

Translator's notes

Uładzimir Arloŭ (p. 25)

Polacak – a city on the confluence of the rivers Palata and Dźvina; the oldest city in what is now Belarus, and one of the oldest in the East-Slavonic lands (it is first mentioned in the Chronicles under the annal for 862). During the 9th–12th centuries it was the main seat of political power in the area, until superseded by the rise of Navahradak. It remained, however, and remains to this day, an important focus of culture.

Nižnepakroiskaja – the oldest street in Połacak; used here to symbolize all that is most valued in Belarusian urban cultural tradition, just as Unter den Linden, the principal avenue in Berlin, symbolizes the parallel values for west European tradition.

Eduard Akulin (pp. 43, 45)

The Niamiha – a river, flowing through Miensk, now (like the many lost rivers of Miensk), contained in a culvert. The first disaster was a battle in the 11th century, when forces of the prince of Kyiv defeated those of Połacak. (The mediaeval epic 'The lay of Igor's Host' refers to the 'bloody banks of Niamiha'.) The second was on 30 May, 1999, when a crowd of young people were attending an open-air pop concert in Miensk. There was a sudden downpour, and they ran for shelter in the underpass of the nearby 'Niamiha' metro station. The steps were wet and slippery; people began falling. In the crush, 53 young people lost their lives.

Rahnieda (in Old Norse *Ragneið*, ⚔) – the daughter of the Scandinavian-descended Prince Rahvalod (Old Norse

Rognvaldr) of Połacak. In the year 978, she refused to marry the (polygamous pagan) Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv – on the grounds that whereas his father was royal, his mother was only a slave-concubine. Angry at her refusal, Vladimir sacked Połacak, killed her parents, and carried her off by force. In 988, when he became a Christian and put aside his existing wives to marry a princess of Byzantium, she seems to have retired into a convent. Through her sons by Vladimir, she was the ancestress of many European royal lines, one of her descendants in the 35th generation is Queen Elizabeth II. The rape of Rahnieda is frequently treated as an archetype of the sufferings inflicted on Belarus by more powerful neighbours. Here the poet seems to focus rather on her attempt to refuse a marriage which she considered degrading.

Janka Kupala (1882–1942) – the poet, one of the leading figures of the Belarusian cultural renaissance of the early 20th century.

Maksim Bahdanovič (1891–1917) – the greatest lyric poet of Belarus, who, both on account of his talent and his premature death from tuberculosis has often been compared to John Keats. His works include the profoundly patriotic poem 'The Pahonia', which is in effect an alternative national anthem of Belarus.

Larysa Hienijuš (1910–1983) – the poet. Before World War II she lived in Western Belarus (under Polish rule). In 1937, she and her husband moved to Prague, where she was active in Belarusian émigré literary and political life. In 1948, when communist rule was established in Czechoslovakia, she was arrested, extradited to the Soviet Union, and in 1949 was given a 25-year prison sentence. During the political 'thaw' of 1956, her sentence was reduced to

8 years, and eventually she was able to return to Belarus, and to publish her work there. However, the charges against her were never formally dropped – and (to date) three attempts to have them annulled proved unsuccessful.

...*Christ once walked among us...* – The motif of Christ visiting Belarus is the basis of the 'Apocrypha' – a prose-poem in Biblical style, written by the poet Maksim Bahdanovič, an English translation of which appeared in the poetry magazine 'Manifold' (No.27, 1968, pp. 39–41). A somewhat similar motif occurs in a poem of Uładzimir Karatkievič (1930–1984), – though in the latter work it is related to 'eternal present' – rather than the legendary past.

The Stracim-Swan – in a fable by Maksim Bahdanovič; a swan who out of pride refuses a place on Noah's Ark and perishes in the flood. (The name is associated with *stracicca* – to perish.)

Every fourth one... – During World War II, Belarus lost 25% of its population. This fact did not become public knowledge until the mid-1960s; once known, it inspired the poem 'Every fourth one' of Anatol Viarčinski (for translation see 'Like Water, Like Fire: An Anthology of Byelorussian Poetry from 1828 to the Present Day'. London, 1971. P. 275).

