



THEODORE
ODRACH

THE
VILLAGE
TEACHER
AND OTHER
STORIES

G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S

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by Theodore Odrach

Translated from the Ukrainian by Erma Odrach

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A FEW WORDS FROM THE TRANSLATOR

My father died when I was nine years old. I never really knew him and most of what I remember is observational. I recall him hugging me, taking me to the park but I don't recall exchanging words with him, though of course I did. He was an enigmatic figure, always in the shadows, always with his head in the clouds. I never understood him, and he seemed so unfamiliar, so distant. He was a complicated man, too complicated for a young child's mind. As irrational as it all was, in many ways he frightened me. My father agonized over my view of him, and no matter how hard he tried to fix it, there was no fixing it. And yet, in spite of it all, I came to learn later into my adult life he somehow knew I would one day translate his work.

Born in the heart of the Pinsk Marshes in Belarus, one of the largest marshlands in Europe, my father was a true fisherman – it was in his blood. From our Toronto home, at every opportunity, he would disappear to a lake somewhere, or a river, or his favorite spot on the Toronto Islands. At the Islands he would often stay all night. On many occasions, with my mother and sister, we would take the streetcar to

the docks and catch the early morning ferry to meet him. My father's love of fishing went beyond fishing and one day he announced to us he wanted to start a worm farm. Thanks to my mother, that never happened.

When I began translating my father's work, it was then I came to realize how inextricably connected his fishing was to his writing. To be out in a peaceful and quiet setting, in the open with nature, was the perfect way for him to escape reality and focus on his stories. Fishing allowed for reflection and meditation and gave him much-needed piece of mind. But that's not to say he didn't catch fish. Quite the contrary, our fridge and freezer were always stocked with trout, carp, bass, perch – every freshwater fish imaginable.

In the evenings, when my father came home from work, which was at a local printing shop, the most prominent sound in our house was that of his typewriter. It was a thirty-five-pound cast iron Olympia, which he brought with him after living in England for five years. The tapping of the keys often put me to sleep. I was always keen to know if his stories had happy endings. I don't know if I ever got an answer but there always came a smile.

When my father died it was a horrible day and I thought I was dreaming. But I wasn't dreaming, it was all very real. His office stood empty, there was no one at his desk, and the sound of the typewriter was gone. On a bookshelf by the window on the top was a line of books written in Cyrillic, published in such places as Buenos Aires, Toronto and New York. Some were hard-cover, some were soft and they all had my father's name on them. So many books. I wondered what was in them. I had only a vague idea.

Years passed, almost twenty. I kept thinking about my father's books still up on the shelf of our bookcase. Though I was familiar with the Cyrillic alphabet and knew the Ukrainian language, reading and understanding Ukrainian on a literary level was a completely different matter. My father's books were virtually incomprehensible to me. Then one day I became determined to learn about his world. Armed with a Ukrainian-English dictionary, I started the laborious task of decoding my father's words. When I got stuck, I reverted to my mother, who, luckily for me, knew my father's work well, as he had read her all his manuscripts. But my mother was German and could sometimes explain only in German. So, in many instances the common route for us was from Ukrainian to German to English.

Once the transcribing was finished, I found myself completely absorbed. A turbulent time in history was laid out before me – the Second World War. There were real people living in the pages, there was conflict, and bombs were going off from all sides. My father was as much an eyewitness as he was an author.

But the question remained, would I be able to put it all into English and honor the original? I wasn't a translator and I'd never translated anything before. Then I began to play around with words. I paid attention to style, I listened for tone, for cadence, I kept an eye on pace. And suddenly it occurred to me: if I could capture my father's voice and keep myself invisible, I could do it.

