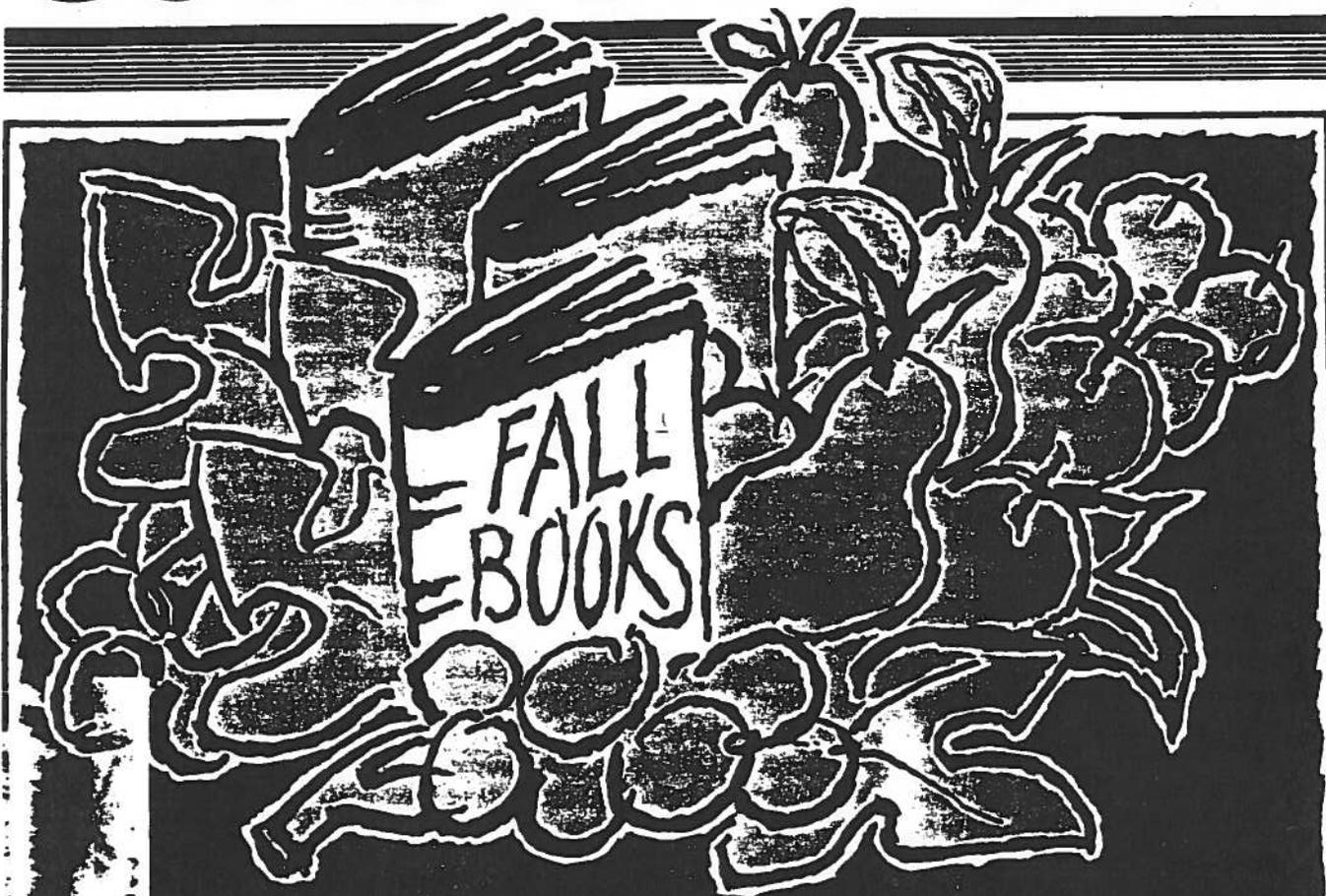


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COMMONWEAL



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THE EDITORS on
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ALL SAINTS
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 Jennifer Corbett · Abigail McCarthy · Warren R. Carlin
GORDON C. ZAHN reviews
 Kenneth Woodward's **MAKING SAINTS**

That is hardly surprising; the lure of future prosperity (and, with it, power) overshadowed the memory of what prosperity and power had brought the nation in the past. Less easily understood is the easy acquiescence of the West, which for decades gave lip service to the *idea* of unification, but only while it remained a distant and receding goal. Yet the *de facto* approval of two Germanys as a permanent fixture on the European scene has collapsed without a second thought; the future political and economic power of this new Germany barely crossed the minds of distracted politicians and diplomats. Grass worries about how much the Germans may forget; he might also worry about how much the rest of the world seems barely able to remember.

