



Canadian Slavonic Papers

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Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes, Vol. 3 (1958), pp. 103-108

Published by: [Canadian Association of Slavists](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40866035>

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*A Lyricist's Record of the Revolution:
A Note on an Unpublished Collection of Verses
by Volodymyr Sosyura*

G. S. N. LUCKYJ

It is generally agreed, by Soviet and non-Soviet critics alike, that Volodymyr Sosyura, along with Pavlo Tychyna, Maksym Ryl's'ky and Mykola Bazhan, belongs to the "big four" of contemporary Ukrainian poetry. All of them first gained prominence shortly after the revolution and may be regarded, each in a different way, as its products. Their talents, however, are very dissimilar and their achievements different from each other; at least until these poets, in Tychyna's phrase, "kissed the Pope's slipper" and in the early 1930's became court-singers of Stalin and the communist party. In the twenties these four poets, still unrestrained by "socialist realism," wrote according to the dictates of their own Muses and enriched Ukrainian poetry immensely. Today, when they are fêted as the "grand old men" of Soviet literature, little is said about their youthful follies. The new editions of their collected works pitifully neglect their early literary productions and readers in the Soviet Ukraine today may have no inkling that these bemedalled literary stalwarts were at one time the angry young men of their generation.

Tributes paid to Volodymyr Sosyura two years ago on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday were intended to strengthen the public image of the poet as a conformist, a pillar in the edifice built by the party. The meanderings of the passionate and carefree lyricist, so characteristic of his early poetry, were dismissed in a few sentences. Similarly, the early intellectual poetry of Bazhan, the philosophic poems of Tychyna, or the neo-classicist masterpieces of the early Ryl's'ky are kept dark or at least in the shade. They are regarded as displays of ideological weakness on the part of their authors who themselves often confirm this attitude in their own breast-beatings about the early "waverings." The result of this policy of deliberate distortion, which has been little affected by the post-Stalin cultural thaw, is that today

none of the four poets mentioned above has been honoured by a complete edition of his works or by an exhaustive biography.

In view of these facts it is all the more difficult to describe and adequately analyse the discovery of an unpublished collection of verse, dating from 1918–19. It is contained in a little notebook which the present author found among the Lyubchenko Papers.¹ The notebook, containing sixteen pages, is 9½ by 7 inches, is entitled “Virshi V. Syusyury”² (Verses by V. Sosyura), and bears a dedication: “Na dobry vspomyn bortsyu za volyu zalytoyi sl’ozamy i krovyu Nen’ky O. Sharkomu vid V. Syusyury” (In good remembrance to O. Sharky, a fighter for freedom of the motherland drenched in tears and blood, from V. Sosyura). Across the very top of the title page, in a handwriting that is not Sosyura’s (but possibly Sharky’s), there stretches “Khay zheve (!) vil’na Ukrayina” (Long live a free Ukraine). An interesting feature of the manuscript is that in between the lines of poetry written very neatly in ink there are some pencilled lines of prose (a scene from a play) in someone else’s (Sharky’s ?) handwriting, a testimony, perhaps, to the shortage of paper or to the comradely spirit in the army. For there is no doubt that Sosyura filled the notebook with verses during the revolution: the first poem was written in April 1918, in the village of Verkhne,³ and the last on February 24, 1919, in the town of Proskurive.

Equally certain is the authenticity of the manuscript. With the exception of the last two pages of the notebook which are marked as written by the hand of Sharky (rukoju Sharkoho), the handwriting, as can be seen in comparing it with the facsimile of the poet’s manuscript dating from 1921 (*Chervona zyma*), reproduced in the recent volume of the history of Soviet Ukrainian literature,⁴ is indisputably Sosyura’s. The best evidence, however, that these poems are Sosyura’s is his own reference to them in his early autobiographical essay “Z mynuloho” (From the Past) published in 1925.⁵ The latter also provides some comment, direct and indirect, on the poems, since both refer to the same places and events.

¹The personal papers of the Soviet Ukrainian writer Arkady Lyubchenko (1899–1945), which include the records of the literary organization VAPLITE.

²This is how Sosyura spelt his name.

³According to biographical sources Sosyura spent much of his youth in Verkhne (*Istoriya ukrayins’koyi literatury: radyans’ka literatura*, Kiev, vydavnytstvo Akademiyi Nauk Ukrayins’koyi RSR, 1957, p. 508), where he also joined the uprising against the Germans (Sosyura, *Tvory*, Kiev, 1957, I, p. 7).

⁴*Istoriya ukrayins’koyi literatury; radyans’ka literatura*, p. 71.

⁵V. Sosyura, *Chervony shlyakh*, 1925, nos. 1–2, pp. 146–85.

