

Yuri Kapralov, A 'Grandfather' of E.V. Counterculture

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East Village bohemians lost an elder statesman with the death on Aug. 27 of noted artist and author Yuri Kapralov. He had a stroke after being ill for some time with liver disease. He was 73.

A Russian immigrant who came to New York as a refugee of World War II, Kapralov was a formative artist. Though he never attained any lasting fame, his works — which included abstract paintings, sculptures and constructions made of found materials — were featured in group shows alongside artists like William de Kooning and Franz Kline. He also wrote hundreds of poems and short stories and published several acclaimed books, including *Castle Dubrava*, a modern-day vampire novel set in Transylvania, which the *Los Angeles Times* called “full-bloodied and sexy,” and *Once There Was a Village*, his quintessential homage to the East Village of the 1960s and early 1970s, which remains one of the most haunting and evocative portraits of the neighborhood at that time.

Kapralov also fathered two daughters and a son through three tumultuous marriages, drove a cab and bartended at long-gone East Village joints like the Kiwi and the Frog Pond, wrote ads and taught art to runaways, homesteaded a building, ran a gallery, drank way too much and advised many a young rebel not to take life too seriously.

His own life was framed by tragedy. Born in Stavropol, Russia, on March 7, 1933, Kapralov was violently uprooted at age 12 when the Germans carpet-bombed his village in the North Caucasus Mountains during World War II. Separated from his mother (who may have died in the bomb attack) and his father, an army lieutenant who was off fighting in the war, Kapralov and the other villagers were rounded up and taken to work on a German farm — a life he called “one step above a concentration camp. If the Americans did not break through, we all would have died of hunger and hard work,” he once remarked in an interview.

In 1949, he was shipped off to the U.S. with a boatload of “displaced persons” and brought to work on a Vermont farm with other youth “orphaned” by the war. Then 16, Kapralov rebelled at performing what he called “slave labor” for the farmer, and instead fled with a group of Russian kids to Nyack, N.Y., where they took up residence in an abandoned zoo. “I lived in the house of the white elephant,” Kapralov claimed.

Kapralov found odd jobs as a dishwasher and busboy and loading vegetables at Hunts Point Market in the Bronx. On his days off, he and his friends would take the bus to 42nd Street to watch movies and improve their English. He also visited the then thriving Russian immigrant community on the Lower East Side to check out variety shows and the Russian Free University on East Seventh Street, where Trotsky once lectured.

Kapralov reunited with his father when the elder Kapralov defected to the States and got a job teaching Russian at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Kapralov went to high school there and later attended the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore, where he got by doing sketches of tourists and hookers outside the waterfront bars.

Drafted at the close of the Korean War, Kapralov served in the 101st Airborne Division, stationed in Fort Jackson, S.C., and went on missions to Korea and Laos. By then he was

married with a daughter and a second child on the way. When he was discharged from the Army, he and his wife Ruth moved back to D.C. and opened a “bohemian, post-Beatnik” coffeehouse in Dupont Circle called The Unicorn.

He later moved with his second wife, Laura, to San Francisco, where he got a gig writing and drawing cartoons for the Open City Press, an early precursor to alternative weeklies. He also became moderately successful as a copywriter for ad agencies.

Kapralov landed on the Lower East Side in 1965, when he and his young family moved into a series of rundown walkups on East Seventh Street and East 11th Street, which Kapralov chronicles so vividly in *Once There Was a Village*. Of all the social histories that have been written about the East Village, *Once* is the only one to document the series of riots that rocked Avenue C in 1967, violent clashes that make the 1988 Tompkins Square riot look like a minor skirmish. When heroin hit hard in 1969, Kapralov wrote, “four to six people were mugged on our block EVERY SINGLE DAY.” The neighborhood was swimming in all sorts of drugs, and like the hippies around him Kapralov indulged plenty, landing himself in the psych ward from his own excesses. But Kapralov also wrote lovingly of his neighbors, particularly the “forgotten” Slavs, and the book features several of his delicate pen-and-ink sketches.

