

S L A V I S T I C A

No. 84

Percival C U N D Y

MARKO VOVCHOK



1984

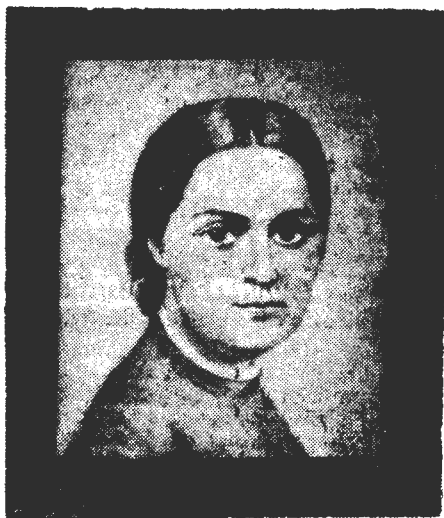
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СТОР.384:

"МАРКУ ВОВЧКУ"

На пам'ять 24 січня

1859

"There is only one who has a mastery of our language: Marko Vovchok!" This led to a personal acquaintance by Turgenev with Shevchenko's "literary daughter," and as a result, in 1859, the first volume of the *Tales* appeared in Russian, translated by Turgenev himself. A year later what is considered to be the most characteristic of Marko Vovchok's stories, *The Aristocrat* (Instytutka), also appeared in Turgenev's Russian translation two years before it was published in the original Ukrainian. Her popularity was great but also lasting. Before me as I write lies a copy of *Marusya* (also called "The Kozak's Daughter"). It was printed in Zhovkva, 1938, and bears on the title page "Tenth Edition." What is more the editor, T. Kostruba, says in a foreword: "This story is a most popular book in Europe. Translated into French, it has run through several dozen editions, and from French it has also been translated into German and Italian." A bibliography of her works shows that in addition to the languages already mentioned, her stories have appeared in Serbian, Croat, Polish and Czech. In English, a few of them, translated by the present writer and others, have appeared in recent years in the pages of the "Ukrainian Weekly."

The publication of the *Tales* created an impression comparable to that made by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although from a literary and artistic point of view there is no comparison between the two women writers. Marko Vovchok's work has remained, as Kulish prophesied it would, "fundamental in our national (Ukrainian) literature." Seventy years later, Yefremov said what amounts to the same thing in other terms. Critics made a search for parallels in the work of both, talked learnedly about "influences" of the American on the Ukrainian authoress. However, it does not seem that Marko Vovchok was acquainted with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when she was writing the first series of her stories. What the two women had in common was a burning indignation against human bondage of any sort and a profound sympathy with the enslaved and downtrodden, one with the Negro in America, the other with the serf in Russia. "Even the ox under the yoke will bellow; why then should a Christian soul suffer all kinds of abuse and indignity and not cry out," says one of Marko Vovchok's characters. Harriet Beecher Stowe's work was a powerful piece of literary propaganda for the times in which it was written, while Marko Vovchok's *Tales* remain a living classic. Her work bears the stamp of native originality in form and content, coupled with the power to touch the most sensitive strings in the reader's heart, and through it all there runs a democratic, freedom-loving, humanitarian philosophy of life.

As has been said there is much of the mysterious, unexplained, and conjectural in the life and personality of Mariya Markovych. As far as Ukrainian literature is concerned she was like a meteor, bursting out suddenly with great brilliancy and as swiftly fading away. As there was at first little knowledge of the facts behind the pseudonym and confusion later on, the authorship of the *Tales* was a matter of critical debate for years. The question was: Who in reality is Marko Vovchok? Mariya, or Opanas, or both together,

