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OREST ZILYNS'KYJ, IN MEMORIAM: (12 APRIL 1923-16 JULY 1976)

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## CHRONICLE

### OREST ZILYNS'KYJ, *IN MEMORIAM*

(12 APRIL 1923-16 JULY 1976)

In July 1976, shocking news reached this country: Orest Zilyns'kyj, the spiritual leader of the Ukrainians of Czechoslovakia, had died. We, his colleagues and personal friends, were stunned by the thought that this kind and gentlemanly scholar had been struck down in the prime of his life. Soon, his death during a holiday excursion in Zemplínska Širava (Eastern Slovakia) was confirmed. The circumstances of that death remain obscure. His body was buried in Svidnik, the Ukrainian cultural center in Slovakia he had often visited to advise its intelligentsia on their cultural and literary pursuits.

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Orest Zilyns'kyj was born on 12 April 1923, in Krasna (Lemko Ukrainian Korosten'ka, the district or *powiat* of Krosno), within the Lemko-Ukrainian enclave in Poland. He was the son of the eminent Ukrainian linguist Dr. Ivan [Kobasa]<sup>1</sup> Zilyns'kyj (1879-1952), professor of East Slavic philology at the universities of Cracow (1926-1939) and Prague (1946-1952). He attended the Polish gymnasium in Cracow until 1939 and received his certificate from the Ukrainian gymnasium in Jaroslav in 1940. Orest's parents tutored him in Ukrainian subjects.

As a young man of eighteen, in the fall of 1941, Orest Zilyns'kyj entered the Ukrainian Free University in Prague. He also enrolled in the German university of that city. (The Czech Charles University had been closed by the German authorities.) Prior to 1945, he was quite active in the literary and student circles of the Ukrainian colony

<sup>1</sup> Ivan's father was a farmer named Mykola Kobasa who married a Polish girl, Anna Zilińska, from Wola Jaseńska; their son adopted his mother's name. Ivan married Julija Pryslops'ka, daughter of the local priest. Ivan Zilyns'kyj's *magnum opus* was his "Phonetic Description of the Ukrainian Language," which will appear in English translation in the Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies.

in Prague. In 1943, Zilyns'kyj's studies were interrupted by his imprisonment in the notorious Pankrác fortress by the Gestapo, and later by the events of war. Among his university teachers were renowned philologists and literary scholars, such as the Ukrainians Oleksander Kolessa (1867-1945), Ivan Pan'kevych (1887-1958), and his father Ivan Zilyns'kyj, as well as the Czechs Bohuslav Havránek, Julius Dalanský and Bohumil Mathesius. Orest received his doctorate from Charles University in April 1949. The topic of his dissertation, which remains unpublished, was "The Semantic and Stylistic Function of the non-*polnoglasié* in the Literary Language of the Ukrainian Territory (*Sémantická a stylistická funkce neplnohlasí ve spisovném jazyce ukrajinského území*)."

The pedagogical activity of Orest Zilyns'kyj spanned only nine years, from 1949 to 1958. He taught at the Palacký University in Olomouc, first as assistant professor (1949-1956) and then as associate professor (1956-1958). His subjects were Polish language, Old Rus' literature and folklore, and modern Russian literature. In 1958, Zilyns'kyj opted for a research career, accepting the invitation of the Czechoslovak Academy of Arts and Sciences in Prague to become a research fellow in comparative literature and folklore. He worked with the academy for eighteen years, until his sudden death (in the *Československo-sovětský institut* from 1958 to 1964, the *Ústav jazyků a literatur* from 1964 to 1971, and the *Ústav pro českou a světovou literaturu* from 1971). When Czechoslovakia adopted the Soviet system of academic degrees, he wrote a second dissertation, on "The Popular Games of the Slavic Peoples (*Lidové hry Slovanů*),"<sup>2</sup> which he defended in 1966.

Orest Zilyns'kyj married twice. With his encouragement, Zilyns'kyj's first wife, Ludmila Klymenko, translated Ukrainian literature into Czech. They divorced in 1969. His second wife, Jeva Biss, is one of the leading Ukrainian novelists in Czechoslovakia. He is survived by two children by his first wife—Oksana and Bohdan.

