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**SOVIET TRANSLATOR
ALEXANDER ROMM:
AN EXPERIENCE OF LITERARY
DEPERSONALIZATION**

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**SOVIET TRANSLATOR ALEXANDER ROMM:
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DEPERSONALIZATION²**

The article addresses a literary biography of Alexander Ilyich Romm (1893 – 1943), philologist, poet and translator, focusing on the last years of Romm’s life when he had been an active member of the Translators Section of the Union of Soviet Writers, involved in producing translations of politically committed poetry both from foreign languages and from national languages of the Soviet Union. Drawing upon Andre Lefevere’s idea of translation as rewriting and manipulation, the article takes a close look at the process of production and stylization of such translations. Surviving archival documents, including Romm’s diaries, offer a glimpse of how harrowing for him was an experience of depersonalization translators were subjected to in the Soviet literary system.

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This article focuses on the biography of Alexander Ilych Romm (1898 - 1943), who can be described as a typical Soviet translator of the 1930s. His father, a Jewish doctor from Sankt-Petersburg was a member of the illegal Social Democratic party, and his younger brother Mikhail became the famous Soviet film director. In 1922, Alexander Romm graduated from Moscow University with a degree in classics. In the 1920s, he was an active member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and produced the first Russian translation of de Saussure's *Le Cours de linguistique générale* (Toddes, Chudakova 1981). As a poet, Romm published a collection of his verses in 1927. In the 1930s, he worked mostly as a literary translator and became a notable member of the Translators Section of the Union of Soviet Writers. During the Second World War Romm served in the Navy, in the Black Sea Fleet. After having written Stalin a letter about abuse of power committed by the Fleet Chief Command, he was transferred to another job not connected with the military. The circumstances of his death in 1943 are unclear; according to the official version, it was a suicide.

Although Romm's early life and work has already drawn researchers' attention (Beglov, Vasil'ev 1995; Gasparov 1994; Gasparov 2002; Toddes, Chudakova 1981) his texts and translations created in the totalitarian times have been generally ignored. Meanwhile RGALI retains some interesting documents, including his diaries, public speeches and translations drafts, which makes possible to reconstruct his literary standpoint in the 1930s in detail. Presumably, researchers have shown little interest to Romm's work in the 1930s because at that time Romm could not fulfill himself as a linguist, philologist and a poet. Instead, he was involved in whatever translating activities that were open for intellectuals because he wanted to secure his status as a Soviet writer, his social environment and a possibility to write for a living. This is how Mikhail Gasparov describes Romm's later poetic works:

Romm is ruining his life and his song; he does not write good verses anymore, but only terribly bad ones – of the kind he felt the epoch, the system, the people required from him ... He writes as is prescribed by all the Red handwriting worksheets – about Lenin, about Stalin, about shock-work construction projects, about the Soviet Army and Navy, he writes both propaganda articles for newspapers and long poems yet rarely gets published: the system had a good ear and it could hear that his voice was not clear enough (Gasparov 2002).

In this article, I intend to read those «terribly poor verses» as a typical example of the literary product the totalitarian state of that time supposed its literary workers to churn out. On the other hand, Romm's case allows us to discuss not only the poetics of his literary translations and their place in the system of the official literary production but the translator's attitude to his

situation as well. Surviving entries from Romm's diaries and verbatim records of his speeches at the proceedings of the Union of Soviet Writers offer a glimpse into his personal perspective on his circumstances, giving us an opportunity to analyse cultural patterns that shaped that perspective. Therefore, we will consider one of the ways in which a Soviet literary translator of the 1930s could view his work.