The fact that Mariya had apparently been brought up solely at Orel in Great Russia, and that she seemed to have resided only five to six years in Ukraine after her marriage to Opanas Markovych, coupled with the fact that her husband was a zealous Ukrainian patriot with a passion for the study of the peasantry and their folklore, gave rise to the assumption that the pseudonym covered the cooperative authorship of husband and wife. This was reinforced by a false statement made by Kulish, according to which Mariya provided the plot and artistic form and Opanas the verbiage of the *Tales*. The inference was drawn that it would have been impossible for "a typical and full-blooded Great Russian" to have acquired the mastery of the language and insight into the life and psychology of the peasantry displayed in the *Tales* in so short a period of residence in Ukraine. Moreover, while there, the Markovych's had lived mostly in cities and very little in the country. On the other hand, it was a fact that Mariya possessed remarkable linguistic gifts. She spoke French like a native without a trace of foreign accent, Polish likewise; Czech admirably, and she could read with ease and discrimination German and English classics in the original languages. With such gifts she could easily in five or six years' residence in Ukraine have attained the mastery of the vernacular she displayed in the *Tales*.

However, the "fatal fact" remained for some that after the death of her husband in 1867, Mariya "died" as far as Ukrainian literature was concerned. The battle over the "enigmatic pseudonym" raged for years. For some, Mariya was indisputably "Shevchenko's literary successor," for others, she was "the impudent Muscovite who tried to steal the crown from Ukraine's finest writer, her own husband, Opanas Markovych." Only since 1908, thanks to the research of V. Domanytsky, who chivalrously defended Mariya and demonstrated her sole authorship of the *Tales*, has all doubt and suspicion been dissipated. However, much in her personality still remains "mysteriously Sphinxlike," to use Turgenev's phrase concerning her. Judging from the published correspondence of men such as Shevchenko, Kulish, Turgenev, Herzen,

Bakunin and others, men who knew her well and were in close relations with her, she somewhat mystified them, while at the same time they bear witness to her great charm, intelligence, and sympathy. She was frank and open-hearted, but her dignified reserve left many of her motives unfathomable. Hence, in some part, arises the aura of mystery which surrounded more or less all her life.

Mariya Oleksandrivna Vylynska (there are three variants in the spelling of her surname) was born in 1834. Where, it is not exactly clear, but in all probability on her grandfather's estate in Orel. Her ancestry, according to some notes she scribbled on the pages of a magazine, correcting misstatements of an article therein purporting to give her biography, was mixed Great Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian. She was educated in a private boarding school at Kharkiv, Ukraine. This, together with some statements in her letters, testifies to the fact that the Ukrainian language was familiar to her from her early years. Although it was not the language of ordinary intercourse at home, we do know that Ukrainian proverbs, sayings, and songs were often heard there.

In 1848 a young student, Opanas Vasylovych Markovych, came to reside at Orel under government supervision for complicity in the affair of the Brotherhood of Sts. Cyril and Methodius. He was an attractive and interesting personality. Here he met Mariya, who, besides the promise of great intellectual and spiritual gifts, also possessed a handsome face and figure. She is described as a splendid blonde, tall, and with beautiful grey eyes, a quiet and assured composure, and with an easy flowing grace in all her movements. She must have exercised a great fascination by her intellectual qualities also, for Turgenev, who came to know her intimately and greatly befriended her, speaks in one of his letters to her of his desire to continue "those long, long conversations while travelling together." (He meant the journey to Paris in 1859.) "Particularly do I recall one conversation we had between Cologne and the border in the warm and tranquil evening. I do not remember what exactly we talked about, but the poetical sentiments aroused by it remain in my soul since that night." In 1850 or 1851, the year uncertain, but at Orel certainly, Opanas and Mariya were married. Under his influence Mariya came fully to share the views of the Brotherhood in regard to the emancipation and uplift of the common people, and with him as mentor, took up ethnographic study as a means of coming to know them better. As a result we have her literary productions in Ukrainian. Yefremov remarks with justice that "the works of Marko Vovchok with their protest against serfdom are the

only immediate result in Ukrainian literature of the broad and far-reaching plans which were discussed in the meetings of the Brotherhood in Kiev during 1846-7."

Shortly after their marriage the young couple moved to Ukraine where they resided in various places, including Chernihiv and Kiev. In 1855 Opanas got a position as teacher of geography in the local gymnasium at Nemyriv, Podolia. It was from here that the first of the *Tales* were dispatched to Kulish with the resulting enthusiasm which followed.