Soon came another question: was there an audience out there for a deceased Ukrainian author from Belarus, immigrant to Canada, whose work was now in translation? In

all honesty, I had my doubts. Nevertheless, I continued to translate. As a sort of test-run, I started sending stories and novel excerpts out to literary magazines. Happily, before long, these pieces began getting accepted in both Canada and the U.S. *Connecticut Review*, *Antigonish Review*, *The New Quarterly* to name a few. Later came a story in *The Penguin Book of Christmas Stories*, then the publication of *Wave of Terror*, Chicago Review Press, and now *The Village Teacher* by Glagoslav Publications, and not to forget, an honorable mention from the Translation Center at Columbia University.

In translating my father, I've worked closely with his published work as well as with his original corresponding drafts and manuscripts, which, for the most part, contained multiple corrections and revisions. Sometimes my father had several versions of one story. I chose to use certain versions and passages I felt would provide a broader and more comprehensive representation of his work.

I learned a lot about my father – that he had a humorous side, that he was thoughtful, insightful, that he had a sense of civility and humaneness. Had it not been for translation, I would never have known.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express a heartfelt thanks to the people who helped me in the translation of these stories. My mother, Klara, who was the voice of my father and my savior; my husband, Michael, who displayed unwavering devotion to my father's work, whose discerning observations and impressions were very much appreciated, whose tech help was indispensable; Jane Wilson who spent long hours reading my drafts and offering me her clear and insightful criticisms and comments; Claire who gave invaluable support and last-minute advice; Tanya who challenged me and shared her unique perspectives.

*This translation is in memory
of my mother and father*

WITNESS

They were walking along a green path up into the blue horizon and day in and day out Grandfather Korny watched after them; he could not seem to get enough. His grandchildren were up front: Prohor, Danilo, Anna, and behind them his son Yevhen with his wife. The path was narrow and like a scroll of cotton, it meandered upward, then disappeared into the blue sky. They continued to walk along the path that seemed to have no end.

Grandfather Korny shouted out to them.

“Stop! Please stop! Let me get a better look at you. You’re so frail, and why are you in such a hurry? Is the way to Heaven so far?”

But the drifters did not stop; they remained unresponsive. The old man began to call them out by name: “Yevhen, my son, Sonia, my daughter-in-law, my grandchildren, Anna, Prohor, Danilo, stop!”

Still, the drifters did not respond. They walked in a zig-zag between the faint clouds that floated across the sky, toward a large bend. And every time the old man saw them in his fantasy they were always hurrying upon the same path.

“What an endless road before you, my dear children,” the old man clasped his chest.

Fifteen years had already passed since they had left Grandfather Korny, and for all that time he carried their faces in his heart. They had swollen, cracked mouths with open red sores on their cheeks. Death peered through their sunken eyes. At first, their coughing was dry and faint, later it intensified and they began to choke, then the blood started, and finally death. One after the other, within a year, they all left Grandfather Korny, except Orest, the youngest.

At times Grandfather Korny cursed his health, "If only I could have a heart attack and be freed. It's time for me to catch up to my children."

But the old man's heart was strong. As he watched his family walk along the green path, suddenly he realized they were dead. They no longer had faces, only silhouettes. He recognized them by the way they walked. Yevhen held Sonia's hand, Anna was up front, and behind Anna shoulder to shoulder, walked the boys, Prohor and Danilo. The old man watched them for a long time and wept.

"They're so quiet. The boys were always very playful and Anna was such a chatterbox. Now they're just walking and they don't say a word."

When their image disappeared from the old man's mind, he made the sign of the cross and stepped up to a slender aspen that grew in his backyard behind the well.

"I planted this tree," he began to himself, "in my yard as witness to my grief. One day I walked to the edge of the village, to the coppice, and thought to myself, which tree should I transplant? An alder is much too ordinary and a birch too hefty. Then I noticed a slender aspen leaning up against a cranberry bush. The leaves rustled magically and

seemed to whisper, 'Old man, take me to your yard.' So, I took the aspen and now look what a beauty it's become, it's blossomed like a young girl. It keeps soaring upward and I keep digging my feet deeper into the ground."

