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Writers group for human rights conference

Michael Monastyrskij

To many people a prisoner of conscience is a courageous opponent of Communism, arrested for his beliefs. For others a prisoner of conscience is a valiant Communist, arrested because of her relentless fight for justice. A smaller, but still large group believes that a prisoner of conscience is everyone arrested for having exercised such fundamental rights as freedom of assembly, religion and speech.

Because they have seen colleague after colleague imprisoned, or because they themselves have suffered persecution, many writers fall into the last category. The recently formed Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights, having recognized the special concern authors and poets have for basic freedom, has invited over seventy writers to a conference

entitled The Writer and Human Rights, the proceeds from which will go to Amnesty International.

The gathering is taking place at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Thursday-Saturday, and will feature such international figures as Allen 'Howl' Ginsberg, Susan Sontag and Englishman Alan Sillitoe. In addition several well known Canadians including Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler and Roche "Hockey Sweater" Carrier will be participating. Rosemary Sullivan, chairman of the Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights, stresses, "They're doing the conference at virtually their own expense."

The conference's honorary chairman is Josef Skvorecky, a Czech writer who fled his homeland after the Russian invasion in 1968. His novel the *Tank Corps* was to have been



Conference honorary chairman Josef Skvorecky.

published in 1969 but it was banned in advance. Earlier, in 1958, Skvorecky had lost his job as the editor of the journal, *World Literature*, after the authorities disapproved of his work, *The Coward*. "If you have the bad luck to be a writer in a police state...you are," he says, "either a national prize winner or in jail. There is no in between."

Sullivan believes that although basic freedoms "are increasingly under siege"... The public is more complacent about human rights." She also thinks that "with policies such as Reagan's", human rights are also threatened in North America.

She confirms that some of the conference participants have had problems obtaining the visas they need in order to pass through the United States before they come into Canada. One of the questions asked at U.S. immigration is, "Have you ever been in prison?" Sadly, for many of the writers the answer is yes. Immigration lawyers recruited by the conference organizers, will be anxiously waiting at the airport.

Like Josef Skvorecky, Arved Viirald, an Estonian writer living in Toronto, had to leave his country because of Soviet policies. He sees the conference as a way "to put a focus on the

problems people have in the Eastern European countries." Viirald is vigorous in his opposition to Communism: "I'm afraid that some of the delegates will be trying to sell revolution rather than evolution." However he adds, "If we don't let them speak, we would be just as bad as the governments (in Eastern Europe)."

Aside from the conference itself, a number of other activities have been organized to help Amnesty International and to encourage interest in human rights. For example, there will be two benefit concerts at Convocation Hall. One featuring Eduardo Galeano and Daniel Viglietti and Los Companeros will take place Sunday at 2 p.m. The second concert, hosted by Tom Paxton starts at 8 and will highlight Heather Bishop, Dario Domingues Odetta and Ian Tamblyn. Tickets are available at Bass and at the door.

In addition to a reading held yesterday, York will be the site of two events. On Monday at 8:30 p.m., Chilean Fernando Alegria, Daniel Viglietti of Uruguay and Lusia Valenzuela of Argentina will be appearing in the Fellow's Lounge, 004 Atkinson College. On Tuesday, at 3:15 p.m. Phyllis Webb will appear in Room A107, Glendon College.

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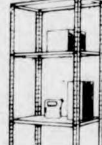
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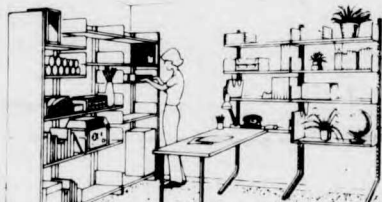
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