The Interpretation of Finnish culture in the Slavic world seen through the examples of Kalevala Polish translations

Every nation has its own national symbols which, to lesser or greater extent, are present in the daily life. Despite the fact that these symbols, which are incorporated into the given culture, are still evolving (because of social, cultural and political factors) they are a reference point, both for that nation itself, as well as for the outside observer.

In my presentation, by analyzing more and less successful Polish translations of Kalevala, I would like to discuss the way of perceiving Finland in Poland. I would also like to show the change that took place, within 150 years, in Polish response to the Finnish epic. This development in portraying Kalevala is also connected with the changing image of Finland, in the eyes of Polish writers, scientists, and publicists whose views were very important in the shaping of public opinion, during the time periods that will be discussed here.

In the 19th century both states did not have their own independence; Poland lost it in the result of the partitions and Finland didn't managed to obtain it yet. Both states were dependent from the tsarist Russia, however its attitude towards the subjects differed significantly, especially in the first half of the 19th century. In opposition to Poland, Finland had a significant dose of freedom as far as national culture was concerned. In Finland its development meant the creation of national identity. In the
eyes of Russia folk culture was harmless, and also helpful as means of breaking the
ties between the Finnish lands and Sweden. In case of Poland there was a plan of
annihilating the entire home culture in an attempt to make the lands truly Russian.

In the times of Kalevala's national identities were emerging. It was connected with the
scientific views of that time. The German period of storm and stress, the pursue of
nations for independence, masses in local languages, going away from civilization
myths, while replacing them with the idea of a noble savage, and the creation of folk
studies in the 19th century, all influenced the fact that the surprising advancement of
the Finish nation preceded so quickly and was caused by one men.

First Polish publications concerning Kalevala are dated as late as the second half of
the 19th century. The works written earlier by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, Zenon Fisz
or even Adam Mickiewicz show the Finns as representatives of a tribal culture, which
in evolution terms was considered to be on a low level of civilization development.
Exotism and incapability of communicating with the natives were the main causes and
problems behind the spreading of stereotypical thinking about the northern neighbors.
There were rumors of witchcraft being commonly used by the Finns, and the pagan
character of their culture. However even then, an unaccustomed foreigners noticed an
unusual Finnish attachment towards their native land. Finland was seen as a piece of
land which was a trump card between Sweden and Russia, not a homeland of any
particular nation. Despite the view of nation being superior to the concept of state, the
Finns, through lacking in tangible cultural heritage, were never considered in Europe
to be a separate nation.
Negative image of Finland was spread by Adam Mickiewicz during his lectures in Paris “The Finn, dull, wretched, created for subordinance or destruction, in the Slav had met an entity superior to himself, but he has fouled it with his touch. The Finn taken alone is always a slave, when taken by a higher force, he becomes a despot or a vandal. It is a great shame that the songs of the northern Finns were lost, as only they of the entire tribe sometimes sang… however remnants of the northern-finish poetry, preserved in the tradition of the Russian people, give us an idea of what this tribe truly once was.” After the publication of the above text the authorities on the subject heavily criticized the poet trying to interpret his words as signs of bitterness, caused by the political status of Poland. One of the people who referred to the negative statements of Adam Miczkiewicz was Józef Treiak, who translated fragments of Kalevala.

The unusually enthusiastic response towards the publishing of Kalevala among the European scholars effected the Polish way of thinking. The fact that the Polish reaction towards “the discovery of the Finish culture”, was rather delayed, in comparison to Europe, was explained through historical context. Such situation has reflected on the level and quality of the Finish epic's translations into Polish.

In this period there were three attempts of translating the Finnish epic into Polish. Seweryna Duchińska who emigrated in 1863 and was a French, Hungarian and Spanish poetry translator, published her version in 1869 in the Warsaw Library.

The text of Kalevala's fragments itself written in form of a poem with included commentaries, is full of references and remarks clearly suggesting the subjectivism of
the translation. Kalevala is a proof of Finnish superiority over the other ugrofinnish groups “All songs gathered in the volume can be considered to be a monument of literature belonging to those Finns who remained under the strong influence of Scandinavian civilization”.