Romm's literary works of the 1930-s prove to exemplify the type of writing relevant to the Soviet literary culture of the Stalin epoch. In the aftermath of the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, the literary field got reconfigured, with the ideological and political pressure on it increasing and reaching its climax in the period of the Great Terror that bore upon both the administrative board of the Union of Soviet Writers and its rank-and-file members. The situation in the literary field of the 1920-s with its idea of success as hinging on the author's creative individuality and their popularity with readers had given place to the system where to climb the career ladder in literature one needed not a distinctive personal style but loyalty both to the Party line and to the general style of the social realism. Evgeniy Dobrenko has rightly pointed out that Soviet writers in their search for the relevant poetics of lauding Stalin and the Soviet system could not exclusively draw upon the Russian tradition with its "experience of personalism and modernism" (Dobrenko 2011). It was then when orientalist pseudo-translations from national languages of the Soviet Union came to occupy a central position in the literary system (Witt 2013).

The style of Romm's politically motivated translations

Romm translated foreign classics, one of his most significant published works being a two times republished translation of *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. He translated contemporary communist writers from the West and the East, such as German left poet Johannes Becher, Hungarian communist Antal Hidas or Chinese revolutionary poet Emy Siao. Also he actively participated in translations from national languages of the USSR, specializing in Bashkiria, which he visited twice with assignments from the Writers' Union.

Let us consider some examples of Romm's poetical translations done in the 1930-s. Each of them can be taken to demonstrate the ways of producing the type of pseudo-translations that pervaded newspapers and magazines in 1930-s and whose ideological correctness was much more important than the accuracy of the translation itself.

For instance, Romm was almost an exclusive translator of verses written by Chinese communist writer Emy Siao who fled to Moscow from Chiang Kai-Shek's political persecution.

Siao's poems translated by Romm were published in newspapers, journals and as special editions. While Romm himself did not know Chinese, Siao, according to the contemporaries, had a decent command of Russian. The majority of Siao's poems published in Russian are marked as "authorized translations". Katerina Clark, who worked with Siao's files in the Comintern archives, argues that Siao provided Romm with cribs - some raw texts in Russian to be polished. Thematically and stylistically, translations from Siao fall into two categories: revolutionary verses and classical Chinese lyrics. To represent Siao's revolutionary, communist identity the translator resorts to Mayakovsky's style with his distinctive 'staircase' form of placing a poetical text on the page. It should be noted that Romm adopted the same technique in his translations of Hidas. Siao's links to the Chinese tradition were emphasized by including in texts Chinese realia, folklore poetic elements (juxtaposition of a natural scene with a social or personal situation) and pastiche of Chinese landscape poetry. Apparently, Romm was familiar with the tradition of poetic translations from Chinese into Russian, established by the famous sinologist V.M. Alexeyev, and employed in his own work the key stylistic principles elaborated by that tradition.

Apart from translations of foreign communist writers, Romm was heavily engaged in translating from national languages of the Soviet Union. Bashkiria was the republic of his "specialization", which did not imply that he had to confine himself to translations from only one language. Using interlinear cribs in the process of translating from languages of the Soviet Union was a common practice at that time (Witt 2013). While knowledge of the source language was encouraged in translators in words, editors actually did not demand it, and it was considered admissible if a translator worked on texts written in different source languages. Moreover, translations from national languages of the Soviet Union frequently came out without an indication of the translator. And since that happened more often with translations from national languages than with translations of contemporary foreign writers, not to mention the classics, translators chose to accept translations from the languages they did not have any command of.

Let us consider several translations done by Romm and published in the anthology «Creations of the Peoples of the U.S.S.R.», which had been compiling and preparing for publication by a special editorial board of the newspaper 'Pravda' over two years. Chief-editor of "Pravda" Lev Mekhlis was in charge of this project. Apart from the texts in Russian, the anthology contains translations from twenty-four languages of the nations that had a quasi-state status in the Soviet Union, from national republics to Territories (Krai) and Regions comprising R.S.F.S.R (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic). The archival fund of the editorial board well preserved in RGALI enables us to trace the process of creating texts that professed to be

