

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
JACK A. POSIN
(1920 - 1993)

Jack A. Posin, a retired professor of Russian at Stanford who prophesied the collapse of the Soviet empire in campus speeches during the 1950s, died Tuesday, January 31, 1995, of an apparent heart attack, at the Sharon Heights Convalescent Home in Menlo Park. He would have been 95 on Feb. 4.

A native of Ashkhabad in Russian Turkestan, Posin came to Stanford in 1946 to head the Russian section in what was then the Department of Asiatic and Slavic Languages. In addition to language courses, he taught Russian Literature and Civilization from 1800. Upon retiring in 1965, he taught at Amherst College for two years.

Posin spoke often at Stanford alumni conferences, using such provocative titles as "Is the Soviet Empire Crumbling?" and "Is the Iron Curtain Rustproof?"

In 1953, just four months after Stalin's death, Posin told a campus business conference that "some people say that the communist bosses can push the Russian people around indefinitely. But I am inclined to think that they cannot. After all, the Russian people did have a revolution once, in March 1917. They may do it again, and regain the respect of the world as well as their self-respect. No one can tell how long it will take before the break-up comes. But it would not surprise me if, once started, the whole structure of dictatorship collapses."

Posin considered democracy to be the best weapon against communism:
"At all times we must preserve and strengthen our own democracy. Our democratic way of life is, in the final analysis, our strongest weapon because it wins for us support and admiration even among the common people beyond the Iron Curtain." There are strong indications that there is something definitely rotten in the Communist hierarchy itself, which like fish, spoils in the head first."

At the annual alumni conference in 1957, Posin said Americans should not be afraid of competition from the communists:

"Our system is immeasurably more vital and abundant than anything they can devise. That is why their leaders hate us so: the very existence of the free world is a threat to the communists and spells their eventual doom."

He suggested two ways to "speed the crumbling process of the Soviet Empire":

"1. We should keep our powder dry, i.e., keep up our defenses. If we give up on any point, we shall make the task of inimical forces that much easier. We must not, therefore, make the mistake of yielding on any essential point, and we can do that only if we are strong.

"2. We must keep our democracy bright and shining. Every time we deny the safeguards of the Constitution to anyone, we weaken our strongest weapon. Conversely, every time we demonstrate to the world that we have respect for law – as interpreted by our Supreme Court – we gain the equivalent of several modern divisions. While it is true enough that only the strong are free, it is even more true that only the free are really strong."

Posin emigrated to the United States in 1918, driven by the Great War and the Russian revolution and drawn by the promise of a new future.

He first studied chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley, but his love of Russian literature – particularly the works of Alexander Pushkin – drew him to Slavic languages and literatures. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1933, a master's in 1935 and a doctorate in 1939.

In 1931, Posin married Frances Perstein, a biologist he met when she attended the Russian course he was teaching for the U.C. extension service. They lived in the old Stanford Village for two years, then spent 40 years in Palo Alto. His wife died in 1992.

Posin taught at Cornell from 1939 to 1942, then served as director of the intensive Russian program at the University of Iowa for two years. From 1944 to 1946 he was head of the Russian department at the U.S. Navy language school at the University of Colorado.

Posin wrote numerous articles and published Russian prose and poetry in translation. He marked his 30th year of teaching in 1964 with publication of Beginner's Russian, published by D.C. Heath.

Posin's close friends, mechanical engineering Professor Milton Van Dyke and his wife, Sylvia, said the Russian scholar was a "charming and delightful companion, ready with a Russian saying for any occasion." He had a tremendous memory for poetry, they said, and could quote Pushkin and sing old Russian folk songs.

Posin served as vice president of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages in 1955. He was a life member of the Modern Language Association and a member of the American Association of University Professors.

He is survived by a brother, Professor Dan Q. Posin of Millbrae, who teaches physics at San Francisco State University and biology at the Jewish Home for the Aged in San Francisco. A sister, Mary, of San Francisco, also survives.

Richard Schupbach