In 1880, in the same magazine, Feliks Jezieski published a more detailed translation. The text of Kalevala itself is rather a collection of thoughts and feelings, experienced by the author during his reading of the epic and not a solid translation. He picks various, particular fragments and concentrates on themes which he considers to be the most vital. He also uses numerous comparisons referring to European cultural standards, because of this however he looses the Finnish features of the epic.

The most extensive translation of Kalevala by the professor of history of polish literature Józaf Tretiak (1841-1923) was published in 1882 in Literary and Science Guide. The author criticizes Adam Mickiewicz and his way of portraying the Finns. He speaks of a “painful injustice served to these people” by the Poles. Józef Tretiak still advocates the theory of Slavs' superiority over the Finns, he however mentions a superiority of the Finns and the Hungarians over the other ugrofinnish groups, which do not have their own literature, that could be the proof of their old beliefs and heritage. According to Józef Tretiak the work perfectly shows the character of the Finnish people as well as their social ways, interpersonal behaviors and religious beliefs. He also portrays the Kalevala's characters as cultural figures, who represent personality models of Finnish origin and correlate with the European counterparts. The Finnish personality is dependent from nature and is adjusted to it: calm,
melancholic people who lead a sad life, and in the effect often turn to song festivities, as their only means of enjoinment.

The articles discussed above are the first attempts of interpreting Kalevala, and although according to the later translators, they cannot be considered to be a fully valid translations they are no doubt a proof of changing the attitude towards the Finns and of the rising interest in this country.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century first articles and books dealing with historical similarities between Poland and Finland appeared. In 1907 the entire October issue of Illustrated Weekly one of the most important polish periodicals for intelligentsia was devoted to Finland. The text dealt with historical similarities, and familiarized the reader with the Finnish fine arts. They also show the immense role of Kalevala in shaping the local culture. The authors point out that the Finns belong to the Mongolian race. The issue of fine arts was not discussed often at that time. Stanisław Górski: It is thanks to these features that the Finnish, although not being in great number, were able to gain a steady position in Stockholm and then in Petersburg.

The contemporary political situations cannot be measured by the same means but they are dependent from the same causes. […] no one will look for the sights of Switzerland if he ever set foot on the Finnish soil. With regret I leave this wonderful land, this beloved land, this land of friendly people whose fate is so similar to ours.
In this period, books directly devoted to Finland were starting to be published. In the book “Finland the Country of Model Cooperation” Maria Dąbrowska regrets that despite a good historic situation, Poland is in many ways behind Finland in the sphere of economy. In his “In the Land of a Thousand Lakes” Stefan Belza portrays Finland not only as a place of beautiful nature but also as a country which may stand as an example to follow in the field of economic and scientific development: “Of those who come here in pursuit of science (for enjoyment no one travels to Finland) who of them I ask is not curious of this image” these words show the respect for Finland in relation to science. This view is drastically different from the one given at the beginning. All of this shows that the interest in this country grew significantly after the publication of Kalevala.

In Polish 19th century views Finland is seen as a land of very rich folk culture and it may seem that only this kind of culture was noticed.

1. Interwar years

The period of twenty years between the first and the second world war brought Finland even closer to Poland. The similarities between the two countries became more and more accepted. On December 6, 1917 Finland had gained its independence for the first time. Poland regained independence on November 11, 1918. Both countries belonged to the group of young states which have obtained their freedom in similar time and in similar circumstances. Their autonomy was confirmed by them being granted the right of self rule. Both in Finland and in Poland, aside from great joy, there were many domestic unrests connected with military actions in both countries.
In the years 1934-1936 there was a significant increase of publications of Kalevala's fragments. This was connected with the one hundred year anniversary of the epic's first Finnish publication. A significant role was played here by the Polish-Finnish Society and its partner Polish-Finish-Estonian Journal. The society was founded in 1928 in Warsaw and consisted of one hundred members. Thanks to their initiative a large festivities in Warsaw were organized, celebrating the anniversary of Kalevala. This was a reaction to the ceremony held in the assembly hall of the Helsinki University which praised the one hundred year anniversary of publishing “Pan Tadeusz”.