translations of the pieces of oral lore written down from the words of folk performers from different regions of the USSR. It is noteworthy that the anthology contains references to all the folk performers while no one translator is named. However, on the basis of archival materials we can reconstruct the list of the translators who cooperated with the editorial board of the anthology. Among the materials of the editorial board's archive draft translations can be found, belonging to, at least, thirty translators, from well known Soviet writers like Demyan Bedny, Margarita Aliger, and Mikhail Isakovsky to novice Alexander Tvardovsky. Many translations were done by members of the Translators Section of the Union of Soviet Writers who in the 1930-s were deprived of opportunities to publish their own poetical works and resorted to professional translations. One of such translators was Romm, who was assigned about ten texts for translation. Let us consider three of them; eventually, the editorial board approved only two of the three for publication.

The first text is called "The dawn has broke from behind the mountains". It is indicated that it was recorded "from the words of A. Salatkin, 22, resident of Kerensky district of Irkutsk Region (at the estuary of the river Ikka). Translation from the Evenki language" (Tvorchestvo narodov SSSR 1937: 574). We failed to discover any intermediate materials of the translator's work - drafts, interlinear cribs, or records of the performer's words, which does not mean that they did not exist. However, this fact suggests that the editorial board did not give much value to the supporting materials and did not always preserve them.

The final version as printed in the book is on the right side of the table below, and the version that was accepted from Romm by the volume editor is on the left. At the bottom of the sheet was written by the hand of the editor: "Accept, pay five rubles per line."

За горами рассвело

*Вот – за горами рассвело,
Ночь убавляется теперь.
Вот – подымается эвенк,
Вот – рукавицы он надел.
Вот – на все стороны глядит,
Вот – он на горы поглядел,
Вот – свое солнце видит он.
Вот – это Ленина лучи,
Вот – это партия его! (RGALI. F. 1521.*

За горами рассвело

Перевод с эвенкийского

*Вот за горами рассвело,
Ночь убавляется теперь.
Вот подымается эвенк,
Вот рукавицы он надел.
Вот на все стороны глядит,
Вот он на горы поглядел,
Вот свое солнце видит он.
Вот это – Ленина лучи,
Вот это – партия его! (Tvorchestvo narodov*

This example demonstrates how the editors of the volume worked with texts they received from translators. Romm's verse is based on repetition in order to imitate the primitive folklore consciousness. Each time the word “vot” (here is) comes at the beginning of the line and is followed by a dash. This emphasizes the contemplative mood of the speaker who observes the state of the world. In the final version of the translation, the dashes were removed all throughout the poem but in two last lines where they were moved one word forward: as a result, the statement of fact was replaced by a statement of indication, with the folk persona of the poem pointing at the objects she/he sees as manifestations of the Soviet system. So the lines with dashes “Вот это - Ленина лучи / Вот это - партия его” definitely emphasize the ideological content of the poem.

The other Romm's translation included in the volume, however, almost without any blue-pencilling, which meant that it was considered a success and seemed to meet the stylistic requirements of the anthology, was a Georgian song “Two suns” written down, as was indicated, from the words of a Georgian kolkhoznik. It utilizes the same key metaphor of Lenin the sun with its distinct reference to the folk tradition that the Evenki poem builds upon. However, in the Georgian song the metaphor is developed in a different way, giving the poem a flavor of orientalized panegyric, a convoluted “oriental” laudation of Lenin shining brighter than the sun itself.

Солнце, солнце, довольно слез!

Пусть над горем сияет день.

Светом был для тебя Ильич! –

Ты в алмазы его одень.

(RGALI. F. 1521. Op.3. D. 76. L.23; Tvorchestvo narodov SSSR 1937: 81)

This example demonstrates how differences in the body of multinational literature were constructed. Unlike the Evenks, who only had an oral culture, Georgians prided themselves on the long, famous, and officially recognized tradition of the written literature. As a result, translations from Georgian bore formal traits of the modern poetry - rhyme and meter, the traditional Russian song trochaic tetrameter in this case. That was done notwithstanding the fact

that the text was marked as folklore and was written down from the words of an illiterate man, not familiar with the literary tradition.

