

# PETÖFPS POETRY IN SLOVAK TRANSLATIONS (186W918)

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Requiring practically one hundred and fifty years in the Slovak cultural environment, the reception of Alexander Petőfi's poetry (1823-1849) has passed through various peripeteia. Periods of unconcern, reserve and even inimical refusal alternated with stages of a positive attitude towards his work. This was apparent both in the impulses which it gave to some Slovak poets, particularly at the start of their literary career, and in the number of translations of his poems that appeared in journals or books.

This ebb and flow of interest cannot be explained through literature alone. The relationship of the Slovaks to Alexander Petőfi's personality and work was determined right from the beginning by extraliterary factors which had their roots in the Slovak-Hungarian political, national and cultural contradictions and conflicts of the time.

The relationship of the Slovaks to Petőfi was partly conditioned by this Hungarian poet's Slovak origin, partly by the strong Magyar nationalistic charge of his poetry and partly by his key position in the development of Hungarian romantic poetry. Slovak intellectuals with a deep sense of national consciousness could never forgive him his "treachery" - his becoming a "renegade" - the fact that he, the son of Slovak parents, Stefan Petrovič and Mária Hruzová, had changed his name to Sándor Petőfi and became one of the foremost representatives of Hungarian national, political and cultural efforts directed against the existential interests of the Slovak nation. These facts affected Petőfi's reception in Slovakia from the forties of the last century until 1948. It was only the so-called socialist internationalism which for the next forty years controlled the social thinking in this country and in our southern neighbour that helped to span the chasm between Petőfi's Slovak origin and his vehemently declared Hungarian nationality.

By 1861, when the first translations of Petőfi's poems appeared in Slovak, his work had been concluded. He died during the revolutionary fighting of 1849. During his lifetime he published several poetic collections, which in 1847 he included in a volume *Petőf Sándor összes költeményei*.<sup>1</sup> It is comprised of poems

from 1842-1846 and appeared of in a second edition one year later. His works from 1847-1849 came out posthumously in 1858 under the title *Petőő Sándor újabb költeményei*.<sup>2</sup> However, censorship excluded over eighty revolutionary anti-Hapsburg poems. Many of the others were mutilated or altered. After a few incomplete editions, the Hungarian reading public could become acquainted with Petőő's complete works only in 1877. A scholarly edition appeared only in 1890. Then followed a critical edition of Petőő's works in six volumes<sup>3</sup> which naturally carry with them the ideological orientation of their authors, evidenced by a disorientation and befuddlement of his revolutionary poetry and concealment of or passing over in silence their utopistic-socialist design.

Alexander Petőő, the principal representative of a populist-national movement\* in Hungarian literature, wrote his poetic work between 1842 and 1849. During these seven years he produced over eight hundred and sixty poems of diverse poetic genres and eleven shorter epic compositions. His poetic career, prematurely ended in a heroic death, is divided into four main developmental periods.

The first stage, bracketed by the years 1842-1844, witnessed the process of crystallization of the popular nature of literature. A new type of a lyric hero was born, one moulding reality from a meaningful aspect and from people's emotions. Petőő reevaluated or renewed all the poetic genres that he pursued at the time: genre images, artificial folk songs, natural and amorous lyricism, versified epic, etc.

The second period includes the year 1845 and the first half of 1846. These are months of a mental and artistic crisis. His effort to express his interior restlessness with the condition of the society gets into contradiction with the results of his work, and this disrupts the poetics and aesthetics of his poetry.

In the third stage of his poetic development from the middle of 1846 until 1848, Petőő develops on a higher plane all that he had artistically achieved until then. He extends the frontiers of his poetry. He sees contemporary events against a background of history, he joins the fate of the Hungarian people with that of nations of the whole world. Love of life again revives in him, a desire of social activity, a revolutionary ardour. New procedures and genres appear in his poetry. He enriches his work with new motifs. Petőő's poetic revolution grew into a political one. With his poetry he takes hold of all the aspects of this topical circuit.

In the fourth stage of Petőő's work during the revolutionary years 1848-1849, political poetry became the axis of his writings. The poet's radicalism attained the extreme limits: his social programme expressed the interests and goals of a leftist, Jacobine wing in the Hungarian revolution. However, he simultaneously preaches the idea of social justice and freedom for

all the nations of the world. Yet, his poetry was not uniquely reduced to the political topic, but dealt with all the aspects of life.