Chernobyl (in Belarusian *Čarnobyl*) – the site of the nuclear power station which on April 26, 1986 became the site of the world's worst civil nuclear disaster, lies only a few kilometres south of the Belarusian-Ukrainian frontier. At the time of the disaster, and for the vital few hours following, the wind was from the south-east. As a result, an estimated 70% of the fallout came down on Belarus, rendering almost a quarter of the country unfit for agriculture. In spite of the newly announced policy of '*glasnost*' (openness), Soviet officialdom managed to

downplay the extent of the contamination to three counties in the extreme south of the country, and it was not until 1989 that the full extent of the damage was officially acknowledged. The full consequences to the health of the population are still not known; each successive study by scientists and epidemiologists produces a higher figure. Moreover, earlier studies concentrated on the most prevalent isotopes in the fall-out (radioactive iodine and caesium), and only very recently has work started on the distribution of the small, but extremely dangerous, particles of material from the reactor core, some of which will remain radioactive for centuries to come.

Paval Marcinovič (p. 47)

Day of Freedom – 25 March, the anniversary of the declaration of Belarusian independence in 1918. Of recent years, this date, or the nearest Sunday to it, has been marked by rallies of the pro-democracy opposition – usually with police intervention of the type described in this poem.

The *four* (empty) *coffins* represent four people prominent in Belarusian public life who in the period since September 1999 have mysteriously disappeared: opposition politicians Viktor Hančar and Jury Zacharanka, businessman Anatol Krasouški and TV journalist Džmitry Zavadzki. In June 2001, certain media outlets in Belarus received a videotape of what claimed to be an interview with two former members of the investigation service, who – in connection with the disappearances – accused the Belarusian authorities of sponsoring a death squad to eliminate political opponents.

Švislač – the river on which Miensk stands.

Cna – a river in the vicinity of Miensk.

Danuta Bičel (pp. 49, 51)

The poet is writing from the perspective of her home-town, Horadnia, in western Belarus, which, after more than a century and a half of Russian rule, was between World Wars I and II, part of the Republic of Poland. In September 1939, under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the USSR, it was incorporated into the USSR.

The family names in the final lines are – being names – left untranslated – though I have ventured to give them an English plural ending. It is worth noting, however, that they are, in the main, either derived from Belarusian place names or from traditional trades.

Aleś Barski (pp. 53, 55)

From Połacak to Padlaśša... – Padlaśša (in Polish *Podlasie*) is a region of eastern Poland, with a large ethnic-Belarusian minority. Since Połacak lies in the north-east of Belarus, ‘from Połacak to Padlaśša’ here signifies the whole extent of ethnic Belarusian territory, similarly to ‘from Bielsk to Smalensk’ in the poem of Jan Čykvín (p. 300).

Halina Karžanieŭskaja (p. 59)

Oh yes, we're people of the marshes... – This line of the poem evokes two famous works. The first is an 8-line poem by Janka Kupala ‘Oh yes, a prole am I’ (‘O tak! Ja – praletar!’), written in 1924, expressing his growing disillusion with Soviet rule, and contrasting the official ‘internationalism’ of the Soviet Union (‘The world is motherland to me’), with the fact that still ‘To Belarus my dreams are turning!’ The second is ‘People of the Marshes’ (‘Ludzi na bałocie’), the first volume of the trilogy of novels dealing with life in

Soviet Belarus in the 1920s: ‘The Chronicle of Palesie’ (‘Paleskaja chronika’) by Ivan Mielež (1921–1976), published in stages over 15 years (1961–1976). The first two parts ‘People of the Marshes’ and ‘The breath of the storm’ (‘Podych navalnicy’) won Mielež the Soviet Union’s top literary award – the Lenin prize.

Marshes no light task to drain... – Marsh-drainage and ‘land-improvement’ schemes played a major role in Soviet agricultural planning – and sometimes proved excessively costly, and, in the long-term, had unforeseen and negative consequences for the environment.

Valžyna Mort (p. 103)

Barabbas – the robber and murderer whom, according to all four Gospels (Matthew 27:17, Mark 15:11, Luke 23:1, John 18:40) the crowd demanded should be amnestied, rather than Christ – used here, perhaps, as an archetype of mistaken populist choice.

