

Reviews

Kaľubovič, A., ed. and comp. *Janka Kupała i Jakub Kołas. 1882-1982. Vianok uspaminaŭ pra ich*. Printed privately, USA, 1982. 81 pp.

The so-called Third Wave of emigration from the Soviet Union which has produced such riches of memoir writing during the last decade is predominantly Russian in character, with the other republics, including Byelorussia, little represented. However the earlier exodus of Byelorussians at the end of the Second World War means that many who can bear testimony to, amongst other things, the cultural history of their country are in a position to record their experiences. Several have in fact done this over the past three decades, and it was undoubtedly a good idea to draw together from the scattered periodicals where they had appeared the various memoirs relating to Kupała and Kołas, and to publish them as a collection in the poets' memorial year. Though uneven in literary and informative value, they combine to present a composite picture of Byelorussia's two national poets which adds considerably to the information obtainable from available monographs and other sources.

The book's arrangement is roughly chronological, but only one contribution goes back to pre-revolutionary times, namely Mikola Syła's description of Kupała at work in the offices of *Naša niva* in 1909 and early 1910 ('Maje сустrečy', *Šlacham žyćcia*, 1947, no. 8 (20)). Far more expansive is Ina Rytar's recollection of Kupała, mainly in 1921, but with one or two later episodes ('Na sud historyi', *Konadni*, 1963, no. 7). As sister-in-law of the Maładniak poet Michaś Hramyka, she was in a good position to witness the day-to-day contacts of various writers of the time, and this is what she describes — nothing momentous, but nevertheless a valuable insight into the private lives of the great and not-so-great. The same writer's 'Jakub Kołas' relates details of the poet's honourable role in the so-called Listapadcy trial of 1926 and his relations with one of the accused, Ničypar Miacielski. She also describes the orthography reform conference held in 1926 and the unsuccessful attempts to save playwright Francišak Alachnovič from arrest. Ina Rytar's picture of the rapidly worsening atmosphere in the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences in the second half of the twenties rings true, but her article also serves as a reminder of the caution with which such reminiscences must be approached, for she refers *en passant* to Kupała's death as suicide

(p. 33) as if this were quite beyond doubt. Lastly from the twenties, a highly subjective anonymous piece, A.S. 'Na lysaj hare' (*Bielaruskaja motadž*, 1961, no.11), describes a personal meeting with Kupała in the summer of 1926, which the author felt gave her a deepened insight into his character.

The collection's editor, Aühien Kaľubovič, makes one of the longest contributions 'Jakub Kołas i Janka Kupała' (*Bielaruskaja dumka*, 1973, no.15) presenting a series of separate themes from the poets' lives in the thirties. These include a vivid account of a 1936 meeting in the Writers' Union organized by powerful hacks like Aleksandrovič and Kučar to denounce formalism in literature: Kołas's growing disgust with these abstract yet sinister proceedings finally erupted when he declared to the startled company that his own story *Adščapieniec* (1931) was formalist too. Less typical of the age, yet also interesting, is Kaľubovič's account of the negotiations preceding the awarding of a pension to Bahdanovič's destitute father, Adam, and of Kołas's enthusiasm for the poet's critical writing, much neglected at that time. The embarrassing squabbles over orthography are well described in sometimes farcical detail, and Kołas's strong stance against the russicisms and other linguistic distortions perpetrated most often by the newspaper *Zviazda* is clearly recorded. Also relating to Kołas are a recollection of some of the prototypes for characters in *U htybi Paleśsia*, and, most important, his attempts to assist colleagues arrested during the purges, including the ill-fated former editor of *Naša niva* Aleksandr Ułasau. Kaľubovič's memories of Kupała centre on a visit to his house in 1940. Like many other witnesses, he stresses Kupała's great humanity and the immense support given him by his wife, Ciotka Ūladzia, but also important is his description of Kupała's habit of signing whatever was put in front of him without reading it — something that obviously has relevance for our understanding of his publicist heritage.

The minor poet Masiej Siadnioŭ describes Kupała and Kołas's anniversary celebrations in 1935 and his own role in them: 'Jubilejnaja сустrečy (Zblišku ad Kołas i Kupały)' (*Bielaruskaja motadž*, 1963, no. 19). Finally, Mikola Sčahloŭ (Kulikovič) offers

some subjective, impressionistic, and rather verbose recollections of Kupała, 'Maje ūspaminy (Janka Kupała)' (first published in fuller form under the pen-name M. Miensky in *Bielarus*, 5/11 — 11/17, 29 June — 20 September 1952). The 1935 celebrations provided the setting for the first performance of Mikaj Aladaŭ's insufferably long and strident avant-garde cantata based on Kupała's poem *Nad rakoju Aresaj*, a piece so appalling that only Kupała himself was polite enough to sit to the end. Also part of the celebrations and not without an element of farce was a banquet at Kupała's house, almost ruined by a plan to broadcast it live, with all the inhibiting censorial apparatus that implied. Ščaŭhoŭ's reminiscences further take in preparations for a week of Byelorussian culture in Moscow during 1939, a visit by writers to recently 'liberated' Stoŭpcy where the former were powerfully struck by the high living standards of their hosts — which did not prevent Ajzik Kučar from indulging in some grotesquely untrue propaganda about Soviet living standards. Kupała as always, emerges as a figure of great common sense, tightly restricted by the likes of Kučar. The author describes vividly Kupała's depression at the start of the War, and, although it is not