In 1859 came a visit to St. Petersburg where Mariya and her husband made personal acquaintance with many leading personalities, such as Shevchenko, Turgenev, and others. Kulish she had already met. While there a mysterious something took place, which caused a crisis of a sort in the marital relations of Mariya and Opanas. Taking her young son, Bogdan, Mariya went abroad, first to Berlin, then to Dresden. Opanas followed her to Germany but soon returned, "finding his position somewhat embarrassing." From then on husband and wife lived apart, and the latter returned to Russia only after Opanas' death in 1867. To add to the mystery, the two kept up a correspondence in cordial terms all the time, and Opanas, although frequently in straitened circumstances, sent his wife money from time to time. There was plenty of "talk" among their friends, though no one really knew what was at the bottom of the whole affair. "Why they lived apart," wrote Opanas' nephew later, "I do not know; but this I do know for certain that my uncle grieved terribly, and his favorite topic of conversation with me, a second-year student in gymnasium in 1860, was his son Bogdan, his studies and his letters." It appears now that Kulish was the one responsible for the original separation. What the reason was on his part is open to speculation, but later on he took an ignoble revenge. In 1886, in answer to a question by Prof. Ohonowsky, then engaged in writing a history of Ukrainian literature, as to who should be regarded as the real author of the *Tales*, Kulish replied: "These stories were written by Opanas and Mariya Markovych in cooperation, so that in the history of Ukrainian literature the two must be regarded as constituting one author." This was utterly untrue, but the testimony of Kulish was looked upon then as conclusive evidence until the matter was finally cleared up by the researches of Domanytsky, and Mariya received her just due.

In company with Turgenev, Mariya travelled to Paris, and after visiting Rome and several other places, settled there until her return

to Russia after her husband's death. Here the stories included in the second and third volumes of the *Tales* were written and sent to Russia for publication. During these years she seems to have been constantly making preparations to return home, but something always arose to prevent it, either a lack of funds or some other causes unknown. In any case, as we learn from Turgenev's letters, she spent money like water and was often entirely without ready cash. He says in one place, "Mariya Alexandrovna is again in her normal condition—without a cent." Again, "She is a very fine woman, but she eats up money." Turgenev greatly assisted her as a sort of literary agent for her with Russian publishers, arranging for the publication of her work and terms of payment. During her residence abroad, besides the *Tales* in Ukrainian, she began to do a good deal of translation work into Russian. One of her productions in this field was a translation of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. After a time she ceased writing in Ukrainian altogether.

The stories in Marko Vovchok's *Tales of the Common People* may be grouped under three heads. First there are those dealing with peasant life under conditions of serfdom. Second, those treating of social and family relations among free peasants. Of the remainder, some may be classed as social-psychological studies, while others are based on popular historical traditions, fairy tales, and legends. All we shall speak of here are those in the first and second classes, because they are intimately related and constitute the substance of Marko Vovchok's "messages."

The strongest and most characteristic of the *Tales* are two, written shortly after her settlement in Paris.

The Good-for-Nothing (*Ledashchytsya*) is the story of the daughter of a free Kozak woman. The mother has been made a household serf by fraudulent means and can find no way of escape. The mother's longing for freedom has been transmitted to her daughter, Nastya, who asks her mother's help in winning freedom. The mother tells her that it is no use trying. In desperation Nastya takes to drink and has a child by a man who, she hopes, will make her a free woman. The man fails her, the child dies, and Nastya becomes a hopeless drunkard. When freedom is finally proclaimed, all Nastya can say is: "Good people, am I free, or am I drunk?" At the cost of her virgin honor and broken health Nastya had vainly sought to purchase freedom, and when it does come it releases her only to die a drunkard's death. The point of the story is that here is a woman of free birth, unjustly made a serf, who longs and struggles for freedom.

