DE GRUYTER OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/clear-2016-0004

Manifestations of Slovak and Rusyn Identity in Vasil Stefan Koban´s *The Sorrows of Marienka* and *Excerpt from Michal*

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Abstract

Vasil Stefan Koban (1918-2007) was an American writer of Slovak origin. His cultural identity is, however, somewhere between Rusyn and Slovak, but all his writings were published in Slovak journals such as *Slovakia,* or *Almanac* run by National Slovak Society. The Slovak translation of his only novel, *The Sorrows of Marienka*, was published in 2006 with the subtitle *Púť Slovákov za lepším životom do Ameriky*. The book is about the life of his mother Marienka who after marriage to Ivan Kinda emigrates from Jarabina to Conemaugh, an American coal mine town. *Excerpt from Michal: Biography of a Galician Coal Miner, 1906-1933* is a revised version of the story in which Michal, Koban's father and Marienka's second husband, loses his leg in an accident and he must stay in a hospital for a year. In both stories Koban uses lots of Slovak words, but on the other hand, he mentions that Michal helped to build the Russian Orthodox Church of St. John the Baptist in Conemaugh with other Galicians, his natives, since he was born in Habowa. Although he considered himself to be of Slovak origin, Koban is enlisted under Carpatho-Rusyn Literature in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*. The article focuses on manifestations of Slovak and Rusyn identity in Koban´s two most notable literary works.

Keywords

autobiographical novel, Slovak identity, Rusyn identity, ethnicity, minorities.

Vasil Stefan Koban

Vasil Stefan Koban was an American writer of Slovak origin born in Conemaugh, Pennsylvania in 1918.[1] His parents came from Austro-Hungarian Empire. Mother Mária Jedinák was from a little Slovak village Kamienka in Prešov region, situated near Polish borders and his father Ivan Kindja was born in Jarabina, just across the hill from Kamienka. According to Koban´s daughter, Marienka travelled to America alone and later she was accompanied by Ivan and their children. She started to run a boarding house in the Johnstown borough Franklin, so she could save some money and buy a farm on the Singer Hill Street. After a mine accident that killed her first husband Ivan, Marienka married Michal Koban, a Galician from a Polish village Habowa, who was killed in a car accident.[2] Marienka gave birth to thirteen children; however, this number Koban sees as fatal in their family fate. In his article "Heavenly Father" (1991), he reminiscences how his siblings either too young or too unexpectedly left this world. Marienka´s children gradually died in various other accidents and under different circumstances. Interestingly, as Koban writes, Marienka re-named her children, so for instance there were three boys who were named Stefan – when the first Stefan died, Marienka gave this name to another newly born boy and when he died again she gave the boy the same name. Nevertheless, this was against her Orthodox religion and Koban believes that this could be the reason for so many deaths in his family (44). In addition, it was also against their religion to make marriage vows for sisters as well, which again happened in Marienka´s case because of poverty (48).

[1] In America, Vasil usually changed to „Charles". The following information is written in the note about a writer in his novel: "Vasil S. (Charles S.) Koban was born in Conemaugh, Pennsylvania, in 1918."

[2] In his novella *„Excerpt from Michal: Biography of a Galician Coal Miner, 1906-1933"*, Koban writes that Michal Koban was born in Habowa. Presumably it is Hałbow, now Desznica (Poland).

The life at the turn of the centuries was very hard for them. For example, Koban notes that after Ivan´s death, the oldest son Michael started to work in the mines when he was only twelve (44). Vasil attended no more than four grades at school as he had to work on the family farm. His daughter remembers that he wore clothes of his sisters due to their bad economic situation. He worked in a steel mill, in the taxicab business and occasionally got a small acting role in a TV series, such as Colombo. He married three times and had two daughters. Two of his wives were descendants of Slovak immigrants coming from Kamienka, Marienka´s native village. As it is observed, the bonds of Slovaks in their new land were very strong even after several years. They enclosed themselves in their diaspora that gave them the sense of belonging and kept them together. Slovaks tried to maintain their culture and customs, to have something common in the hostile country, as this is how America was experienced by the newcomers.

