

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### TRUBAR AND HIS BIOGRAPHERS

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Mirko Rupel, *Primož Trubar, življenje in delo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1962); Jože Javoršek, *Primož Trubar* (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1977); Jožko Humar, *Primož Trubar, rodoljub ilirski* (Koper: Založba Lipa, 1980).

That the memory and literary achievements of Primož Trubar, the Slovene Luther and "Father of Slovene Literature," fell into oblivion immediately after his death in 1586, where they remained for nearly four centuries, can in no way be attributed to fate. Half a century after the ruthless suppression of Protestantism in the Slovene provinces of Carniola, Carinthia, and Styria, not even the encyclopedic Janez Vajkard Valvasor was aware that the Slovene Protestant writers had produced some fifty religious books, of which about sixteen had survived the massive book-burnings of the Counter Reformation in Carniola and found a safe haven in the Jesuit College in Ljubljana, from which Valvasor was graduated. Even as late as 1907 Ivan Cankar noted that for some Slovenes the honor of being the "Father of Slovene Literature" belonged unmistakably to the industrialist and literary patron Baron Žiga Zois, who lived two hundred years after Trubar.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Catholic restoration in the Habsburg domains, and for four centuries thereafter, any interest in personalities or matters deemed heretical in nature was strictly precluded on religious grounds, for such were the demands of rigid adherence to Catholic orthodoxy then prevalent. Ivan Tavčar's historical novels, his *Visočka kronika* in particular, very vividly portray the reactionary attitude that set in immediately after the Reformation. Also the abusive nickname, "Jurij Kobila," used by people to taunt the Catholic clergy who went over to the Lutheran side in order to be rid of their celibacy, persisted long after the Reformation. On nationalistic grounds as well, the "German" Reformation came to be regarded as a source of alien contamination, highly detrimental and inimical to the aspirations of Slovene national consciousness. This notion the Catholic clergy promoted with great vigor especially during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Despite this intransigent posture, a life-size figure of Trubar by F. Berneker was placed by members of the Liberal Party, who ran Ljubljana's city government, at the entrance of Tivoli Park in Ljubljana in 1910, the hey-day of Slovene nationalism, and then a monument, rather grotesque in form, commemorating the publication of the first Slovene printed book, was erected in Trubar's native village in 1951. Thus nearly four hundred years had to pass before the historical Trubar emerged from the shadows of obscurity and parochialism.

The first serious interest in Slovene Protestantism came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the fad of German romanticism prompted German noblemen to make their libraries accessible to researchers fascinated with the past. First in the field was Christian F. Schnurrer with his study of Slavic book production in sixteenth-century Württemberg, where Baron Johann Ungnad von Sonnegk printed several of Trubar's books in Slovene and Croatian translation for distribution in the southern reaches of the Habsburg empire and beyond.<sup>2</sup> On a different level important advances were made about this same time by Baron Žiga Zois and Jernej Kopitar in exploring the literary and cultural aspects of the Slovene Reformation. Zois (1747-1819) used his wealth for purchasing and collecting numerous rare books of the sixteenth century, while the linguist Kopitar (1780-1844) delved into the historical and etymological roots of the Slovene language. Their work as the pioneering intellectual leaders of the Slovene national renaissance was finally brought to full fruition in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Understandably enough, it was Teodor Elze (1823-1900), the first Protestant clergyman to be stationed in Ljubljana more than 250 years after the Reformation, who did the first scholarly research into the life and times of Primož Trubar. Starting with almost nothing, Elze began gathering material for a full documented history of the Slovene Reformation. He was not destined to complete his ambitious task however, because of the vast number of documents and sources he unearthed about Trubar and his co-workers; these needed more time than Elze had for study and analysis. All the same Elze's persistence and industry resulted in a monumental achievement. During the last two decades of his life he published in various German periodicals his studies of Slovene Protestant bibles, prayer-books, catechisms, sermons, writers, preachers, and theology students. He crowned his labors in 1897 with a collection of most of Trubar's correspondence, and thus provided scholars a wealth of material.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact Elze served up not only the basic materials, but also the directions that needed only further study and

refinement for actualization. To this day Elze still remains the Trubar scholar *par excellence*.