His death at the battle of Fehéregyháza put a premature end to his work. Nevertheless, the latter constitutes a mature and meaningful whole which won him the fame of being the greatest Hungarian poet and opened for him the way into world literature.

The first Slovak translator of Petőfi's poetry was V. Paulíny-Tóth, a poet and an eminent cultural representative. In 1861 he published three poems in the humoristic-political journal *Cernokňaznik*, published in Pest: *Piesne moje* (My Songs), *Bud' mužom* (Be a Man) and *Pomätenec* (Madman). All three belong among the poet's mature works. The last one was written early in 1846 in the second stage of the poet's creative career marked by his ideological and artistic crisis. The other two are from his third developmental stage.

V. Paulíny-Tóth made fortunate choices. *My Songs* are a self-characterizing expression of the artistic picturesqueness of the author's poetry, and its motivation by life circumstances. In the *Madman* he made use of free verse to capture the striking associations of a lunatic's thinking and fantasizing. In the stream of his monologue, the poet expressed his deep deception in life and in public affairs, his bitterness and contempt of the world. *Be a Man* is from the circuit of poems in which the author suggestively moulds the character of the man whom the impending fight for freedom will demand. Such a man should have a resolute attitude towards life, must be a man of action, faithful to his ideals, incorruptible and inflexible.

Published in the first volume of the journal *Krajan*, one more translation of Petőfi's poem is known from the mid-sixties of the last century. The anonymous translator translated the merry love poem *Povedál bi* (I should say) from the author's first period of writing.

Two further translations of Petőfi's poems appeared in the journal *Sokol* half a decade later (in 1869): *Zreje žitko* (Wheat's Ripening) and *Život a smrt'* (Life and Death) - both in Lužansky's translation. The former runs in the spirit of a folk song, the latter speaks aphoristically of two contrasting values, such as wine and love on the one hand, death for one's country on the other.

A further translation - a prosaic one this time - was published in the journal *Orol* five years later. In 1874 this journal published an extract from Petőfi's diary from 1848 under the heading *How Petőfi wanted to be a senator*, in a translation by A. Trúchly-Sytniansky in which the poet describes his unsuccessful attempt to be a senator of the Hungarian parliament. The following year, two translations appeared in *Orol*. Under the pen name Podolský, V. Paulíny-Tóth again published the poem *Piesne moje* (My Songs) and Martin Medňanský, under the pseudonym Divinkov-Svedernik, a translation of the

poem *Nerozumie mi svet* (The World Does Not Understand Me) on the poet's love to his sweetheart and his country. In 1878 C. Gallay published in Orol the poem *Básnici XIX. storocia* (Nineteenth-Century Poets), the poet's earnest view of a writer's mission. We know yet another translation from the seventies which appeared in the literary monthly *Dunaj* published in Pest. A. S. Osvald translated one of Petöfi's humorous genres of images from the popular milieu *Jazdi ovčiar na oslu* (The Shepherd Rides an Ass).

This was a very modest translation harvest for two decades. In sharp contrast to this was Petöfi's reception in other national literatures in which they already began to translate him during his lifetime. The first to discover him was German literature and this is due to the German press in Hungary, which abundantly contributed to the propagation of his works in the entire German-speaking area. And through the intermediary of German translations, Petöfi reached other nations of the world.

There were several reasons for Petöfi's slow and delayed penetration into Slovak literature. One of them was - as has already been noted - the author's alienation from his Slovak extraction. Slovak scholars repeatedly expressed their regrets that such an extraordinary talent from Slovak blood had through his works made another nation famous in the world, not his own. A second reason was that the Slovak intelligentsia and many Slovak burghers had an excellent command of the Hungarian language and thus could read him in the original. Of great significance was also the fact that there were few Slovak journals and magazines. For instance, in the sixties *Sokol* was the only Slovak literary journal publishing belles-lettres and translations.

