

Tovaryshky [Friends] by Olena Pchilka – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Katja Mihurko-Poniz : 14-17 minutes

The eight article of the *Distant Reading Recommends* series was written by Dmytro Yesypenko.



Olena Pchilka (Olha Kosach, 1849-1930)

Ukrainian literature can hardly be considered as well-known in Europe. It is not broadly represented in university courses and its translations make a rather rare appearance on the shelves of bookstores, even in neighboring countries. However, in Ukraine, literary classics are not just authors of texts of aesthetic quality, but also key figures in the history of the development of the Ukrainian language, the formation of the nation's consciousness, and development of statehood. The images of literary classics and characters from their texts are present in contemporary Ukraine too, both in radio and television broadcasts, in graffiti on city walls, in symbols during Euromaidan protests, and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war (2014-?). Every visitor to the country is likely to soon notice the omnipresence of literature, by just taking in hand *hryvnias* banknotes and seeing there more than one canonical writer.



Ukrainian writers on the national currency *hryvnia*. Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722-1794), Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), Ivan Franko (1856-1916), and Lesia Ukrainka (Larysa Kosach, 1871-1913).

The single female figure of Larysa Kosach stands out among male classical authors. In the final decades of the 19th century, the Kosach family was one of only a few in Kyiv that adhered to the Ukrainian-language education of their children. As a result, in the following years, many Kosachs contributed greatly to the different fields of Ukrainian cultural activities. The role of Olha Kosach (1849-1930) in the family's success can hardly be overestimated. Like her daughter Larysa, the aforementioned Lesia Ukrainka from the 200

hryvnias banknote, Olha Kosach was a writer. She signed her literary texts with the pen name “Olena Pchilka.” “Pchilka” means a “bee” in Ukrainian and is usually associated with the concept of hard work. Olena Pchilka indeed proved to be hard-working and productive as an organizer and creator in various spheres of Ukrainian cultural life.

She is known primarily as a writer for children. However, the Ukrainian subcollection of ELTEC includes her story “for adults”, or rather for “young adults”. The story “Tovaryshky” [Female Friends] was published in 1887 in the almanac “Pershyi vinok” [The First Wreath], a collection initiated by women, written by women, and for women.



Olena Pchilka and «women’s almanac» Pershyi vinok [The First Wreath. 1887].

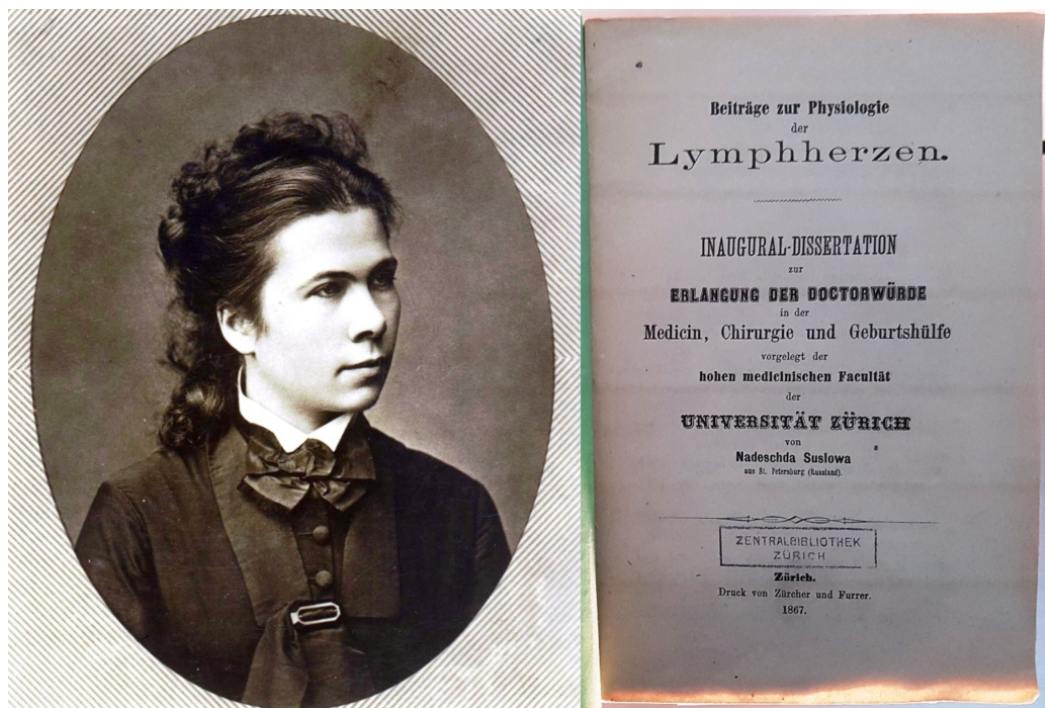
“Tovaryshky” is a story about girls from the Poltava province of the then-Russian Empire who became the first female students at the University of Zürich. The story colorfully depicts the European journey of young people from a Ukrainian province, detailing their studies in Switzerland and Austria and also includes a number of romantic plots, with entangled and everchanging relations between the characters, in the style of the “Beverly Hills” TV series.