After the literary critic Ivan Prijatelj severely castigated Slovene Catholics for disregarding the importance of the Reformation for their literary and cultural awakening in his extended essay, *O kulturnem pomenu slovenske reformacije*, in 1908, and after Matija Murko, historian of Slavic literatures and cultures, published his long-awaited conclusions about the significance of the Reformation for the South Slavs, *Die Bedeutung der Reformation und Gegenreformation für das geistige Leben der Südslaven*, in 1927, two Slovene scholars managed with an industry and persistence akin to Elze's to bring his unfulfilled ambition to brilliant completion. France Kidrič (1880-1950), a positivist in his approach to literary history and criticism, despite the quantity and depth of new data he discovered relative to Trubar and the Slovene Reformation, was quite loath to attempt a full scale biography of Trubar, as new material kept surfacing in profusion. In addition to numerous articles Kidrič produced an important short prospectus for a biography of the reformer by analyzing the earliest accounts of Trubar penned by his contemporaries Jakob Andreae, his panegyrist, and Bishop Tomaž Hren of Ljubljana, the "hammer of heretics" in Carniola, and then later by Valvasor, one of Trubar's earliest denigrators. Kidrič also produced a special series of newspaper articles recapitulating and updating Trubar research. These were edited and published posthumously in 1951 by his student and successor Mirko Rupel.<sup>4</sup> With Kidrič's important contributions before him, Rupel finally was able to bring more than fifty years of intensive study and research to a climax.

Mirko Rupel (1901-1963), noted philologist and literary historian, devoted most of his scholarly career to studying Trubar and the Slovene Reformation, searching libraries all over Europe for copies of Slovene Protestant books, discovering and collecting more new material than any one before him. He made two major contributions to the study of Reformation literature in Slovenia. In 1934 he published *Slovenski protestanski pisci*, an anthology of Slovene Reformation writers that still remains the comprehensive, authoritative sourcebook for Slovene literature of the period, complete with a wealth of representative passages in modern transliteration, enriched with biographical, historical, linguistic notations for the fifteen writers anthologized. An enlarged edition of the work, incorporating newly discovered material, was published after Rupel's death in 1966.

Rupel's second, and more important, contribution was the eagerly awaited biography of Trubar, which first appeared in popular

form in Serbian in 1960, and then two years later was expanded into a full-length, profusely documented version, with extensive quotations from Trubar's writings and correspondence. Using only documentary evidence and eschewing fantasy, Rupel reconstructed the events of Trubar's life, and especially his literary activity, as they played themselves out in very muddled historical circumstances amid many personal conflicts filled with no little bitter feeling. That Rupel was able to delineate this whole dramatic interplay of personalities, happenings, and ideas in a minutely precise, balanced, nonpartisan fashion, speaks highly of his integrity as a scholar. He revealed Trubar with many citations from his theological tracts and prolific correspondence. Most gratifying is the final chapter in the biography, where Rupel evaluates Trubar as a religious reformer, writer, and man, without making excessive obeisance to current political ideology or revisionist historiography. With its bibliographical apparatus, Rupel's monograph stands out as a remarkable achievement in Slovene scholarship; it represents the culmination of a hundred years of painstaking research and arduous study. Since no definitive history of the Slovene Reformation has as yet appeared, Rupel's work may well serve for a long time as its only and most reliable history.

In Rupel's view, Trubar was a maverick religious reformer, whose eclectic theology, drawn mainly from Zwinglian and Lutheran sources, was adapted and devised by him for improving the culturally deprived and spiritually impoverished Slovenes, hapless victims, according to Trubar, of Turkish aggression and Roman repression. Trubar launched his reform movement, like other reformers of the time, by reacting vehemently to the exaggerated devotional practices of the late Middle Ages. Beyond zeal for correcting these abuses, and except for his acceptance of Lutheranism, it seems he made little progress in his theological thinking. His immediate target was not doctrine, as he was not sufficiently knowledgeable in theological matters himself, but the folk religion of a vast number of believers, against whom he railed incessantly with the overblown rhetoric of a ranting preacher. Examples of such tirades against devotionalism from Trubar's writings are sprinkled throughout Rupel's biography.

Considering the circumstances in which he found himself after his first expulsion from Carniola, Trubar, as Rupel makes clear, settled for Lutheranism almost reluctantly, perhaps even accidentally. Though he never became a theologian in the strict sense, Trubar nevertheless had a theology of a kind, but one which caused the charge of heresy to be leveled at him several times by his German Lutheran supporters. On that account his own position as a reformer was imperiled, as well as that of his principal supporters, for whom his reformation was merely a political tool for use against the

centralizing tendencies of the Habsburgs. As a consequence, no original contributions were made to Protestant doctrine by either Trubar or his co-workers. Conformity to the Augsburg Confession, even though Trubar seemed not to be in full agreement with it, called for compromises, perhaps even stances at odds with his convictions, which Trubar was more than willing to make, so that he would not lose the moral and financial support available in Württemberg and Carniola for the continued progress of his literary work.