More contributions to make Alexander Petöfi's poetry available in the Slovak environment came from Magyarophile Slovak newspapers, journals and calendars which were either published or financed by the Hungarian government. Their role was to spread and promote Hungarian patriotism among the Slovaks and propagate art, which could help this goal. They formed a counterbalance to Slovak national efforts. They strove to paralyze the Slovak national movement and its press organs and prevent the spread of Slovak national consciousness. These were times of a sharpened Magyarizing pressure following the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867. The Hungarian government set itself the aim of creating a unique Magyar political nation, introduced compulsory teaching of Hungarian as a State language at schools, and founded cultural clubs that were to spread Hungarian culture.

This category also included the paper *Slovenské noviny* (1886-1919) edited by Viktor Hornyánszky in Budapest, the weekly *Krajan* (1904-1918) published by "Vlastenecké spisy rozširujúci spolok" at Banská Bystrica.

These periodicals often carried translations of Hungarian authors, among them also those of Petöfi. He was frequently translated by anonymous

translators, or people who appended their initials or pen-name. They gave priority to Petőfi's patriotic poems, such as *Pieseň vlastenca* (A Patriot's Song), *Pieseň národa* (A Nation's Song), etc. There was no shortage of poems from the other topical areas. The standard of the translations varied from dilettantish to more successful ones. For the most part, however, they fell short of the stricter artistic claims.

Some Slovak poets and translators also cooperated with these journals, e.g. D. Bachát-Dumný, F. O. Matzenauer, E. Podhradský, R. Uram-Podtatranský and others. They contributed most to the spread of Petőfi's poetry among the Slovaks in the eighties and nineties of the nineteenth century. Their translation activity was probably related to the Hungarian cult of Petőfi, which was especially propagated during the last two decades of that century. But of course, the period's interpretation of Petőfi's work did not derive from its revolutionary meaning, but was tailored to suit the excessive, extravagant nationalism that had frenetically taken hold of Hungarian social and cultural life.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, various selections and anthologies of Petőfi's poems appeared in large numbers in illustrated and exclusive editions. These formed the basis for Slovak book editions.

The translator and editor of the first selection of Petőfi's works was the Evangelical parson Karol Hrdlička, who published *Sándora Petöbho Spisy Básnické* (A Petőfi's Poetic Writings) at Békéscsaba in 1890.<sup>5</sup> The publication consists of two slender brochures, containing sixteen lyrical poems, predominantly from 1843-1844 and a versified story *Hrdina Ján* (The Hero John). Most of them are from the poet's first formative period. They stand out by their imagery and the melodiousness of folk songs. Hrdlička only partially succeeded in transmitting their fresh style. The same also applies to *Hrdina Ján*, translated for the first time into Slovak. His translation is primarily of literary-historical significance and documents a new stage in the reception of the Hungarian poet.

In 1893 two publications with Petőfi's poems appeared. One was Alexander Petőfi's *Lyrical Poems* in F. O. Matzenauer's translation.<sup>6</sup> The latter took assumed an unusually demanding task: it intended to translate Petőfi's entire writings; planning to publish a series of cheap brochured editions and thus making him accessible to the Slovak reading public at large. However, Matzenauer succeeded only partially in his plans: he published but three brochures. In two hundred and ninety-six poems he published, without any selection, his verses written from 1842 up to about the mid of 1845.

The first brochure presents a rather comprehensive biographical study by Lajos Györffy about Petőfi. The author introduces the Hungarian poet in

conformity with the romantic notions which Hungarian literary scholarship had created about him towards the end of the nineteenth century: a genial world-renowned Hungarian poet ardently loving his "motherland", freedom, and truth, all of these ideals interpreted in a sense different from the way the revolutionary poet understood them.

By his design to translate Petőfi's lyrical work without Matzenauer's anthology, Hrdlička set himself a task difficult to resolve: how to cope in a complex manner with a heterogenous style, composition, strophic and metric structure of the author's poems. He succeeded in this primarily with poems utilizing the poetics of the folk song. However, the specificity of Petőfi's style becomes often lost in translations of poems with a more complex rhythmic and strophic pattern.

A more deliberate and rounded concept of translation was applied by E. Podhradský in his selection from Petőfi's works. His book *Selection from Alexander Petőfi's Poems*,<sup>1</sup> comprised of one hundred and eleven selections, aims to give a rounded image of the poet's work, trying to show his richness of style and genre. These efforts, however, are made less effective by the fact that Podhradský anxiously avoided dealing with Petőfi the revolutionary.

