

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ IN BULGARIAN CULTURAL MEMORY

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Apart from immortality, great figures in literature possess the rare gift to exist in foreign national cultures, with their works being often interpreted in a different and sometimes even extremely opposite to the original context. This is undoubtedly the case of Henryk Sienkiewicz's presence in Bulgarian cultural memory; we have every reason to speak of "the Bulgarian Sienkiewicz" whose literary fate differs from that of the Polish or world known Sienkiewicz. Literary science and cultural thought in this small Balkan country have already accumulated a rich bibliographical record concerning the eminent Pole's presence in Bulgarian intellectual life.

The first notable articles in Bulgaria, interpreting Sienkiewicz as a world-renowned author, come from Alexander Balabanov (Balabanov 1904) and Ivan Shishmanov (Shishmanov 1925)⁵¹. Both of them dedicate special studies on Sienkiewicz noting his exceptional talent as well as the high ethical values in his fiction: the former claiming that "Sienkiewicz is not only a Polish writer. There is no cultural nation in the East and West that hasn't translated his major works into their language.", the latter speaking of the "Sienkiewicz phenomenon". These initial aspects of Sienkiewicz's Bulgarian presence follow the pattern of neglecting typical Polish elements in his works in order to enhance their worldwide, humanistic and most of all – their pan-Slavic importance. The concept of Slavic unity, applied to Sienkiewicz's prose, was strongly proclaimed by authorities such as Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), Bulgaria's national poet, and Boyan Penev (Penev 1925)⁵². This was an attempt to reveal native Bulgarian culture as a carrier of similar to Sienkiewicz's humanistic ideas. By opening the door for historical and cultural parallels between these two Slavic nations, the Polish national past could be easily interpreted in the light of Bulgarian sufferings during the so-called Turkish yoke (the period of Ottoman rule) and distant memories of glory of Bulgarian kingdoms. The sense of historical and spiritual kinship was indeed so genuine, that immediately after the author's death Ivan Vazov dedicated a heartfelt poem to him – *To Sienkiewicz*, written at the end of 1916⁵³:

⁵¹ A. Balabanov (1879–1955), scholar, university professor, critic, one of the most influential intellectuals in modern Bulgarian history; I. Shishmanov (1862–1928), critic, folklorist, cultural historian, prominent scholar of Slavic literary relationships.

⁵² Prof. Boyan Penev (1882–1927), one of the most influential literary historians and critics in Bulgarian culture. A strong advocate of Romanticism and Modernism, he was the main figure in the Polish-Bulgarian cultural dialogue during the first decades of the XX c.

⁵³ The poem was included in the collection *New Echoes (Нови екове, 1917)*, which contemplated on the challenges and legacy of the World War and thus largely exploited „death–resurrection” motifs.

Възкръсна Полша, а ти загина,
дойде свободата, а ти замина.
Казах ли право? Не, полски сине:
не гасне слънце, духът не гине.

Poland resurrected, alas you're dead,
Freedom came but you have left.
Did I say right? No, Polish son:
Spirits don't die and never fades the sun.

Ти жив си вечно в умът, в сърцата,
смърт на безсмъртье не е позната,
ни на тоз, който цял свят сладеше,
който ни даде "Камо грядеши!"

You stay alive in minds and souls,
For death immortals does not know,
Nor shall it meet him whose noble word
Gave us "Quo Vadis" and sweetened the world.

Apart from the somewhat banal statements and rhyming, one thing worth noting here is that Sienkiewicz's (doubly underlined) Polish identity merges with his worldly acclaim. The metaphoric notion of *sweetness*, expressing humanity's gratitude, clearly depicts the way Sienkiewicz was accepted and interpreted in the newly created Balkan country – he was seen both as an eloquent storyteller and a comforter to the afflicted or – to put it in other words – a new messenger of eternal human truths. Moreover, the singling out of *Quo vadis* as the author's emblematic oeuvre reveals several paradoxes of the „Bulgarian Sienkiewicz” phenomenon: the neglect of pro-Catholic fervor (indeed, this particular aspect never drew the attention of Bulgarian critics) as well as the fact that the Pole's initial renown in the country was due to his short stories and *Quo vadis*, while his *Trilogy* and *Knights of the Cross* did not gain popularity until after World War II⁵⁴.