Extraordinary girls, “Sarmatian neophytes”.

The action takes place in the mid-1860s, long before the beginning of the suffragette movement and the so-called first wave of the women’s movement. The main character of the story, Liuba Kalynovska, is a young woman of a new generation who reads long books — and these are not light fiction novels. Ukrainian authors are among her favorites. In contrast to her, Olena Pchilka portrays another heroine, Liuba’s friend Raisa Bragova; she is an aristocrat who rejects everything related to peasants and considers Ukrainian culture to be unrefined.

She is far from the people and their customs; her interest in Ukrainian peasants has a “biological” character and she compares them with plants and animals. Together with a friend of the same age whose name is Kostia, Liuba and Raisa go to Switzerland to study at the University of Zürich. Local university professors are surprised at the success of the students: firstly because they are women; secondly because such results are shown by “wild Sarmatians from the east.” Moreover, Raisa Bragova achieves something highly unusual and unique: she becomes the first woman in the history of the University of Zürich to give a public lecture. In addition to academic accomplishments, Raisa is successful in her amorous affairs, too: she wins the heart of the university professor, Herr Stockmann.

Artistic reality corresponds to historical fact since natives of the Russian Empire were indeed the first women who were allowed to study at the medical faculty of the University of Zürich. Similarly to Raisa Bragova from “Tovaryshky”, Nadezhda Suslova (1843-1919) was the first woman in modern history to obtain a medical degree from a reputable higher education institution. Suslova married Friedrich Erismann and they moved together to St Petersburg. Nadezhda also improved her knowledge of obstetrics and gynecology in Vienna, as does Liuba Kalynovska from “Tovaryshky”.



Nadezhda Suslova (1849-1930) and her thesis for Doctor of Medicine degree (1867)

Ukrainian Zürich

Based on the story, it is possible to draw a fairly detailed map of the most picturesque Zürich locations. These are places where young people live and walk, undertake their studies, have heated discussions, and passionate rendezvous.

For example, the story mentions the hotel “Baur au lac” as the place where the main characters first settle: “the comfort is excellent and the view is wonderful, but, as they say, we couldn’t afford it at all.”



Hotel Baur au Lac (Zürich, Talstrasse 1)

An apartment on Künstlergraben becomes a new, more affordable place for girls to live: “in the windows of the house you can see Limmat with bridges, you can see its bank, the “Old Town”, you can see those nice mountains that attract one’s eye”.

Girls meet with their peers, students on Rämli Strasse, and during their walks, young people enjoy the views near the Zürich Polytechnikum: “They came to the terrace in front of the Polytechnic, from where a view of the city and mountains bathed in the sun opened up.”

It is curious to note how Ukrainian youth, “ukrainize” one of the walking areas in the city center, Hohe Promenade. One of the story’s characters, Korniiievych, calls it “a Cossack’s promenade with poplars». The Cossacks he refers to were glorious warriors from the

steppe on the territory of today's eastern Ukraine; between the 15th and 17th centuries, this self-ruling military group exerted great influence on European geopolitics.

Hohe Promenade is frequently described in very passionate terms; it seems that the author herself was a big fan of these landscapes over the lake. The beauty touches the souls of the loving protagonists Kostia and Liuba and corresponds with the first tender feelings of young people: “The rays break through the branches from the side, in wide stripes lies between the tree trunks on the road, and there further – oh, how wonderful! The lake is changing with gold at its edge, and in the distance it is such a pure one, gleaming with color deeper than during the day. And all the greenery on the shore seemed to look younger, it seems so bright! .. The distant mountains seem to be changing with delicate colors too.”



Hohe Promenade (Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, Adrian Michael)

Mountains are burning and hearts are on fire.

The story extensively describes the stay of young people in the mountains, where they observe the so-called Alpenglühen: “The sun is in the west, and the Alps are burning: the sun is not visible, only its golden glow shines on the tops of the mountains. The pale fawn, golden, pink, orange color changes, varies, shines, then glows more clearly, like the heat of a giant hearth without a flame. One could not stop watching this sight! .. And then it begins to fade away gradually; the tones change again, this time in a different way, softer, thinner; light shadows penetrate in between the pink color, fight against it, shroud this mountainous distance with a gray haze. The hearth is dying out.”



Alpenglühen (Wikipedia, Afrank99, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The “fire” of the mountains kindles sparks in the hearts of the characters; indeed, every single young person experiences the fluctuations of heartfelt feelings.