R. Uram-Podtatranský's *Alexander Petőfi's Poems*<sup>2</sup> (1911) is also a brochure edition, several of which were planned to appear. However, probably because of the unfavourable Slovak critique, the translator did not continue the work.

The booklet comprises fifty-four poems, predominantly from the period 1843-1845, with occasional overlappings into the following years. The translator arranged them in thematic entities. He began with a few patriotic poems, thereby exploiting Petőfi's work to imbue the Slovaks with a spirit of Magyar patriotism. Included are also certain poems advocating freedom, family and amorous lyric, genre and nature images, reflexions on poetry, etc. Just as in the preceding selections, the poet's image is deprived of its antimonarchistic and socially revolutionary aspects. Of all the book editions of these translation, those by Podtatranský have the lowest artistic standard.

The above four selections from Petőfi's works, despite their individual drawbacks, helped to broaden the view of this poet. However, the breadth of this view was determined by the period's typical interpretation of his personality and work. The outcome was a mutilated image of the poet, deprived of his revolutionary character. From the artistic aspect they also were little more than modest contributions to Slovak translations.

Of quite a different quality were the translations from Petőfi's works by P. O. Hviezdoslav. They appeared in *Slovenské pohiady* in 1903, 1904 and 1905, and comprised forty-two poems which he had selected from the years 1841-1849. Besides these, he also translated for the *Petőfi Almanach*<sup>3</sup> the

poet's lifelong creed Freedom, Love and his ardently amorous poem *Chvie sa ker* (The Bush Sways). In this selection he paid tribute to the favourite poet of his youth. He himself says so in a letter to Jozef Skultéty dated 24th January 1903: "For the second number... you will receive 12 poems translated from Petőfi... I wish to submit at least twice as much from Petőfi, that is to say, a matter on which my youthful mind had formerly tenaciously clung: I feel pleasure seeing them in Slovak, in which language they in fact ought to have originally been written; and I flatter myself that I render them here fairly accurately."<sup>10</sup> Hence, this meant a personal choice of poems that had long ago deeply interested the translator and still preserved their charm for him.

Hviezdoslav had translated Petőfi back in 1869 as a student at the Kežmarok Grammar School. His translations of the poems *Horký život, sladká ľúbosť* (Bitter Life, Sweet Love) and *Šialenec* (Madman) have been preserved in manuscript form. He returned to the former of them after practically thirty years, but left the Madman out of this selection. In Hviezdoslav's poetic débuts, Petőfi had a multi-faceted influence on his attitude towards natural and social reality and some of his poems show traces of the Hungarian poet. Hviezdoslav preserved his respect and love of this Hungarian poet even in his old age.

Hviezdoslav strictly adhered to a temporal sequence. Work from 1842 is represented by a single poem *V domovine* (In the Homeland). Likewise, from 1843 he also chose but one poem. Production from the subsequent years is represented more abundantly: 10 poems from 1845, 6 from 1846, 14 from 1847. 1849 again just one poem *Na smrt' rodičov* (On the Death of Parents). Thus we see that this translator focused on the work of the mature Petőfi.

The topic of the poems is picturesque, their genre structure and artistic form vary. There are poems moulding various forms of love: love of the native land, of parents, of a sweetheart, of the simple folk. On the opposite pole is hate: hate against tyranny, all forms of bondage, misery of the people. Like Podtatranský, Hviezdoslav also leaves aside his radical, revolutionary and anti-Hapsburg poems, which are in harmony with Petőfi's conviction insisting on universally humanistic social justice. He therefore translated the poem *Básnici XIX. storočia* (Nineteenth-Century Poets), which is in agreement with Hviezdoslav's social ethics. However, in his translation of the poem *Palác a chalupa* (Palace and Cottage), he left out the third strophe depicting a vision of doom for the rich who were robbing the simple folk of the fruit of their work. And in general, he made his choice of verses so as to make a "classic" of the Hungarian poet, to create a balanced ideal form. There is a lack of lighter genres, as e.g. poems about wine. Neither are there any selections from Petőfi's times of crisis.