In 1925 Janina Krahelska, as the first, attempted to translate the text from Finnish however, it turned out that the knowledge of contemporary Finnish was not enough to translate Kalevala correctly.

Later in 1929 Kazimiera Zawistowicz noted that the phonetic features of the Finnish language supported the creation of the songs. In her translation she concentrated on the text itself and any references and comments she included in the footnotes. She presented the entire subject-theme of the epic. Although the translation was made from French, thanks to the authors ethnographic knowledge, it was considered to be the most accurate of all the Polish translations.

Fragments of the translation from Russian made by Józef Brzechwa have been published many times in numerous newspapers and journals. The poet himself opted for the historic way of seeing Kalevala. “The plot of Kalevala is the image of the
ancient Finn's perception of the powers controlling the existence and fate of man, and his unstopped, horrible struggle with the unwelcoming nature of the north”.

In this period translations of foreign articles also appeared. In 1935 the Illustrated Weekly published a work entitled “One Hundred Years of Kalevala” by Emil Nestor Setälä. The author shows Kalevala as the most important factor in freeing the Finnish nation. He states that “the Kalevala's influence on the contemporary history cannot be compared to anything else (...) as it is thanks to it that the Finnish nation managed to suddenly stand among the countries of Europe with the greatest culture.”

The texts by foreign authors are written with a more emotional approach and are a supplement of the Polish translations. They also exemplify the way in which the young countries symbolized their independence and autonomy. An epic became a symbol of the nation's spiritual unity and its heritage. The heritage itself existed long before the nations were given their own statehood. It is because of this, there was a wide support for celebrating the anniversaries of national epics' publications. These efforts were supposed to manifest the independence and individuality of the new born states.

The long period of the second world war obviously terminated any Polish publications dealing with Kalevala. Both countries became targets for enemy attacks. Although they were on the opposite sides of the conflict they both were engaged in the war out of necessity.
2. People’s Republic of Poland

After the second world war Europe had been divided into two blocks; the eastern and the western. Although the social situation was difficult, translations of Finnish literature were being made. However, the existence of ideological propaganda and the excessive attempts of the governing powers to incorporate literature into the lives of the working class had left their mark on the way of portraying Kalevala, which had been published twice at that time.

The first complete translation, made from Russian, by Janina Porazińska appeared in 1956 and was reprinted in 1967 and 1985. The publication was preceded by an article in Sparkle, the most popular children's magazine in the country. The text of the epic has been divided into ten parts, each of these parts was given a title and illustrations made by Michał Bylin. In the afterword the reader finds out that “the Finns are a nation forced between the invasive tsarist Russia and the warlike land of the Swedish Vikings, and are characterized by almost unusual attachment to their native land”. The work was a free translation composed of prose with occasional poems. It was directed to children and because of this it is written in the style of a poetic tale and the only things connecting it with the original Kalevala were similarities of themes, behind the characters and events. In 1963 fragments of this text, under the supervision of Mieczysław Kotlarczyk, were presented in the Rhapsodic Theater in Krakow.

The second translation, made by a folk poet Józef Ozga Michalski, was a poetic one, published in 1974 and 1980. The entire work was based on a philological translation made by Karol Laszecki. Although Józef Ozga Michalski made references to his connections with folklore culture which were suppose to help him in understanding
the text, he knew neither the Finnish language nor the cultural context of the epic. He claims that the greatest value of Kalevala is man himself, and everything depends from him. He changes the message of Kalevala into a message given to the contemporary world. Taking into consideration the political state of Poland at that time, this had a very significant meaning.