There are thirteen poems in the collection totalling altogether forty-four four-line stanzas. Eight of them have titles: I, "Ni, ni" (No, no); II, "Zirnytsi" (Dawn); III, "Pisnya" (A Song); V, "Son kokhannya" (Dream of Love); VI, "Poslidniy biy" (The Last Battle); VIII, "Na varti" (On Guard); IX, "Shcho vam" (What Do You Want?); "Dlya" (For . . .). As far as metric form is concerned these technically and linguistically very imperfect stanzas consist usually of alternating long and short lines with a varied rhyme pattern (*a b a b, a a b b, a b b a*).

In content and form Sosyura's verses might be classed as juvenilia. This was possibly one of the reasons why the poet preferred not to publish them although without access to all the published poems of Sosyura it is impossible to know whether any of them were ever published. It is most likely that the collection, regarded as of no particular value, found its way to the archives of the literary organization VAPLITE of which Sosyura was a member and Lyubchenko a secretary. It lay there undisturbed for, one might think, almost sentimental reasons—as the first attempts of a poet who later received fame and recognition. After the dissolution of VAPLITE in 1928 the manuscript remained in Lyubchenko's possession.

Yet on the second reading, this collection, like all juvenilia, is not without significance. It contributes a great deal to our knowledge of the poet's growth and personality.

The first poem (No, no) describes the conflict between love and war. The poet is aware that "the birds are singing and dreams of spring pry into his heart," that his sweetheart's "hand is in my hair"—yet he must reject all this because his "soul is drenched in blood." Very similar sentiment is expressed in poem V (Dream of Love). Poems II, III, and IV, written respectively in May 1918 and June 1918 in Bakhmut, and in December 1918 in Svatovo, introduce themes of revolution and liberation.

Of special interest is poem III since its first stanza is quoted in full in Sosyura's memoir. He relates how in 1919, during his service in the "Haydamak" regiment, he found himself cut off from his unit and surrounded by Red partisans. Hiding in a peasant house he was discovered by a village elder who wanted to turn him over to the Bolsheviks. At this critical moment, Sosyura continues, "there awoke in me the poet-agitator. I started to tell him who we were and that such was our destiny, and I started to read my verses to him. And a miracle happened. The bald elder asked me to copy one of them so that he could learn it by heart. I remember the beginning. (Oh, my verses

were as naïve and green as was my everlasting youth!) [There follows a quotation from "Pisnya."] You should have heard how I recited it. . . . My hair rose in exaltation. . . . Well, they gave us some fat, cucumbers and bread and let us go.⁶

Essentially a lyricist, Sosyura does not dwell on politics or reveal his political sympathies. Yet if one can speak of a single dominant sentiment which pervades the entire collection it is that of the poet's deep attachment to his country.⁷ This nationalist feeling is sometimes quite overt as in stanzas in poems II and III where the poet calls on his fellow countrymen to show the world that they are no longer slaves or describes the Ukraine as weeping in search of her children (a motif familiar in Ukrainian folksongs).

Patriotic as they are, these poems reveal another important aspect of Sosyura's art: his attempt to resolve the conflict between nationalism and communism. The horrors of the civil war, so realistically depicted in his memoir, torment the poet's mind because of the fratricidal tragedy. It is well known that until 1920 Sosyura fought in the ranks of the nationalist army led by Petlyura. According to his own statement, confirmed by other writers, he went over to the Bolsheviks at the time of the Polish occupation of Kiev.⁸ Yet if one accepts the view that all the poems in this collection express the front-line experiences of a young poet who jotted them down without much time to recollect them "in tranquillity" then one can see an inner conflict even before the decision to join the Bolsheviks. Of particular interest are poems VI (The Last Battle), VII, and VIII (On Guard) written in January 1919 in Lozova.

In the first of these the poet tries to rally his strength for the last and decisive battle and believes that the volunteer cossack regiments of the nationalist army will bring about "golden freedom in the morning light." Yet this mood of determination ("now we know where is friend and foe") is dispelled, in the next poem, by reflection and doubt. The fate of his unhappy and strife-torn country is still uncertain. Sosyura's melancholy and apprehension are best expressed in poem VII, which perhaps as the most accomplished in the collection, deserves to be quoted in full:

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁷Sosyura's adoration for Ukraine has, in later years, led to his condemnation as a "bourgeois nationalist," particularly in 1951, when his poem "Love the Ukraine" was severely criticized (see, *Pravda*, July 2, 1951; also A. Parry "Russia's Latest Witch Hunt," *New York Herald Tribune*, October 17, 1951).