For Koban it was a challenge to find a sense of life, since his marital relationships always failed. Still, he found some happiness in "my religion, my foreign spoken language and my foreign cooked food" ("Heavenly Father" 46). He started to work for the Greek Orthodox church community, building a church in Miami, Florida, in 1950: "All my church really needed was youth. I was 35 and could speak the Slovak language. So I helped out as an errand boy, and they came to confide in me like their own son" ("Over-the-Hill" 49). He describes these five years as the most beautiful of his lifetime ("Heavenly Father" 46). He died in Hollywood, Florida, in 2007.

Interestingly, Koban´s cousin and childhood playmate was Michael Strank, a soldier and a member of the U.S Marines during World War II, who appeared in Joe Rosenthal´s famous photograph "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima", where he was eventually shot and died. Despite Strank was born in Jarabina, the same village Ivan came from, he was raised in Conemaugh Township and even achieved high school education.

The Sorrows of Marienka

Koban under Michael Novak´s guidance, his lifelong friend, advisor, and Johnstown native, enjoyed being a part of a Slovak community. Through the years he informed National Slovak Society about his life and literary activities. He published several articles in journals *Slovakia* and *Kalendár – Almanac*, such as "Heavenly Father" (1991), "'Over-The-Hill' Gang Meet in Argument Park" (1988), and "They Were Not Strangers" (1985), reminiscing his personal and family life struggles.

It took him twenty-six years to get his only novel *The Sorrows of Marienka* (1979) published. The novel came out with the help of Michael Novak under the project EMPAC![3] and it was his dream to see the book translated into Slovak language too. Just a year before his death Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov published it in 2006 as *Marienkine žiale* with the subtitle *Púť Slovákov za lepším životom do Ameriky*.

Uncommonly for a writer born in the USA, half of the book takes place in the present-day Slovakia. This autobiographical novel depicts the life of the seventeen years old Marienka who gets married to Ivan Kinda, an officer in his best years, whom she sees at the wedding for the first time. Marienka is a strong and spirited woman which helps her to overcome wrongdoings of her jealous mother-in-law. Marienka and Ivan build a small house but soon an unpleasant event occurs and she seeks a way out of the hostile village. She accidently sets fire on the local tavern when she wants to teach Ivan lesson because of his excessive alcoholism. People start to avoid her and gossip: "I tell you that woman is a witch. She should be run out of town" (*Sorrows* 78). So they travel with their two children from the Slovak village Jarabina to the American coal mine town near Johnstown in Pennsylvania.

Koban shows their simple manners and peasant ignorance of the world when they see a black man on the ship: "A black man! Who ever heard of such a thing?" (88). Moreover, a gypsy man tricks all the passengers that America is a dangerous country populated with fierce Indians so they buy knives from him for protection: "Haven´t you heard of Indians? Don´t you know what America´s like at all? It´s a wild

[3] EMPAC! (The Ethnic Millions Public Affairs Council) was a national civil rights committee, dedicated to politics of family and neighborhood, to equality and fairness, to a new America. It was founded in 1975.

land full of savages that attack men alone in their fields and helpless women. They grab them by their hair and skin off their scalps" (92).

The Slovak community in Conemaugh is presented from the point of view of only one generation - the newcomers. The author focuses on the life of Marienka and her family. From the very beginning she is very enthusiastic about America and because she can neither write nor read she goes to her compatriot Katarina Borsuk and pays her twenty-five cents for writing and sending a letter to her father. She starts her letter as follows: "America isn't like home. No, not at all. America is wonderful" (102). But too soon she realizes that this is far from the reality. As the conditions are hard in the New World, Marienka takes twelve boarders to care for. She prepares all their meals, does the washing for them, besides raising her own sons. The boarders are all Slovaks and they have a very nice relationship. This, however, cannot be said about the Slovaks who are sent from the coal mine company. When Ivan stays one day at home because he is sick, the men come and want a one week pay for his absence. This unfair act strikes Marienka hard and she actually understands that their previous friendly manners were just a falsehood: "Swindle. The word was a new one to Marienka. And it seemed especially cruel that it would be their own countrymen who would introduce them to this ugly practice" (108).