From next door a couple of men hopped over the fence and entered the yard; one was in army uniform, the other, dressed like a peasant. Catching sight of the old man, they made toward him.

Ignoring them, Korny started talking to his aspen, "Two years have barely passed, and look what's already happened. Like worms, they bore into your flesh and there's no escape."

"Hello, old man!" a pair of steely blue eyes peered from under a helmet. It was Deputy Julikov of the Pinsk Division. He asked impatiently, "Well, old man, when do you plan to pay your taxes?"

Korny looked up, "There's nothing to pay them with, Comrade. There's hardly enough to eat." Then back to his aspen, "Hah, isn't that the truth? And you are my witness."

The man in peasant clothes, whose name was Sopun and who also happened to be the village chairman, hastened to apologize on the old man's behalf.

"Comrade Julikov, as you can see, the old man's not quite right in the head. There's no point in talking to him."

Julikov laughed, "Don't worry, I've seen his kind before!" Then to the old man, "Tell me, why didn't your grandson go out into the woods and haul logs with the rest of them?"

Ignoring the question, looking up at the shimmering young leaves of his aspen, Korny said:

"You see how they torment the aged, my little aspen? And when the Reds were fleeing from Warsaw, I saved the

life of one of their soldiers. I covered him with hay in a barn. The Poles poked around with their bayonets but couldn't find him anywhere. And when they threw me up against the wall and threatened to shoot me, I didn't care, because I was happy to have saved a human life."

"We know all your little tricks, old man," said Julikov with a rush of anger. "Where's your grandson?"

"I don't know; I don't follow him around. He's young and always on the go; he has his own roads."

At once, Korny turned to look up at the sky. He shouted, "You're off again my dead ones! But Anna, your feet must hurt. You're so little. Yevhen, take her in your arms! Our Father who art in Heaven ... Dear God, give them eternal shelter."

"Idiot!" Julikov spat between his feet. "We're not through with you yet, old man – not by a long shot."

"He's senile, comrade," Sopun tried to explain. "He always babbles like that to his son and grandchildren. They all died of consumption years ago."

Julikov hardly listened. He signaled with his head for Sopun to follow him into the old man's house. Once inside they searched for the grandson. They looked in closets, under the beds, behind the stove, but he was nowhere to be found.

"The son-of-a-bitch!" yelled Julikov. "He thinks he can fool us!"

"But the old man's confused, Comrade," Sopun pointed out again. Following Julikov out into the yard, he couldn't help but say to himself but in such a way Julikov couldn't hear, "Confused, yes, just like the rest of us."

Julikov swung round and drilled his eyes into Sopun. "I heard what you just said. You may be village chairman but you're a complete idiot."

Later that day a car appeared from the direction of Pinsk. It let out a series of honks. For some reason, it turned toward Grandfather Korny's house and stopped before the gates of his yard. Two officials in black leather jackets and steel helmets stepped out. Julikov and Sopun, who happened to be there, rushed to greet them. They stood at attention and saluted.

"Does Kornelius Pavlovich Kovb live here?" asked the shorter of the two.

"Over there, Comrade," pointed Julikov. "He's sitting under that tree."

Without another word, the officials turned toward the aspen. Julikov and Sopun followed close behind.

"Hello, old man," the officials called out.

Korny ignored them and proceeded to talk to the aspen, "How the boys liked to swing from your branches. And little Anna would lift her pretty little head and laugh and laugh."

"Er, excuse me, Comrades," Sopun took it upon himself to address the officials. "You must understand, the old man has hallucinations. He's not quite right in the head."

"Not quite right in the head? Well, we'll see about that! And who are you?"

"My name is Sopun, I'm the village chairman."

The shorter official glimpsed quickly at his watch. He said in a matter-of-fact tone, "Very well, Sopun. Call a meeting in front of the gates of Kornelius Pavlovich Kovb's house. In half an hour. We have a very urgent matter to address."