The next proscenium is a village near Zürich under the particularly telling name of Küssnacht (“night of kissing”, if literally translated from the German language). Raisa goes there with the scientific purpose of collecting shellfish and Kostia accompanies her, and it happens that they stay overnight. Instead of shellfish, Raisa catches Kostia in her nets. From that moment, he becomes less interested in Liuba. Upon returning to the university, Kostia pays attention to another beauty, Princess Beloselskaia, who reciprocates his feelings. Korniiievich, in turn, comforts Liuba, and she begins to notice his charm. Liuba's admirer, Kuzmenko, is the third wheel in the scenario, so is Pestsova, whom Kuzmenko stubbornly ignores.

As their university studies come to an end, the graduates make their plans for the future. Some stay in Zürich. However, for Bragova and her husband, Zürich is only an stepping

stone on the path to conquering the capital of the Russian Empire for an ambitious young woman. Soon, the Stockmanns escape from “Swiss poverty”, as Raisa describes it, for a profitable practice in St. Petersburg. Along with his new flame, Beloselskaia, Kostia goes to bohemian Paris.

At this moment Liuba again reveals her originality; she decides to study obstetrics in Vienna in order to return to the “wilderness” in the Poltava province with her newly-acquired skills.

Learning compassion and finding own Ukrainianness in Vienna.

Thus, Liuba is in Vienna, not so much admiring the architecture of the metropolis as contemplating dramatic pictures of human grief and suffering. In addition to what she has read in books and heard at lectures, she practices the essence of a doctor’s work— how to alleviate the suffering of patients—in a local clinic, and specifically the suffering of women, her “poor sisters”: “one hears so much groaning, and immense voice of anguish; and what to do, Liuba looked at those torments, listened to those screams with the thought that later she will be able to lessen the women’s suffering, being a skillful adviser to the poor sisters, and perhaps the savior of some of them from death. She gained expertise as the actual practice gave so immeasurably more knowledge than books.”



Vienna clinique

Vienna is both strange and familiar to her. Contemplating the Danube, Liuba recalls a song from her childhood: “And the Danube, this “quiet Danube”: isn’t it good! You stand by the bridge, watch how it carries its wide, calmly deep waters. So here he is, the Danube, whose name you know from childhood, from those songs that tell how a Cossack gives his horses to drink near the Danube, and a girl lets her hairs swim in the quiet Danube...”. Liuba is lonely in Vienna; men are not courageous enough to approach this independent “junge Dame”, with cropped hair.

And yet she is lucky to meet a fellow countryman from Galicia, a student called Buchynskyi. Thanks to him, she discovers the Galician Ukrainian world, “the European Ukraine,” and the richness of the Ukrainian language. The girl is ashamed of her own national self-consciousness in front of Buchunskyi, and she tries to learn and improve.

Rewarding service. Friends-antipodes

Liuba returns home to the Poltava province not only with new knowledge but also with a altered, much improved sense of national self-awareness. She gets a job as a paramedic in her native countryside and also serves also as a kind of psychologist and adviser. Peasant women share their troubles and secrets with her, “open their souls while laying on a pillow”. Liuba helps them with their female illnesses, which are, at times, very severe. Liuba’s assistance is needed also in the most difficult of cases when local healers cannot help women in labour.

At the end of the story, there comes a denouement of the main love line. Korniiievych confesses his feelings to Liuba. Interestingly, the narrative still conforms to conventional storylines: it is man who decides the fate of the relationship. The author of the story explains Korniiievych’s restraint as related to the circumstance that he had not the influence of the “soft female environment” in his childhood; he grew up the writer concludes, emotionally deficient. Ukrainian modernist authors later in the period would continue to consider adult psychological problems as rooted in childhood, of course, by focusing on Sigmund Freud’s theories, especially popular at the turn of the century.

The end of the story marks also the end of the friendship between Liuba and Raisa; although they have the same occupation, they are now completely different people. Unlike Liuba, Raisa believes that she should not waste her time treating patients who cannot afford the services of expensive doctors.

Future female leaders.

In her “Tovaryshky” story, Olena Pchilka demonstrates that women’s self-realization in both professional, public, and private spheres is possible. The writer situates events outside the usual locations for Ukrainian literature – outside the village – and shows people a new generation. Her heroines, who come from a traditional rural environments, manage to be successful in the new world and successfully fight against unfavorable circumstances. The story’s female characters are not inferior and often even dominate their male counterparts when it comes to their abilities and professional qualities. They are even more decisive in amorous affairs.

«Tovaryshky» is included in the Ukrainian corpus of ELTeC, and can be read [here](#). The story appears according to the first publication. This is important, since particular fragments have been removed from most of the later published editions of the story. For example, there is no description of how Ukrainian students make fun of the poor pronunciation of their Russian peers. Such cuts are not accidental but inherent in the practice of publishing Ukrainian writers during the time of the Russian Empire and subsequently in the Soviet Union. Russia, Russian culture and its representatives were supposed to be superior “elder brothers”, but by no means should be ridiculed.

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