

Naša Niva

BY

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On the 23rd of November (10th November according to the old calendar) 1906 there appeared in Vilna the first number of the Byelorussian weekly journal *Naša Niva* (Our Cornfield). If one excepts its short-lived predecessor *Naša Dola* (Our Fate) which ran to only six issues, it was the first lawful Byelorussian paper to be published in the Russian empire. During the subsequent nine years of its existence it became a focal point of the Byelorussian national renaissance movement. Its merits are particularly great in the cultural field, and it may be said without any risk of exaggeration that modern Byelorussian literature, including such names as Kupała, Kołas, Biadula, Bahdanovič, Harecki and others, was born on the pages of *Naša Niva*.

The appearance of *Naša Niva* marked the end of a period in the history of Byelorussia which had begun at the close of the 18th century with the occupation of the whole country by Russia. In the eyes of the Russian tsarist government, Byelorussia was simply the north-west province of Russia, inhabited by people speaking a kind of Russian peasant dialect. Outward appearances often seemed to confirm this point of view, for the Byelorussian language at that time was in fact spoken mostly by peasants, whereas the Byelorussian nobility had in the cultural sense long since been polonised. Fortunately this polonisation was often only superficial. This was true particularly in the case of the lesser nobility, who lived in everyday contact with the peasants and felt a great deal of affinity and sympathy for them. It was from this class of the minor country gentry that the harbingers of the Byelorussian national revival were to arise. Such was Jan Čačot (1799-1847) — an amateur ethnographer and poet, who was the first to trace an outline of Byelorussian grammar and to compile a short Byelorussian-Polish vocabulary. His was a labour of love, made all the more difficult by a sense of hopelessness, because Čačot was very pessimistic indeed about the future of the Byelorussian language and people. In the preface to the last volume of his ethnographical collection, published one year before his death, he expressed the view that any person undertaking the task of writing a good grammar of the Byelorussian language, would earn the gratitude of posterity. But he continued thus: "... if we are glad to have the written remains of the Celtic and Herule languages, in the same way perhaps one day the monuments of the Kryvian dialect —

and I doubt whether it will ever become a literate and independent language, — will arouse a deep interest."¹

Čačot proved a poor prophet, for in the same year 1846 there appeared in Minsk a musical comedy called *Sialanka* (The Peasant Girl). Its author, Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievic, was a man of considerable literary talent, who made a valid contribution towards the development of Byelorussian literature, and may justly be called the founder of the modern Byelorussian theatre. His literary activities aroused a great deal of hostility on the part of the polonised nobility who accused him of fomenting "separatist" feeling among the peasants. Marcinkievič rebutted this accusation in a letter to the Polish writer I. Kraszewski in 1861, in which *inter alia* he says:

"Living among people speaking Byelorussian, deeply immersed in their way of thinking and dreaming about the better future of this brother nation . . . I decided to write in their own tongue in order to encourage them towards education in the spirit of their own customs and traditions and according to their abilities; with astonishment, I soon noticed that my works *Sialanka*, followed by *Hapon*, *Viečarnicy*, *Dudar*, *Kupała* etc., were favourably received by the people, and the young began avidly to learn to read, and learn by heart, my works which were so dear to them. As the result of this, the reading of Byelorussian works of literature is now spreading on the banks of the rivers Vilija and Nioman, on the Švislač, Biarezina, Džvina and Dniepr, whereas the awakened desire and zeal for spiritual life finds rich material in the native tongue . . . Can anyone wonder, that no Polish organ, in spite of efforts for almost a century, succeeded in moving this people? Could in fact any organ reach the ears and convince the peasant, for whom it was so difficult to master the Polish language and who, watering with his sweat the fields of his masters, had no time for intellectual pursuits? And when the sound of the mother tongue sometimes reached the eager ears of the poor man, it was usually a string of threats and abuse heaped on the head of the despised orphan."²

The activities of Dunin-Marcinkievič were a source of concern not only for the Poles, but also for the Russian officials who kept a close watch on him. When in 1859 he translated into Byelorussian Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, thereby showing that what had been considered a peasant dialect was in fact a fully developed language capable of reproducing even the greatest masterpieces of world literature, it was more than the authorities could tolerate, and they confiscated the work.

By that time many other people began to realise that the only way to the soul of the Byelorussian peasant lay through his native tongue. Many of them were professional politicians and revolutionaries of all shades of opinion who cared little for Byelorussians as such, and

¹) J. Czeczot, *Piosnki wleśniacze z nad Niemna i Dźwiny*, Vilna 1846, p. xxxiv. "Krivian dialect" (*narzecze krewickie*) is Czeczot's name for the Byelorussian language. It comes from the name of the old Slavonic tribe *Kryvičy* which inhabited the central and northern parts of Byelorussia.

²) B. I. Дунін-Марцінкевіч, *Збор твораў*, Minsk 1958, pp. 46-47.

only sought to win them over to their particular cause. But there also developed a steady growth of Byelorussian national consciousness and the beginning of a struggle for national independence. The young Byelorussian movement produced several outstanding figures, the greatest of which was Kaŭstus Kalinoŭski (1837-1864), leader of the anti-Russian armed insurrection of 1863-64 and, incidentally, editor of the first Byelorussian clandestine paper *Mužyckaja Praŭda* (The Peasant's Truth). Captured by Russians and sentenced to death by hanging, Kalinoŭski, on the eve of his execution, wrote a letter to his people, his ideological testament, which ended with the following words:

"Fight, my people, for your human and national rights, for your faith, for your native land. For I say to you from beneath the gallows, my people, that you will only then live happily, when no Muscovite remains over you."

This, and similar incidents, alarmed the Imperial Russian government so much, that in 1867 they promulgated a law forbidding any publication in the Byelorussian language. It was, however, too late; the Byelorussian national movement was gaining strength, greatly helped by the social changes brought about by the abolition of serfdom in 1861. It was after that date that the Byelorussian peasants, who constituted the bulk of the population, acquired certain political and civil rights, including the possibility of acquiring an education. Material poverty prevented the majority of peasants from enjoying their newly gained freedom to the full. As to education this usually did not go beyond the village school, followed possibly, for the more able and the more ambitious, by a four-year course in one of the newly opened teachers' colleges (or teachers' seminaries, as they were called) established for the purpose of training village teachers. The education in those schools and colleges was free, but it had drawbacks, as may be appreciated from the following description of a person who experienced them himself:

"A little Byelorussian boy goes to school. He frequents the school for, let us say, five or six years. Does he hear there his native tongue? No. What he hears is only mockery and abuse of his native language; sometimes he forgets himself, and from his mouth there would escape inadvertently a word of his own, a word to which he had been accustomed from his swaddling clothes and which he uses when he speaks to his mother and father, — and at once the teacher and other pupils begin to jeer at him ... Thus in the soul of the future Byelorussian intellectual is sown the hatred of his native language, customs and traditions. From the village school the Byelorussian boy goes further, let us say to the teachers' college. And there again everything is specially adapted to eradicate from the soul of a Byelorussian anything Byelorussian which by any chance may still remain there, to make out of him a submissive sheep, to brainwash him, in a word to transform him into a booby. After such a college education, the Byelorussian would utter sometimes inadvertently, in company, a

Byelorussian word, and at once he feels ashamed of himself. His face reddens to the tips of his ears."³

The fact that the author of these lines was none other but Jakub Kołas, one of the greatest Byelorussian poets, shows that Russians were not always successful in achieving their aims. In fact their russification policy often produced a completely opposite effect, and the list of eminent Byelorussians who were formerly students of Russian teachers' colleges makes impressive reading.⁴

Teachers in the village schools were expected to be the apostles of Russian patriotism. Since, in the eyes of Russian officialdom, Russian nationality was inseparable from the Orthodox faith, only sons of Orthodox peasants were admitted to the teachers' colleges. But there was also a new opening for Byelorussian Catholic peasant boys, at least for some of them, who now could enter the priests' seminaries hitherto completely dominated by Polish elements. Thus at the beginning of the 20th century there was already in existence a significant group of nationally conscious Byelorussian Catholic priests.