really memoir writing as such, relates the circumstances of the secret burial given to the poet in 1942, and goes on to discuss in increasingly exalted tones the falsification of Kupała by the Soviets, the degree of genuine sovietization reflected in his writing, finally proclaiming exultantly Kupała's inalienable place as the embodiment of Byelorussia's national consciousness. The book concludes with Kołas's celebrated 'O, kraj rodny, kraj pryhoży' from the third part of *Symon-muzyka*, and Kupała's poem *Pierad budućyniaj* of 1922.

In welcoming this collection as a valuable contribution to the centenary of Byelorussia's two national poets it must also be noted that several other Byelorussians in emigration (to say nothing of those in the Soviet Union) could contribute more, in some cases much more, to our knowledge of the life and times of Kupała and Kołas. Perhaps their unwillingness to write has entirely valid reasons. Certainly such enterprises cannot be dictated, however great the cost of silence, and meanwhile we must be grateful to Aŭhien Kaŭbovič for compiling and editing this most welcome centenary garland.

Arnold McMillin

Kupała, Yanka, Lołas, Yakub, *Songs as Clear as the Sky*. Edited with an introduction by Yasep Semezhon. 'Hołas radzimy', Minsk, 1982. 78pp.

This small volume deserves to be noticed since it is likely to be widely distributed and even read (the print run, surprisingly, is not in the traditional place at the end). Whether it will serve to advance the glory of Byelorussia's two national poets is another matter, for the translations, though for the most part faithful, are unlikely to impress anglophone readers, and the Introduction, itself in pidgin English, sows some odd ideas, not least of which is that 'in accordance with the decision of UNESCO all the progressive people of the world will mark and celebrate, Kupała and Kołas's centenary in 1982. As the editor goes on, 'Our future readers are supposed to keep in mind the rare fact that perceptible limits of a certain literary "period" coincide so closely with crucial political events as in the case of what we, poets and literary critics, call the "Renaissance Movement" in our national pre-revolutionary poetry'. Moreover, the selection, which is intended to be in two parts corresponding to two historical periods (before and after the Revolution), 'sets out to provide... an account of the social content of two celebrated People's poets of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic'. Be that as it may, the representation of Kupała's poems from before and

after the Revolution in this anthology is in a ratio of 25:4, and for Kołas 13:5, a distribution which, though rational on literary grounds, hardly supports the editor's contention that 'each of their volumes was an important event in the literary life of the Byelorussian SSR and the whole country in the post-revolutionary years'. One cannot help wondering whether the editor was himself 'edited'. The Introduction ends with an original English poem by the translator herself, dedicated to Kupała — mellifluous, heartfelt and totally artificial, it highlights the problems of writing or translating poetry into a language not one's own which are in fact felt throughout the whole enterprise.

The selection has the merit of being mainly of poems not hitherto available, for only two of the verses are translated elsewhere: *A chto tam idzie?* is in the anthologies of both Vera Rich and Walter May; Kołas's *Budzie navalnica* only in May's collection. A glance at Vera Rich's version, in fact, serves as a valuable reminder that verse translation does not have to be into a stilted language of its own. This, however, is the unfortunate fate of many poems in *Songs as Clear as the Sky*. Odd vocabulary frequently jars, as, for example, in 'birdies' (p.38), 'sonny' (p.53), 'earring'

(p.55), 'holey' (p.56), 'teen' (p.60), and lines frequently sound all too like doggerel. Two instances will suffice. From Kupała's *Lavon* (characteristically given in the Russian form of 'Levon' here): 'On second thoughts the lad / Understood that it was bad / To be not unlike a walking piece of wood' (11. 10-12). And from Kołas's *Ručej*: 'At night often some star / Takes at it a good look. / A lone cloud by day / Gazes long at the brook' (11. 13-16). The second stanza of Kupała's *Paezija* also gains an unwanted additional dimension by the translator's unfortunate, though understandable, lack of familiarity with modern English usage: 'A warm sum-

mer night, / The fragrance of hay, / A lad and a maiden— / Here is a lay' (11. 5-8).

The enterprise of 'Hołas radzimy' in commissioning such a publication was perhaps foolhardy, and it would have been much better to use the services of a native English translator such as, for example, the usually workmanlike Walter May. Anisija Prokof'jeva has made a remarkable achievement in producing these versions at all (Dr. Johnson can hardly be kept at bay), but they are very unlikely to foster respect and love for Byelorussia's two national poets.

Arnold McMillin