

EDWARD KOTSBEK: THE CONSCIENCE OF HIS AGE¹

Abstract:

The article is dedicated to the Slovenian modernist, Edward Kotsbek (1904–81), a writer who occupied a prominent place in the history of the national literature and political life of the country. Kotsbek's active civil and democratic position led him to conflict with communist power and forced him into retirement in order to limit his influence on Slovenian society. But these measures were unsuccessful: he was a person of great prominence and left a lasting effect both on the history of Slovenian literature and on the story of the struggle of democratic intellectuals against totalitarianism.

Keywords:

Slovenian literature, Catholic direction, personalism, dissidence.

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Статья посвящена словенскому модернисту Эдварду Коцбеку (1904–81) — писателю, занимавшему видное место в истории национальной литературы и политической жизни страны. Активная гражданская и демократическая позиция Коцбека привела его к конфликту с коммунистической властью и принудительной отправке на пенсию с целью ограничить его влияние в тогдашнем словенском обществе. Но эти меры оказались безуспешными — он был личностью большого масштаба и оставил глубокий след как в истории словенской литературы, так и в эпопее борьбы демократической интеллигенции против тоталитаризма.

Ключевые слова:

Словенская литература, католическое направление, персонализм, диссидентство.

Edward Kotsbek (in Slov. — Edvard Kocbek) was a Slovenian poet, essayist, politician and public figure, a representative of the young Catholic literary movement, known as “the conscience of his era,” and a dissident. He was the first to speak publicly about secret mass executions in Slovenia after the end of the Second World War. His only collection of short stories, *Strah in pogum* (“Fear and Courage,” 1951), outpaced the general development of national prose.

Kotsbek was born in the town of Videm (Gornya Radgona) into the family of an organist. Upon completing a classical gymnasium in Maribor in 1925, he studied theology and became a member of the Christian socialist movement, then transferred to Romance philology at the Philosophy department of the University of Ljubljana and attended lectures in Berlin. While still a high school

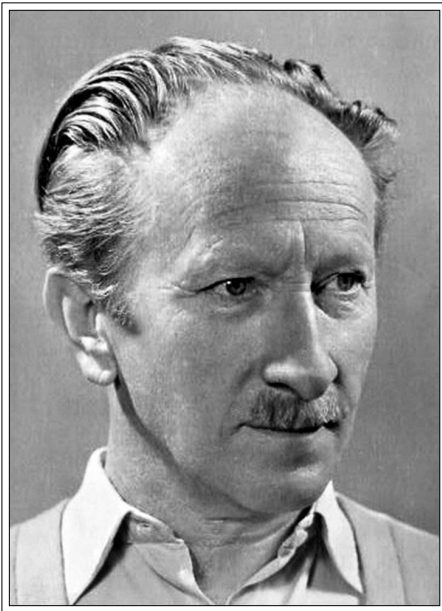
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student, Kotsbek published his first poems in the gymnasium newspaper, *Stražnji ognji* ("The Watch Lights," 1924). As a student, he became the editor-in-chief of the Catholic youth newsletter *Križ* ("Kross") and published his works in one of the central literary magazines with a pro-Catholic orientation, *Dom in svet* ("Home and World," 1929). Upon completing his studies in Lyublyana in 1930, Kotsbek worked as a teacher and continued to write.

In articles and public speeches, the young writer expressed a critical attitude toward the existing capitalist structure, arguing that the economic doctrine of Marxism did not contradict Christianity and that both teachings were similar in their understanding of eternity and history. At the same time, Kotsbek was convinced that a new society needed pluralism rather than totalitarianism.

In 1932 Kotsbek continued his studies in Lyon and Paris, having become acquainted with personalism, whose ethics and existentialism influenced his further work. For many years he maintained contact with Emmanuel Mounier (1905–50), the leading representative of French personalism.