⁸See Introduction by M. Ravich-Cherkassky to V. Sosyura, *Izbrannye stikhi v perevodakh russkikh poetov pod redaktsiey M. Golodnogo*, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1930, p. 4.

Tam chorny lotos, tam chorny lotos . . .	There a black lotos, a black lotos . . .
Zitkhaye vazhko chervony stav.	The pond sighs sorrowfully.
I khtos' rydaye tak sumno, sumno.	And someone is crying in sadness
Bahnet tam sertse komus' pronyav.	A bayonet has struck someone's heart.
Zhovto-blakitny tam prapor viye,	A yellow-and-blue flag ⁹ is flying there
I chorny vechir ves' v zloti znov . . .	And the black evening is shrouded in gold.
Rozhevy misyats' tremyt' i mliye,	A pink moon trembles and swoons
I til'ky styne moja lyubov . . .	And my love grows cold.
I ty ne znayesh i ty ne znayesh	And you don't know
De toy khto v pisnyu tebe vsyu vklad.	Where is he who infused you with this song.
Vorozhe nizhno z Gangesom lotos,	The lotos whispers gently to the Ganges
I sumno, sumno zitkhaye stav.	And the pond is sighing in sorrow.

The mention, in this poem, of a "bayonet stuck" in "someone" is the echo of an actual incident recorded by Sosyura in his memoir. In December 1918, in Lozova (the poem was written there in January 1919) Sosyura's unit captured eighteen followers of the famous Ukrainian anarchist leader, Makhno. All eighteen, some of them teenage peasant boys, were executed. In the description of this grim scene, which shook the poet to the core, we find this detail: "One of them, when they struck him, was pierced with a bayonet in his neck. The tip of the bayonet stuck out of his mouth and he caught it with his hand. . . ."¹⁰

In poem VIII the poet is in a similar mood of dejection which cannot be explained merely as a disappointment in love. Poem IX, written on February 8 in Vapnyarka and poem X (Pavlysh, January 29) are tinged with melancholy, and poem XI (Znamyanka, February 1919) expresses rather vehemently the feeling of revulsion with empty verbosity and political propaganda ("So in words we fight for freedom, so in words we love our country"). Finally, the theme of the internecine civil war reappears again in poem XII (Proskurive, February 1919), in which the poet deplores the struggle of "brother against brother" and calls for the unity of his countrymen. This, again we learn from the memoir, was directly related to the slaughter which followed the mutiny of the 15th Bilhorod cavalry regiment in Proskurive.¹¹ In the last four-line poem (XIII) Sosyura declares that these songs, dedicated to his country, were born in "mortal battle" and "do not shine with inspired beauty." So ends a beginner's attempt to record his war experiences in poetry. There follow rather illiterate verses by Sharky, the second of these, entitled "Na spomyn" (In Remembrance), having

⁹The flag of the Ukrainian People's Republic and thus of Petlyura's army.

¹⁰Sosyura, "Z mynuloho," p. 156.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 162-5.

a definite relation to the preceding poems. They, like Sosyura's last poem, were written in February 1919 in Proskurive and were added by Sharky perhaps as an expression of his friendship for Sosyura. In their tone these verses are openly anti-Bolshevik. They speak of the "northern hurricane" which "with the red horde ruins our country" and describe the communist invaders as killers of the "golden freedom."

Sosyura's collection is of little value as poetry, but as a personal document it offers valuable material for further study. Above all, it reflects the conflict resulting from active participation in the revolution with the consequent recoil from its horrors and absurdities, a conflict which in this instance is the chief impulse for writing. There is one further point on which "Virshi" shed new light. It is nowadays generally accepted by Soviet scholars that Sosyura began writing in Russian. In his recollections, printed recently, Sosyura himself states that not until 1920 did he "begin writing in Ukrainian,"¹² and clearly implies that prior to that he wrote in Russian. It is also now generally agreed that one of his first poems published in Ukrainian was "Vidplata" (Recompense) printed in 1920.¹³

The discovery of "Virshi" proves that Sosyura wrote poems in Ukrainian as early as April 1918. To be sure, his Ukrainian was not perfect and was littered with Russicisms, but the poet obviously felt the desire to use his native language in poetry. Perhaps Sosyura's feeling that linguistically these early verses were imperfect contributed to his decision not to publish them. In their content, however, the "Virshi" express quite unmistakably those characteristic themes (national destiny, revolutionary romanticism, frustrated love) which form the core of Sosyura's later poetry.

¹²Sosyura, "Dni yunosty," *Literaturna hazeta*, August 6, 1957.

¹³Sosyura, "Yak ya pysav 'Chervonu zymu,'" *Dnipro*, no. 8, August 1957, pp. 104-5.

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