Kapralov combined his art with activism. In 1967 he was among the feuding factions of Young Lords, Black Panthers and white “revolutionaries” who occupied the Christodora House on Avenue B, before it became a luxury high-rise. He was also a founding member of Seven Loaves, the arts collective of seven neighborhood groups that, with CHARAS, took over the old P.S. 64 building on East Ninth Street and made it into a community center back in 1979. At CHARAS, Kapralov had a studio where he fashioned many of his abstract constructions from the guts of broken-down pianos, beads, wood and other found materials.

Kapralov founded his own homestead on East Sixth Street and ran a gallery called Sixth Sense in the ground-floor storefront that would later become home to the housing advocacy group GOLES (Good Old Lower East Side). During the 1980s, Sixth Sense was the scene of many performances and raucous openings with collaborators like Spider Webb, the legendary tattoo artist. “I lost so much money, you wouldn’t believe it,” Kapralov laughed in an interview before his death. “[Mark] Kostabi wanted to buy all of my pen-and-inks and I refused because I thought he was a shit.”

In 1988, his bloody, bald head was featured on the front cover of the *Village Voice* following the Tompkins Square riot. He got battered by the cops for singing “This Land Is Your Land” in the street.

Kapralov suffered greatly following the brutal rape and murder of his daughter Faith, an up-and-coming actress and folk singer who was living in Seattle — a shocking act from which he never really recovered.

But he remained a “warrior poet” and vibrant soul, and all those who got to know him were greatly enriched by his wisdom, and the glee that would peak out of his eyes when he got caught up in a good story or joke long enough to forget his sadness.

“He was my East Village art father,” said jazz poet and artist Janet Restino, who stayed with Kapralov off and on during the 1980s when she was “bouncing around between sublets.”

“He was a good friend who to me kind of encapsulated an old-world attitude toward art communities that I would have imagined existed in Paris during Picasso’s time,” said Restino. “Yuri was the East Village. He was a kind of an old-world king of the East

Village.”

Renegade homesteader David Boyle, who helped pioneer the East 13th Street squats, termed Kapralov “my Russian druid” and even cast him as a druid in his play *The Wisdom of the King*, which is enacted annually at the Sixth Street and Avenue B Community Garden.

“He was a poet, he was a mystic, he was adept at old law, he did all the things that a druid would do,” explains Boyle. “He was a strong figure in the arts and he easily slipped into the role of being a grandfather figure.”

In fact, Kapralov had three grandchildren and a great grandchild named Kayla.

For all his troubles, Kapralov seemed to live a charmed life. Lower East Side activist John Penley recalls the time Kapralov’s dog Sharik got lost and was found by a couple of supermodels cruising the Lower East Side in their limousine. The women took the dog back to their Uptown digs and pampered him with manicures and sirloin steaks, until a friend noticed one of the signs that Kapralov had plastered all over the East Village seeking information about his beloved pet. “So the supermodels cruised back to the Lower East Side in their limo to return the dog, and Yuri ends up becoming friends with one of the models, who turned out to be part Russian,” Penley laughed.

Though his health declined severely in later years as his drinking got worse, Kapralov continued making art until just weeks before his death. He also continued to charm new arrivals to the Lower East Side like Barbara Monoian, who included several of Kapralov’s wooden sculptures in a recent show at Musee de Monoian, the gallery she runs in her fourth-floor apartment on East Sixth Street. “In my opinion, he was hugely important. He was like an energy from this lost era moving around the neighborhood. He’s one of the reasons I started this gallery,” says Monoian, who hopes to compile an art book of Kapralov’s works.

Once There Was a Village was reissued in 1998 by Akashic books (www.akashicbooks.com), which also published Kapralov’s novel about the Russian Civil War called *Devil’s Midnight*. Kapralov also published many funny short stories and poems in the *East Village Eye* and *Downtown*, a former East Village community paper. His daughter Katya, who lives in Seattle, says she hopes to collect his writings and art works and display them at a memorial gathering sometime in October.

In a letter to *The Villager*, Katya Kapralov wrote: “Rich in spirit and through clever determination, my father lived a life of dreams. The reality of his dreams was his art and words which inspired hope for all the lost and found, including me.”



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