Although printing in Byelorussian was forbidden, there was some limited academic freedom, and many scholars — some of them Byelorussians by birth, — began to undertake researches and publish works on the Byelorussian language and literature (Karški), history (Doūnar-Zapolski, Lubaŭski, Łappo) and ethnography (Šejn, Ramanaŭ, Niki-faroŭski).

The effect of all those changes became noticeable at the end of the 19th century. The bulk of Byelorussian peasants still remained as they had been before, their greatest aim being "to be called human beings", as Janka Kupała wrote a few years later. However there was also a considerable and continuously growing group of nationally conscious Byelorussian intellectuals, drawn for the first time from all strata of society. Together with the "father of the Byelorussian national renaissance" Francišak Bahuševič (1840-1900) they declared: "Our language is as beautiful and as noble as any other language; it is holy, for it was given to us by God, as to other good people." Byelorussian books were printed abroad — in Poland, the Ukraine

³) Дзядзька Карусь, *Беларуская мова ў казённай школе, Наша Ніва* № 7, Віляна 1906.

⁴) Apart from Jakub Kołas, it is known that writers and poets such as Jazep Losik, Janka Žurba, Kandrat Lejka and M. Aroł were also teachers. There were no doubt many more, whose identity remains hidden under various pseudonyms and initials, hitherto undeciphered. The use of pseudonyms was necessary, because teachers were forbidden to read *Naša Niva*, let alone to write in it. Jadvihin Š. in his *Listy z darohi* (Letters from the road) gives the following impression of his meeting with some village teachers in the village of Ščorsy in central Byelorussia: "The young people show a great desire to study, but it is well known what kind of education they get: they are taught to read and to write, and then — go, drown yourself if you wish... Some of them consider themselves lucky if they succeed in becoming village teachers. I made acquaintance with some of them here, and I must admit that at first they looked at me askance. However we started to talk, and soon they had thrown away their restraint. I learned then that if you can rub off the patina, with which the director of the teachers' college in Maładečna covers his students, then underneath you may be sure to find a good and genuine Byelorussian." (Ядвін Ш., *Лісты з дарогі, Наша Ніва*, № 33, 1910.

and even England, — and smuggled into the country. Other books were printed illegally in Byelorussia, and even legally — by misleading censors into thinking that the language used was not Byelorussian but Bulgarian. Byelorussian organisations began to spring up, particularly among students in the various universities of the Russian empire. The most important of these student circles flourished in St. Petersburg, and was headed by Branislaŭ Epimach-Šypiła (1859-1934), deputy chief librarian at the Petersburg university and professor of Classics at the Catholic Academy. In 1902 the first Byelorussian political party was formed which, after a few initial changes, finally adopted the name of *Bielaruskaja Sacyjalistyčnaja Hramada* (Byelorussian Socialist Union). Its national character from the very beginning distinguished this party from other political parties, which were then active on the territory of Byelorussia, but which were indifferent and often openly hostile to the national aspirations of the Byelorussian people.

The first Russian Revolution of 1905 brought about a certain relaxation of Russian policy with regard to the non-Russian peoples of their empire. In particular the ban on printing in Byelorussian was lifted. Soon afterwards, on the 1st September 1906 there appeared in Vilna the first legal Byelorussian paper *Naša Dola* (Our Fate). It was the organ of the Byelorussian Socialist *Hramada* and its radical character soon attracted the displeasure of the Russian authorities. The next five numbers of *Naša Dola* were confiscated, after which the paper itself ceased publication. But even before this, on the 23rd November 1906, there began to appear also in Vilna another paper, *Naša Niva* (Our Cornfield). The people who founded the new paper were the same as those who had been publishing *Naša Dola*, and thus *Naša Niva* may also be regarded as the organ of the *Hramada*. The difference between the two publications was however evident at first sight. Whereas *Naša Dola* bore the subtitle "The first Byelorussian paper for working people in village and town", *Naša Niva* was described simply as "The first Byelorussian paper with illustrations." Moreover, the aims of the new publication were explained thus in its first editorial: "Think not that we wish to serve only the gentry, or only the peasants. No, never! We want to be the servants of the whole long-suffering Byelorussian nation; we wish to become a mirror of life, so that from us, as from a mirror, light may be reflected into darkness . . . We shall strive to make all Byelorussians — who do not know who they are, — understand that they are Byelorussians and human beings, that they should learn their rights and help us in our work."

It was this avoidance of extreme political views, coupled with a clearly marked national character, that made *Naša Niva* so popular among all classes of Byelorussians, and enabled it to become the unifying factor within the Byelorussian national movement. Moreover, thanks to its moderation in the field of politics, *Naša Niva* managed to survive for nine years and avoid the fate of its predecessor at the hands of the Russian authorities.

Among the founders of *Naša Niva* one should mention in the first place Alaksiej Ułasau and the Łuckievič brothers. Ułasau, a wealthy landowner and an economist by education, held for many years the post of chief editor of the paper. Ivan Łuckievič (1881-1919) was the moving spirit behind the scenes, whose work and example inspired the others. He was a qualified archaeologist, and his name will for all time be associated with the Byelorussian Museum in Vilna founded by him. His brother Anton Łuckievič was active in political life and, under the pseudonym of Anton Navina, became one of the first outstanding Byelorussian literary critics.

Byelorussia has always been a predominantly agricultural country and at the beginning of the 20th century nearly 80% of its population were peasants. This fact could not be ignored by any paper claiming to be a Byelorussian national organ. And indeed *Naša Niva*, especially during the first years of its existence, gave over much of its space to topics of particular interest to its village readers. There were farming hints, articles about cooperatives, credit banks, the life of farmers in other countries and, of course, numerous reports on the life of Byelorussian villages. Small wonder that the Byelorussian peasants began to consider *Naša Niva* as their paper. Anton Łuckievič, writing in 1912, had this to say on the subject:

"... Thus *Naša Niva* has gradually become a kind of mirror in which the Byelorussian national movement is reflected. From the most distant and forgotten corners of Byelorussia, wherever the paper — or at least news of it, — managed to find its way, there began to arrive at the editorial office contributions, written by the horny hand of a peasant, or a small-town tradesman, sometimes a village teacher and others. According to the calculations of its editors, during the first three years of its existence *Naša Niva* published 950 contributions from 489 Byelorussian villages and townships, and during the fourth year — 489 contributions from 321 localities. It must be added that the contributors, who for the most part are peasants, receive not a penny to cover their expenses and postage. They consider the paper to be their own. And in this they are right: having become the spokesman not of the editorial board alone, but of all nationally conscious and thinking simple people, *Naša Niva* is the property of the whole Byelorussian nation."⁵

Maksim Bahdanovic echoed these thoughts when he wrote in 1914:

"For many thousands of people it (i. e. *Naša Niva* — *A. N.*) was the first newspaper ever read by them, the first source of information written in a simple and intelligible language free from the stamp of officialdom. The Byelorussian peasant had begun to get used to the idea that he was the scum of the earth and his language — the language of the gutter; and *Naša Niva* addressed him in precisely this language in print, thus kindling in him a feeling of respect towards his native tongue and raising his self-esteem and giving birth to the con-

⁵) А. Навіна, *На дарозе новага жыцця, Маладая Беларусь*, Сэрыя I, сшытак I. St. Petersburg 1912, p. 23.

sciousness of his own human dignity."⁶

Many contributors, emboldened by the sight of their names in print, grew more ambitious and began to send their first poems and short stories. *Naša Niva* tried to encourage the literary activities of its readers by showing a keen interest in, and giving advice to budding authors. But a great deal of hard work was also done by members of the editorial staff. Later Janka Kupała recalled his work in the paper thus:

"During my work in *Naša Niva* my chief duty was to correct the masses of often incorrigible poems sent to the papers. Only in the works of Jakub Kołas was there nothing to correct; poems by Bahdanovič, Biadula, Ciotka, Kanstancyja Bujła, Hurło, Żurba needed some minor corrections . . . One sweated a lot over the works of other authors, and, as it subsequently turned out, to no avail. . ."⁷

It was in this way, however, that a new Byelorussian literature was born. During its first three years *Naša Niva* published altogether 246 poems by 61 poets and 91 short stories by 36 authors.⁸

Before the appearance of *Naša Niva* Byelorussians were not without their writers. One of them was Karuś Kahaniec (pseudonym of Kazimir Kastravicki (1868-1918), related to the French poet Guillaume Appollinaire), a poet, short story writer and playwright. Born in Siberia where his father had been deported for taking part in the anti-Russian insurrection of 1863, he returned to Byelorussia and became active in the Byelorussian national movement, for which he was twice sentenced to a term of imprisonment. Kahaniec was one of the founders of the Byelorussian Socialist *Hramada*. He began to write in 1893. Later his works began to appear in *Naša Niva*. He was best known however as the author of the comedy *Modny Ślachciuk* (A Fashionable Squire) written by him in 1910, which at once gained considerable popularity with Byelorussian audiences. Another writer

⁶) М. Богданович, *Білоруське відродження*. Vienna 1916, p. 19.

