

## BOOK REVIEWS

**RUSINKO, Elaine, translator, with Bogdan Horbal and Slavomir Olejar:  
“God Is a Rusyn.” Edited by Elaine Rusinko. Bloomington, Indiana :  
Slavic Publishers, 2011. 306 p.**

With the publication of this book, Elaine Rusinko, Associate Professor of Russian Literature and Language at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has produced the first ever anthology of contemporary Rusyn poetry and prose in English translation. A published scholar in Russian literature, Rusinko took up a personal and professional interest in Rusyn literature and language some years ago and has successfully translated this interest into articles and a substantial book on the history of Rusyn literature (*Straddling Borders: Literature and Identity in Subcarpathian Rus*, 2003). For the present anthology, Rusinko drew on literary works by twenty-seven individuals from a large pool of writers representing the Carpatho-Rusyn populations in the six European countries in which approximately one million Rusyns live – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia.

In this undertaking, Rusinko was faced with a difficult task – translating literary works from the differing variants of Rusyn employed by these writers. While all Carpatho-Rusyns can easily understand and communicate with each other, variations among their dialects and literary standards present the translator with a major challenge. While singlehandedly tackling translations of the literature from Ukraine, Slovakia, and Hungary, Rusinko relied on Bogdan Horbal (Head, Technical Processing at New York Public Library Science, Industry, and Business Library) for help with the Lemko-Rusyn language (Poland) and Slavomir Olejar (Independent Writer and Editor, Toronto) for his help with the Rusyn language in Serbia and Croatia. The verbal and structural shaping of all the translated poems, however, is Rusinko’s own work, and in this work she clearly seeks to convey as much as possible the original flow of the language, as well as the heart of the poems’ meaning.

To this end, for instance, Rusinko explains her decision to retain in the texts certain native Rusyn terms from the original works. She provides the reader with

a helpful one-page glossary of these terms in their Cyrillic original with a transliteration and English translation – and she also offers translations and clarifications of terms in footnotes as the Rusyn terms appear in the texts. These include terms for family members, certain foods, professions, and traditional items. A map of Carpathian Rus', 2004, by Paul Robert Magocsi shows the Carpatho-Rusyn homeland settlement pattern in central Europe in 1920 with international boundaries as of 2004 superimposed. In addition, a transliteration table offers a full Cyrillic alphabet with transliteration for Rusyn, Vojvodinian Rusyn (Serbia and Croatia), Ukrainian, and Russian.

In her "Forward" on literature in Carpathian Rus', Rusinko presents a concise and informative ten-page history of Rusyn literature interwoven with the history of the Rusyns. Setting such a context for the translations is absolutely essential because most readers who pick up the book may lack any familiarity with Rusyn history, let alone the emergence and evolution of the literature. Yet the historical context is crucial for an understanding of who the writers are and why they have written what they have. And this is because Rusyn literature is inextricably linked with the twists and turns of the history of the Rusyns, a small nation without a nation state in Europe.

Thus, when we learn in the brief biographies prior to each writer's selections that much of the writing of the Rusyn poets from both Slovakia and Transcarpathia (Zakarpatt'a) was first in Ukrainian or Russian, and that they began writing in Rusyn respectively just prior to the revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, we understand why this is so. A monumental Rusyn cultural revival in 1989 overturned the imposed ukrainianization of Carpatho-Rusyns in Slovakia (then Czechoslovakia) dictated by Stalin after World War II, and gave hope in 1991 to Carpatho-Rusyns in Transcarpathia where the Federal government of Ukraine still to this date does not recognize them as a distinct ethnic group. The cultural revival encouraged Carpatho-Rusyns to write in Rusyn, and Rusyn writers began publishing in their native language. Only in the Former Yugoslavia were Rusyns recognized as a distinct ethnic group from the beginning of their residence there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and were permitted to use Rusyn in all aspects of private and public life.

Given the complexity of the Rusyn-language situation with different standards established in the countries in which Rusyns live, Rusinko wisely includes an appendix with "selected original texts, sources, and language resources." Here, she provides a short informative commentary on the Rusyn language employed in each of the countries represented, as well as excerpts matching some of the translations of each writer's work in the original Rusyn variant used by that writer. All of this supplementary material offers an intriguing glimpse into the nature and quality of the Rusyn-language originals vis-à-vis the translations and should be of special interest to Slavic linguists and literary scholars. Rusinko also divides up her bibliography in the appendix according to country, which further enhances her anthology's value for students and scholars. There is no index, but an index is not really necessary in this kind of anthology, especially in light of the fine Table of Contents.

Among her chosen texts, Rusinko clearly seeks to achieve some balance between pieces containing a specifically Rusyn message and those with a more universal message, and often the two messages are intertwined. What does it mean to be a Rusyn? What images evoke Rusyn-ness? Petro Trokhanovskii in "Humanitas" evokes the landscape: "Oh, my Beskyd/hunch-backed like fortune/like the will of the strongest/petrified"; Gabriel Hattinger-Klebashko – a sense of the Rusyns' homelessness in "Wandering": "No one ever/told me/how to live in the world/. . ./I wander,/and wander/merrily around the blind world,/until I see/that I am recognized/me, the wanderer, a Rusyn."); and Vladimir Fedynyshynets – a sense of loss: "You can steal a cat or a dog,/But they will come back home. . ./But you can also steal a people's history,/As it was stolen from me, a Rusyn."

Stefaniia Trochanovska evokes the tragedy of the post-World War II Vistula Operation (Akcija Wisła) when thousands of Lemko Rusyns were forced out of their homes and villages in southeastern Poland and relocated in distant areas left abandoned by evacuated Germans in western Poland ("Yearning"): "the mountains/followed/the people/west/what were they/ to do/so accustomed/to each other/they couldn't/ live without them." And Rusinko draws the title of her book from the ironic verses of Ivan Petrovtsii in "God is a Rusyn": "God is a Rusyn/He wears a *kleban* [old man's hat]/just like my *nianio* [father]."

But the poetry and prose excerpts here go well beyond a localized "Rusyn" focus to a universal questioning through personal imagery: Valerii Kupka writes that "stars flap their wings/with eight-pointed feathers/they write our fates/whoever wants to can read/one must sit/and squint/must not laugh/or you will startle the handwriting/then our fates will be illegible/and life on earth will be unlivable." And Olena Duts-Fajfer confronts contemporary life in "Sun": "Once. . ./people went/to the mountain/to pray to the sun/Now. . ./people have sold the sun/and think/it is easier to live." Finally, holding a special place of honor is Maria Mal'tsovska (d. 2010), one of the handful of writers here who are no longer with us. The single longest excerpt in the anthology is an excerpt from her beloved collection of stories, *Manna i oskomyna* (Bitterness and Heavenly Sweetness, 1994), entitled "Mother." Here, the narrator revisits her care of her aged and ailing mother – a period of time which affords her many valuable opportunities to reminisce about her past and the meaning of "mother" in the scope of all our lives. With this story, Mal'tsovska skillfully raises the local "Rusyn" experience to the level of universal experience.

The great value of such an anthology as Professor Rusinko's is that it introduces those who do not know a Slavic language to a Slavic literature – in this case, one which uses Cyrillic and which is young and evolving in its new life, liberated from linguistic and political restrictions of the recent past. Those who know a Slavic language other than Rusyn will enjoy exploring the language and will comprehend much. Lovers of both poetry and prose will find a fresh voice here, and some may be inspired to undertake language study in order to experience this literature in its original form.

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