For that reason Trubar's literary activity, his most enduring merit, comprises the main thrust of Rupel's portrait of Trubar, because a new literature in a unified literary language, in embryo at least, resulted as an offshoot from his religious zeal and objectives. Trubar's linguistic achievement, further refined and improved by Dalmatin, gave the Slovenes a vernacular bible and with it a new standard of linguistic usage. In Rupel's opinion, this was Trubar's true greatness. Even on his deathbed he was still dictating his last book, so that, in Luther's words, "the business of the Gospel is driven forward."

One of the incredible aspects of the Slovene Reformation was Trubar's determination during thirty-six years of exile in Germany to drive forward with "the business of the Gospel" on behalf of the Slovenes, most of whom were illiterate peasants, distrustful of their oppressive Lutheran masters, and for whom at the beginning of the reformation movement Anabaptism, and then later various other spiritual movements, proved more satisfying spiritually than Lutheranism. Nonetheless, with deep affection for the downtrodden Slovenes and with patriotic feelings for his native soil, Trubar put together one book after another in Slovene, for a total of thirty-one. Even if the political means used for enforcing the Counter Reformation are discounted, his evangelistic efforts with the printed word were doomed to failure however, because he was not able from his German exile to direct a movement of religious proselytizing and to head an ecclesiastical organization without the active participation and support of the common people. Revolutions themselves are not simply created, nor are they made by propaganda.

As Rupel insists, it is not accurate to describe Trubar as a humanist, though he was extremely well-read, or to credit him for being some kind of genius, religious, political, revolutionary, or otherwise. Through his ministry he rose from his peasant status to that of a middle-class burgher, conservative in his mental make-up, and very cautious and practical in his ways of getting things done. It is possible to speak of him as a social reformer in the context of his concern for the intellectual enlightenment of Slovene peasants, for helping students acquire a higher education, and for improving

educational institutions in Ljubljana. But here too, his religious aims were predominant, because he wanted to have an informed laity governing the church and future ministers for carrying on his work. As for the social aspirations of the peasantry, which were dramatically voiced in three violent uprisings during his lifetime, Trubar was in no position to say what he really thought. While it is true that he condemned wicked masters for oppressing their subjects, he also reminded the "poor commons" to submit to their masters in everything, just or unjust, as demanded by Scripture, lest they too, like their masters, come to a bad end. His thinking in social matters was on the whole more in line with Zwinglian than Lutheran dogma.

Rupel's critical evaluation of Trubar stands in very marked contrast with the assessments of the Slovene reformer offered by Jože Javoršek and Jožko Humar, both of whom seem to believe that Rupel somehow failed to delineate Trubar's real greatness. They, however, simply recount Trubar's life and performance in episodic fashion without producing any new facts or sources of information, and use quotations without citing their sources. Theirs is more or less an effort to fit Trubar and his deeds into a Marxist straitjacket with especially designed Slovene and Yugoslav appendages.

Javoršek's short work (201 pages), outfitted with a useful chronology of Trubar's career and a short bibliography, sets out to demonstrate that Trubar was "junaški avantgardist in humanist." Rupel is criticized for his excessive reserve in praising Trubar. Then with more enthusiasm than documentary underpinnings, Javoršek proceeds to set the record on Trubar straight: undoubtedly Trubar was a genuine humanist, one of the greatest theologians of the age, a poet as well, and the one who with his zeal for the conversion of the Turks laid the foundation for the Yugoslav idea.

Javoršek's methodology suffers a severe breakdown on page 52, where he makes four statements in a row about Trubar's days in Trieste prefaced with "verjetno," and then admits: "Probably . . . Probably is the word which unfortunately must be employed constantly when we write about a man for whose life and achievements we do not have enough hard information."<sup>5</sup>

In similar fashion Humar makes liberal use of "zelo verjetno," "vse kaže," "po vsej verjetnosti," "morda je," and like qualifiers, throughout his 573 pages, divided into 102 sketchy chapters. The three-page bibliography does not list all the works cited in the text, but it does make note of the facsimile editions of Trubar's works. Humar, like Javoršek, wants to round out Rupel's portrait of Trubar by stressing the social aspects of Trubar's activity ("družbeno stran Trubarjevega delovanja"). Thus, according to him, Trubar is the first real Slovene revolutionary, a political rather than a religious refugee,

a memorable social reformer, the founder of a Croatian as well as a Slovene church, a first-rate theologian, but one more inclined to politics than dogma, the first genuine Yugoslav and the original ideologist of Yugoslavism, whose books are of "epochal importance" in the history of our peoples ("v zgodovini naših narodov"), a giant in Slovene political thought and action, outdone only by Boris Kidrič and Edvard Kardelj. Unabashedly Humar uses the word "propaganda" in reference to anti-Lutheran polemics, but fails to note that propaganda from both sides was the natural environment in which Reformation emotionalism thrived.