Hviezdoslav was a mature master and a great poet with a specific poetic character. Therefore, he was congenially able to translate many poems. Such are,

for instance, *My Songs*, *Nineteenth-Century Poets*, *Wasteland in Winter*, and others. The age difference between the young poet and his substantially older translator, perhaps also differences in temperament, resulted in a toning down of the emotional spontaneousness and dynamism of certain poems, their shift toward objectivity, e.g. *V dym postý'plán* (Plan Gone up in Smoke). A further difference is due to a certain discrepancy between the romantic style of the original and the realistic style of the translation. What is outlined lightly and with flourish in Petőfi, Hviezdoslav, as a rule, elaborates upon and completes or rounds off. The number of words and verses in the translated texts is thereby increased.

Hviezdoslav's translations from Petőfi's lyrical works constitute an outstanding achievement. In comparison with the sporadic translations from the sixties and seventies of the last century, they gave a rounded image of Petőfi's lyrical works. In contrast to the book editions by K. Hrdlička, F. O. Matzenauer, E. Podhradský and R. Uram-Podtatranský, which comprised translations of a very heterogeneous nature and often of a rather low literary standard, Hviezdoslav's translations meant an artistically balanced and professionally well mastered whole. Of course, the translator's crystallized, personal poetic style imparts itself to the poems. In their time, however, their greatest significance lay in that they helped to create a fuller image of Petőfi in Slovak culture, and to assign it positive values Slovak literary translation.

Of course, just as other translators, Hviezdoslav also impoverished Petőfi's image with certain characteristic traits, particularly his radical democratism, his revolutionary and utopistic-social ideals.

The year 1918 marks the end of the Slovak reception of Petőfi's poetry under the socio-historical conditions of Magyar Hungary. It was a complex process of Slovak culture getting even with this Hungarian poet of worldwide renown, who was born of Slovak parents and had purely Slovak ancestors. This process went through certain stages, beginning with the period of sporadic journal translations, through the first book publications that gave a broader view of his work, up to Hviezdoslav's translations on the pages of the representative literary organ of the cultural centre at Turčiansky Svätý Martin-Slovenské pohľady. Hviezdoslav ensured an adequate and definitive place to the work of this Slovak-born Hungarian poet in Slovak literary culture.

A new significant stage in the reception of Alexander Petrovič alias Sándor Petőfi in our Slovak culture opened early in the fifties of the 20th century. Only then did his work flash in all its versatility and entirety, as well as in adequate poetical translation. This, however, constitutes another chapter in the investigation of his Slovak reception.



## Notes

1. *Petőfi Sándor Összes költeményei* [Sándor Petőfi's Collected Poems] (Pest 1847).
2. *Petőfi Sándor újabb költeményei* [Sándor Petőfi's Newer Poems] (Pest 1858).
3. *Petőfi Sándor összes művei* [Sándor Petőfi's Complete Works] 6 vol., with an introduction by Mór Jókai (Pest: Havas Adolf, 1892-1896).
4. The popular national trend in Hungarian literature considered the language of the farming population and folk poetry as the source of national literature. The norms and the value system of national literature were derived from them.
5. *Sándora Petőfiho Spisy básnické* [S. Petőfi's Poetic Writings] (Békéšska Caba: Corvina Printing House, 1890).
6. *Alexandra Petőfiho Lyrické básne poslovenčil Fr. O. Matzenauer (Beňovský)* [Alexander Petőfi's Lyrical Poems, translated into Slovak by F. O. Matzenauer] (Trnava: A. Horovitz, 1893).
7. *Výber z básni Alexandra Petőfiho preložil Emil Podhraašský. Spodobizrnou básnikovou. Pod tlač usporiadal I, Ž.* [Selection from Alexander Petőfi's Poems, translated by E. Podhradský. With a Portrait of the Poet.] (Banská Bystrica: Singer Sonnenfeld, 1883).
8. *Básne Alexandra Petőfiho* [A. Petőfi's Poems] vol. I (Lipt. Mikuláš: Izidor Stein, 1911).
9. *Petőfi-Almanach* (Budapest, 1909).
10. P. O. Hviezdoslav's Correspondence (Bratislava: SASc Publishing House, 1962, 183).