Sopun jumped at the command, and as fast as his legs could carry him, made for the village.

“And why are you still here?” the officials turned irritably to Julikov. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Julikov wrung his hands and for some reason he looked excited and his face was all red. As it turned out, he had just seen something behind Korny’s house, and it looked like a young man. He believed it might be Korny’s grandson. He needed to tell the officials.

“Sirs, I have to tell you something. Over there, just right now, behind the house, I saw old man Korny’s grandson, the one you’ve been ...”

But the officials were preoccupied with their own matters and hardly listened to what Julikov had to say. They cut him off abruptly.

“Enough of your empty talk. There’s no time to waste. The meeting’s in half an hour. You can tell us later.”

Under Sopun’s orders, ten peasants scattered throughout the village. They banged on doors and windows and shouted out to passersby, “Listen up, people! There’s an important meeting out in the pasture! Officials from Pinsk have arrived!”

The bells from the little Orthodox church began to chime and drums started to beat. From all ends of the village people emerged and streamed toward the pasture. A table decked with a white embroidered cloth was set under the open sky and around the table were benches and chairs. Red banners with hammers and sickles were suspended from high wooden poles on either side and everywhere were picture-posters of Stalin. In the middle of the table sat the two

officials and between them, to everyone's amazement, was Grandfather Korny. But Grandfather Korny looked numb and dazed as if he didn't understand what was going on. A crowd of people elbowed forward to get a better look; those who were at the back stood on tiptoe. All were eager to find out why an emergency meeting had been called.

"Why on earth did they sit that poor old man between those two wolves in helmets?" The people wanted to know.

"Comrades!" the shorter official rose from the table and pierced his gaze into the crowd. "Be proud. Your village will go down in the history of the Soviet Union – and in gold letters. This old man here, Kornelius Pavlovich Kovb, has become the first to be honored in the western region of the U.S.S.R. His name will become the symbol of the endless devotion to our socialist Fatherland. Allow me to explain: when our glorious Red Army was cold and hungry and forced out of Warsaw, this old man did not lose faith. At a most critical moment, he risked sacrificing himself to save the life of one of our soldiers."

Turning to Korny, he smiled warmly and courteously, "Comrades, do you realize whose life he saved? Korny Pavlovich Kovb saved the life of our national hero, General Pipigin!"

Pulling a crumpled piece of paper from his jacket pocket, he proceeded to read out loud: "Eternal gratitude to Kornelius Pavlovich Kovb, signed, I.C. Pipigin, General of the Western Division."

"Bravo, Korny, bravo!" Julikov's voice suddenly surged throughout the crowd.

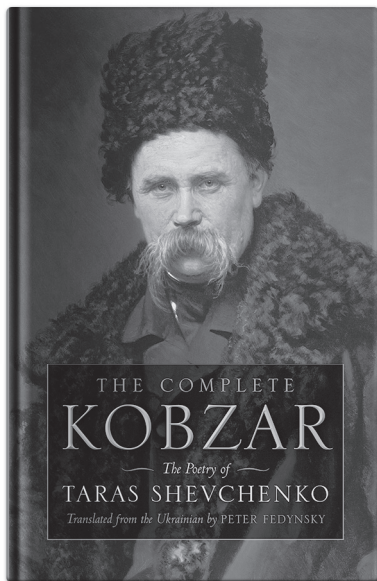
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theodore Odrach was born Theodore Sholomitsky in 1912 outside of Pinsk, Belarus. At the age of nine, he was arrested for a petty crime by the authorities. Without his parents' knowledge, he was sent to a reform school in Vilnius, Lithuania (then under Polish rule). Released at the age of 18, he entered what is now Vilnius University, studying philosophy and ancient history. With the Soviet invasion in 1939, he fled Vilnius and returned to his native Pinsk, where he secured a job as headmaster of a village school. As with all teachers of the time, his main duties were to transform the school system into a Soviet one and usher in complete russification. Within a year, he fell under suspicion by the Soviet regime and became imprisoned on some trumped-up charge. He managed to escape and flee south to Ukraine (then under German occupation), where he edited underground war-time newspapers. Toward the end of the war, with the return of the Bolshevik regime, he fled over the Carpathian Mountains to the West. Traveling through Europe, in Germany he met and married Klara Nagorski. After living in England for five years, in 1953 he and his wife immigrated to Canada. It was in his home in Toronto that Odrach did most of his writing. He died of a stroke in 1964.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Erma Odrach is an author and translator living in Canada. Her writing and translations have appeared in literary journals in Canada, the U.S. and UK. *Alaska or Bust and Other Stories* was published by Crimson Cloak Publisher, 2015; *The Bank Street Peeper* was published by Adelaide Books, 2021. Her translation of *Wave of Terror* by her father, Theodore Odrach, was published by Chicago Review Press in 2008.