Fifteen years before writing his poem, Vazov revealed another specific aspect of Sienkiewicz's presence in Bulgarian culture – the Nobel prize winner in literature was quickly recognised as a reliable source of historical knowledge. Depicting a day spent in Sofia's mineral baths, Vazov begins his recollections from 1901 with an essayistic introduction: „... these sensuous Roman conquerors [...] were passionate lovers of baths – a place for their political meetings, revelries, orgies, as Sienkiewicz tells us in his novel *Quo vadis*?”⁵⁵

This is possibly the most obvious proof of Sienkiewicz's prestige spreading from literature to broader cultural fields – it's worth remembering that Vazov's piece was written at a time when Bulgarians did not possess nationally acclaimed history books on Antiquity. The Polish writer's function as an authentic source of reference conforms with another crucial aspect of Bulgarian literary life, originating from National revival ideology – good literature must not only help ethical education, but also contain broad factual knowledge. Such curiosities show that in the context of Bulgaria's cultural development at the beginning of the XX century Henryk Sienkiewicz had an unquestionable potential to epitomise the ideal of a successful European writer and intellectual.

It has been documented that *Quo Vadis*'s fame, along with its purely artistic values, has been highly regarded by another of Bulgaria's great writers, Yordan Yovkov, who once planned „a short story [...] and later a novel that could easily remind *Quo Vadis*, but would definitely be something genuinely original” (Sarandev 1986: 392).

⁵⁴ The latter aspect is discussed and widely justified by Kalina Bahneva (Bahneva 2002).

⁵⁵ „... тия сластолюбиви римски завоеватели [...] са били страстни любители на баните – място за техните политически свиждания, веселби, оргии, както ни разказва Сенкевич в своят роман “Quo vadis?” – *In the Warm Waves. Observations from the Bath* (Vazov 1976: 325).

Little more than a decade after Vazov's remarks on Sofia's Roman baths, the so-called Patriarch of Bulgarian literature himself would become an object of comparison with Sienkiewicz, this time in the sphere of national appreciation of its leading authors. Georgi Stamatov's short story *Spoons* (*Задгробници*, 1914) discusses the grim perspectives before national intelligentsia due to the lack of true recognition by the state; describing Vazov as "the eminent old man", one of the characters jumps to the comparison: "And is it the same in Europe? Poland gifted Sienkiewicz an estate worth 50 thousand levs"⁵⁶.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this quote: 1) by the beginning of the World War Sienkiewicz was so distinguishable and intimated into Bulgarian culture, that he could be referred to only by surname; 2) Poland is recognised as a representative part of Europe through synecdoche; and 3) as a consequence of 2) – the obvious bulgarisation of Polish realia (using the Ottoman term *chiflik* for the estate and calculating Oblegorek's value in national currency), serving as a cushion between Balkan and European civilisational differences. It must also be noted that Oblegorek palace, gifted to Sienkiewicz by the grateful nation, have long captured the imagination of Bulgarians as a testimony to the stature of writers and the social role of literature in Poland; even in the XXI century, it can still be alluded to in the headlines of leading Bulgarian newspapers (e.g. Neznakomova 2010).

Another dimension of Henryk Sienkiewicz's indirect role in Polish-Bulgarian cultural dialogue is revealed by the act of Boyan Penev, preserved for future generations in Dora Gabe's memoirs. At the transfer of Sienkiewicz's remains to Warsaw the Bulgarian scholar „held a speech in Polish, which drew the attention of all. [...] the old Mrs Sienkiewicz summoned him and gave him a motherly embrace in front of the thousands of attendees.” (Gabe 1994: 423). This symbolic act encompasses deeply suggestive messages: the spiritual closeness between the two national cultures is best demonstrable through and past Sienkiewicz's reputation; solidarity among Slavs exists even in the modern era and beyond the traditional mediation of Russian culture; it vividly depicts the mother-child relations that prof. Penev professed in terms of the two nations' literary and cultural contacts. Bearing all this in mind, prof. Penev's fervor and "unwavering faith" in Slavic unity in his speech at the above mentioned ceremony should be accepted as a statement of intent for the future of Bulgarian art and culture: "In our country, in Bulgaria he [Sienkiewicz] is read and popular, on par with our greatest poets. Our children at school read his short stories and fragments of his historical novels in their readers, they get enthralled by his ideals, by his knightly, heroic characters. And when we see how in their thoughts they enter the world of Polish history, when we hear them speaking about him with excitement, we trust unwaveringly in Slavic unity" (Penev 1988: 118).

At the beginning of the XX century Sienkiewicz was also "unsurpassed in the number of performances" of *Quo Vadis* theatrical adaptations in Bulgaria (Klejn 2003: 213), although in terms of performing arts these were the years of the rapidly growing fame of Stanislaw Przybyszewski. It was Ivan Vazov again who publicly condemned Przybyszewski because of the immorality of his plays and instead recommended Sienkiewicz to the Bulgarian public (Vazov 1979: 388–389). The "Przybyszewski – Sienkiewicz" opposition in Vazov's text is doubled by its Russian analogue of Mikhail Artsybashev and Lev Tolstoy. In doing so, the Patriarch

⁵⁶ А така ли е в Европа? Полша е подарила на Сенкевич чифлик за 50 хиляди лева. (Stamatov 1983: 484).

of national literature stated his personal preferences towards morally engaged art, as well as towards the peaks (and low points) of the two most prestigious, in his opinion, Slavic literatures. Of course, the ethical side of this particular case had its aesthetic dimensions, dividing Bulgarian cultural elites since the last decade of the XIX century: the conflict between “young” and “old”, “realists” and “modernists”, “conservatives” and “liberals”. Sienkiewicz was undoubtedly a powerful weapon for the traditionalist camp, however there is no evidence that his name was used for political purposes.

