentle humor, and who was always unfailingly kind to her students.

It was my first winter away from India and I was anxious, lonely and struggling to find my feet at Smith when she agreed to be my advisor. I am not sure she realized how much hand-holding that would involve, but she was there every step of the way. And by the time I left for India that summer, Smith was home, because she made it feel like home."

And another: "I was a sophomore at Smith on the morning of September 11th, 2001. It was a dizzying day. We were all crying and rushing about with nowhere to go. I went to Prof. Banerjee's class. That day, and all the days to come, she made the impossible and the unthinkable make sense. And she did it all by teaching the *Iliad*. We didn't stop talking about the text, not once, nor about the chaos around us. Instead, she made the *Iliad* feel like a guidebook for our own time. I'm a teacher now, and I think of her every time I open an old book with teenagers. If I do it right, which I rarely do, it can be relevant, useful and curative, just like Prof. Banerjee showed me."

She will be remembered with love, gratitude and admiration by the many whose lives she touched.