I am of opinion that the optimism of Kalevala has a deep basis to it. I trust that we will not have to resolve to it in such a critical situation as Vaeinemaeinen when he was forced to look for the sun in the dark.” According to him “Kalevala is the key to understanding the culture and prehistory of the Finns, who despite being geographically close to us are still completely distant in every way.

The works published at that time especially in the daily press often dealt only with one way of seeing the epic. Because of the trends of the period, there were attempts of showing Kalevala as an example that underlines the values of a society not divided into classes, and that portrays people working in a collective, which for the characters is their goal and sense of life. Only the rural features of the epic were highlighted and the mythical themes were omitted. Apart from this, falsified information were being published. This did not only concern Kalevala itself but also Karelia, which was shown as a place constantly undergoing a cultural and economic development.
In 1949 Życki defined Kalevala as an “Epic of labour” which is the property of Karelo-Finnish Soviet Republic. He claims that Kalevala was created in the time of the greatest Russian oppression, and if it was not for the possessiveness of Russia, the texts would have never originated. Życki also presents the reader with some contemporary songs which, in his opinion are as valuable as the original works are. “The new joy of the nation, which until the October Revolution knew only oppression and poverty, is the main theme of these songs. In the song about the new Sampo, the singer Michajewská speaks about, how the soviet state makes the dreams of Karelo-Finnish ancestors come true and how the people of today, under the guidance of great teachers Lenin and Stalin, get the new Sampo.” The author also heavily criticizes the theories advocated by the western scholars.

While describing Kalevala as a “rural epic”, special attention was drawn to the statement that the fate of man lies only in his own hands, that it does not depend from any higher powers and that a life is worth living only if it is full of heavy labour. As it was said “work ennobles”.

Apart from these themes: showing Kalevala as the pride of the Soviet nation; understanding it as a layout of the Marxist theories and incorporating political slogans of that time into the text, which do not entirely determine its content, many articles may be found, especially in the 1960's. They are the reaction to the 1974 poetic translation by Józef Ozga Michalsk. These works were being published both in the daily newspapers as well as in professional journals.
In his articles Jerzy Litwiniuk, the later translator of Kalevala, devotes a lot of space to the epic. Jerzy Litwiniuk was a folk poetry translator and in 1979 he translated *The Finnish Mythology*. His later notes, in which he points out the biggest and the most common mistakes, that occur in, translating folk poetry, are provoked by the previous Polish works dealing with the Finnish epic. In an article published in *New Books* in 1974 he gives his opinion on the Polish translation of Kalevala. He expresses appreciation and praises the work of Józef Ozga Michalski. The critic calls the Finnish epic a book that “on one hand ennobles the rural energy and persistence” and on the other hand “shows Europe the proper way to go, while the continent is stiffing under the Victorian restraints.” The author gives two reasons explaining the fact that the Polish translation was presented 125 years after the publication of the original work.

The first reason given, is the Polish laziness and the lack of interest in the Finnish culture, let alone its gods. The second reason contains three more important barriers. The first is connected with the fact that there were no specialized places for learning the Finnish language “however the situation today, is far better than it was 10 years ago, and 10 years it was far better than ever before in the past. The number of translations is on a steady rise.” Another problem is the language of Kalevala. Even the Finns themselves when they are reading the epic, use a dictionary created specifically for this purpose. Despite the fact that Finnish has been the official language of the country for one hundred years it has undergone a far greater changes then e.g. Polish. The last element is the impossibility of making any reference to the terms used in Swedish which was possible in Lönnrot's times and is connected with the bilingualism of Finland.
Apart from the above problems, the biggest difficulty the author sees in the Polish language itself, because it makes necessary for the Poles to use commonly known poetic structures. This however, does not reflect the original, in any way, which as it was already noted, had its own kind own rhythm called the rhythm of Kalevala. Because of this all of the translations made were rather a caricatures of the epic, which is also caused by the fact that they were made from other European languages, and not Finnish. In this period, articles in professional journals also appeared. They were a kind of counterbalance for the text from the daily press. A lot of them were published in People's Literature. These are both works by Polish authors and translations from Finnish and English. They portray Kalevala in a way that is much more varied and consistent with the facts. They still support the statement that Kalevala is the key to understanding the Finnish culture.