(This is an Ukrainian version of the Russian article of the same title written by Bahdanovič in 1914, but which was not available for consultation).

The following letter of Zmitrok Biadula to *Naša Niva* is a good illustration of the effect on peasants of a first contact with that paper:

"Last Sunday I read *Naša Niva* to some of the local peasants. They were dumbfounded with wonder, and at once the voices could be heard from all sides: 'O-o-o! It is in our language, as my soul is dear to me, it is in our language!'. To tell the truth they have never dreamt of hearing the printed word in a language intelligible to them, the language of their fathers and grandfathers . . . Something gripped my heart as with tongs, when I looked at those illiterate, hardened, lean sons of Byelorussia, with their horny hands. What could they have been, if they had had the opportunity to acquire learning, if their native culture had not been so neglected? — I thought. Then I began to read again, and again the exclamations followed: 'They write all the time about us! What kind of people are these?'.

It just shows you, brothers, what the native language means and what force the printed word has in that language. Try, Byelorussians, to light the torch of learning, and to enlighten our darkness, our miserable life. Let us hope that our people will wake up one day and become acquainted with their own riches and their hidden talents." (*Naša Niva*, No. 32, 1910).

⁷) Я. Купала, *3 аўтабіяграфічных пісьмаў*. Любімы паэт беларускага народа. Minsk 1960, p. 10.

⁸) *Да чытачоў*. *Наша Ніва* № 27, 1910.

was Jadvihin Š. (pseudonym of Anton Lavicki, 1868-1922) who can be considered as one of the founders of *Naša Niva*, on which he served for many years as literary editor. He was a former pupil at a school conducted by the daughter of Vincent Dunin-Marcinkievič; later he studied at Moscow University where he joined the Byelorussian student circle and from whence he was expelled for taking part in revolutionary activities. Jadvihin Š. began to write in 1891 and became known in Byelorussian literature as a talented short story writer.⁹ The first work of Ciotka (pseudonym of Aloiza Paškievič, 1879-1916) was printed in a collection of Byelorussian poetry entitled *Pieśni* (Songs) published in London in 1903. Later her poems appeared regularly in *Naša Dola* (beginning with the first number) and *Naša Niva*. After 1905 Ciotka was compelled to flee to the "Ukraine to escape from persecution by the Russian police, and she did not return to Byelorussia until 1911. Two years later, in 1913, she founded the first Byelorussian journal for children, *Łučynka* (The Torch).

Soon after the publication of the first number of *Nasa Niva* new names began to appear on its pages. Among these was that of Albert Paulovic (1875-1952), a minor civil servant from Minsk, whose humorous poems became well known and loved throughout Byelorussia. A little later we find the name of Sary Ułas (pseudonym of Uładysłaŭ Sivy-Sivicki, 1865-1939), a forester on the estates of count Tyškievič in western Byelorussia, who wrote charming lyrical poems full of folklore about the everyday life of the Byelorussian peasant.¹⁰ In 1908 Uładysłaŭ Hałubok (1882-1937), a poet, short story writer and, later, playwright and theatre director, made his literary debut in *Naša Niva*. He and his father were both railway workers. However

⁹) One of the most interesting — and least known — works of Jadvihin Š. is his *Listy z darohi* (Letters from the Road) which is a sketchbook of his travels on foot through Byelorussia, which he undertook in the summer of 1910. It was published in a serialised form in *Naša Niva* starting from No. 23-24, 1910 (10th June) and continuing through the subsequent 15 issues.

An extract from the work, describing the author's encounter with a blacksmith in the village of Svajaciški in western Byelorussia, is a good illustration of the popularity of *Naša Niva* among Byelorussian peasants:

"I enter the courtyard. The house is new and the barn is being built; it is surrounded by a small orchard. I meet the host near the smithy. 'Where are you from?', he asks. 'From Vilna', I answer. 'Not from *Naša Niva* by chance?'. I look at him with eyes wide open: how did he guess?. 'Well, who else would visit us, poor people as we are, if not from *Naša Niva*!'; he begins to talk: 'Thank you for coming. Sit down, let us talk a little, although there is not much time: I have hired men to build the barn, now I must watch and help.' Our conversation went on smoothly, like water, as if we were good old acquaintances. And no wonder: he was an intelligent man, read the papers, and knew what was happening in the world." (Ядвігін Ш., *Лісты з дарогі, Наша Ніва*, № 26, 1910.

¹⁰) Sary Ułas lived in Vałożyn, and Jadvihin Š. mentions him (not by name) in his *Listy z darohi*, when he talks about his visit to that town:

"I made acquaintance with a local group of Byelorussians; they are not numerous, it is true, but very active, and, if they are careful, they can do much... It is a pity, a great pity that I was unable to know them better, to spend at least one evening with them in talk; however one of them is well known to me from his letters and works, which he sends to the editorial office, and I can only say this: may *Naša Niva* have more like him...". (Ядвігін Ш., *Лісты з дарогі, Наша Ніва* № 38, 1910.

he was not the only, nor even the first, member of the relatively small Byelorussian working class to take part in the Byelorussian national movement. This honour went to a young carpenter from Minsk Aleš Harun (pseudonym of Alaksandar Prušynski, 1887-1920) who became conscious of his Byelorussian origin through reading a book by Dunin-Marcinkievič which he chanced to obtain. His first poem appeared in *Naša Niva* in 1907. Towards the end of that year he was arrested by the Russian authorities for revolutionary activities and sentenced to a term of hard labour. This sentence was later commuted to deportation to Siberia, from whence Harun did not return till 1917. From Siberia he continued to send contributions to *Naša Niva*, full of love and longing for his native country. Maksim Bahdanovič spoke highly of Harun's "light, melodious and carefully chiselled verse . . . conciseness of language." In Siberia Harun made the acquaintance of another Byelorussian political deportee whose works appeared in *Naša Niva* — Jazep Losik, the uncle of Jakub Kołas.¹¹

In the first number of *Naša Dola* there appeared a poem called *Naš Rodny Kraj* (Our Native Land), the first stanzas of which are as follows:

Our poor land, our dear land,
Forests, marshes, sands,
Only here and there a small meadow . . .
Pine trees, moss and heather.
And the mist, like a cover,
Spreads over the forest and grove.
O, you poor country,
O, you God-forsaken land!

The sad hopeless picture is an old theme, borrowed from the 19th century poets, shedding tears over the fate of their native land. The poem was signed by one Jakub Kołas, a name which meant nothing then, but which soon was to become a household word. It was in fact the first work published by the young poet, and there was barely anyone who could foresee in him the future author of the immortal *Novaja Ziamla* (The New Land).

The real name of Jakub Kołas (1882-1956) was Kastuś Mickievič.¹² He was the son of a forest-warden. In 1902 he graduated from the teachers' college in Niašviž and became a village schoolmaster. In 1906 Kołas took part in a clandestine meeting of Byelorussian teachers, for which he was dismissed from his post and later sentenced to three years' imprisonment (from 1908 until 1911). In the spring of 1907, whilst unemployed and waiting for his case to be heard in court, he went to Vilna and worked for a short time on the editorial

¹¹) In 1912 a group of Byelorussian political deportees from Siberia sent a letter to *Naša Niva*, congratulating that paper on its sixth anniversary. The letter was signed by J. Losik, A. Prušynski (i. e. Aleš Harun — *A. N.*), A. Kapušcin, A. Tołpinski and J. Ušcinovič. *Новаа Ніва*, № 46, 1912).