\* \* \*

Orest Zilyns'kyj was one of those fortunate young scholars who know their goal early in life. As a twenty-year-old university student, he had already chosen the path he would follow throughout his creative life—that of the Ukrainian *Geistesgeschichte* within the

<sup>2</sup> An English translation will appear in the Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies.

theoretical framework proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Zilyns'kyj sought to objectify the Ukrainian experience through the Ukraine's language and literature, its institutions, and its history during specific epochs. In his view, literature, in the broadest sense, was the truest self-expression of Ukrainian historical consciousness. Therefore, intellectual creativity and especially folklore,<sup>3</sup> concurrently with the study of social groups and their historical development, commanded his attention.

At the outset of his scholarly career, Zilyns'kyj was fascinated by the Ukrainian renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He believed that during this great, contradictory epoch Ukrainian pre-secular society suffered the cruelest blows in its uneven contest with secularized Western culture, and yet mobilized dormant energies to produce its first full self-expression.<sup>4</sup>

Zilyns'kyj searched for Ukrainian roots in the cultural beginnings of the Slavs. He studied Ukrainian and Slavic perennial ritualistic games and songs, from their traditional beginnings to the seventeenth century. The relation of Slavic popular ballads to the Ukrainian *dumy*, in particular, attracted his interest. The complex problem of the origin of the *dumy* genre would continue to occupy his intellectual curiosity throughout his life.<sup>5</sup> He later studied the folklore of the times of Bohdan Xmel'nyc'kyj (d. 1657), especially Ukrainian love songs and humoristic verses (*virši-oracii*). The Ukrainian revival of the nineteenth century and the towering personality of Taras Ševčenko (1814-1861) inspired Zilyns'kyj to write some fifteen studies. He also published several articles on Ivan Franko (1856-1916), whom he considered to be Galicia's own "Moses."

The literature of the Ukrainian *rozstriljane vidrodžennja* of the 1920s also captivated Zilyns'kyj. He wrote about many of its writers, analyzing their work and epoch in depth. Among his subjects were Mykola Bažan (b. 1904), Oleksander Dovženko (1894-1956), Jevhen Hryhoruk (1899-1922), Jurij Janovs'kyj (1902-1954), Jevhen Plužnyk (1898-1938), Valer'jan Poliščuk (1897-1942), Maksym Ryl's'kyj (1895-

<sup>3</sup> Folkloristic themes dominated Zilyns'kyj's work. An article on this aspect of his creativity will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*.

<sup>4</sup> See his "Duxova heneza peršoho ukrajins'koho vidrodžennja," in *Steži: Žurnal ukrajins'koho students'koho seredovyšča Nimeččyny ta Avstriji* 1, nos. 7-10 (Innsbruck-Munich [Göttingen], 1946-47): 6-20.

<sup>5</sup> An English translation of his basic monograph on the *dumy* will appear in the Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies.

1964), Volodymyr Svidzins'kyj (1885-1941), Pavlo Tyčyna (1891-1967), and Oleksa Vlyz'ko (1908-1934). Zilyns'kyj's studies helped rehabilitate some of these literary figures, for instance, Jevhen Plužnyk and Volodymyr Svidzins'kyj.

It was Zilyns'kyj's special distinction to have opened the eyes of the Soviet Ukrainian literary establishment to the talent and uniqueness of the Lemko Galician poet, Bohdan Ihor Antonyč (1909-1937), whose "thinking and style," wrote Zilyns'kyj, "was indeed passion ruled and governed by intellect."

A favorite scholarly idea of Zilyns'kyj's was that the Ukrainian *Geist* attained its greatest heights in lyrical poetry. He devoted special effort and care to this branch of literature, preparing several studies and anthologies, which, one hopes, will be published one day. Parallel to his studies of such sophisticated works, Zilyns'kyj wrote a monograph on the verses of Hryhorij Olijnyk, a Galician peasant who emigrated to Canada.

The literature of the "men of the sixties" (*šestydesjatnyky*), especially the poetry of Ivan Drač (b. 1936), the prose of Jevhen Hucalo (b. 1934), and the novel *Sobor* (1968) of Oles' Hončar (b. 1918), prompted Zilyns'kyj to deal with the Ukraine's capacity for spiritual regeneration.

From 1965, Zilyns'kyj took on the role of mentor to Ukrainian literary activity in Czechoslovakia, particularly in Prague and Prešov. In an effort to elevate the literary standards of the westernmost Ukrainian province, he wrote more than ten critical essays on regional poetry and prose, challenging its authors to become the avant-garde of Ukrainian national literature. He devoted special attention to the work of the gifted poets Myxajlo Drobnjak (b. 1942), Stephen Hostynjak, Ivan Macins'kyj, and Myroslav Nemet (b. 1943).