Now let us consider “A Chechen song” devoted to Sergo Ordzhonikidze as an example of a translation that was rejected by the editor. This is the first stanza of the poem:

*Колыхаясь, стонали от бешеных вихрей леса,
Услыхав, что родное гнездо снесено наводнением у нас,
Прорезая широкою грудью скопление туч в небесах,
Ты как сокол, Серго, прилетел с высоты на Кавказ.*
(RGALI F. 1521. Op.3. D. 76. L.4)

Many of the submitted translations that had been initially accepted by the editorial board eventually were not included in the volume, but in Romm’s case, his translation was not even accepted. The editor's comment at the bottom of the sheet was 'reject as an author's work'. This comment sheds light on the problem the editorial board had to deal with. It was not on the grounds of trueness to the original that the editorial board made a decision on whether a particular translation suited the volume or not. Since translations almost never were collated with their source texts, accuracy or looseness of the translation could not be used to distinguish a translated text from a text that was only given for a translation but in fact was an original piece of poetry written by the translator. The editor primarily assessed a translation on the basis of its conformity with the general style of the volume, that is, whether the text exhibited the main features of the genre of “translation from national languages”. Therefore, we can only assume that the main attribute of the 'authorship' here is the quite unusual anapestic pentameter.

These examples should suffice to show that the main task for Romm and many other translators involved in the projects of creating the corpuses of “the world revolutionary poetry” and “the multinational Soviet literature” was not to translate the source text but rather to adapt it to the conventional poetical norm replicated across publications. By that time, a set of canonized “translation” genres had been established, and every translated text had to conform to one of those genres: Soviet literary culture of the Stalin epoch was centered on the reproduction of set patterns.

The texts produced under these circumstances defy subsumption under the category of translation and hence cannot be assessed in terms of accuracy. However, they can be understood within the framework of translation as rewriting proposed by André Lefevere (Lefevere 1992), one of the founders of the manipulative school in translation studies. Lefevere points out that translation as a way of circulation and transition of texts across cultures can never remain

unaffected by external social factors, among which the crucial role belongs to ideology, system of patronage and dominant poetics. According to Lefevere, rewriting may have different functions under different cultural circumstances. “Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewritings can also repress innovation, distort and contain” (Lefevere, ed. 1992: xi).

Applying Lefevere’s ideas to Romm’s texts considered above, it can be concluded that as the ideological pressure of the system was extremely strong, the rewriter scarcely followed the source text; moreover, its entire absence did not impede the process of translation. The selection of texts for translation as well as of the contractors who would carry it out and earn their living this way was determined completely by the system of patronage where the totalitarian state was the only customer who both ordered and censored all the literary production. Romm’s texts also demonstrate how strong was the pressure of the dominant poetics and of the established patterns and conventions all the editors and translators adhered to.

Romm’s attitude to the translator’s craft

Judging by the works he published, Romm seems to have been a typical participant in the process of establishing the multinational and international Soviet literature. But his speeches at sessions of the Translators' Section of the Writers' Union and his diaries make his case more complex. Both in his public speeches and in his private diary entries Romm appears as an emotional, not always rational man who, with all his energy, tries to fit into the new literary order.

Romm was actively engaged in the sessions of the Translators’ Section of the Writer’s Union and often took a word there. In the bureaucratic game of “the creative union”, the Section strived for the access to resources, both material and symbolical. This struggle was made more complicated by the fact that translators occupied an inferior position in the literary hierarchy, whereas their status as writers, as compared to that of playwrights and novelists, was rather dubious. A vehement controversy over the translator’s status flared up at the Section’s session in December 1936, where the agenda of the upcoming First All-Union Meeting of Translators, a major official event of high bureaucratic and ideological importance, was discussed. At that session, Romm gave a long and spontaneous speech addressing the humiliating situation in his profession:

In the newspaper where I was put down, there was the article named "On the Georgian translations by Pasternak". I have never told that I put myself on a par with Pasternak, who is one of the greatest poets of our time, but I can tell you that it's not just a matter of Boris Pasternak's personal development, it is about the fact that, not being a translator, he published a book of translations... Yet people don't want to become translators because of the sense of social inferiority that accompanies a translator from the very birth throughout his life and to his miserable death and makes people unwilling to become translators. People do that against their will. (RGALI. F. 631. Op. 21. D. 8. L. 7ob.)