Aleš Harun used also the pseudonym I. Žyvica, with which he signed his prose works.

¹²) Jakub Kołas wrote also under the pseudonyms of Taras Hušča, Dziadzka Karuś, K. Nadniomaniec and others.

staff of *Naša Niva*. He was, however, expelled from Vilna by the Russian police. Kołas began to write whilst he was still a student at the teachers' college, but his works remained in manuscript till 1906 when his poem appeared in *Naša Dola*. Thenceforth he became a regular contributor to *Naša Dola*, and later to *Nasa Niva*. One can trace, through the pages of *Naša Niva*, the growth of Kołas' literary talent, for he published in that paper a total of 31 short stories and 126 poems, including the first chapters of his epic *Novaja Ziamla*. Kołas himself acknowledges his indebtedness to *Naša Niva* in his autobiography written in 1927: "The appearance of the first Byelorussian papers *Naša Dola* and *Naša Niva* and my acquaintance with Ułasū and Byelorussian newspaper workers marked a sharp turning point in my life, and I thenceforth dedicated myself entirely to the Byelorussian cause and Byelorussian literature."¹³

Jakub Kołas died in 1956, widely acclaimed as the greatest Byelorussian poet and writer. The only other poet who equalled, if not surpassed him in fame and talent, was Janka Kupała (1882-1942). However whereas the talent of Kołas was preeminently epic, Kupała took upon himself the role of the "Prophet of the Byelorussian renaissance" whose task it was to interpret the prevailing mood and aspirations of the Byelorussian people. His real name was Ivan Łucevič and his father was a tenant-farmer. Kupała's formal education ended with the primary school; thereafter he was obliged to help his father on the farm and, when the father died, to look after his widowed mother and sisters. He even worked for three years as a labourer in a brewery. About the year 1904 Kupała had the good fortune to strike up an acquaintance with Jadvihin Š. who introduced him to the works of the 19th century Byelorussian writers. Kupała's first printed work was his poem *Mužyk* (The Peasant) which appeared in a Russian liberal paper in Minsk — *Severo-Zapadnyj kraj*, — on the 15th May 1905. The poem *Mužyk*, both by its theme and the repetition of the words "For I am a peasant, a foolish peasant", recalls an early poem by Bahuševič *Durny Mužyk, jak Varona* (The Peasant is Foolish, like a Crow). There is however a defiant note in the two final stanzas:

But for as long as I shall live,
No matter how long my life-span is,
I never shall forget, my brothers,
That, though a peasant, I am a human being.

And everyone who cares to ask me
Will always hear from me this cry:
Although everyone despises me,
I shall live, because I am a peasant!

After this debut Kupała published nothing for two years until May 1907, when his poem *Kascu* (To the Haymaker) appeared in *Naša*

¹³) Якуб Колас, *Аўтабіяграфія. Якуб Колас: у літаратуры і крытыцы*, Minsk 1927, p. 10.

Niva. It marked the real beginning of his literary career and of the close cooperation with the paper in which he published some 150 of his works. In the year 1908 Kupala gave up his work in the brewery and, at the invitation of the editor of *Naša Niva*, came to Vilna where he worked on the editorial staff of the paper, and also in a library. In 1909 he went to St. Petersburg where he lived for 4 years with Professor B. Epimach-Šypiła, and was given the opportunity to broaden his education. On his return to Vilna in 1913 Kupala again worked in *Naša Niva*, of which he ultimately (in February 1914) became the chief editor. In his autobiographical notes he recalls his work in that paper in the following terms:

"What role did I play in *Naša Niva*? I had to do everything: correct the manuscripts, especially poems, read the proofs, help in posting the paper and so on; one had to do all this because the editorial staff was very limited. That was in the years 1908-1909. During the years 1913-1915 (until the evacuation of Vilna) I was already the responsible and *de facto* editor of *Naša Niva*. Once again there was a lot to do. The editorial staff consisted of myself and Biadula. It was our duty to write articles, read the proofs and edit the paper. Of course we also received material from various places. I have no strength to remember all details of my work in *Naša Niva*, because for that I would need to write a volume of memoirs."¹⁴

The powerful talent of Janka Kupala was recognised from the start. The literary critics were unanimous in their praise. Maksim Bahdanovič in his survey of the progress of Byelorussian literature, published in *Naša Niva* in 1911, wrote: "As in the year 1909, Janka Kupala attracts the most attention, not only because of the greatness of his talent, but also because of his elasticity and aptitude for multi-lateral development. He is perhaps the only one of our poets who goes forward, continues to perfect himself and, having already achieved a great deal, has not ceased in his progress until the present day."¹⁵ A little further Bahdanovič speaks with appreciation of the bold and rhythmic quality of Kupala's poems and of his rich vocabulary, the like of which was not to be found in any other contemporary writer. At the same time, he warns the poet against the danger of being carried away by rhythm at the expense of intelligibility. It was a timely warning and one would like to think that Kupala took it to heart in his later work.

Maksim Bahdanovič (1891-1917) appeared on the Byelorussian literary scene in 1907 with the publication in *Naša Niva* of his short story *Muzyka* (The Musician). He occupies a unique position in Byelorussian literature. Although born in Byelorussia, after the age of 5 he lived in central Russia (Nizhnij Novgorod), where his father, a bank employee, had been transferred. The only link with his native country was Maksim's aunt Magdalena (his mother died when he was a small child) who was deeply attached to Byelorussian folk-customs and traditions, and the rich library of his father Adam Bahdanovič,

¹⁴) Я. Купала *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵) М. Багданович, *Глыбы і слаі*, «Наша Ніва» № 3, 1911.

a keen amateur ethnographer and author of an interesting work on the vestiges of ancient beliefs among Byelorussians. Later Adam Bahdanovič wrote thus of his son's early interest in the Byelorussian language and literature: "It all started with the reading of Byelorussian fairy-tales, which initially I used to read to the children aloud, and which Maksim later began to read on his own. He saw in them a means of learning the Byelorussian language, which he was prevented from doing by what he heard either within his own family or from other people (the language in the family was Russian — *A. N.*). This was his own, completely independent decision... I did not encourage him in this pursuit, although, of course, did not prevent him from doing so. He made his first attempts to write in Byelorussian at a very early age, when he was 10 or 11 years old, for he showed his works to his godmother Olga Jepifanovna Sjomova when she came on a visit to Nizhnij Novgorod, and that was, if I remember aright, in 1901. From that time they corresponded frequently and... she subscribed on his behalf to *Naša Dola* and later to *Naša Niva*."¹⁶

Bahdanovic spent the summer vacation of 1911 in Byelorussia, where he came at the invitation of *Naša Niva*. He lived for one month in Vilna with the then secretary Vaclaū Ľastoūski, and spent the rest of the time on the estate of Ľuckievič brothers in the Vilejka district.¹⁷ This personal acquaintance with his native country and with the leaders of the Byelorussian national movement made a great impression on Bahdanovič and influenced his subsequent work. In particular his cycle of poems *Staraja Bielaruś* (Ancient Byelorussia) was inspired by his visit to Vilna and by Ivan Ľuckievič's collection of Byelorussian antiquities.

The literary heritage of Bahdanovič is very modest in quantity. It is practically all contained in a volume called *Vianok* (The Wreath) which was published in Vilna in 1913 and consisted of poems, most of which had previously appeared in *Naša Niva*. It is nevertheless a very precious legacy on account of its quality. Bahdanovič, unlike many other Byelorussian writers of that time, had had a good general education. He spoke several languages, and was acquainted with the best works of world literature. The aim which he consciously had before him was to show that no poetical form of expression was alien to the Byelorussian language. To do this he introduced into Byelorussian poetry new and hitherto unknown verse-forms (sonnets, rondeaux, triolets etc.). It is a measure of Bahdanovič's talent, as well as his determination, that he succeeded so well in his aim over so short a space of time. One cannot refrain from admiring this man who achieved greatness as a Byelorussian poet by the sheer strength of his will in the face of seemingly unsurmountable difficulties.