Obviously, more people try to establish themselves by swindle. Igor Cigan, a deacon and a treasurer of the church, persuades Slovaks to raise money and build a new church. Although the old one was not even ten years old, people believe his good intentions. So it happens that Igor keeps seven thousand dollars with him. Jacka, Marienka's younger sister, falls in love with him. It seems suspicious to Marienka that Jacka gives preference to Igor over Michal. In fact, Michal meets Marienka on the board of a ship on the way to America. Jacka, being the most beautiful girl for him, is the main goal why he wants to be Marienka's boarder. Michal is very shy hiding his feelings, but Marienka tries to push Jacka toward him. Jacka, however, is not interested in Michal as Igor seems to be a successful man. Marienka and Ivan start to be nervous about Jacka being still single. Ivan wants Igor for her, while Marienka prefers Michal: "One of these days she's going to wake up to the fact that the only man worth having is Michal." Ivan replies: "That young nobody?" For Ivan, Igor is "the one with a future" and "There's nothing about Michal" (161). Jacka can hardly wait for Igor to propose to her, but all Slovaks soon learn that Igor Cigan is a swindler. People see him to get on a train to New York and later on there are gossips that he lives in Bratislava and has been attacked and tortured by some men who want to know where he keeps all that stolen money. In fact, his name means a gypsy, a member of ethnic group; however, "cigániť" signifies a liar, swindler, or an untrustworthy person in Slovak language.

Marienka often sends letters to her father, but replies from him are rather rare. If she receives a letter, the message is usually unpleasant. In one of these letters her father writes that her mother had died and that he is going to marry Marienka's coeval and best friend Zuska. Because Zuska comes from a very poor family, no one wants to marry her. She must endure the fact that Štefan Haluška, the man she loves, marries a girl from a rich family. So Zuska in order to have something on her own does not to hesitate to marry a sixty-year-old man. Koban on this example shows how hard the life in Slovakia was and what compromises people had to make. A girl in the era of mass emigration could only hope that she will find a husband in America, otherwise her prospects were very poor.

The work in the mines is dangerous and deadly accidents are an everyday threat to the workers: "There was always danger in the mines, but the men didn't want to talk about the danger unless they could laugh or sing about it. And even the sad words of the songs were not meant to be sung like a dirge. They were just happy songs with sad words" (157). Eventually, Ivan makes a song about Ivan Yuháš who is killed in the mines and whose place is given to him:

Ivan Yuháš was a miner
From over Johnstown way,
A brawling, dirty miner
Was what they used to say.
He dug for coal like the rest of us
But one way he was the best of us,
In playing a guitar.

It's not a guitar
That's made of wood,
Nor strung with gut
As you think it should;
The sounding box is the pit o' the mine
With strings called props that number nine
For playing this guitar.

From roof to floor
And the guitar's pitch
Is a deep bass roar;
Oh, any of us can tune the thing,
But only the brave can cut the strings
In playing this guitar.

Ivan Yuháš played
With bated breath
There in the gloom
A song called 'Death',
A lonely tune we all must play
Who work in the mines from day to day
In playing our guitar. (158)

The song is rich in imagery. It metaphorically connects the sound that miners make while they are digging with the sound of a guitar: "The sounding box is the pit o' the mine". They create a song called "Death" that is present "from day to day". The working place here shares both positive and negative pictures in their minds. On the one hand, the working surrounding brings unpredictable consequences for the miners with the notion that if the roof or the props cave in after the explosion, they will lose their lives. On the other hand, to give some meaning to everyday struggles in the pits, they feel that during their long shifts there is some way to escape the misery through the work of art and imagination.