This Romm's speech appears extraordinary even against the backdrop of common complaints Translators' Section members would make about their bad financial situation and adverse criticism. He argued very emotionally and openly that the translator's status humiliates him and does not let him consider himself a full-fledged member of the guild of Soviet writers. The hardest task for him was to refuse to be an author, to depersonalize his work. At the same time, he thought there were other poets who had their own poetic voice and creative freedom. His speeches and diaries make it clear that for him Boris Pasternak epitomized such a poet. Romm begrudged Pasternak his exceptional status and at the same time admired his poetry.

After having spoken out at the December session, Romm delivers a speech at the Meeting of Translators, which was broadly covered in mass media, where he observes the ideological requirements of the time to a public utterance. Romm argues against the formal accuracy of translation and points up the translator's responsibility towards the Soviet reader, weaving in his speech the story of his own success.

In spring, at the Soviet Writer's House we met up with five heroic Red Army soldiers who covered on skis an immense distance from Irkutsk to Murmansk. Final hundreds of kilometers they were wading through mud because the winter was over and the snow had melted; in the Far East, they traversed taiga, with fallen trees everywhere on their way... And in their hardest moments, when they had to do sixty kilometers a day in the snowstorm, walking across taiga, they sang «Po dolinam i po vzgoryam» and Hidas's march «Gremit, lomaya skaly». Hearing that, I realized that my efforts had not been in vain. If our comrades sing my work on their passage from Irkutsk to Murmansk, then I have accomplished something real. It was I who did the translation. (RGALI. F. 613. Op. 1. D. 8480. L. 275.)

However, entries in Romm's diaries made in 1937-1940s present a different picture that resonates more with his speech about "the second-rate translators". Although Romm worked as a translator, his diaries and drafts show that he actually wanted to publish his original work. In the following entry of his diary from 22 September 1937 he recollects his impressions from the First

Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, when Bukharin declared Pasternak to be the best Soviet poet. Romm remembers his feeling of resentment as Pasternak was allowed to have an individuality, while Romm forced himself to eliminate everything individual from his work, focusing only on the political dimension.

I do have a slight feeling of discontent with what is going on (not from the aesthetical point of view but from the political one); I have had this feeling since the time when I was nauseated by the all-embracing hallelujah of the 1934, in fact, by the atmosphere created by Bukharin and Gronskey. For a good reason, when writing "Bikzyan" [narrative poem about Bashkiria – E.Z.], I was violently crossing out everything that did not comply with political goals – I felt was going against the tide, which for me amounted to one name: Pasternak. Pasternak got overthrown both during the discussion about formalism and at Pushkin Plenary Session, yet I still feel aggrieved and lonely. (RGALI. F. 1495. Op.1. D. 80. L.12)

In another diary entry from 13 February 1939 he said that his work in the Translator's Section prevented him from developing his own style, but he tries to convince himself that there still might be hope, that he must 'write verses'. It is clear that he did not consider translations to be "verses", that is, poetry.