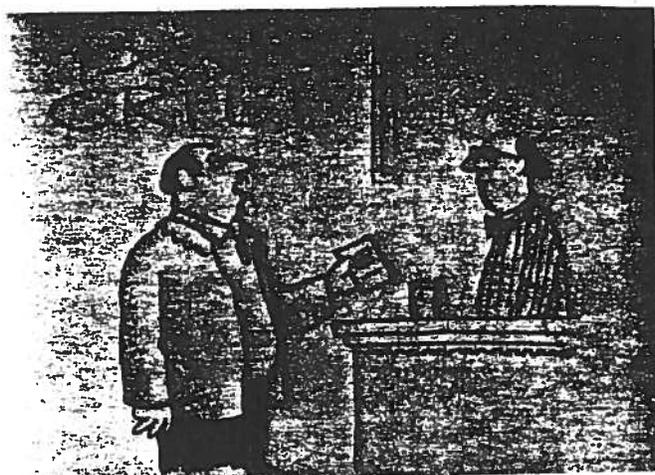
FLORIO & THE TAX WARS

ROBIN HOOD'S MERRY PLAN EDUCATING THE GARDEN STATE

Here is a story about the tax revolt that's supposedly blowing across New Jersey like a sand storm. The protagonist is John Budzash, the postal worker who called a Trenton radio talk show to complain about Governor Jim Florio's controversial new tax laws. The talk-show host challenged Budzash to do something about the new levies, and he did—he founded Hands Across New Jersey, the voice of the anti-tax movement. What's interesting about Budzash is that he's among those who will almost certainly benefit from Florio's plan.

Like everyone else in the state, Budzash is already paying 7 percent sales tax instead of 6, thanks to the governor, and paying on items like paper towels, shampoo, and beer, which had been exempt before the higher sales tax took effect in July. But since Budzash earns less than \$35,000 a year, he won't pay a penny more in the state income taxes he has complained so bitterly about than he has in the past. (The higher rates start after \$35,000 for single people and after \$70,000 for couples; the new top rate, for single people making more than \$75,000 or couples making more than \$150,000, is 7 percent, double the old top rate.) Budzash is in line to get a \$500 property-tax rebate from the state, and along with that, his property taxes, around \$4,000 a year, should go down. That's because under Florio's new laws, Budzash's town—Howell, in the southern part of the state—is one of the winners. It stands to receive almost \$7 million more in state school aid than it did pre-Florio. Its regional high school should get close to \$20 million more. And, statewide, New Jersey will assume county welfare costs now paid by local taxpayers.

When reporters asked Budzash about these calculations, he brushed them off. "How do we know we're really going to get that tax relief?" he asked, adding later, "I think it's ridiculous to try to take money away from people that work and earn their money and give it to people that don't." Many of the thousands of people who have rallied against Florio, signed petitions against



I have to leave early, John. In case some of the regulars come in later, here are my views on the new tax proposals.

him, or put "Impeach Florio" bumper stickers on their cars could, like Budzash, end up benefiting from the governor's new programs, either through better schools, lower property taxes, or both. There are far more winning towns than losers. In fact, a third of the state's 600 districts will get at least 10 percent more in state aid in the very first year of the program, which is to be phased in over five years. Still, gut reactions rule the day. Two of the most prominent tax critics are radio hosts in Trenton who punctuate their commentary with pig squeals and the theme music from *Jaws*.

The middle class, in Jersey as elsewhere, is squeezed a little harder every day. It's not surprising that a lot of people in New Jersey—a state that's made up mostly of very small suburban towns with very high property taxes and a rather parochial home-rule mentality—are angry about taxes. The whole country is in the same mood. The Jersey tax revolt, however, is not the real news. It already seems to be sputtering somewhat, with diminished rallies and newspaper polls showing that voter discontent so far does not seem likely to translate into Republican gains in local elections, despite the governor's plummeting popularity. Other than holding rallies, the anti-tax crowd doesn't have a real opportunity for revenge until state legislative elections November 1991.

The real news is still Florio, who has until then to rebuild his depleted political capital. What New Jerseyans think of their governor by the end of next year depends in part on whether they come to understand his complicated message and whether they come to perceive themselves as coming out ahead, all things considered. What will they think of him five years from now? That depends in large part on the state of New Jersey's public schools.