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Orest Zilyns'kyj regarded himself primarily as an armchair scholar. Yet, he was far more than an anchorite who retired into the seclusion of his study. He believed in a mission, and he accepted the challenge of making a permanent contribution to his times.

Zilyns'kyj's aim was to use the highly-developed Czech literature and its relative intellectual freedom in the 1960s to strengthen the position of Ukrainian literature. Relying on his excellent rapport with Czech literati and scholars, he endeavored to arouse their interest in Ukrainian letters. His efforts met with enthusiastic response from a group

of Czech writers. In 1968, on the occasion of the Sixth International Congress of Slavists in Prague, an imposing volume (480 pages) appeared as a publication of the renowned Czech Slavonic Library (*Slovanská knihovna*). Its editor and foremost contributor was Orest Zilyns'kyj. The title of the work was *Sto padesát let česko-ukrajinských literárních styků, 1814-1964: Vědecko-bibliografický sborník* [One hundred fifty years of Czech-Ukrainian literary relations: a collection of scholarly bibliography]. The annotated bibliography with numerous essays, most of which were written by Zilyns'kyj, enumerated over 15,000 items. A large portion of the publications catalogued had come into being due to the inspiration and urgings of Orest Zilyns'kyj. Indeed, the volume is a testimony to a remarkable cultural exchange brought about through the efforts of a single individual.

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In the last decade of his life Zilyns'kyj strove toward a twofold goal. On the one hand, he wanted to help Ukrainian literature enter the international literary arena through the medium of the respected Czech language. On the other, he sought to bolster the dignity of Ukrainian writers burdened with the inferiority complex that came with being representatives of the "younger brother." He had the satisfaction of seeing his goal materialize, as even the culturally sophisticated and demanding Czech public began reading works of Ukrainian literature.

During Czechoslovakia's era of "socialism with a human face" (1965-1968) the monthly *Duklja* published in Prešov became, under the guidance of Zilyns'kyj, one of the leading Ukrainian literary periodicals in Eastern Europe and certainly the most independent and bold among them. In effect, *Duklja* served as a literary "window on Europe" for Ukrainian writers in the more remote and restricted cultural centers of Kiev, L'viv, Odessa, and Xarkiv.

Orest Zilyns'kyj's greatest ambition was to organize an international association for Ukrainian studies having its own scholarly journal. He proposed such a venture in 1968, at the Sixth International Congress of Slavists in Prague; its Soviet participants, however, could not support his plan. With the end of the Prague "spring," his idea passed into oblivion in Czechoslovakia. However, that same year, in 1968, a systematic program of Ukrainian studies was initiated in the United States, at Harvard University. A few years later, in 1973, the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute was estab-

lished and the planning of its international journal began. Orest Zilyns'kyj followed these developments with great interest and rejoiced at the thought that his concept was being realized in this country.<sup>6</sup>

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Orest Zilyns'kyj began publishing scholarly work in 1946, at the age of twenty-three. By 1976, he had produced a total of 206 books, articles, textbooks, reviews, and translations.<sup>7</sup> These appeared in several languages: Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Russian, English and German. At least five of his unpublished works are being prepared for publication; several others remain in manuscript form.

Nevertheless, Zilyns'kyj's design was left incomplete. His striving for exactitude and bibliographical perfection, paired with his passion for pioneering work, did not allow synthesis at an early age. Surely, however, had he lived, he would have constructed the magnificent edifice of the Ukrainian *Geistesgeschichte* that he had planned.

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Let us part from Orest Zilyns'kyj with the words of Jeva Biss, his devoted wife:

He passed from us at the height of his creativity, in the 53rd year of his life. He died, as dies a tall tree, whose roots cling tightly to its native soil and whose branches always catch the first songs of the heralds of dawn.

We believe that his great work will find its rightful continuation. Let the memory of this gentle, tender, and true person be cherished in the hearts of those for whom he lived and worked, whom he loved and befriended.

May you, Orest, find the soil of Svidnik light, and may a gentle wind from your native Krasna reach your eternal resting place.

Omeljan Pritsak  
Ihor Ševčenko  
*Harvard University*

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard repeatedly invited him to teach Ukrainian literature at the university, but he was unable to accept these invitations.

<sup>7</sup> A bibliography of Zilyns'kyj's publications will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*.