**The Complete
KOBZAR**
by Taras Shevchenko



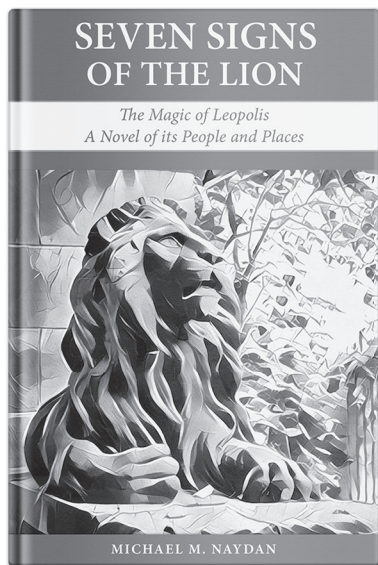
Masterfully fulfilled by Peter Fedynsky, Voice of America journalist and expert on Ukrainian studies, this first ever English translation of the complete *Kobzar* brings out Ukraine's rich cultural heritage.

As a foundational text, The *Kobzar* has played an important role in galvanizing the Ukrainian identity and in the development of Ukraine's written language and Ukrainian literature. The first editions had been censored by the Russian czar, but the book still made an enduring impact on Ukrainian culture. There is no reliable count of how many editions of the book have been published, but an official estimate made in 1976 put the figure in Ukraine at 110 during the Soviet period alone. That figure does not include *Kobzars* released before and after both in Ukraine and abroad. A multitude of translations of Shevchenko's verse into Slavic, Germanic and Romance languages, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Bengali, and many others attest to his impact on world culture as well.