Those schools are now among the most segregated and inequitable in the nation. They range from Camden, an old industrial town on the state's southern border with eighty-five thousand people and only ten thousand jobs, which annually spends \$4,184 per student, to twenty-one districts in well-to-do Bergen County that spend more than \$10,000 per pupil. For years, New Jersey has relied too heavily on local property taxes to pay for its schools,

leading to huge inequities. The political boundaries within the state have been drawn in a way that aggravates the problem, with wealthier communities cut off from the burdens of poorer districts. That means the Camdens, the Newarks, the Jersey Citys never have enough money, even though they have more needs. They are forced to raise taxes so high they drive out or scare away business, and thus get poorer. The wealthier districts, on the other hand, can usually raise what they need. Some even have the added luxury of being so small and exclusive that all sense of economy and efficiency goes out the window. Two towns in prosperous Bergen County, for example, have two elementary districts and one regional high school district between them, complete with three superintendents, three school boards, and three support staffs. The total number of schools in the three districts is...four.

Shortly after Florio took office, he learned that Thomas Kean, his patrician Republican predecessor, had left a budget deficit of about half a billion dollars. That alone might have called for some kind of tax increase. (Florio had said in his election campaign that he saw no need for new taxes; that flip-flop is a major component of the anger his tax program produced. He had promised an audit that would turn up ways to cut waste, but after the election the taxes came first.) Certainly, Florio knew when he took office that he would have to address the school funding problem, at least minimally, because the New Jersey Supreme Court was expected to rule—and soon did—that conditions in the state's thirty poorest school districts had to change, and that the inequities were unconstitutional.

But Florio decided to use his early momentum to take care of both problems at once, and his educational funding plan, breathing-taking in its scope, went much further than the court demanded: while the 30 neediest districts will receive most of the new funding—\$1.3 billion over the next five years—some 350 districts will see their state aid increased, while 220 wealthier districts will lose state aid, some almost all of it. By assisting the middle- and working-class schools, Florio wants to bridge the political schism between them and the poor of the big cities. His opponents argue that he is trying to buy back the Reagan Democrats; Florio would contend that those blue-collar and middle-class working people are also damaged by the inequities of New Jersey's educational system, either with inadequate schools or with unjust property taxes. He took on the home-rule tradition, New Jersey's version of states' rights.

Florio realized that the redistribution program would take big money, so he marched both the sales-tax increase and the larger income-tax package through the legislature in dramatic all-night sessions. At one point, two very ill Democratic senators were whisked in by state troopers from their sick beds to cast votes. "A political master stroke," wrote a newspaper columnist in Bergen County. "We who are about to pay for it must salute him." In the wealthier suburbs his massive state-aid redistribution earned Florio the title of Robin Hood. Perhaps "The Equalizer" would be more appropriate.

What's wrong with that?

Well, the sales tax part is regressive, no way around it. One has trouble reaching out to Joe Sixpack as one taxes his beer.

Then there is the governor's campaign suggestion that new taxes seemed to be unnecessary. Christine Todd Whitman, the Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate who ran a Quixotic campaign against popular incumbent Bill Bradley, says voters tell her it's not the taxes that anger them so much as Florio's *modus operandi*, and the sense that the size of the tax package was not completely justified or adequately explained. "They have the sense they were lied to," says Whitman.

While Florio's initial legislative triumphs were masterful, his public relations efforts were weak. He waited until weeks after the measures were rammed through the New Jersey legislature before making his first foray into the community to meet face-to-face with ordinary people and explain his plan. He was not aggressive with the press, failed to challenge misinformation, and lost momentum. Now that he and his people have sensed the depth of the tax revolt, they are pushing hard to get their message out.

Part of that message has to do with accountability. As John Budzash of Hands Across New Jersey so bluntly put it, some people don't like the idea of bailing out inner-city school systems. They see it as pouring money down the drain. Other critics point out that money alone does not guarantee an improvement in education, and that for years some of New Jersey's worst districts have perfected ways of quietly robbing their students of even the most basic education. Elena Scambio, the superintendent brought in by the state last year to straighten out the Jersey City school system, recently reported that the district's health insurance plan had been abused to the tune of several million dollars, even covering many who had long since left the system's employ, including dead people.

Florio has promised to guard this new money like "a pit bull." To make sure the needy school systems are held accountable for how their money is spent, the governor has appointed an inspector-general within the Education Department to examine charges of local corruption. He has also suggested that the smaller, wealthier districts think about ways they could save money and

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be more efficient, by merging, for instance, into bigger, more diversified districts that could offer students more variety. So far, that suggestion has raised no echo. In New Jersey the idea that suburban districts might possibly be wasting or mismanaging money is about as believable as little green men on Mars.

Yet money clearly does have something to do with a quality education, or the wealthy suburbs would not be yelling so loudly about losing even some of their state aid. In cities as in suburbs, money is what pays decent teachers and buys plaster, computers, library books, trombones, microscopes, baseball bats, and the near-tangible feeling that something important and worthwhile is going on.