¹⁶) А. Богданович, «Материалы к биографии Максима Адамовича Богдановича». *Беларуская Літаратура, даследванні і матар'ялы* № III, Minsk 1960, p. 205.

¹⁷) In the editor's note to the article by A. Bahdanovič (Cf. Note 16) it is mistakenly stated that the secretary of *Naša Niva* at that time was Zmitrok Biadula (op cit., p. 211). In fact it was not him, but Vaclaū Ľastoūski. Biadula did not come to Vilna till 1912, one year after Bahdanovič's visit.

Nothing came easily to Bahdanovič, least of all his native Byelorussian language, which he mastered entirely by himself. And all this he achieved despite an illness which brought about his premature death at the age of 26.

Bahdanovič was also an outstanding literary critic. Very exacting with regard to himself, he was also severe with others, especially with those in whom he sensed great talent. In his eagerness to create a new Byelorussian literature which would not be inferior to the literature of any other modern nation, nothing but the best could satisfy him.

By the year 1909-1910 the pioneering work of a few dedicated men began to bear fruit. New talents emerged which had come into contact with the Byelorussian national movement through the medium of *Naša Niva*. One of the youngest of those new arrivals was Kanstancyja Bujła (born 1898), the daughter of a forester, whose first poem was printed in *Naša Niva* when she was 11 years old. Speaking of this in her autobiography she writes:

"All of us — Stasia, myself, Eddie, Ina and Vicia (my sisters and brothers), — were very fond of reading. Father, having noticed this, tried to get books for us . . . Once he brought the Byelorussian paper *Naša Niva*. There were poems by Jakub Kołas and Janka Kupała. We liked them very much. I remember that we read them over and over again. And thus the idea was born in our heads to try to write our own poems. This was in 1909. I wrote a poem *Les* (The Forest). It was a short simple poem . . . Eddie suggested that I should send the poem to *Naša Niva*. But I . . . said that I was afraid to send it. Then Eddie took the matter into his own hands and posted the poem, having signed it 'E. Bujła.' You may imagine our surprise, when *Naša Niva* arrived with the poem in it. Thereafter I wrote a few more poems, which were printed in the newspaper, and the editors began to send the paper to us regularly."¹⁸

Later Bujła went to Vilna to study, and became closely connected with *Naša Niva*. She writes with warm feelings of that period of her life, about *Naša Niva* and persons connected with that paper. She particularly remembers Zmitrok Biadula and Janka Kupała who personally undertook to edit her book of poems *Kurhannaja Kvietka* (The Burial Mound Flower). Kanstancyja Bujła, who is still active in Byelorussian literature, is the author of one of the most popular Byelorussian songs *Lublu naš Kraj* (I love our Land).

Another noteworthy new writer was Ciška Hartny (pseudonym of Zmitro Žyŭnovič, 1887-1937). He was a tanner by trade, and therefore belonged to the working class. He was also a member of the Russian Socialist Democratic Workers Party — later to become the Communist Party, — which he joined as early as 1906. So far as is known he was the only Byelorussian communist of any significance. In 1919 Hartny became the first Prime Minister of the Byelorussian

¹⁸ Канстанцыя Буйла, *Па пройдзенаму шляху. Пяцьдзесят чатыры да-рогі (аўтабіяграфія беларускіх пісьменнікаў)*, Minsk 1963, pp. 73-74.

Soviet Republic and later occupied various important posts until he was finally liquidated by his comrades in 1937.

Hartny began writing in Russian. However, as he later admitted in his autobiography, "there was something which did not satisfy me. I was not satisfied until by chance in 1908 I happened to obtain a copy of *Naša Niva*. A newspaper in my native language was for me a revelation. The poems read awakened in me an urge to write in Byelorussian. I sat and wrote my first poem, which in January 1909 was printed under the title *Biazdolny* (The Ill-fated One), and I dedicated it to Janka Kupała . . . But writing alone did not satisfy me: I was captivated by the idea of the Byelorussian renaissance. In the year 1909, in the month of July, I went to Vilna, to the editorial office of *Naša Niva*, to see those men who stood at the head of the Byelorussian movement."¹⁹

Hartny left a considerable mark on Byelorussian literature, both as a poet, and as the author of many short stories and of the first substantial Byelorussian novel *Soki Čaliny* (The Saps of the Virgin Soil). He was a sincere and ardent patriot, but no less sincerely did he believe in the justice of the political system he helped to establish, and which brought in its train tragic consequences both for himself and for many thousands of other sincere and patriotic Byelorussians. It says something for the broadmindedness of the editors of *Naša Niva*, who did not hesitate to publish in their paper the works of this rising scion of the Communist party, along with the poems of the Catholic priest Andrej Ziaziula (pseudonym of Father Alaksandar Astramovič, 1878-1921).

The most remarkable member of the second generation of *Naša Niva* writers was undoubtedly Zmitrok Biadula (pseudonym of Samuel Płaunik, 1886-1941).²⁰ Born of Jewish parents in the township of Pasadziec in central Byelorussia, he spoke Yiddish and Byelorussian from early childhood with equal facility and came to consider the Byelorussian language as his second mother tongue. Biadula acquired his primary education in a Talmud school, from whence he was expelled for writing poetry in Hebrew — an activity considered as frivolous and unbecoming for a future rabbi. He was introduced to Byelorussian literature and *Naša Niva* in 1908 by another Jew, Vulf Sosienski, who also encouraged his friend to write in Byelorussian.²¹ Biadula's first Byelorussian work *Piajuć Načležniki* (The

¹⁹) Цішка Гартны, *Абеглы самарыс майго жыцця. Пяцьдзесят чатыры дарозі...* p. 135.

The autobiography printed in this collection was written by Hartny in 1923.
²⁰) Another pseudonym used sometimes by Biadula, especially in his early poetical works, was Jasakar ("The Black Poplar").

²¹) Vulf Sosienski has written the following interesting account of his first meeting with Biadula:

"An interest in the printed word brought me into contact with the newspaper *Naša Niva*. I began to send in my contributions. Once, when I had shown a copy of that paper with my letter printed in it to Mera Gordon, a grammar school girl I knew... I learned from her that she knew here, in our parts, a boy who could write beautiful poems. Mera promised to introduce me to that boy:

Nightwatchmen are singing), which may be called a poem in prose, was printed in *Naša Niva* in 1910. At that time the author was himself working with his father in the forest as a lumberjack. During the following two years he became an assiduous correspondent of *Naša Niva*. Then, in 1912, at the invitation of the paper's editors, he came to Vilna and was offered a post on the editorial staff. Of this event Biadula writes: "My first short story, *Malitva Maloha Habrusika* (The Prayer of Little Habrusik) was published in *Naša Niva* in 1912. Soon afterwards a great event occurred in my life: the editors of *Naša Niva* invited me to Vilna and offered a permanent post with the paper. I, of course, agreed at once... My real school of self-education began in Vilna among my friends the fellow-workers of *Naša Niva*, with whom I have maintained the most friendly relations up to the present day."²²

In the person of Zmitrok Biadula, Byelorussian literature gained another highly talented and original writer equal in rank to Kupała, Kolas and Bahdanovic. His poetry, no less than that of Kupała, is distinguished by its vigorous rhythm and by the striking richness of its vocabulary. Even his prose has a poetic, musical quality, and many of his shorter prose pieces may be justly called poems in prose. Biadula also showed himself to be a master of the short story. Together with Kolas he must be considered the originator of modern Byelorussian literary prose. There is, however, a significant difference between the two writers. Whereas Kolas usually draws realistic, often amusing,

— He will come to see you with great pleasure. You will see what kind of a boy this Plaūnik is.

Thus in summer 1907 I heard for the first time about Biadula. Five or six weeks passed since my conversation with Mera, before we met.