Prior to the start of World War II, Kotsbek had only one poetic collection, *Zemlja* ("The Earth," 1934). His poems were of a Christian, existential nature: the main motifs in them were Earth, God and Death. Experts rated this book as one of the most significant poetic collections of the interwar twentieth century in Slovenia. Thanks to this work and his essays, the writer gradually came to be one of the most prominent representatives of the Young Catholic trend in Slovenian literature.



Edward Kotsbek,
1930

In 1937 Kotsbek openly supported the Spanish revolutionary camp in one of his articles and condemned Catholic circles for their right-wing views. Their condemnation of fascism was shared by many Christian socialists and Catholic social commentators. He published a monthly on economics, culture and politics *Dejanje* ("Activity," 1938–41), becoming its editor-in-chief. In the pages of this and other publications, he spoke out against the clericalization of Christianity and for a creative attitude toward life by every free and ethically responsible person. The writer's articles, *Slovenska politika* ("Slovenian Policy," November 1939) and *Slovenci in politika* ("The Slovians and Policy," 1940), are considered the best works of that time on the Slovenian national question.

After the start of the Second World War and the organization of the UF (Libe-

ration Front), Kotsbek immediately became a member of its Executive Committee from the Christian group and conducted an active anti-fascist propaganda campaign in occupied Lyublyana in his articles and speeches on the illegal radio station *Kričac* ("The popular cry"). In the spring of 1942, he joined the partisans, and by the end of the year he became the Slovenian vice-chairman of the Executive Committee of the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia, at the same time publishing the Catholic bulletin of the Slovenian Revolution Public Foundation. From March 1945 to February 1946, Kotsbek was the Minister for Slovenia in the government of the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia, and from spring 1946, the Vice-Chairman of the Presidium of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia and the Central Committee of the PF. His political career, however, was interrupted after his speech at the Second UF Congress in April 1951. In it, Kotsbek openly expressed his disagreement with the political course pursued by the country's leadership, accusing it of voluntarism, undemocratic tendencies and ideological narrowness. His collection of stories, *Fear and Courage*, added fuel to the fire. In February 1952, Kotsbek was forced into retirement and began to be persecuted as a writer and private individual.

The aforementioned collection, *Fear and Courage*, consists of four short stories, each of which depicts a borderline extreme situation. Their heroes must make hard choices on which human lives depend. The stories reflect the doubts of a person looking for answers to complex questions of human existence and trying to grasp the true meaning of life. At the same time, they speak about the writer's readiness to step beyond all ideological conventions and convey to his contemporaries the truth about the people's struggle for liberation, which was at odds with the authorities' official interpretation. The writer showed how tragically and fratricidally society was split and conveyed in the book how he had changed his mind and how he felt as a poet and as a Christian. Kotsbek's extraordinary perspective on the events of the recent heroic past engendered misunderstanding at the highest levels and caused a political storm, although the writer did not doubt the correctness and historical necessity of the partisan movement during the last war.

For Kotsbek, the historical accuracy of his novels was far less important than the truth of his characters' feelings, sensations and impressions. They were interpreted by the writer in terms of a deeper life and philosophical plan. In post-war Slovenian literature, this was the first attempt to comprehend the inner mystery of man. The leitmotif of the collection was the search for humanity in the midst of war. Intertextuality plays a large role in the novels; there are abundant references to European and Slovenian musical and literary masterpieces across a wide chronological spectrum. They are designed to emphasize the universality and unresolved problems of the hero, his innate spirituality and humanism, and serve as expressions of the emotional tension of a person who is full of internal conflicting feelings.

According to Kotsbek, a person already differs from history because he pre-dates history. In being true to his inner nature, a person should strive for good and constrain evil, even when obliged to submit to external circumstances. In the collection *Fear and Courage*, the author with great sincerity created a poetic image of human existence, full of conflicts and contradictions. It is marked by freedom and responsibility, which is determined by physical death and spiritual immortality. After the writer's death, the famous Slovenian director Matyazh Klopchich (1934–2007) shot a feature film in 1989, on the basis of the final short story of the collection, *Črna orbideja* ("Black Orchid"), based on the script of the famous Slovenian writer Andrey Hing.

