

Writers Discuss Their Work

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I have written two novels about Abai, the great enlightener of the Kazakh people who lived in the second half of last century: *Abai* and *Abai's Path*. Each consists of two parts, and together they aim to give a rounded picture of the life and work of a man who holds so special a place in Kazakh literature. The first novel, *Abai*, has gone through several editions, and has been translated into seventeen languages of the U.S.S.R. and the People's Democracies.

The first part of *Abai's Path* appeared this year; I am now working on the second part which will complete the story.

Both books differ from such Soviet historical novels as *Peter the First*, *Yemelyan Pugachev* and *Stepan Razin* which describe men of strong character; great popular leaders. The hero of my novel is a poet, an artist, and though he never actively headed a mass movement, all his writings were devoted to the people and expressed his sympathy with their struggle.

My purpose has been to give the reader not only an account of Abai's work, but also an insight into his creative efforts, into the psychology of his writing. I tried to lay bare the historical roots of his poetry, to show how it stemmed from his own life experience.

I chose Abai because his life was so intimately linked with the life of the Kazakh people. Abai was the personification of the new, advanced, and historically progressive features which began to appear in Kazakhstan under the influence of the revolutionary-democratic culture of the Russian people.

Time and again, in my work on the two books, I turned to the teachings of the great Stalin on the struggle between the old and the new in society. The old and reactionary is personified in the novel by Kunanbai; the new—by his son Abai, who was later to become the "spiritual eye" of his people.

The writing of the novels involved a good deal of research. To begin with, there are practically no records of Abai's work, especially his early writings. The Kazakhs, of course, had a written language long before Abai, but it was only towards the close of the poet's life that his compositions were recorded. For his earlier verse I had to depend on the memory of his friends.

My first job was to bring together all available information about Abai, to form a picture of his childhood and youth, and this picture I had to build up from the fragmentary reminiscences of people who had

known him. True, I come from the same part of Kazakhstan as Abai, and as a young man I met many people who had come into contact with him.

Much of my knowledge of the poet came from his wife Aigerim, who died in 1918 at the age of sixty. From what she told me, and from what I learned in conversations with other contemporaries of Abai, I pieced together the story of his youth. It is, of course, based on reminiscences, many of which, as is usually the case, have been elaborated on and expanded with the passage of the years, thus acquiring the character of folklore.

Abai's works were known to me as a boy. My first acquaintance with them dates back to the days when I was at secondary school, and the interest continued throughout my student years at the University of Leningrad. But it was only after 1930, when but a few of Abai's friends were still alive, that I began the systematic collection of biographical data. I recorded reminiscences of contemporaries, half-forgotten verse, and as a result of this painstaking work I managed to gather about forty per cent of Abai's unpublished poems.

I often compare myself to the belated traveller who misses the caravan in the desert, and, finding some smouldering coals in what is left of its campfire, tries to revive the flame with his breath. My job has been much the same: out of a dim past I have tried to resurrect the image of Abai, and from the features of sixty-year-old Aigerim, to re-create the beauty that had captivated the poet.

The writer of fictionalized history is entitled to supplement historical data with his own imagination. But in my case I often had also to resort to the imagination of people who had known Abai. Some of the facts they told me were authentic, others were adorned with legendary trimmings, as can be expected when people recall the distant past.

The second part of *Abai's Path* will complete the story of the great enlightener, shown against the background of prerevolutionary Kazakhstan. The plot is laid mainly in the city where Abai spent the last years of his life among the poor working folk. The book concludes with his expression of radiant hope, with his unshakeable faith in a better future for his people.

My present plans are to write a series of novels about the development of the Kazakhs into a Socialist nation under Soviet power. I intend to cover all the important stages in its life since the October Revolution and to the completion of the first postwar five-year plan. Taking the more salient life stories of well-known personages in Soviet Kazakhstan, I want to show the historic path to Socialism traversed by my people together with all the nations of the Soviet Union.

The novels will deal with the ordinary folk of Kazakhstan, their creative labour and their struggle for happiness, peace, Communism. Included in the novels will be the life-stories of the children of farm hands, workers, and nomad peasants from their early childhood, which coincided with the victory of the Great October Revolution, to our day. These people are symbolical of the regeneration of Kazakhstan, of the new and happy life that has been won by its people.

I have already begun a separate work on one of these themes—a film scenario about the Kazakh woman and the part she is taking in the development of my country—and I intend to write a novel and play on the same subject.

SOVIET LITERATURE

CONTENTS

NEW STORIES

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>B. POLEVOY</i> —Builders of a Great Waterway | 3 |
| <i>N. ATAROV</i> —Magistralnaya Gorka | 19 |
| <i>I. METTER</i> —The Team-Leader | 42 |
| <i>B. GUSEV</i> —Land Surveyor | 55 |
| <i>S. ZALYGIN</i> —The Second Act | 77 |
| <i>V. DUDINTSEV</i> —Alpine Fever | 82 |
| THE PROGRAMME OF PEACE AND CONSTRUCTION | 90 |
| <i>J. SUDRABKALNS</i> —My Transfigured Country | 96 |
| <i>S. RASHIDOV</i> —Under the Banner of Friendship | 100 |

LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>S. PETROV</i> —The Soviet Historical Novel in the Postwar Period | 103 |
| <i>A. MUKHANOV</i> —A Book About the Soviet Working Class | 111 |
| <i>V. SMIRNOVA</i> —Learning From Stanislavsky | 117 |

LITERATURE IN OTHER COUNTRIES

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>N. TIKHONOV</i> —Nazim Hikmet's New Play | 125 |
| <i>I. ANISIMOV</i> —Colonel Foster Pleads Guilty | 129 |
| <i>I. LVOVA</i> —A Talented Work of Japanese Progressive Literature | 133 |
| <i>Y. MIRSKAYA</i> —The Novels of Kazimierz Brandys | 138 |

WRITERS DISCUSS THEIR WORK

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>M. AUEZOV, A. KOPTYAYEVA</i> | 148 |
|---|-----|

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| OUR DIARY | 154 |
|---------------------|-----|

MISCELLANY

| | |
|--|-----|
| Satirists' Section—A Film About Young Workers—The Uzbek Theatre— A Monument to Lesya Ukrainka—Festivals of Progressive Films— Dissertations on German Literature and Language—Readers Discuss Amado's Works | 157 |
|--|-----|

PLATES

Their Teacher. By L. Benko.
N. Ostrousky. Portrait by D. Sapozhnikov.
Korean Mother. By G. Badalyan.
The Uzbek Theatre

Index of Soviet Literature, 1952. Nos. 7—12