In the Peoples Republic of Poland various published travel guides discussed the notions of Finland, and Kalevala as the Finnish epic. It was typical for this kind of works to describe Finland as an example of stability where everything has its time and place. One of the visitors writes; “I was astonished by the kindness that could never be experienced in our country. Every step on the way I saw things that astounded me and which should not astound me. And I am sure that the Finns saw nothing surprising in the things that I stared at with greatest amazement. But I came from a country in which everything is done backwards, in which to often homo homini lupus est, and absurdity fights for its prize with nonsense.”
3. The present

After the end of communism a war in the world of history broke out. The pursuit of the counties to unite within the European Union was accompanied by a kind of identity crisis and fears of loosing cultural autonomy. It became extremely vital to show the people that the European community is not about creating one single culture for the entire continent, but its goal is to sustain Europe's wealth through intercultural dialogue, which became the symbol for “Europe of many cultures”. In this context there was a rise in the mutual interest between the countries already belonging to EU and those that were to join. Because of this, Kalevala was often referred to, when speaking about Finland, as a constant element of this country's culture.

In 1999 Jerzy Litwiniuk who translated many works from Slavic and ugrofinnish literature published his version of the epic's translation. It took place exactly 150 years after its original publishing in Finland. About 20 years earlier Jerzy Litwiniuk translated the Finnish Mythology. The easiness of operating in the world of Kalevala's beliefs, combined with skills obtained during translating folk poetry, determined the shape of the Kalevala's Polish version. It is the best translation made so far, which, according to the critics, perfectly gives the spirit of the original. This edition includes a dictionary of terms, a list of spells and explanations. The author used both Old Polish terms as well as the Silesian dialect and the dialects of the Polish Highlanders. Thanks to this he created a new dialect which, by some scholars, has been called “Kalevalic Polish”.

In the introduction and the afterword Jerzy Litwiniuk familiarizes the reader with the plot of Kalevala and concentrates on the mythical characteristics of the epic. He states
that the entire impact and the distinctiveness of Kalevala comes out of its ability of showing various sides of human traits. No character is completely good or completely evil. Just as none of them is connected only with the world of humans or only with the world of gods. It is a feature that distinguishes the Finnish work from other European epics. It is at the same time the most human and the most godlike of all the tails. In his Polish translation Jerzy Litwiniuk also gives bibliographic notes, dividing them into Finnish language literature, foreign literature, and Polish language literature which is “scarce at the moment, but is the reflection of the progress made from the interwar beginning”.

Apart from translations and articles one may notice various cultural enterprises connected with the will of showing the themes of the epic. This includes, performances of alternative theatres that use fragments, or longer pieces of the text, and adapt them to their needs. There were also a few exhibitions dealing with Kalevala. There, one could find various editions of the epic and replicas of works of art, connected with it. In 1999 in Tarnów there was an exhibition of the gifts of Norbert Lippocza, a Hungarian who settled down in Poland. During this event, 53 different editions from all over the world were displayed. Kalevala is also available on Polish web sites. Information about it are scarce and often repetitive however, very often, beside the actual text there are pictures by Akseli Gallen Kallela and other great Finnish artists. It may serve as a kind supplement to the information given in the articles.

At present Kalevala is shown in a similar way as it has been done by Jerzy Litwiniuk. Its folk characteristic is highlighted and many attention is given to the magic and
witchcraft which it includes. From the perspective of 150 years it can be seen that the interest has shifted from Kalevala to Finland. In the 19th century Finland was written about in the context of Kalevala, as the background for the creation of this world literature's masterpiece. By using the epic there were attempts of raising people's curiosity about this part of Europe. Today, on the other hand, Kalevala is mentioned in the context of Finland, and it is through the country that the interest in the epic itself is being aroused. However, there is no doubt that for the average Pole, Finland is rather associated with Nokia and Santa Claus and not with the epic.

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