Florio learned his politics in Camden County, watching generations of schoolchildren slip away and hearing the tiresome chorus that there just weren't the resources to do anything about it, when the real problem was a lack of political will. He's neither liberalism's new hope nor its last gasp, as he's been portrayed in the build-em-up-knock-em-down press. But he's an unusually gutsy and driven politician. Compared with the neighboring governor of New York, the one that looks so presidential, he is perhaps less gifted with shining words, but more prone to action. Florio contends that one accumulates political capital in order to buy something worthwhile. He's already done so, and despite a few premature obituaries, he probably has enough time left to accumulate some more.

MICHAEL HOYT & MARY ELLEN SCHOONMAKER

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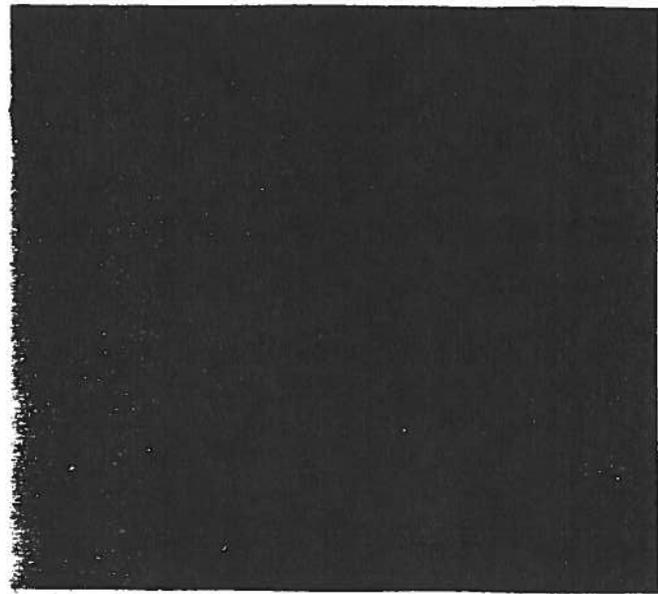
RUSSIAN WRITERS TAKE STOCK

LOST IN TRANSITION LITERATURE AFTER CENSORSHIP

Ever since *glasnost* and *perestroika* rid Soviet writers of a dependable as well as inspirational enemy—political repression—there has been talk that creativity would suffer and public interest would wane. What would happen when honest writers no longer had to camouflage their message between the lines? Would telling the truth bring the same thrill?

A small group of Russian writers met in September at the Daniel Klagsbrun Symposium on Writing and Moral Vision at Connecticut College in New London to address these questions. Poet Tatyana Beck had come from Moscow, short story writer Valeri Popov had come from Leningrad, and the poet Joseph Brodsky, winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize for Literature, had come from South Hadley, Massachusetts, where he teaches at Mount Holyoke College. They were all Russian writers, but they were worlds apart in other ways.

The philosophical premise of the event was nearly sabotaged



by a declaration of independence by Nobel Laureate Brodsky. Exiled from the Soviet Union eighteen years ago, he could not resist interrupting when in the midst of a bland but heartfelt speech about the desire of Russian writers to rejoin the world community, Popov used the collective "we." The word agitated Brodsky like the inflammation of an old wound.

Throughout the day Brodsky used this collegiate forum to make a very American case for self-reliance and the power of the individual. The issue on the table was: Has freedom undermined the creativity of the Russian writer? The fifty-year-old poet, who had freedom thrust upon him while still in his youth, saw it as a nonissue.

"I don't want to brag about it," Brodsky said, "but as for writing, basically one is always free. It is publishing that is not free."

Brodsky went on to throw even the validity of publishing into question, delivering—to tenuous applause—a very un-American speech in praise of anonymity.

Beck had observed that a reading by a poet as prestigious as Brodsky, which drew only about two-hundred-and-fifty people in Connecticut, would attract thousands in Russia, where poetry is a popular art.

"As for myself," said Brodsky, "I think the situation here, where poetry is all but ignored, is healthier. It at least makes you sort out in your mind what you are doing this for—for success, for applause, for publication, or for the degree of truth you can put down on paper."

Brodsky has yet to return to the Soviet Union, fearful, he said, that he would be met with flowers and—he searched for a modest word—"enthusiasm."

Prior to Brodsky's arrival, Beck had spoken of poets driven to suicide during the years of repression because their style was stolen by poets of lesser talent and integrity, who infused it with slogans and were rewarded with fame. Those Soviet writers found no comfort in anonymity.

Today, said Beck through an interpreter, slogans still abound in contemporary Soviet poetry, although they are wielded satir-