One night, Ivan brings a drunken Slovak to their house and in a while he starts singing a sad song:

There are three kinds of roses,
There are three kinds of roses.
A husband, I had a husband,
I had a husband who was a drunk.
He didn't work, he only drank,
When he came home, when he came home,
When he came home, he beat me up.
Don't beat me up, don't torture me.
Don't beat me up, don't torture me.
I will leave you and the children,
I will go beyond the Danube.

From atop the ship she was waving a white handkerchief
From atop the ship she was waving a white handkerchief
Come home, dear wife, your children are crying.
Your children are - (124-125)

This song is in its original meaning called "Červená ruža trojaká" and according to some sources it is supposed to be a song of Rusyn people. Slovaks are portrayed as people who love music and singing.

Koban translates many Slovak folk songs in the novel and thus they become a strong indicator of their national pride and identity. Furthermore, these songs also point out their common life experiences in their mother land. In this case the song is about a woman whose husband is a drunk and beats her. She has no other option than to intimidate him that she will leave him and the children and travel beyond the river Danube. The last stanza of the song gives us a hint that she might travel to America and never come back. The following song is in Slovak "Ej, javor, javor, javor zelený". The maple tree is in the Slovak verbal art associated with love and happiness of newlyweds. The same song Ivan sang after he and Marienka got married.

> Eh, maple, maple. Green maple!
> Under our window you were planted! (126)

Koban uses in the novel Slovak names, such as Štefan Haluška, Igor Cigan, Petro Hrobák, Ignác Kohutik, Adam Drotár, Mrs. Česlák, Katarina Borsuk, Zuska, Jacka and names of Marienka´s sons: Michal, Jánik, Mikuláš, Jozef, Jurko. The geographic names are frequent too: Jarabina, Kamienka, Spišská Magura, Košice. He makes use of many Slovak phrases to highlight their national and cultural heritage (see table 1):

Slovak phrase	**English translation**
čepec	Bonnet
slivovica	plum brandy
šatka	Headscarf
grajciars	Cents
čardáš	Czardas
starosta	Mayor
borovička	juniper brandy
koláč	Cake
žandárs	police officers
krčma	Saloon

Table 1 Slovak phrases in *The Sorrows of Marienka*

Religion plays a significant role in the novel. Marienka and Ivan are married in the church in Jarabina and all their children are christened. Jánik, their son, plays with the fire in the kitchen and subsequently gets deadly burnt, while Marienka is helping Ivan in the mines. In this situation Slovaks hold close to each other and help with necessary doings: "The Slovaks of the town gathered to sing the slow, sad dirges of their country. Someone brought food. Others brought drinks" (117). Jánik is buried in the cemetery "of the new Greek Catholic church which the miners from Slovakia had built in Conemaugh" (122). His grave is the first child's grave to be placed in the cemetery.

Here Igor Cigan explains to Michal why it is important to build a new church. If we leave his selfish intentions out of consideration, it seems that having a church means a lot for Slovaks because it reinforces their national identity towards other ethnic groups living in Conemaugh:

> You're a newcomer to Conemaugh. You don't know how our family of Slovaks here has grown. Why, when that church was built there was only a handful of our countrymen in this town. Building a church was one of the first things they did, for God is always close in our hearts. We showed the town. We showed the Irish and the Italians and the Americans that we Slovaks amounted to something. And now there are thousands of us. And we're going to keep on showing them. (165)

As in other American towns, Slovaks keep enclosed against other ethnic groups. The exceptions are usually nations such as Magyars and Poles with whom they have closer contacts in Austro-Hungarian

Empire. Nevertheless, Slovaks work with Irish in the mines and even though they do not understand each other due to ignorance of English language, the relationships between them are more antagonistic than friendly. Michal talks about his Irish fellow worker: "It makes two weeks he's been in the mines with me … he still don't know how to take out the coal, but I know more about that girl than I did about my own mother." Ivan adds: "All those Irish are alike" (169).