Viera Burlak (pp. 107, 109)

Ra (or Re) – the ancient Egyptian sun-god. The rendering of lines 37–46 necessarily includes certain approximations. Some Belarusian words, drawn from ‘international’ vocabulary, do have English equivalents which also contain the phoneme *RA* (e.g. here, Belarusian ‘restaRAn’, ‘haRAž’, ‘RAdyjo’ = English ‘restauRAn’t’, ‘gaRAge’, ‘RAdio’). Moreover, there are some fortuitous correspondences: ‘GeneRAL store’ is a fairly close approximation to the Belarusian ‘PRAmTavary’ while the US ‘VeteRAn’s AdministRAtion’ corresponds neatly to the Belarusian ‘RAda veteRAnaŭ’. Other terms, however, are less obliging. In the interests of accuracy, therefore, I append the following list of approximations:

| <i>Belarusian term</i> | <i>Literal translation</i> | <i>Rendering</i> |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| HastRAnom | Food store | High-gRAde foods |
| KRAma | Shop | Shopping paRAde |
| RÄžlikovy RAchunak | Current account | Cash withdRAwals |
| AeRAport | Airport | Air tRAnsport |
| KantoRA pa baRAčbie z TaRAkanami pry dapamozie chloRA* | Bureau for the Struggle against Cockroaches, using Chlorine | eRAdicating RÄts (by tRApping) |

*An alternative rendering – keeping the allusion to cockroaches by using the zoological name for the species – would be ‘Directorate for dictyopterRA pest eRAdication (using perchloRAte)’.

Anatol Brusevič (p. 129)

In the original, each line has total alliteration, i.e. all words in it begin with the same letter. Although the same technique is (just) feasible in English (Robert Southey managed it, for example, in his ‘Siege of Belgrade’), the use of definite and indefinite articles in English makes it far more difficult – and the result tends to give the impression of clever verbal acrobatics rather than a work of art. In my rendering I have followed the original technique to the extent that all major words (verbs, nouns, adverbs, adjectives) alliterate with each other. Furthermore, in line 2, I have had recourse to the convention of Old English alliterative verse, according to which all vowels are considered to alliterate with each other.

Alena Ihnaciuk (p. 147)

The painting by *Eugène Delacroix* (1798–1863), ‘La Liberté Guidant le Peuple’ (1830) is in the Louvre. It is usually known in English as ‘Liberty leading the people’.

Blue flag – presumably the flag of the European Union, or possibly that of the United Nations – in either case viewed as an organization guarding and guaranteeing human and civil rights.

Taciana Chmarka (p. 151)

Kryvian – of or pertaining to the *Kryvičy*, a confederation of prehistoric/early mediaeval tribes whose area of settlement included what is now north-eastern Belarus and western Russia. At the beginning of the 10th century the Principality of Połacak was established in the western territories of the Kryvičy; the inhabitants of the Principality are several times referred to in the Chronicles as Kryvičy as late as the 12th century (e.g. annals for 1127, 1129, 1140, 1162). In poetry ‘Kryvičy’ is often used as a metonym for ‘Belarusians’ – particularly in contexts evoking a heroic past.

Midsummer Night’s water – midsummer folk traditions in Belarus – as in northern Europe generally, focus primarily on fire; the lighting of bonfires and leaping over them. However, water also plays a role – including, in particular garlands of flowers with lighted candles fixed in them are placed on a brook or river and set free to float downstream.

Tamaš Suchaviej (p. 153)

God walked our Land... – See note to the poem of Eduard Akulin (p. 292).

In ancient time... – This is a literal rendering of the original – which by one of those happy coincidences which sometimes occur in translation, has, for the English reader, very similar literary/emotive resonances to those this poem has for Belarusians.

Maryna Nataliĭch (p. 179)

Choke-cherry gas — *cheremukha*, the Russian name for the tree known in English as 'bird-cherry' or 'choke-cherry' is also the name of a gas (similar to CS), used in CIS countries e.g. to disperse demonstrations.