... The weather outside is beautiful. However I have no time to admire it. Mine is the lot of a tailor. I sew and sing. My brothers sing. My father sings. My voice is more resounding than anybody else's. In the street people begin to gather and listen to our 'concert.'

Suddenly the door opens. Plaūnik comes in. Under his arm he holds a parcel wrapped in a paper and tied with yellow string. His father follows after him. They have come to order a suit. While our fathers settle the details of the order, I strike up a conversation with young Plaūnik. I tell him about the newspaper to which I send my contributions, and also that Mera is full of his praise.

Plaūnik begins to talk timidly and quietly. He is so delicate, he blinks his eyes, as if he were afraid of something, and feels uneasy.

— Can you show me your newspapers? — he asks. — Mera says they are very good.

I quickly threw over my work and began to show him the newspapers. A few copies of *Naša Niva* I gave him as a present.

Plaūnik thanked me warmly...". (В. Сосеню, *Першыя сустрэчы. Літаратура і мастацтва*, № 36, Minsk 1961, p. 3).

Later Sosienski wrote to *Naša Niva* about his new friend and the editor published the following reply: "If your poet can write Byelorussian verses, let him send them to us, and, if they are good, we shall publish them." (*Наша Ніва*, № 12, 1910).

The above sheds an interesting light on the question — hitherto completely unexplored, — of the participation of Jews in the Byelorussian national movement.

²²) Змітрок Бядуля, *Аўтабіяграфія. Пяцьдзесят чатыры дарогі*, p. 82. The autobiography was written in 1928.

sketches from life, Biadula always detects some unexpected meaning in seemingly ordinary banal things, thus giving to his writings an impressionistic quality. Stories like *Piać Łyżak Zacirki* (Five Spoonfuls of Soup), *Homa Ŭdavy Symonichi* (The Misery of Simon's Widow), *Letapiscy* (The Chroniclers), *Małyja Dryvasieki* (The Little Lumberjacks) — all published in *Naša Niva*, — are masterpieces which have rarely been surpassed to the present day.

In talking of Byelorussian prose it is impossible not to mention the name of Maksim Harecki (1893-1939) who was later to enrich Byelorussian literature with several outstanding novels, and to write the first History of Byelorussian Literature. He began to read *Naša Niva* as a student at the agricultural college of Horki, from which he graduated in 1913. In 1912 Harecki began to contribute to *Naša Niva*, and in 1913 several of his stories appeared in that paper. The most important of these was *Rodnyja Karani* (Native Roots) which raised the crucial problem of the first-generation Byelorussian intelligentsia and its links with the peasant milieu from whence it came. In 1914 Harecki, then only 21 years old, was already considered one of the better-known Byelorussian writers.

The list of new writers who began to publish their works in *Naša Niva* after 1909-1910 does not end here. One can easily add to it the names of such well known poets as Janka Źurba (pseudonym of Ivan Ivašin, 1881-1964), Aleš Hurlo (1892-1938), F. Čarnyševič (translator of Ševčenko's poem *Katerina*) and, slightly less known, M. Aroł. The prose was enriched by the fine short stories of Kandrat Lejka who succeeded in creating a well-drawn gallery of Byelorussian characters. Finally there was Miečysłaŭ Babrovič (b. 1891, killed during the war, in 1915), a talented writer who under the pseudonyms of Barys Zajac and Lavon Hmyrak published in *Naša Niva* a series of stories and critical articles. One can continue the list further.²³

A young literary critic S. Jasienovič wrote in *Naša Niva* in 1910:

"Byelorussian literature had ... a long period of trials and beginnings, but only three or four years of real life ... There were no writers. And if there lived somewhere one or two, they wrote their works quietly and published something from time to time (and the thing was usually of no great value) and had no links whatever with their readers. Perhaps that is why not one of them could become a real writer of his time, for such a one can grow only on one kind of

²³) The effect of the pioneering work of *Naša Niva* can be appreciated from the following extract from the letter of Janka Źurba, written by him in 1910 on the occasion of the 4th anniversary of that paper:

"... There was a time — a few years ago, — when I thought that *Naša Niva*, Byelorussian literature and the Byelorussian movement where little more than unrealistic wishful thinking. However, I became interested and began to ponder over it till at last after a few years I saw clearly that the cause was not dead, but alive, and that it was only necessary to start working more actively towards its realisation... I firmly believe that Byelorussia will see better and brighter days in its difficult life." (Гамма Нива, № 49, 1910).

Janka Źurba, a professional teacher, was not the only one who had second thoughts about the Byelorussian national movement and brought a valid contribution to it.

soil. That soil is the readers. There must exist an unbroken unity and living connection between a writer and his people."²⁴

Making allowances for certain overstatements, this passage sums up correctly the situation in Byelorussian literature prior to the publication of *Naša Niva*. The appearance of that paper provided at last a much needed forum, through which writers could acquaint themselves with the works of other writers and become better known to the general reading public. This had a beneficial effect on the general development and raising of standards of Byelorussian literature, and compelled the authors to be more critical and exacting in respect of their own work. It was no longer sufficient merely to write something, vaguely expressing a love for one's native land: it had to be well written. This point was aptly expressed by the editor in answer to one of the readers' letters: "Everyone can write verse these days. What we need is poetry." On the other hand young authors received valuable help from literary critics who wrote in *Naša Niva*. Men like Alhierd Bulba, Anton Navina, Maksim Bahdanovič, S. Jasienovič, Lavon Hmyrak and others made a valid contribution towards raising the general tone of Byelorussian literature and cultivating new talents.

Maksim Bahdanovič, in his analysis of the characteristics of the early poetry of Janka Kupała, said that the latter wrote initially "Buračok-wise." Maciej Buračok was the pseudonym of the "Father of the Byelorussian national renaissance" Francišak Bahuševič (1840-1900) who in his poem *Maja Dudka* (My Flute) asked his flute to

"Weep in tearful tone
Over the agony of the people."

This "tearful" brooding over the fate of the nation was a characteristic trait of the late 19th century Byelorussian poetry, and it continued well into the first years of the *Naša Niva* period. This was perhaps only to be expected, because the men who were then beginning to write had been brought up at a time of national and social oppression. The new generation, however, which became active about the year 1910 revolted against this constant public self-humiliation. Instead of weeping they wanted to be proud of being Byelorussians, of the history of their country, its culture, customs and traditions. One of the chief exponents of this new trend was Vaclaŭ Łastoŭski (b. 1883; arrested in 1930, after which his fate is unknown). He was a man of great ability and amazing energy. After receiving only an elementary schooling, he acquired an extensive knowledge through self-education, although his lack of systematic training is evident in all his subsequent activities. Like many other eminent Byelorussians of this period, he was closely connected with *Naša Niva*, where for some years he held the post of secretary. Łastoŭski's literary output

²⁴) С. Ясеновіч, *Беларуская Літаратура за 1909 год*, Наша Ніва, № 7, 1910.

S. Jasienovič was the pseudonym of a young and talented writer and critic Siarhiej Palujan who died tragically in 1910 at the age of 20. It was he who 'discovered' Maksim Bahdanovič, whose work was initially not properly understood by the editors of *Naša Niva*.

was limited to a few short stories, which were however highly appreciated by Maksim Bahdanovič for their literary qualities. Significantly enough, the themes of most of them were taken from the legendary past of Byelorussia. His most important work, however, was his *Karotkaja Historyja Bielarusi* (A Short History of Byelorussia) first published in serialised form in *Naša Niva* and then issued as a separate book in 1910. It was not a scholarly work, but as a first popular book on this subject it played the important role of restoring in Byelorussians consciousness of the rich and not unglorious past of their nation.²⁵ Łastoŭski's restless energy did not allow him to stop there. Under the pseudonym of Jury Vieraščaka there appeared in *Naša Niva* a series of his articles, often written in a somewhat tactless tone, but always directed towards heightening the national pride and self-esteem of Byelorussians. The article which stirred everybody's feelings more than the others appeared in *Naša Niva* in July 1913 under the title *Splačvajcie Doŭh* (Pay your Debt).²⁶ In it Łastoŭski attacked the "Parnassus" of Byelorussian writers for seeing around them only misery, poverty and dirt, and not noticing the beauty of their native country. The accusation, although not completely unfounded, was much too sweeping in its generality and written in an acrimonious tone, which rendered it both unjust and insulting. In the debate that followed it was Janka Kupała himself who gave the most reasoned and exhaustive answer to Łastoŭski's accusations. In his article *Čamu Plača Pieśnia Naša?* (Why is it that Our Song Weeps?), signed by "One of the Parnassus Group", he wrote in particular:

"Do not think that the 'Parnassus' poets have not seen and felt all the rich beauty of our land with its hills, valleys, rivers and forests. However, what could they say, when half of these natural riches, all the unpraised beauty is not ours, but belongs to our well-fed *Kulturträger*, for whom the Byelorussian spends his time in grinding toil which makes him blind and dims his intellect... The sad present-day reality cannot evoke a happy mood in the mind of the poet. ... To remember the past means to remember serfdom, because our free life, when the bell of free assembly was tolling, lies buried under the heavy burden of some five centuries... And the poet, whether he wanted to or not, could not by-pass present-day life. That is why our song, which is perhaps a trifle too tearful, cannot help but make an appearance; but it will not be so forever, just as a living nation cannot always slumber in a sleep of death... We firmly believe that the day is not far away, when our Byelorussian nation will awaken to a new, bright life, and then its poet-prophets will accord the strings of their thoughts to a different tune: they will sing about the great riches and beauty of their native land and about the great joy if its faithful children."²⁷

²⁵) Among those who expressed their appreciation of Łastoŭski's work was Janka Kupała who wrote a poem *Dudar* (The Piper) dedicated to "The author of the 'History of Byelorussia', Vlast." (cf. *Naša Niva*, No. 40, 1910). Vlast was the pseudonym most frequently used by Łastoŭski.

²⁶) Юры Верашчака, *Сплачвайце доўг, Наша Нiва*, № 26-27, 1913.

²⁷) Адзiн з Парнасьнiкаў, *Чаму плача песня наша, Наша Нiва*, № 30, 1913.

The controversy was significant in showing the change of attitude among Byelorussians, and in this sense it was indicative of the progress made by the Byelorussian national movement since 1906 when *Naša Niva* first began to appear. Be that as it may, the whole tone of Byelorussian literature was gradually becoming more cheerful and optimistic. It was Kupała himself who as early as 1911, on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of *Naša Niva* wrote the poem which almost became the Byelorussian national anthem and which began with the following words:

"The stars will not go out so long as there is a sky,
An occupied country will not perish so long as there is a people."

There is a marked contrast with "Who goes there", written four years previously, in which Byelorussians demanded only the right "to be called human beings."

Lastoŭski was not the only representative of this new trend, which in any event was not really novel. Others did the same work with less fuss, but no less effectively. It suffices to mention Bahdanovič and the way in which he enriched Byelorussian literature by introducing new poetical forms. Similarly Romuald Ziemkiewič began to work seriously on the history of Byelorussian literature and published several interesting articles in *Naša Niva*.²⁹

The problems besetting *Naša Niva* were many and varied. One of the most acute was that of the Byelorussian alphabet. Traditionally the Byelorussians used the Cyrillic alphabet, but already as early as the second half of the 16th century certain works and documents had begun to be written in Latin characters, mainly under Polish influence. In the 19th century the Latin alphabet was used by almost all Byelorussian writers, owing to the special circumstances which then prevailed in their country. The existence of a dual alphabet was convenient to the Russian authorities, who used it to implement their policy of denationalising Byelorussians. Their tactics was particularly insidious, because they tried to sow discord among the people on religious grounds also. In the eyes of Russian officialdom, Orthodox Byelorussians were all Russians and should therefore use the Cyrillic, or "Russian" alphabet. The Catholic Byelorussians on the other hand were identified with Poles, and were supposed to write in Latin, or "Polish" characters. This policy of dividing Byelorussians into "Poles" and "Russians" was intensified after 1863, and its effects began to be felt at the beginning of the 20th century, when the Byelo-

²⁸) Romuald Ziemkiewič was a student at Kiev University. His articles *Vincuk Dunin-Marcinkiewič, jaho žyćcio i litaraturnaje značeńnie* (Vincuk Dunin-Marcinkiewič, his life and literary importance; *Naša Niva*, No. 48, 1910), *Taras Šeŭčenka i bielarusy* (Taras Šeŭčenko and Byelorussians; *Naša Niva*, No. 8, 1911), *Adam Honory Kirkor* (Adam Honory Kirkor; *Naša Niva*, No. 49, 1911; Kirkor was a well known Byelorussian 18th century historian and ethnographer) are distinguished from other articles of this kind published in *Naša Niva* by their scholarly character. Ziemkiewič also translated into Byelorussian and published in *Naša Niva* several short stories by the Ukrainian writer V. Stefanyk.

russian national movement began to gather strength.²⁹ Faced with this difficult situation the founders of *Naša Niva*, rather than risk offending the susceptibilities of any group, decided to print the paper in two parallel editions — one in Cyrillic and one in Latin characters. This decision did credit to men who, in the cause of national unity, were not afraid of saddling themselves with additional work and financial liability. And so, for the first five years, *Naša Niva* appeared in two editions and it was only in 1912 that a serious discussion started through its columns as to whether it was not time to put an end to this anomalous situation, and choose a single national alphabet. One of the most significant figures involved in this discussion was Janka Kupala, who wrote:

"There is one great Byelorussian country, one multi-million Byelorussian nation; this nation has one Byelorussian language, and a book in the native tongue has no right to divide it (i. e. the nation — *A. N.*) into two halves — Catholic and Orthodox, — as it has been done hitherto by means of religion, helped by printing the native idiom in two alphabets ... In this way, having considered the whole problem in the light of my conscience ... I join my voice to that of the supporters of a single alphabet for the Byelorussian language, and cast my vote for the characters in which was printed the first Byelorussian secular book — The Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania."³⁰

The Statute of the Grand Duchy — a code of Byelorussian civil and criminal law, — was printed in Vilna in 1588 in Cyrillic characters. The opinion of a man of Janka Kupala's stature carried great weight among Byelorussians. It was remarkable for many reasons, not least of which was the author's firm grasp of the concept of national unity and his appeal to the historical past of Byelorussia. As an outcome of all this discussion, *Naša Niva* began to appear in 1913 in a single edition printed in Cyrillic characters. However by that time the

²⁹) Vulf Sosienki, in his article *Z padarožža pa maich vakolicach* (From travels in my neighbourhood), wrote:

"... At first I happened to come to the town of Ilja. I arrived there and at once got stuck in a soft, but deep and sticky mud. Somehow I managed to reach the market square. In the middle of the square stands the Orthodox church. I met a man and we began to talk. 'This church — he told me, — is very old. It was built in the times of the Dukes of Lithuania. It stood originally in the graveyard where many of our *Polish* ancestors were buried, but afterwards the graveyard became *Russian*.' I pointed out that since he considers them to be his ancestors, they could hardly be Russians or Poles. The old man looked at me, shook his head and said: 'Who knows what the truth is. Our truth has fallen asleep, and people say different things.' I went into that church and also visited the new Catholic church. And indeed those temples were *Polish* and *Russian* — I was reminded of the old man's words." (B. Cosencki, *С падарожжа па маіх ваколіцах. Наша Ніва, № 47, 1910*) Sometimes the religious differences showed themselves in a more disturbing manner, as can be gleaned from the following reply of the Editor to a certain Makoŭski:

"We have not heard about a Russian or a Polish God. We know that God exists, but he is neither Polish nor Russian, but one for all men. Your letter is filled with hatred towards the faith of others, the faith of those who are after all your brothers. We shall not publish such things", (*Наша Ніва, № 43, 1910*).

³⁰) Гутаркі з чытачамі. Які шрыфт?, *Наша Ніва, № 5, 1912*.

national consciousness of its readers was such, that its circulation did not suffer perceptibly on account of the change.

Among other problems discussed in *Naša Niva* one might mention the problem of national schools and the use of Byelorussian language in churches. Indeed there was hardly an aspect of the Byelorussian national life which was not reflected in the pages of that journal.

