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JUDGEMENT ON THE DEAD

Following is a translation of an article by Jozef Lobodowski in the Polish-language publication Kultura (Culture), Paris, No 6, June 1966, pages 3-9.

A few weeks after the publicized Moscow trial of Siniawski and Daniel, another trial took place in Kiev; in many respects, it was like a twin of the first one, though obviously there were some basic differences. The Moscow court tried and sentenced Russian writers, accused of writing "anti-Soviet, slandering books," smuggling them out of the country and publishing them abroad, under pen-names. The Kiev court tried and sentenced two Ukrainian literary critics, accused of spreading ideas contrary to the official Party line, and therefore "hostile to the people."

The course of the first trial is well known, even the Soviet press discussed it and it was publicized all over the world; but one can only guess about the course of the Kiev trial, the Soviet press did not speak of it and reactions abroad were incomparably more discrete. But the most important difference was that, in the case of Switlyczny and Dziuba, the basic role was played by their Ukrainian nature, always and everywhere condemned as a "nationalistic deviation."

The critics in question not only defended writers, especially young ones, against temptations of Party bureaucracy which annihilate true creativity, not only demanded the right to have live contacts with Western culture, not only dared sharply to criticize the high priests of socialist realism, sanctified by Party and regime and therefore untouchable, but, in addition to these three unquestionable "crimes", they committed a fourth one and the worse: they stood for a separate national literature.

Recently we received in the West the text of a statement made by Ivan Dziuba, one of the two sentenced critics, during an open literary meeting, in front of high officials sitting in the presidium. We shall quote a short but meaningful passage which provides a good introduction to the heart of the matter:

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"Dostoyevsky used to wonder: Would you agree to build world harmony on a single tear of a single defenceless child? Now we ask in our turn: can there be a world harmony, can there exist a world-wide collectivity, can there be a general human justice, if, in order to achieve them, there must take place the slightest injustice done to a single nation, namely the Ukrainian nation?"

This question contains its answer and also an accusation: the Ukrainian nation is being unfairly treated in the Soviet Union. These words which, under Soviet conditions, were not only brave but frankly provocative, were spoken during a meeting commemorating the death of the young poet Vassily Symonenko. When a dozen months later Ivan Dziuba together with Ivan Switlyczny faced the court on the accused bench, the ghost of the late poet was present in the room. He too was accused, he too was tried, he too was sentenced, though posthumously.

Symonenko only lived to be 28 years old. Just like other outstanding writers of the young generation -- Lina Kostenko, Ivan Dratch, Mykola Winhranowskyj, Witalij Korotycz, etc. -- he broke with the socialist realism routine when he first started to write. He did not have the time to reach full maturity, but, from what he left behind him, it is possible to make a collection of good poems, and even some excellent. But I am not writing a literary review. I am interested in his attitude, anti-conformism, unyielding search for new paths, obvious revolt against Soviet reality. A revolt which was artistic, social, political, and national in nature.

He was born in 1935, when Ukrainian countryside was already collectivized and the hopeless resistance of farmers put down in a barbarian way. He could not remember the pre-war years, and barely the war years. Therefore we deal here -- which is a most hopeful feature -- with the revolt of a generation raised under the hard discipline of Communist ideology, and subjected to a strict control and to ruthless punishment in case of insubordination.

Despite this fact, or perhaps because of this fact (it is impossible to make categorical judgments), after so many years, when the jailers begin to believe that they may rest in peace, a revolt awakens and grows. The beginnings can vary, for the spirit blows where it may. Some stories told by older people, some accidental reading outside the official program, some oral family tradition, what not, may constitute the first spark falling on quiet saw-dust.

But the most decisive factor is moral health, for otherwise no sparks will help -- a health carried through the swamps of Soviet education. Only such a health can allow for the birth of a spontaneous protest against a system that violates the very nature of man. The youthful poems of Symonenko, still lacking maturity and looking for a final form, are such a protest, expressed in many ways: as a protest of a man who does not fit in the straight-jacket of uniform collectivity, as a protest of an artist who does not admit a foreign and obnoxious interference with his experiences and feelings, as a protest of an Ukrainian who everywhere sees the wrongs and the humiliation of his fatherland.