Maryna Prakapoviĭch (p. 183)

The train is leaving shortly, Europe-bound... — Belarus, as guidebooks to the country frequently state, 'lies at the heart of Europe'. Though its claim to the actual centre-point of the continent is challenged by its neighbours to north and south — Lithuania and Ukraine, it undoubtedly lies approximately half-way between Ireland and the Urals and on latitudes roughly half-way between those of the North Cape and the 'toe' of Italy. At the same time, in a symbolic sense, Belarusian writers past and present often speak of 'Europe' as if it were something remote from their own country. Political discourse over the past decade has frequently presented the future of Belarus as a choice between 'Europe' and 'Russia'.

Kolyma — notorious, in the Soviet era, for its prison camps.

Nadzieja Salanoviĭch (p. 185)

Although in no way an 'official' emblem, the *cornflower* is considered the 'national flower' of Belarus, and — particularly in the poetry of Maksim Bahdanoviĭch — symbolizes the spiritual and artistic values of the nation.

New Belarusian — the term often applied to sharp-witted entrepreneurs, who have prospered in the post-Soviet situation — unlike the general population, whose standard of living has steadily declines.

Mariya Łuk'janienka (p. 189)

Heracleitus of Ephesus (c. 520–460 BC), to whom is attributed the saying 'One cannot step twice into the same river'.

Valancina Koŭtun (p. 191)

Euphrosyne — St Euphrosyne of Polacak (?1104–1167), honoured as the 'Educatrix of Belarus' was a member of the princely house of Polacak, who at the age of 12 ran away from home and entered a convent. She promoted the spread of learning and the copying of books, probably transcribing some herself, and commissioned the noted jeweller Lazar Bohša to make an ornate jewelled reliquary in the form of a double-barred cross which was one of the historic treasures of Belarus. The cross disappeared during World War II, although there is still hope that it might yet come to light. (For a translation of the mediaeval 'Life of St Euphrosyne' and introductory article, see: 'The Journal Of Byelorussian Studies', Vol. II, No.1 (London, 1969), pp. 3–24.)

Bilingualism — the current official term for a policy of giving the Russian language equal status with Belarusian. After the years of downgrading of the Belarusian language under Soviet rule, bilingualism is seen by many Belarusians as putting their own 'state' language — Belarusian — at a disadvantage.

Hleb Łabadzienka (p. 197)

The pluristops at the end of the poem represent the word 'Belarus'. At times when it has been 'politically incorrect' for Belarusians openly to express their love for their country, it became customary to give the greeting 'Long live!...' without mentioning the subject of that wish.

Halina Taranovič (p. 199)

This poem is noteworthy for its Biblical allusions. In addition to the more obvious allusions – the Star of Bethlehem, which (Matthew 2:2) announced the birth of Christ, and the ‘*purest of arches/of the great covenant*’ – the rainbow, the symbol of God’s pledge to Noah that never again will He send another flood to destroy the world (Genesis 9:12) the whole concept of the resetting of the ‘timepiece’ of the universe seems to have been inspired by the story of King Hezekiah, and the turning back of the shadow on the sundial (II Kings: 20:8–11).

Jan Čykvín (p. 201)

From Bielsk to Smalensk... – Bielsk (in Poland) and Smalensk (in Russia) currently lie beyond the frontiers of Belarus, but are historically part of what may be termed Belarusian ‘ethnic territory’.

Viktar Šalkievič (p. 203)

Aleś Razanaŭ and *Ryhor Baradulin* are two of the leading contemporary Belarusian poets, and are represented in this collection (pp. 17, 21).

Dudaraŭ – this reference seems to be ironic, since Alaksiej Dudaraŭ (1950–), although a noted writer who won many of the major literary prizes of the Soviet era, is a prose writer and dramatist – and has published no poetry whatsoever.

Viktar Švied (pp. 207, 209)

The choice of the villagers’ names – although they are all fairly frequent in Belarus – was evidently conditioned in part by the demands of rhyme. It is noteworthy, however,

that they all have evocative overtones for Belarusians. Thus *Jan* will recall (in variant form of the name) a pre-eminent poet of Belarus Janka Kupala. *Sioma* will recall Jakub Kołas’ (1882–1956) narrative poem ‘Symon the Musician’ (‘Symon-muzyka’); *Paŭlina* the heroine of Kupala’s comedy ‘Paŭlinka’, Lavon the hero of a patriotic song inset into Kupala’s narrative poem ‘Night Halt’ (‘Na papasie’), and *Kastuś* – Kastuś Kalinoŭski, heroic leader of the 1863 uprising against Tsarist rule. The irony that the speakers in Švied’s poem, who are uncertain of their identity, all share names with iconic Belarusian patriotic figures (fact or fiction) can hardly be accidental.