Excerpt from Michal: Biography of a Galician Coal Miner, 1906-1933

Excerpt from Michal: Biography of a Galician Coal Miner, 1906-1933 is a sequel to *The Sorrows of Marienka* seen from the perspective of Michal Koban's father and Marienka's second husband. The excerpt is in the form of a novella, but Koban had the manuscript finished and wanted to get it published, but he could not find a publisher for it. The novella is divided into five chapters, each one is dated. It starts on Thursday, May 24, 1906 and ends on Tuesday, December 7, 1909.

The narrative begins with Michal Koban working as a mule skinner in the mine in Conemaugh. An Irish boy Kelly, whom he works with, should get three sprags on the three cars, but he refuses to do so and says that two are enough. As a result, Michal's leg is badly injured and after a few months in a hospital, his right leg has to be amputated. He stays in the hospital for a year and uses this time to learn English.

Koban's novella was published only one year after his novel, but he changes Michal's national identity significantly. If Michal is portrayed as a Slovak and speaks only Slovak language in the novel, here he becomes a Rusyn. From the very beginning of the story, Michal speaks Rusyn language: "´You got three sprags on the three cars, Kelly?´ he asked in Rusin" (*Excerpt* 105). Moreover, Koban repeatedly reinforces the fact that Michal really is Rusyn: "A pert little nurse in a peaked cap came in to take his pulse and speak to him reassuringly in his native Rusin" (106). Nevertheless, when Marienka comes to see him with Ivan, she speaks Slovak: "´How are you, Michal?´ she asked with concern in Slovak, her only language" (106). When he wants to learn more about the condition of his leg, a nurse must interpret what doctor says, because Michal does not understand English and the doctor does not speak his language: "They did not have Slovak or Rusin doctors to talk to the immigrants in their own language" (107). In addition, as Michal is lying in the bed, a little boy runs in his room: "´Where is daddy?´ he said in English. ´*Otec* is down futher´, she [mother] said in Slovak. … The mother hastily pulled the child away with abject Slovak humiliation, and said in English..." (108).

Manifestations of Rusyn and Slovak Identity

When considering both works, *The Sorrows of Marienka* is seen from Marienka's perspective, while *Excerpt from Michal* sees Michal through his own eyes. In the novel, Michal never says that he is Rusyn, or that he speaks Rusyn language, and we do not learn much about his family background. Furthermore, all characters in the Slovak community in the novel are Slovak. Even boarders read a Slovak newspaper (*Sorrows* 163). As Koban uses real places in his work, the villages Marienka and Ivan come from – Kamienka and Jarabina – signify that Rusyn identity could be presented, but is not.[4] In the novella Koban informs us that Michal "was born in Habowa, a little village in the Galician area of Austria, one of four children – two boys and two girls. At 12 he was put out as a servant on a farm, to work from sunup to sundown" (110). To add more confusion in this matter, Koban writes that: "In 1905 he [Michal] and other Galicians put up some money and proudly helped build the Russian Orthodox Church, St. John the Baptist, in Conemaugh. He was beginning to feel a real part of the community" (110). It was already noted that Jánik was buried in the Greek Catholic cemetery that was built by Slovaks in Conemaugh. Koban wants to highlight that most Slovaks portrayed in the novel were Greek Catholics and that most Rusyns profess the Orthodox Church. All in all, Michal's Rusyn national consciousness is completely new in the novella.

To understand why Michal's identity in *The Sorrows of Marienka* is suppressed, we must connect it with the revival of ethnics in the 1970´s and with Michael Novak. It seems that Vasil Stefan Koban tries

[4] According to Paul Robert Magocsi in *Our People: Carpatho-Rusyns and Their Descendants in North America* (Ontario, 2004, Fourth revised edition), Kamienka (144) and Jarabina (142) are Rusyn villages.

