

Laurence R. Richter

Laurence R. Richter has been a major figure in the teaching of Russian at Indiana University for over 32 years. His great sense of humor and wit have become such a mainstay of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures that many of us will find it hard to imagine the department without Larry (or Lavrik, the Russian equivalent that has spread from our native Russian speakers to our department as a whole). He has been a brilliant teacher of a specialized course in Russian phonetics that he developed, focusing not only on the practical aspects of how Americans might perfect their Russian pronunciation, but how phonetics should be taught in the classroom in general. I once attempted to substitute for Larry in this course and soon realized how difficult it was to successfully coordinate the course's theoretical and practical aspects. At that point I began to appreciate how successful Larry had been in structuring the course and its materials. In fact his approach to teaching phonetics in general was so successful that he became the phonetics coordinator of our Summer Workshop in Slavic and East European Languages (SWSEEL) as far back as 1979. He continues to the present to teach Russian-language students on all levels of the workshop.

Larry has also been our primary teacher for teaching Russian-to-English translation, Russian for graduate students, and third-year grammar. In addition to the phonetics course, on which Larry has put his own indelible stamp, a number of other unique courses and areas have come into existence thanks to his insights and efforts. He initiated and served as director of the SWSEEL Leningrad (subsequently St. Petersburg) Language Study Program for a period of 18 years, from 1986 to 2004, for which he had to perform an inordinate number of tasks, from advertising the program and recruiting students to negotiating with Soviet tour operators and identifying competent Russian language professors. He also pioneered courses in Russian for opera singers at IU's prestigious Jacobs School of Music. Here he was able to combine his phonetics expertise with his profound knowledge and appreciation of opera and other musical forms. He can tell countless tales of opera singers who have benefited from his tutelage as they made that giant step to singing in Russian. And in recent years Larry has published a series of invaluable books wherein he has developed a sophisticated transliteration system for training non-Russian speakers to sing the musical masterpieces of the Russian repertoire. To date, the complete song texts of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Mussorgsky have appeared along with a volume of other selected nineteenth-century Russian songs. A fifth volume with Shostakovich songs is at the printer, and a volume on Prokofiev is in preparation. As reviewers have noted, these books allow nonnative singers of Russian to sing with accuracy and confidence, no small achievement given the phonetic complexities of Russian.

Like many Russian teachers of the Cold War generation, Private Richter received his first Russian language training at the Army Language School (now the Defense Language Institute), in Monterey, California, in 1956–1957, where even then he was singled out and honored for his scholastic excellence. After just one year of training he was already at work as a military translator of Russian, working at U.S. installations in Japan between 1957 and 1959. Upon completion of his military service, Larry earned both bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Illinois, where he was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa and awarded highest distinction in Russian. He was named a Woodrow Wilson Fellow (honorary) in 1963. His teaching career began in 1964, and for the next four years he taught at Valparaiso University and Grand Valley State College. In 1968 he came to Indiana University, where he completed course work towards a doctoral degree. In 1970 he began teaching in SWSEEL (then known simply as the Slavic Workshop), and in 1974 he began his IU career as a full-time teacher of Russian. For 19 of his years at IU, Larry served as well as the department's scheduling officer, an onerous task to which he brought verve and no small measure of excitement as he fielded faculty members' requests to schedule all classes between 10 and 2 on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Although Larry Richter is known for his great sense of humor and ability to relate anecdotes (which must have rubbed off on his famous son, the renowned humorist Andy Richter), he has a very serious side when it comes to upholding high academic standards in the field of Russian. Students know that they have to work hard in his courses, but that they will be rewarded with knowledge, skill, and insight for their efforts. Perhaps the best way to illustrate that is to quote a student:

You were always a point of real reference when nothing at all made sense in my life. More than teaching me Russian, you presented yourself in such a way that made me want to wake up and go to class. You are the only teacher I have ever had that was able to touch me in that way.

Now as he approaches what one of our earlier retirees liked to call “the classless society,” we sincerely thank our colleague and friend Larry for sharing his expertise, integrity, and boundless good humor with us for all these years. A major part of any success we as a department have enjoyed in the field of Russian is surely due to him.

Ronald Feldstein