Thus it is a poetic revolt on behalf of freedom of man and freedom of an equally oppressed nation. A revolt sometimes disguised in such a superficial or perhaps purposefully awkward way that one wonders about the naivety or negligence of the censors. It is true that they tried to adapt those Symonenko poems which reached publication to the compulsory slogans. In his diary, the poet complains that editors "tortured his poems." What did he mean?

The poem beginning with the words "I looked again in your eyes..." (its translation from the original text follows this article) was cut down by censorship from eight stanzas to four stanzas. In addition, one "innocent" change. The author concluded his last stanza with the line: "With one more drop of blood I shall fall upon your flag. Your holiest flag." He was speaking of Ukraina. The censor only changed one word: instead of "holiest" he put "red." And we know what "red flag" means.

A completely nonsensical treatment was given to the last poem of our selection (following this article): it was given a new title: "Prophecy from 1917." As if the angry outcry was directed against Tzarist Russia. It is rather strange that these passionate lyrical accusations would be formulated against a reality which passed away nearly twenty years before the poet's birth; besides, why does he use the present tense, and predicts revenge and punishment in the future? It would have been as logical and correct to direct this attack against the times of Ivan the Terrible.

In other instances, the censors simply gave up any beautifying treatment, decided that his poems were not fit to be printed, and denied them publication. The enclosed selection, composed of ten short poems, includes five refused poems or those which had been more or less arranged by the censors.

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During his lifetime, Symonenko published only one collection of poems "Silence and Thunder": another one "Earth Gravity" came out after his death. At the same time, however, forbidden poems or poems distorted by the censors were circulated in their original illegal form. Together with the private diary of the poet -- "Strands of Thought" -- they were brought abroad, partly published in the Ukrainian emigration monthly "Suczasnist" (Modern Times), then came out in a separate collection under the title "Shore of Expectations".

It did not take long before Soviet press in Ukrainian language reacted with angry outcries. According to articles published in leading literary periodicals it is necessary to defend Symonenko's memory against the abusive exploitation of his name by emigration "bourgeois nationalists." Turning everything upside-down, critics wrote that the late poet was a "good Communist" during his short life, that some "doubtful" features in his work were "accidental". Anything else was manufactured by the biased interpretation of enemies of the Soviet Union.

Yet even a superficial glance over the late poet's poems and diary suffices to show that there is nothing "accidental" in them and there can be no hiding behind an alleged interpretive betrayal of the writer's intentions. When the young poet addresses Ukraina in these

terms: "Over the world, the most frightful battle for your rights and for your very existence!", when he says in another poem: "My nation is alive! It will not surrender, it will not bend under anything!", and when he adds rapidly the pathetic words: "Already the nation is like an open wound..." --no one can doubt that he speaks of everyday tangible reality, and does not indulge in some retrospective excursion into the past.

"If all those who were cheated would speak, if all victims of murder were to rise from their graves..." -- who are these people? Awkward and comical attempts at relating these lines to pre-revolutionary times only manage to be ridiculous, since on the next page, addressing Mother-Ukraine, Symonenko writes: "All devils are not yet gone, many of them still haunt this earth..."

Tzarist bourgeois devils went away when Revolution won; "kulak" (rich farmers) devils were chased away by collectivization; nazi devils also disappeared; so what devils did Symonenko have in mind? A sensitive reader will have no trouble to find himself the answer. The censor must also have found the answer, since he crossed these lines with a red pencil without consulting the author.

Socialist realism established a strictly observed regulation in Ukraine to the effect that any writer proclaiming his Ukrainian patriotism must shelter it under an all-Soviet roof; one always must make a submissive courtesy in the direction of Moscow, Kremlin stars, formerly Stalin as well, and today more generally the Party; and if one also manages to add some warm words about Georgians, Uzbeks, Estonians and other nationalities, so much the better; the all-Soviet loyalty will be better stressed. But the common denominator must be the love for the "older brother," the "liberating and guiding" Russia.

We shall not find this in Symonenko. On the contrary, in the above mentioned and quoted poem we shall find the proud and challenging line: "What do I care for the voice of Russia and of the Americas!", also eliminated by the censor. One must be familiar with the conditions of Soviet life to fully appreciate the provocative impact of this scornful expression. Not only the poet does not want to listen to Russia's voice, but he places her on the same level as America. Please note: on the same level as imperialist America!

