



**Samuel Abrahám**

Editorial

## **The poet Daniel Simko**

Svetozar Daniel Simko, a Slovak poet writing in English, did not choose that language by chance. Like a hundred thousand other Czechs and Slovaks, he emigrated with his parents to the US after the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia, and died there in 2004 at the age of 45. Unfortunately, we cannot offer an interview with him, only recollections that we have collected from his friends and relatives in an effort to learn who he was, how he lived and how his emigration affected him. More importantly, we feature 11 of Simko's poems: as Chaplin said, people are not judged by who they were, but by what they leave to posterity. This is particularly true of artists.

Simko left a great number of unpublished poems because, as he said, he was not terribly keen on publishing them. He did not want to become a victim of the vicious race to artistic immortality that was quite common in his circle, and about which he made many acerbic remarks. Paradoxically, it is only after his death that his poems, *White Keys*, *Black Keys*, are being published, in 2008, edited by his artistic executors Carolyn Forché and Jim Reidel who both contributed to this issue.

I was first approached about publishing a profile of Daniel Simko by a prominent Slovak poet, Lubo Feldek, who first met Simko in the early 1990's. Feldek visited New York, Simko came to Bratislava, and they worked together to translate Simko's poems. The result was a bilingual collection; *The World Within a Lost Glove* (Bratislava 2005).

I must admit that at first I was sceptical about the project, because Feldek only wanted to translate the profile, not edit it. I did not know Simko personally and, as happens with most modern poetry after a first reading — especially if it is not in one's native tongue — I wasn't particularly taken by the work. Fortunately, Feldek was extremely enthusiastic and persistent. He introduced me to Daniel's father Vladimir Simko, a physician living in New York, who spoke as only a father can about his lost son, yet who as a doctor also managed to be both candid and objective. But whenever he pronounced his son's name "Svetko", all his love and sorrow were apparent.

Vladimir Simko sent me the poems and photos, and gradually I received various commissioned or already published texts about his son. I have read Simko's poems over and over, studied the nuances of the translation and the English originals with Feldek and Igor André, who helped Feldek with the translation. Lubo stressed that Simko was very meticulous about his poetry, sweated over each word, and was never fully satisfied with the translation into Slovak.

We offer a profile more about Simko's life and his art than about his untimely end, because I view his demise only as one episode in his life as a poet. Isn't the end of someone who dies at 46 evidence of incompleteness, however tragic and definitive? What preceded his death was the journey of an émigré and artist — quite an arduous combination, especially for poets.

Fortunately, Simko left his homeland when he was young enough to make English his artistic language. His idyllic childhood back in Slovakia abruptly ended, and he had to face a strange, new world that even adult émigrés often endure with difficulty. Gradually he became acclimated to America and accepted its rich culture as his own, although his visits to his native Bratislava after 1989 must have shaken his sense of identity. Poems from this period — *Far, Final Instruction, August 1968* — refer back to his childhood in Bratislava. That the Slovak language was deeply embedded in his consciousness is revealed by the fact that during his last days he spoke mostly Slovak.

So who was Daniel Simko? A Slovak poet writing in English or an American poet with Slovak roots? It does not matter — art is universal.

Even if you did not know Simko personally, I urge you to get acquainted with him through the recollections of those close to him, his poetry and photos. You will meet the sensitive soul of a poet.

## Populisms

The Next Page Foundation initiated an exchange of articles between three journals from Central Europe — *Critique & Humanism* from Bulgaria, *Kulturos Barai* from Lithuania and *Kritika & Kontext*. All the articles in their respective languages can be found on the internet journal [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com). Each journal has provided texts: *K&K* contributed its Nietzsche dossier from issue No. 35. The Bulgarian journal *Critique & Humanism* offered several studies on populism, from which we have chosen two essays by Ivan Krastev and Svetoslav Malinov.

Populism in Slovakia, as in many other countries today, is a dominant political force. The ideological differences among major parties gradually diminish, and the political rhetoric becomes suspiciously similar. And yet there are differences between the degrees of populism, though to measure the actual dangers is very difficult. One reason is that populism is extremely broad; like jazz, it is hard to define, but when we hear it we recognize it instantly.

The primary goal of each populist is to gain power at any price, and for this reason he or she is ready to do and promise anything. Hence, the populist has no problem changing his position and policy, or mixing real and imaginary enemies. According to need, a populist can change ideology, or augment or degrade any problem to suit the moment. In contrast with various other ideologies, paradoxically, no populist would ever call himself or herself a populist.

The sorry state of modern politics is that in the age of instant media blips each politician who wants to be elected, and especially re-elected, must use populist rhetoric and promise things that are hardly achievable. Considering that a populist can claim to be either left or right oriented, a great number of them blend smoothly into the contemporary political landscape. However, a true populist differs from a non-populist politician using populist tactics in that the

former knows no limit if he wants to be elected or re-elected.

Generally, populists are not so dangerous as long as they are popular and admired and society remains relatively economically stable. But when a destabilized society sees through their empty promises and rhetoric, they can become aggressive demagogues and autocrats who will do anything to divert the attention and wrath of the population. This was the path taken by communist, fascist or Nazi regimes, and the same formula applies to militant Islamists and other fanatics.

Svetoslav Malinov succinctly observes that populism is not "a childhood disease of democracy" that can be cured by age or experience. On the contrary, as Karl Schmitt might say, "the most intensive form of the political, as the triumphant return of political passion in a public sphere paralysed by political correctness."

Ivan Krastev argues another point that has ominous potential for the future and poses a great danger to democratic societies. It is dangerous enough when populists become openly illiberal — that is a logical and familiar development — but Krastev adds that this danger is greatly enhanced when populist illiberalism is combined with secretly anti-democratic elites.

For the moment, the elites in Central and Eastern Europe are still pro-democratic, although by and large they are paralysed by the confrontation with brute populism. Membership of the EU or NATO guarantees that for the foreseeable future the elites will stay mostly pro-liberal and democratic. However, in a future of increasing economic crisis, deepening social tension, and populists winning free and democratic elections, elites might succumb to the sirens of extreme ideologies, just as happened during the twentieth century when they supported fascism, nationalism, communism, or clericalism. This potential threat from illiberal populism, combined with the fragility of liberal democracy, is a factor that democratic political and intellectual elites must resist and reckon with.

---

Published 2008-11-17

Original in English

Contribution by Kritika & Kontext

First published in *Kritika & Kontext* 36 (2008)

© Samuel Abrahám/Kritika & Kontext

© Eurozine