In terms of Bulgarian translations of Sienkiewicz’s works, a noteworthy detail is the variety of titles given to his short stories and novels. This is mostly due to the fact that the first translations of his fiction used Russian sources. The most famous example concerns the first editions of *Quo Vadis* – the title *Камо грядеши* not only replaced the Latin phrase with its Church Slavonic equivalent, but successfully neutralised possible Catholic connotations. Contrary to Russian translations however (cf. *Куда идешь*), the novel has never received a title in modern Bulgarian. Another peculiar case is presented by *In Desert and Wilderness* (*W pustyni i w puszczy*) which endured several title versions: *In African Deserts and Forests* (*Из африканските пустини и лесовете*)⁵⁷, *Stas and Nelly in the Desert* (*Стас и Нели в пустинята*)⁵⁸ before today’s national recognition simply as *Stas and Nelly* (*Стас и Нели*). This children’s literature classic became so popular that it was alluded to the title of an original Bulgarian family movie *The Adventures of Spas and Nely* (*Патилата на Спас и Нели*, 1987, directed by Georgi Stoev). The bulgarisation (orientalisation) of foreign realia is also visible in the first translation of the *Lighthouse Keeper*, entitled *Фенерджията на маяка*⁵⁹ and later best known as *Пазачът на фара*. Such philological curiosities not only depict the process of adaptation of Polish realia in the Balkan country, but may serve as reliable database for studies on modern Bulgarian literary tastes.

The significance of Henryk Sienkiewicz as a mediator between the two Slavic cultures did not diminish in the communist era. Along with the promotion of socialist realism writers, now completely forgotten by Bulgarian readers, Sienkiewicz’s stature as a world classic was supported by state authorities, republishing *Quo Vadis*, the *Trilogy* and the *Knights of the Cross* in large circulations. A very interesting survey, conducted in 1973 and published in the classified *Bulletin of the Union of Bulgarian Writers*⁶⁰, reveals Henrih (sic: *Хенрих*) Sienkiewicz as the fourth most popular author in Bulgaria⁶¹, ahead of Dickens, Zola, Maupassant or even the national classics (P. M. 1974: 14). Furthermore, a considerable number of Bulgarian postwar writers and scholars (Petar Dinekov, Kamen Zidarov, Ilya Volen to name but a few) have singled out Sienkiewicz’s novels as their first or most influential contact with Polish culture (Todorov 1999: 59–60). It is therefore no surprise that Sienkiewicz has performed a “secret agent” role in students recruitment for the Polish studies program at the University of Sofia; my private

⁵⁷ Translated from Russian by K. Grancharov, 1924–1925. There are more title versions: *Из африканските пустини и дебри* (transl. by A. Podvarzachov, 1946), and the most modern: *Из африканските пустини и джунгли* (transl. by Evgenia Manolova, Sofia 2007).

⁵⁸ Translated from Russian by Rada Petrova, 1923.

⁵⁹ Translated by S. A., first published in *Летописци*, nr 16, 1900, pp. 312–317.

⁶⁰ The survey is referred to as a work of the Research Center of the Committee of Press, the country’s leading censorship institution between 1971 and 1976.

⁶¹ „The most read world classics are: Jack London, Nikolai Ostrovsky, Maxim Gorky, Henrih Sienkiewicz...”

research at the beginning of the XXI century clearly shows that his historical novels, read in high school, ensured that each year at least one freshman would prefer the Polish course amongst other Slavic philology programs. The peak of this tendency was in the 70-ties and the 80-ties, and by the year 2005 it entirely ceased.

Although Polish culture in Bulgaria has had its new iconic figures since the fall of communism (with Czeslaw Milosz being the latest embodiment of Polish literary genius and intellectual thought – see Bahneva 2011: 17; Rikev 2011: 23), there is no doubt that Henryk Sienkiewicz's presence in Bulgarian cultural memory will preserve its vitality. The national edition of *The Big Read* campaign in 2009 comes as the latest justification of that belief⁶².

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⁶² *Голямото четене* – the Bulgarian version of the BBC's Big Read – was carried out by the Bulgarian National Television (October 2008 – March 2009) with the goal to find the nation's best-loved novel. *Quo Vadis* was placed 41st, ahead of *Les Misérables*, *Don Quixote*, *Winnetou*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*... (Big Read 2009).

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