Until the early 1960s the authorities tried to isolate Kotsbek from the political and cultural life of the country, placing him under constant surveillance. But he continued to create, translating the works of Balzac, Maupassant, Merime, M. Frisch, Saint-Exupery. In addition, the writer secretly collaborated with the Catholic magazine *Nova pot* ("The New Way"). Starting in 1961, he again began to publish in the magazines *Perspektive* ("The Perspectives") and *Sodobnost* ("Modernity"). Two years later, Kocbek's second poetic collection, *Groza* ("Terror"), came out, earning him the Grand Presheren Award, and in 1969 his third poetry collection, *Poročilo* ("Message"), was published.

In 1975, in the Italian border city of Trieste, the magazine "Zaliv" published a separate issue with an interview of the writer, "Edward Kotsbek is a Witness of Our Time." In it, the writer talked about the secret mass extermination of the "military reserves" in the Kochevsky Rog after the end of the Second World War. They had fled to neighboring Austria, but the Allied British troops extradited them to the new Slovenian government, after which about 12000 people, including the families of the internees, were shot without trial. These facts, carefully concealed by the new government, caused a real shock in Slovenian society. The words of the writer resounded throughout the country and abroad. For this Kotsbek was subjected to house arrest and public harassment. He was saved from trial only through the protection of foreign colleagues and the intercession of German writer and Nobel laureate Heinrich Böll. In 1976 the poet's poems were published by "Continent", a Russian émigré edition in Paris.

A year later, another collection, *Izbrani pesmi* ("Selected Poems"), was released, which included works from different years, including the "partisan" cycles *Pentagram*, *Žerjavica* ("The scorching heat"), and *Nevesta v črnem* ("The bride in black").

At the heart of Kotsbek's poetry lies a metaphysical attitude to the personal and historical world of man. It is dominated by a lyrical reflection of social cataclysms and an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of historical situations. At the same time, the poet was convinced that the course of history could not control a free and responsible person in his existential reality. The poet's poems are associated with the so-called "transhistorical" person and his metaphysical boundlessness, which can only be conveyed through the language of poetry.



Monument to E. Kotsbek in Tivoli, Lyublyana.
Sculptor B. Drinovets, 2004

Most valuable are the writer’s diaries, some of which were published during his lifetime. The books *Tovarišija* (“Partnership,” 1949) and *Listina* (“Document,” 1967) cover the period from May 1942 to December 1943 and are considered the most reliable evidence of the Slovenian people’s liberation struggle and its leaders. They are a fusion of facts about political and military events, impressions of their participants, authorial dialogues and discussions with comrades, letters, personal observations, philosophical reasoning and lyrical digressions. A selection of Kotsbek’s pre-war diaries is presented in the book *Pred viharjem* (“Before the Storm,” 1980). The writer’s travel notes were partially included in the book *Krogi navznoter* (“Circles Inward”, 1977). A more, though not entirely, complete edition of the writer’s diaries was published in a separate series in 2000–04.

Kotsbek’s essays were a new milestone in the development of the essayist genre in Slovenia. In the collection *Sodobni misleci* (“Modern Thinkers”, 1981), the writer presented portraits of Christian thinkers and theologians: Kierkegaard, Peguet, Mounier, de Chardin and others. Kotsbek’s essays were diverse and responded to topics of the day and were reflexive. Collections of the writer’s essays were published for 30 years, from 1940 to 1972. Kotsbek’s best essays were included in the book *Svoboda in nujnost* (“Freedom and Necessity,” 1974).

Kotsbek was a central figure of Slovenian post-war literature, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. His ethical and aesthetic principles influenced not only young writers, but also such diverse, original literary artists as Drago Yantsar, Jozhe Snoy, Tõmay Shalamoun, and others. Streets in Lyublyana, where he died, and in Tselye have been named after him. On the centenary of his birth, a statue was erected to him. His works have been translated into many European languages.

Translated by Ksenia Melchakova

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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