In *The Aristocrat* (Instytutka) we have a masterly summarization of all that Marko Vovchok wrote on the subject of serfdom. Ustya is a household serf in the home of an old aristocrat who treats her maids fairly well. However, when the old lady's granddaughter comes home after having finished her education at an "Institute," (a private school under Imperial patronage for daughters of the nobility and gentry) Ustya finds that she now has a hard, unfeeling mistress who makes her life a misery. But by taking advantage of a certain situation she manages to get permission to marry Prokip, also a serf, with whom she has fallen in love. The couple plan to win their freedom somehow. This they achieve after great tribulations. Although the story ends with Prokip being sent away to serve a term as a soldier, while Ustya must remain behind in Kiev to gain her living as a household drudge, yet

it ends on a note of indomitable hopefulness. At the end, Ustya says, "Somehow the thought that I am free, that my hands are not bound, will help me. This is an evil that will pass—the other was lifelong." In this story, serfs by birth are actively struggling to attain freedom.

At the time Mariya wrote, however, serfdom was definitely on its way out as an institution, but the lot of the peasant under free conditions was not much improved. In the most representative of the stories dealing with this phase of peasant life, *Sister* (Sestra), the narrator is a hard-working woman who has been compelled by pity and love to mortgage her labor and give the proceeds to save her unfortunate brother and his family from economic ruin. She, too, finds an ungrateful mistress hard to work for. She says in closing, "O Lord, Lord, it's hard to humor a good-for-nothing person. But I've hired and sold myself, so I must needs work it out. But when the year is done, please God, I'll hunt for a decent place. Where there's a will, there's a way."

Mariya possessed a magnetic capacity for attracting the common people to herself, and this was one of her great assets as a writer. She could easily induce them to talk about themselves, their troubles and trials, joys and feelings. It was this that enabled her to penetrate their psychology and to describe them and their life so accurately and movingly. Her attitude toward them was that of a near and dear friend to whom the wretched can freely pour out the burdened heart and relate without reserve the story of the evils inflicted by the upper classes.

In addition, she had the gift of writing a simple, natural prose which revealed the rich treasures inherent in the Ukrainian vernacular. But her great talent lies in the ability to describe the people in the mass, made up as it is of a multitude of indistinct grey existences which form

the solid background of human life. Hence her characters appear rather as collective types than fully drawn, outstanding personalities. Yet for all that, they are none the less real and living—perhaps even more so, for common life is like that. One may easily forget details, even the names of her characters, but their personalities leave an unforgettable impression on the reader. One reason for this is, as a note appended to some of the stories says, that often they were transcriptions of events that came under the writer's personal observation. In her hands, such fragments of experience became pictures of real life in a frame of artistry.

The womanly point of view, and by this I do not mean the "feminine," prevails all through the *Tales*. Almost all of them are put into the mouths of women narrators, either that of the principal actor, or rather, sufferer, or that of a friend who witnessed the whole course of the action. They all speak in simple, unvarnished language, such as a woman from the ranks of the common people would naturally use. With them there is no more dissection of character or analysis of motives than is usual in ordinary life. The descriptions of natural surroundings they give in passing are only such as would come as a matter of course to one thinking of certain scenes connected with certain experiences. The chief interest is centered on woman and her hard and difficult lot in life, whether bond or free. Men, generally speaking, play a subordinate role. This emphasis on women's life and experience in the *Tales* leaves upon them as a whole the stamp of the womanly in its finest sense. They give us throughout an impression of womanly tenderness, mildness, gentleness, and simplicity, except, of course, where the feminine characteristic of shrewishness is introduced. Even here, as it is generally one of the same sex who suffers from it, the womanly characteristic of patience and long-suffering comes out all the stronger by contrast. Marko Vovchok's favorite type is that of a woman, quiet, submissive, kind, and good, who loves generously and self-sacrificingly, and bears without complaint her heavy cross. For this reason the *Tales* are enveloped in an atmosphere of quiet sadness, they breathe an elegaic note of grief over broken lives, finer feelings abused, and hopes unfulfilled, borne with infinite patience and meekness.