It makes me sad to think that I have definitely lost the skill I possessed in the 1925-29s... Had the Translators Section not drawn the line at my writing verses, had I not agreed to that half-[poetic] environment – by now, I would have wielded such skill that I could have realized any idea without being accused in rhetoric. It can be restored and enhanced within a year, if I have not grown old (which is unlikely), and under favorable personal circumstances, which are missing...But I must write verses, verses, and verses, whatever the quality. (RGALI. F. 1495. Op.1. D. 80. L. 34)

However, the idea to be an original author tragically combines in his diary with calculations of his future income:

In 1936, without realizing it, I got used to having money, to dining in a club, to dressing smartly and so on. I need to put all this aside, even if Siao's book brings 12 thousand, even if Bovary is reprinted. I have to remember the fried potatoes of 1935. However, I am still not enslaved anywhere. (RGALI. F. 1495. Op.1. D. 80. L. 34ob.)

There are some manuscripts of narrative poems by Romm in the archive. Still only one poem was published, it was "Doroga v Bikzyan" (Romm 1939) dedicated to Bashkirian history and the struggle of Bashkirs for freedom. In 1936, at a Writers' Union meeting the poem was lambasted for its complicated plot and excessive subjectivity, and, as a result, was not approved for publication. However, the poem was published in Ufa, Bashkiria, three years later. It is

symptomatic that after the publication a research fellow of the Language and Literature Institute in Ufa made a complaint, accusing Romm of drawing heavily on the Bashkirian folklore, which constituted 80 percent of his text. Ironically, Romm was blamed for being unoriginal in his only original published work. Luckily, the complaint was dismissed (RGALI. F. 1495. Op. 1. D. 146. L. 7-8), but it could have been much worse if this complaint had been sent to governmental authorities, not to the Writers' Union.

The poem “Doroga v Bikzyan” has an unconventional narrative structure, alluding to the Russian classical tradition. There is both a protagonist who narrates the story – it is the poet who sets off to Bashkiria to collect folk tales, with his beloved woman on his mind – and “a story within a story” – a historical narrative about a young hero and lyrical digressions. At the same time, it is hard to notice there any stylistic or thematic differences from the texts that Romm published as translations. That was the tragic irony of the situation Romm was so desperate to resolve. In Romm’s diaries, the translator’s craft is understood as something opposite to creative work.

Concluding remarks

As it becomes clear from Romm’s diaries, the contradiction between his personal creative fulfillment and professional responsibilities of the Soviet writer proved to be insoluble for Romm, generating his discontent with both himself and the world around. This situation, common for Romm and many of his contemporaries, is described by Lidia Ginsburg who, unlike Romm, was extremely rational and in her notes of the 1930s tended to analyze the social context.

Distinguishing between two main forms of cultural activity – a creative one and a professional one - makes it possible as well to distinguish between their two main forms – a higher one and a lower one. Then we get the following gradation: 1. Creation – stretched to the limit of your emotional capacity and for yourself. 2. Creative work - seriously and with the aim of being published. 3. Professional work - dutifully carrying out editorial tasks. 4. Hackwork - multifarious and autogenic.

Anyone involved in the cultural sphere is associated with some of these categories and some of us are related to all the four, which leads to great confusion and misfortune. (Ginzburg 2002: 130)

Obviously, Ginsburg's final remark is perfectly applicable to Romm. Considering himself a loser, Romm was trapped in this “multifarious and autogenic hackwork”, which did not call for his unique style or individual face but instead called on him to blend into the crowd. Refusing to

put up with this, he strived for poetic self-expression and tried to write on a personal note in his 'professional' field. Still he could neither resist the power of depersonalization, nor accept it.

As it was argued in the first part of the article, Romm's translations incorporated manipulative practices of the literary system Romm himself belonged to. At the same time, Romm's case shows us how distressing could have been the pressure of circumstances forcing artists into the system that depersonalized the creator of a text and gave no value to the author as an autonomous figure. Like many of his contemporaries, Romm adhered to the modernist idea of the unique authorship, which the Soviet literary situation of the 1920s did not reject, but which underwent a complete marginalization in the Stalin epoch. Romm's reflections, both private and public, on his work create prospects for studying the mechanisms of adaptation to the system's rigid requirements participants in the Soviet literary life employed.

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