Local – Belarusian *tutejšy* from *tut* (here). The word used by Belarusian peasants at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries when questioned as to their ethnic identity. While aware that they were neither Russians nor Poles, they had no other sense of their identity than that they were ‘from hereabouts’. ‘The Locals’ (‘Tutejšyja’) is the title of a play by Janka Kupala, which deals precisely with the problem of Belarusian identity and national consciousness. Although the Soviet Belarusian authorities conferred on Kupala their highest literary honour – the title of ‘People’s Poet’ – from the mid-1920s onwards, ‘Tutejšyja’ was neither acted nor republished within the Belarusian SSR.

Jarastaŭ Atlas-Maskalevič (p. 211)

The sap of the silver birch is a traditional drink in Belarus – refreshing and invigorating.

Volha Ipatava (p. 219)

Andrej Tadevuš Kašciuška (1746–1817) – usually known outside Belarus under the Polish form of his name – Tadeusz Kościuszko. He took part in the American War of

Independence, and was the leader of the 1794 Belarusian-Polish uprising against Tsarist rule. He had an international reputation in his lifetime (both John Keats and Leigh Hunt wrote sonnets in his honour); more recently, monuments have been erected to him in Poland, the USA and Switzerland. A town in Michigan, an Alaskan island, and the highest peak in Australia have been named after him.

Shucak — the focus of the 1920 Belarusian pro-independence uprising.

Kurapaty — a wooded area on the outskirts of Miensk, where in 1937–1941, the victims of Stalin's terror were executed. At least 30,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 people are estimated to have perished there; the discovery and exhumation of their remains in 1988 gave added impetus to the pro-democracy pro-independence movement in Belarus in the last years of the Soviet Union. More recently, when the site came under threat from a planned widening of the Miensk ring — its 'defenders' occupied the site, and sat out a bitter winter in tents.

...tie a towel to the cross... — Ornamental 'towels', that is, cloths with elaborate woven or embroidered designs, form a traditional part of the décor of a Belarusian home, draped around pictures — in particular, icons; they are also, as this poem indicates, tied to graveyard crosses to honour the dead.

Anatol Viarcinski (p. 223)

'The sleep of reason produces monsters.' — The accepted English translation of 'El sueño de la razon produce monstruos', the caption to Plate 43 of Goya's 'Los Caprichos' (1799).

'Slumber of soul begets base slyness.' — According to the author, he noted this phrase in the diaries of Leo Tolstoy; he does not, however, recollect the exact reference.

Valancin Taras (p. 227)

This poem is a response to the poem of Slavimir Adamovič, 'Kill the President', which although clearly ironic, nevertheless, resulted in his being charged with insulting a state official, and spending 10 months in jail. The case was publicised in 'Index on Censorship' 1996 (No. 4) and 1997 (No. 4).

Aleś Lipaj (p. 229)

The thirst for bread and circuses... — Cf. Juvenal 'Satires', x: 81: 'Now that no one buys our votes, the public has long since cast off its cares; the people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions, and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for just two things — bread and circuses.'

Leanid Drańko-Majsiuk (p. 231)

Dźvina — the river on which Połacak stands (usually known in English as the Western Dvina).

St Sophia's fane — the Cathedral of St Sophia in Połacak.

Lukiški jail — in Vilnia, where Kastaŭ Kalinoŭski, the leader of the 1863 uprising against Tsarist rule, was hanged.

'Lest we perish' — A quotation from the Preface to 'Belarusian Flute' ('Dudka Bielaruskaja'), the first collection of poems by the 'father of modern Belarusian literature', Francišak Bahuševič (1840–1900) which, due to the Tsarist censorship, had to be published abroad, in

Krakow, under the pseudonym of Maciej Buračok. The passage reads, in full: 'There have been many peoples, which first lost their speech, as a man may be deprived of his speech before his death, and then they perished entirely! So do not abandon our Belarusian speech, lest we perish!'