At this point, some comments seem necessary. The frequently nonsensical new spelling often confuses the meaning of written statements; in this case, it hides it completely. The correct form should not be Russia but Russias [Translator's note: in the new Polish spelling also the two forms are the same in genitive] -- plural of Russia, corresponding to the plural of Americas. In the Russian language such an unusual plural denotes a clear shade of scorn and disrespect in colloquial expressions. It is quite purposefully that Symonenko used the expression "Russia(s) and Americas", in plural, as if there were many Russias, no matter which ones, but always rejected by an Ukrainian aware of his national particularity. It may only be a shade of meaning, a rhetorical formula, but this rhetorical shade of meaning implies a whole attitude.

If Soviet criticism did not stubbornly try to perform a sinister and farcical monkey-play over the grave of the poet, it would have to

acknowledge that emigration "bourgeois nationalists" who published these legal, forbidden or distorted poems, giving them back their authenticity, did not abuse anything but simply treated the poet as their own. But this would mean that Communist anathema would be cast against the late poet, which was found undesirable from a propaganda viewpoint. Therefore it was necessary to play the game and stubbornly defend the thesis that the author of "Shore of Expectations" was a "good communist," confused at times, which truly can be explained by his unfortunate lack of maturity, or even perhaps by the growing influence of his illness during the last period. One has to save the face, though everybody sees it is lost.

I do not know to what extent this was a conscious attitude, but the fact is that Symonenko related his position to that of writers of the Ukrainian renaissance of the 'twenties, appropriately defined since -- perhaps -- Jurij Lawrynenko coined the term -- as the "shot renaissance", to Kiev neo-classicists, to early Tytchyna before he broke down and joined the court, and mainly to Mykola Chwylowy. And all this after 30 years of interruption, filled with the stink of propaganda fumes. This is a proof that the tree was cut down with the axe of direct terror, but the roots remained healthy. Now it is growing new shoots, therefore it is alive, therefore the Communist rot did not reach beneath the ground.

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Writing about the Switlyczny and Dziuba trial, the Western press closely associated it with the smuggling abroad and publication of Symonenko's works, poems and diary, by the emigration. The monthly "Modern Times," which first printed these writings, in January last year, questions this interpretation, believing that the Kiev trial is but a natural manifestation of a hardened attitude toward literature and art in general, and particularly toward Ukrainian art and literature, always suspect of nationalism.

As I stressed in my introduction, the story of the trial is unknown abroad, and any interpretations are valid, both the right and the wrong ones. It seems however that, even if the matter of publishing Symonenko's works was not the starting point, it must have been mentioned and taken into account behind the tightly closed doors of the court. There are obvious and important reasons to believe so.

When Dziuba delivered his exceptionally brave lecture at the meeting commemorating Symonenko (16 January 1965), no one knew in Kiev that the latter's poems were published abroad. But there is no doubt that this speech was recalled in due time, and considered as another debt to be paid by the risk-running speaker.

Ivan Switlycznyj had much more to answer for, and assuredly this is why the court treated him with greater rashness. On 5 April 1965, "Soviet Ukraina" published the letter of the late poet's mother, Hanna Szczerban, addressing Central Committee of Communist Party of Ukraina with the request that the memory of her son be defended against those who, abusing her good faith, "appropriated his manuscripts" and "circulated them." The simple and illiterate kholkhoze worker even knew

that the text of these "stolen" manuscripts was broadcast by foreign radio stations. It is obvious that this letter was written by the very addressees in the Central Committee, and the unfortunate Hanna was only ordered to sign it, perhaps with three crosses.

Among the dishonest "thieves" the letter named in full two persons, one of them being Switlycznyj. Such a public accusation, made up to look like a private protest, makes the defense extremely difficult. If Switlycznyj had been attacked by a Party journalist or official, it would have been possible to counteract this move in some way, but how can such a matter be discussed with an old woman who obviously is but a stand-by ?

But this letter incident shows that the trial of both critics is most closely connected with the Symonenko story. This does not mean that otherwise there would have been no trial, but the emigration publication of "Shore of Expectations" could not help irritate Party officials, contribute to sharpen the course and the outcome of the trial. Dziuba and Switlycznyj are brothers in spirit of Symonenko; when they were tried, he was also tried posthumously, and the sentence also bears on this untimely stopped creation.

Thus there is no exaggeration in the statement expressed in the title of this essay: In early spring of 1966, in old Kiev, there took place a formal trial of living human beings; actually, it was also a judgment on the dead.

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