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SEVEN SIGNS OF THE LION

by Michael M. Naydan

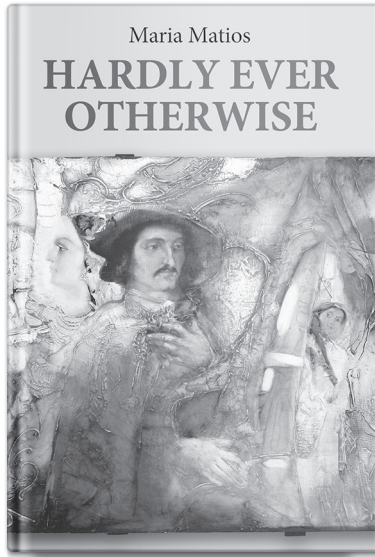


The novel *Seven Signs of the Lion* is a magical journey to the city of Lviv in Western Ukraine. Part magical realism, part travelogue, part adventure novel, and part love story, it is a fragmented, hybrid work about a mysterious and mythical place. The hero of the novel Nicholas Bilanchuk is a gatherer of living souls, the unique individuals he meets over the course of his five-month stay in his ancestral homeland. These include the enigmatic Mr. Viktor, who, with one eye that always glimmers, in a dream summons him across the Atlantic Ocean to the city of lions, becoming his spiritual mentor; the genius mathematician Professor Potojbichny (a man of science with a mystical bent and whose name means “man from the other side”); the exquisite beauty Ada, whose name suggests “woman from Hades” in Ukrainian, whose being emanates irresistible sensuality, but who never lets anyone capture her beauty in a picture; the schizophrenic artist Ivan the Ghostseer, who lives in a bohemian hovel of a basement apartment and in an alcohol-induced trance paints the spirits of the city that torment him; and the curly-haired elfin Raya, whose name suggests “paradise” in Ukrainian and who becomes the primary guide and companion for Nicholas on his journey to self-realization...

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HARDLY EVER OTHERWISE

by Maria Matios



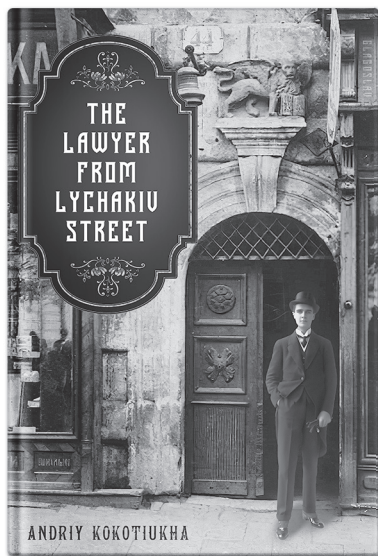
Everything eventually reaches its appointed place in time and space. Maria Matios's dramatic family saga, *Hardly Ever Otherwise*, narrates the story of several western Ukrainian families during the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and expands upon the idea that "it isn't time that is important, but the human condition in time."

From the first page, Matios engages her reader with an impeccable style, which she employs to create a rich tapestry of cause and effect, at times depicting a logic that is both bitter and enigmatic. But nothing is ever fully revealed—it is only in the final pages of the novel that the events in the beginning are understood as a necessary part of a larger whole, and the section entitled *Seasickness* presents a compelling argument for why events almost always have to follow a particular course.

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THE LAWYER FROM LYCHAKIV STREET

by Andriy Kokotiukha



At the beginning of the twentieth century, 1908, a young Kyivan, Klym Koshovy miraculously flies the coop and escapes from persecution by tsarist police to Lviv. However, even here he is arrested – near the corpse of a well-known local lawyer, Yevhen Soyka. The deceased had dubious friends and powerful enemies in the city. Suicide or murder?

The search for truth leads Koshovy through the dark labyrinths of Lviv's streets. On his way – facing daring pickpockets, criminal kingpins and Russian terrorist bombers. And Klym is constantly getting in the way of the police commissioner Marek Wichura. The truth will stun Klym, and his new loyal friend Jozef Shatsky. It will forever change the fate of the enigmatic and influential beauty Magda Bohdanovych.

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- More coming . . .



GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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The twenty-two stories in this collection, set mostly in Eastern Europe during World War Two, depict a world fraught with conflict and chaos. Theodore Odrach is witness to the horrors that surround him, and as both an investigative journalist and a skilful storyteller, using humor and irony, he guides us through his remarkable narratives. His writing style is clean and spare, yet at the same time compelling and complex. There is no short supply of triumph and catastrophe, courage and cowardice, good and evil, as they impact the lives of ordinary people.

In “Benny’s Story”, a group of prisoners fight to survive despite horrific circumstances; in “Lickspittles”, the absurdity of an émigré writer’s life is highlighted; in “Blood”, a young man travels to a distant city in search of his lost love; in “Whistle Stop”, two German soldiers fight boredom in an out-of-the-way outpost, only to see their world crumble and fall.

First published in 1959 as *Pivstanok Za Selom* by Julian Serediak Press in Buenos Aires, Argentina, added to this collection are also stories found still in manuscript form. Eight pieces were previously published in literary magazines in Canada and the U.S.