The Reformation, as conceived by Humar, was a struggle against the political might of the Catholic church, because for centuries it had used its teachings only to strengthen its own political influence and to keep its members in economic and spiritual servitude. One suspects that the amount of anti-Catholic bias stated and implied in this excursion into Trubar's life was not meant for historical interpretation but rather for contemporary consumption. Though Humar tries to provide some historical content with digressions on Trieste, the early history of the Habsburg dynasty, the last years of Charles V, conditions in the Balkans, the career of Pasha Mehmed Sokolović, etc., nevertheless his work is probably more objectionable than Javoršek's, especially for its lack of coherence.

Though the principal events of Trubar's life and his writing career are better known today than at the beginning of this century, there still are many clouded areas surrounding his theological thought and his meaning for the Reformation as a whole. Rupel's biography is by no means complete in assessing Trubar and his achievements, since it clearly betrays a need for illumination of the historical events and personalities involved within and beyond the Slovene provinces. While Trubar occupies center stage in Rupel's monography, the reader finds himself looking for more detailed information about the Turjaks and other Slovene noblemen, Bishop Bonomo, Pietro Vergerio, Baron Ungnad, Flacius Illyricus, Bishops Textor and Seebach, and above all, Jakob Andreae, the provost of Tübingen University and Trubar's closest friend in Germany.

A study of Trubar's dependence on the thought and leadership of Andreae should prove especially illuminating. Andreae was deeply involved in Trubar's attempts at the conversion of the Turks and went so far as to make contact with officials of the Orthodox Church. Trubar was instrumental in getting the Formula of Concord, composed and sponsored by Andreae, approved in the Slovene provinces. At least in one instance, something not noted by any of the biographers, Trubar obviously echoed Andreae's sentiments about the profligate lives of young Lutheran nobles.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately

for such an undertaking, there is no collected edition of Andreae's works, some 150 books and pamphlets.

Some attempts have also been made to examine Trubar's theological bearings, but without much success.<sup>7</sup> As Anton Slodnjak maintains, not much progress will be made in Trubar research "without greater refinement of his religious ideas and performance." Otherwise, he continues, "it is impossible to give an accurate assessment of his writings, nor is it possible to know his social and political convictions and views."<sup>8</sup> Thus even with the excellent study by Rupel in hand, much remains to be explored in the career of Slovene literature's founding father.

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#### NOTES

1. "Anastasius von Schiwitz," in a collection of Cankar's prose satires, *Agonija veljakov* (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1976), p. 73.

2. *Slavischer Bücherdruck in Württemberg im 16. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1799).

3. A full listing of Elze's contributions to the literature on Trubar is given in Rupel, op. cit., pp. 289-90. See also the facsimile edition of Elze: *Die Universität Tübingen und die Studenten aus Krain* (Munich: Trofenik, 1977).

4. A full listing of Kidrič's and Rupel's Trubariana is in Rupel, op. cit., 291-2 and 294-5 respectively. Balduin Saria's German translation of the Rupel biography (Munich: Südosteuropa-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1965) gives an untransliterated listing of Trubar's works and updates the bibliography on Trubar to 1965. For a collection of Kidrič's Reformation and Counter Reformation studies, see also his *Izbrani spisi*, vol. 1 (Ljubljana: SAZU, 1979). I have made an English translation of Rupel's biography of Trubar, which for lack of a publisher has not yet been printed.

5. "Verjetno . . . Verjetno je pač besedica, ki jo moramo, žal, nenehno uporabljati, ko popisujemo človeka, za katerega življenje in odločitve imamo premalo oprijemljivih podatkov."

6. I base this observation on a similarity of thought and phrasing found in a quotation from Andreae's sermon quoted by J. Janssen, *History of the German People*, vol. 8 (N.Y., 1966), p. 400f., and a quotation from Trubar in Rupel, op. cit., pp. 207-8.

7. Two studies of Trubar's theology have appeared to date: F. Oražem, *Dogmatični nazori Primoža Trubarja in njegova odvisnost od početnikov reformacije* (Ljubljana: Dissertation at Univ. of Ljubljana, 1964), and J. Rajhman, *Teološka podoba Trubarjeve Ene dolge predgovori* (Maribor: Dissertation, 1974).

8. Kakorkoli bodo napredovale študije o Trubarju in slovenskem protestantizmu, o tem pa smo že zdaj prepričani, da brez preučevanja njegovih religioznih idej in predstav, ni mogoče oceniti njegovih spisov niti ni mogoče spoznati njegovih družbenih in političnih prepričanj ter pogledov." Anton Slodnjak, "Trubar in kmečki upori," in Š. Barbarič, ed., *Kmečki upori v slovenski umetnosti*, (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1974), p. 29.