'*This heritage has come to me...*' – A quotation from Janka Kupala's poem 'Heritage' ('Spadčyna'), for translation see 'Like Water, Like Fire', p. 99.

The final stanza of the poem is written in the kind of Creolized jargon that has resulted from decades of downgrading the Belarusian language in favour of Russian. A comparable effect in English may be obtained (as here) by Creolizing with German.

Iryna Paŭlovič (p. 237)

Our state flag into shreds they slash... – This is not simply rhetoric. In May 1995, when the white-red-white flag was replaced by the Soviet-style red and green flag, a senior Presidential aide was shown on Belarusian TV, cutting up the white-red-white flag, and autographing the scraps for souvenirs.

Żmicer Bartosik (p. 241)

The poet gives the names of these areas in Vilnia in their Belarusian form. Since they are generally meaningful (see derivations in brackets), they frequently differ in form considerably from the corresponding Lithuanian names, though the meaning is identical (rather as in Brussels a street will have two names – French and Flemish – with the same meaning but different in form, e.g. 'Rue de la Loi – Wetstraat').

Pahulanka (from *hulać* – to play, take a walk; *J. Basanavičiaus* and *K. Kalinauskio* streets area) – a street in the centre of Vilnia, with many cafés, etc. A popular place for people, in particular, couples, to stroll.

Žviarynec – a district of Vilnia, which was formerly a royal hunting park (from *žvier* – wild animal; *Žvėrynas* in Lithuanian).

Castle Hill – the site of the Tower of Gedymin (a mediaeval prince), and of the original settlement from which Vilnia developed. It is one of the highest points in the city, from which one obtains an excellent view.

Lipouka and *Dobraja Rada* – districts of Vilnia, Lithuanian names are *Liepkalnio gatvė* and *Gerosios vilties*. *Lipouka* is named from the large number of lime trees (Belarusian *lipa*) which formerly grew in the area. *Dobraja Rada* means 'Good Counsel'; it is sometimes also called *Dobraja nadzieja* (Good Hope) or *Dobryja spadzianai* (Good Expectations).

The Antokal Courts – a district of Vilnia, *Antakalnis* in Lithuanian; originally built as an elegant suburb.

Zarečča (from the expression *za rakoj* – across the river) – *Užupis* in Lithuanian. The cemetery mentioned in the poem is the Bernardine cemetery in this city district.

Michalina (p. 255)

The first line, in the original, reads simply 'In the [Catholic] church of St Anne'. However, just as, in an English context, a reference to St Paul's, without further qualification, will immediately evoke an image of Wren's cathedral, so to a Belarusian, this line will immediately evoke the Gothic

church of St Anne in Vilnia, of which Napoleon Bonaparte is reported to have said that it was so exquisite that he would like to put it in his pocket and take it back to France.

Niašviž — the former seat of the Radziwill princes; the palace, dating from the 16th-18th centuries, and the surrounding park is a major tourist attraction.

...*the lyrics of Bahdanovič*... — Maksim Bahdanovič; his works include, incidentally, a poem about the Church of St Anne, referred to in this poem.

Alena Siarko (p. 259)

'*Calvary*' — the Kalvaryja cemetery in Miensk, which contains a Catholic chapel, currently used for general worship.

Maryna Šoda (p. 265)

The story of the Tower of Babel (see Genesis 11:1–9) is probably best remembered for the punishment brought on its builders — the division of languages. Here, however, the poet focuses on the aim of the builders — to reach heaven.

Andrej Chadanovič (p. 271)

When will that full-breasted Madame appear... — Presumably another reference to the Delacroix's painting 'La Liberté Guidant le Peuple'. See note to the poem of Alena Ihnaciuk (p. 296).

Valancina Aksak (p. 273)

The image of the six-winged seraph comes from Isaiah 6:1–2. Significantly, this comes immediately before Isaiah's call to his prophetic mission.

Siarhiej Astraŭcoŭ (pp. 283, 285)

Alaiza Paškevič (1876–1916) — writer and poet, who used the pseudonym 'Ciotka'.

There was a bullet for him... — Vlačaŭ Ivanoŭski was shot during the Nazi occupation of Miensk in 1943; Soviet partisans claimed responsibility.

Alma Mater — the poet's Alma Mater is the Belarusian State University in Miensk.