to underscore in Marienka her Slovak identity and in Michal his Rusyn identity. Why did not he implement Rusyn traits in the novel? It was already mentioned that it took him twenty-six years to get his novel published. In the 1970´s Michael Novak immensely contributed to the revival of Eastern European ethnics. He was responsible for the project EMPAC! that pushed Slavic writers to publish their works. As Novak made use of his Slovak background in his lectures and books, Koban could not mix two nationalities in his book then when everyone knew if he was a Slovak or a Rusyn. If Koban put Rusyn traits in his novel, it is suggested that he would not get it published at all. As a result, the date of publication between both works is only one year. If we take into account that the *Excerpt from Michal* is longer than the version published in *Slovakia*, Koban could have changed all Rusyn marks in *The Sorrows of Marienka*, but did not want to do the same in his second novel.

Koban's national identity is somewhere between Rusyn and Slovak, but all his writings were published in the Slovak journals, such as *Slovakia*, or *Kalendár – Almanac*, besides, he regularly kept Slovak Studies Association up to date with his writings and TV roles.

Remarkably enough, Rusinko enlists Koban under "Carpatho-Rusyn Literature" in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature, Vol. I*: "The first Rusyn American writer to seek an audience outside the Rusyn community was Vasil S. Koban, with his novel The Sorrows of Marienka (1979), written in the style of sociological realism" (395).

It must be recognized that Koban is not the only writer whose ethnic belonging is a problematic one. Liza A. Alzo writes in the "Introduction" to her autobiographical novel *Three Slovak Women* how she coped with her ambiguous ethnic background:

> While the author is cognizant that her heritage may be identified as Carpatho-Rusyn and/or possibly Ukrainian, her grandparents chose to identify themselves as 'Slovak'. All family documents and recourses list Verona Straka and Jánoš Figlyar as 'Slovak' with regard to ethnic identity. The book is written as a family testimonial and is not intended as a tool for political causes related to any particular group whether Czech, Rusyn, Slovak, Ukrainian or any others. (xiv)

Alzo shows that the concept of identity is an active process in which people can choose who they want to be. To return back to the novella, while Michal is recovering in the hospital, his boss comes and reassures him that when he is fit he will get another job in the mines, but he must improve his English. A nurse tries to cheer him up:

> "´You see, Michal, things aren't as bad as you thought´, she said. ´You'll have a job, and you can get better jobs as you learn more English and learn how to get along in America – the land of real opportunity.´
> Michal looked up at her. ´You really believe America is the land of opportunity, no matter what happens to you?´
> ´Of course or I wouldn't be here. I'd still be slopping hogs in Galicia.´" (*Excerpt* 109)

He soon meets Tressa Hruska, a Rusyn teacher of English language and attends her classes: "There were children from every possible group in Central, Western, and Eastern Europe – Slovaks, Irish, Rusins, Poles, Germans – all learning to be Americans and take advantage of the glorious American opportunity to better themselves" (114). After few months Michal gets his English Diploma and is happy to become a part of American society. The story ends with Ivan Kinda's death and funeral. Marienka is a widow and her five sons can imagine Michal to be their father.

Although Michal is presented as being Rusyn, Koban uses only Slovak words and phrases: *Prekliaty blbec!* (You goddamn bastard!), *otec* (father), *priatel'* (friend), *veru* (really), *slivovica* (plum brandy), *matka* (mother). He writes that *slivovica* is the Slovak national drink (115).

Conclusion

Vasil Stefan Koban's works showed how Slovaks lived in Conemaugh, Pennsylvania. Although the works are not very known in America, Paul Wilkes in his review appreciates that through literature about our compatriots Slovaks will not forget how they once came and sought better life for themselves and their families. Wilkes warns the next generations that they should keep in mind their roots in the future:

> As second, third, and fourth-generation Slovaks pursue the American dream, buying their four-bedroom houses, gaining their college degrees, wearing shirts and ties, and learning which fork to use, I would caution them to pause for a moment and look back. Look back, if they can, to see if they know anything about what their forebears experienced. … We have pushed aside the Marienkas of our families, we have not taken the time both to listen to them and to record what they have to say. (158)

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