The exact date of Mariya's return to Russia after her husband's death is not known, except that it was sometime in 1867. Toward the end of the 70's she married again, her second husband being a certain Lobach-Zhychenko. She settled in St. Petersburg where she was soon invited to become a regular contributor to a leading Russian journal published there. She wrote a number of stories and novels in Russian

during the years that followed. The work of translations into Russian, begun while abroad, was continued on a larger scale. For example, she translated a large number of Jules Verne's novels from the French, as well as many pedagogical works from various languages.

What induced her to forsake writing in the Ukrainian language in which she had achieved her first and greatest success? What was it that drew her entirely into the field of purely Russian literary activity?

There are a number of valid reasons. Yefremov suggests that as long as she was in contact with Ukrainian circles she kept up her enthusiasm for work in that language. However, living abroad gradually weakened the ties which bound her to the Ukrainian cause until they finally broke entirely. What contributed to this were: the death of Shevchenko; the failure of the short-lived Ukrainian journal, *Osnova*; the dispersal of the Ukrainian group in St. Petersburg; Valuyev's circular ("There never was, is not now, and never will be a Ukrainian language"); and lastly, the death of her husband and first mentor. To these Domanytsky adds others which, in his opinion, were more cogent. They are: the influence of leading Russian writers; the assurance that she could win no less glory by writing in Russian; and the lure of "insidious metal" as a means of comfortable support for herself and son abroad, which "insidious metal" Russian publishers were able to dispense much more liberally than the single Ukrainian journal *Osnova*, which, anyway, was slowly failing. We know, too, that while abroad, Mariya had maintained close relations with Russians such as Turgenev, Herzen, Bakunin, and Pisarev. For Herzen's "Bell" she wrote articles, and for Bakunin she translated revolutionary proclamations into Ukrainian.

It is quite understandable then that as a result of such strong influences and unfavorable circumstances, Mariya passed over into the field of purely Russian activity as a writer. However, she never forgot her first love for Ukrainian ethnographic study and writing. Between 1880-9 she spent eight years near Bohuslav, during which time she amassed a large number of notes on Ukrainian folklore. Besides this, a number of begun but unfinished works belong to a still later date. A visit to Kiev in 1902 revived her early enthusiasm for creative writing, and on her return home, she completed a couple of legends which were printed in Kiev. She also began a long novel, *Haydamaky*, on which she worked to the very last, spending the last few days of her life in correcting it. The language of these last works, it may be noted, is as limpid, fresh, and colorful as that of the *Tales* of 1857. The pity of it is, what might she not have accomplished for Ukrainian literature in

the years between, had it not been for the all-embracing, assimilative spirit of Russian Imperialism in the intellectual realm as well as in the political-

She died in N a l' c h i k, July 28, 1907.



MARKO-VOVCHKIANA

IN THE WEST :

I

The foregoing P.Cundy's text was
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*

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II

Marko Vovchok in Bad Schwalbach

1859-1860



Commemorative Portrait of
Marko Vovchok by Kateryna
Antonovych, Canada (1960),
presented to the city of
Bad Schwalbach on April 3,
1961

by Dr. J. B. Rudnyckyj, Head,
Department of Slavistics,
University of Manitoba,
Winnipeg, Canada.

One of the Library
of Congress cards re M.Vovchok

Markovych, Mariia Oleksandrivna (Vilinskaia) 1834-1907. ^{*)}

Новыя повѣсти и рассказы Марка Вовчка [pseud.]
Санктпетербургъ, Изд. Д. Е. Кожанчикова, 1861.

443 p. 20 cm.

i. Title. *Title transliterated: Novyia poviesti i razskazy.*

PG3467.M34N6

54-48168

Library of Congress (3)

Note:

*) The LC, P. Cundy's (see p.7), and other bio-bibliographers' date of M.Vovchok's birth: 1834 is incorrect; according to recent archival research she was born on December 10, 1833.

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S L A V I S T I C A

A multilingual series relating to Slavic and East European languages and cultures, was founded in Augsburg, West Germany, in 1948 by J.B.Rudnyckyj, then Director of U.V.A.N.-Institute of Slavistics. In the years of 1948 - 1984 - 84 issues were published.

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