Naša Niva was also an important publishing house for Byelorussian books. In this field it was not unique, however, for since 1906 there existed in St. Petersburg an organisation *Zahlanie Sonca i ū Naša Akonca* (Into our window also the sun will shine) which did much work in the field of Byelorussian literary publication. Several other publishing organisations were also founded about this time.

For a long time *Naša Niva* was the only Byelorussian paper. However as the national movement grew, the journal could no longer cater for every requirement and so it was that new periodical publications began to appear. The first was the literary magazine *Maladaja Bielaruś* (Young Byelorussia), which was published from 1912 onward in St. Petersburg under the editorship of Anton Łuckievič. Also in 1912 there appeared the first number of a Byelorussian agricultural paper *Sacha* (The Plough), edited by A. Ūlasaŭ, an erstwhile editor of *Naša Niva*. In 1913 Ciotka (Aloiza Paškievič) founded in Minsk the first Byelorussian magazine for children *Łučynka* (The Torch). Each new periodical was warmly greeted by *Naša Niva* which saw in its appearance a sign of the growth of the Byelorussian national movement. The welcome was more guarded in the case of the weekly *Bielarus* (The Byelorussian) which commenced its publication at the beginning of the year 1913. It was a Catholic paper, printed in Latin characters, and *Naša Niva* understandably felt a little apprehensive, lest it endanger the unity of the Byelorussian movement. In an editorial entitled *Novaja hazeta* (The New Journal) *Naša Niva* wrote:

"We are afraid lest the new paper should deviate from the common Byelorussian ground, — we are afraid, because one false step may cause great harm to the whole Byelorussian cause. Time alone will tell."³¹

It must in all fairness be said that those fears proved to be unfounded, and that the editors of *Bielarus* did nothing which would promote religious discord among Byelorussians. On the contrary, the paper did much good by attracting many Catholic Byelorussians, who would otherwise have remained under Polish influence.

From time to time there appeared in *Naša Niva* Byelorussian translations of the works of such Russian writers as L. Tolstoj, A. Čechov, I. Turgenev, and of Polish writers and poets Eliza Orzeszkowa, Maria Konopnicka and K. Tetmajer, to say nothing of the Ukrainian Taras Ševčenko, V. Stefanyk and others. This was not done by chance, but was part of the journal's general policy, aptly explained by Maksim Bahdanovič:

"In a Byelorussia torn by national strife, *Naša Niva* unceasingly

³¹) *Новая газета. Наша Ніва*, № 3, 1913.

reminded one of the need to respect the rights of each nation, to appreciate every culture and, in strengthening one's own national foundations, to make a wide use of the cultural achievements of the Polish, Russian and Ukrainian peoples."³²

A respect for other nations and an absence of chauvinism were characteristic traits of *Naša Niva* during the whole time of its existence. The Byelorussian scholar Karski, who could hardly be suspected of sympathy with the Byelorussian national movement, wrote the following on this subject:

"The merit of *Naša Niva* lies also in that it avoids any incitement of one nation against the other (and there are several in Byelorussia), retaining a perfectly impartial attitude towards them. In this case it accurately reflects an essential trait of the Byelorussian character: to live peacefully with everyone. The only thing which, in our view, does not harmonise well with the tone assumed by that newspaper is its somewhat frigid attitude towards the chief nation in the state" (i. e. Russians — *A. N.*)³³

Despite this non-controversial and tolerant approach the editors of *Naša Niva* encountered endless obstacles from different quarters, as Maksim Bahdanovič was to observe:

"*Naša Niva* has now been carrying on its work for nine years. It was confiscated several times, its editor was sentenced to prison, its reading was forbidden to soldiers, priests, teachers, students at theological seminaries and to several other classes of people. The Russian press, supported by the government, led a campaign of provocation against it, affirming that it has been published with Polish money in order to weaken the Russian influences in the country and to prepare the way for its polonisation. The organs of Polish chauvinism on the other hand see in it a subtle instrument founded with the help of official (i.e. Russian — *A. N.*) funds for the russification of Byelorussian Catholics. However none of this has been able to break the spirit and energy of the editors of *Naša Niva* and it has failed to check the development of the Byelorussian national movement. And *Naša Niva* is read by peasants now as no other press organ in the country."³⁴

³²) М. Богданович, *Білоруське відродження . . .*, б. 19.

³³) Е. Ф. Карский, *Велоруссы*, т. 3, ч. 3, Петроград 1922, стр. 163.

³⁴) М. Богданович, *Вілоруське відродження . . .*, б. 20.

While the attitude of the Russian authorities and general Polish and Russian public opinion 'were hostile to *Naša Niva* and to the Byelorussian national movement, there were individuals who sympathised with its aims. One of them v/as the Russian writer Maksim Gorkij, who was a subscriber to *Naša Niva*, as may be inferred from the following reply of the editor:

"To Maksim Gorkij. Italy. Capri. We thank you for your friendly letter. We have sent a separate reply to your questions on Byelorussian music. Soon we shall despatch the books, and we have already begun to send the newspaper." (*Наша Нива*, № 41, 1910). Another Russian well-wisher was prof. A. Pogodin who published an article "The Byelorussian poets" in the January 1919 number of the Russian journal *Vestnik Jevropy*, and who sent congratulations to *Naša Niva* on its fourth anniversary (printed in No. 46, 1910 of that paper). Among the Poles W. Wegnierowicz wrote an article in 1912 entitled "Young Byelorussia" on Byelorussian literature, which was published in the periodical *Swiat*

In August 1915 Vilna was occupied by German troops and *Naša Niva* ceased to exist. By that time however the Byelorussian national movement had grown so strong that no physical force could suppress it any longer. Moreover the Byelorussian people possessed a young but vigorous and highly original literature of which they could be justly proud. And there is no doubt whatsoever that one of the chief instruments in awakening Byelorussian national consciousness and in forming new Byelorussian literature was *Naša Niva*. For many people the name of that journal has become synonymous with the Byelorussian national renaissance, and for them the early years of the 20th century up to the First World War are simply known as the "Naša Niva Period."³⁵

Słowianski in Cracow. The Warsaw paper *Słowo*, and the Polish language newspaper in Kiev *Dziennik Kijowski*, published in 1910 a Polish translation — the first ever made, — of a poem by Janka Kupała *Pamiaci Maryi Kanapnickaj* (To the memory of Maria Konopnicka) which had previously appeared in *Naša Niva* (No. 41, 1910).

³⁵) An important contribution was made by *Naša Niva* in the formation of a national outlook in the younger generation which did not become active until after 1918. Uładzimir Duboŭka (b. 1900) began to write in the twenties and is now considered to be one of the most outstanding contemporary Byelorussian poets. He describes his first acquaintance with *Naša Niva* when he was a pupil in the primary school at Miadziel in 1912-1914 thus:

"When I was still at school in Mańkavičy (his former village school — *A. N.*), the older boys... used to bring Byelorussian poems and stories, copied by hand in their exercise books. As I remember them now, they were poems by Francišak Bahuševič — with additions by the copyists, — and by Janka Kupała. I cannot describe the impression those works made on us. When we read them we were filled with pride. Our language which the *pany* (*i. e.* those belonging to the dominant nation — *A. N.*) called peasant, gutter language, sounded as well and as beautiful as any 'lordly' language! That was the great wonder. Look! Listen! There are even resounding rhymes in the verses... I began to ask why there were no books in our language.

And now in Miadziel I saw — even held in my hand and read the Byelorussian newspaper — *Naša Niva!* Moreover, I began to subscribe to it. In order not to ask for money from home, I went to work for a few days on the estate of Kazieta-Pakleŭski, where I helped to make wooden planks for roofing. For this I earned 25 copecks a day. I would say that considering my age and the prices of that time, that was a lot of money. Through that newspaper I made my first acquaintance with the works of Janka Kupała, Maksim Bahdanovič and our other poets."

(Уладзімір Дубоўка, *Сярод людзей добрых, Польшы, № I, Minsk 1963, p. 114.*)