

Simko's Life: Chapter 14, Book Three

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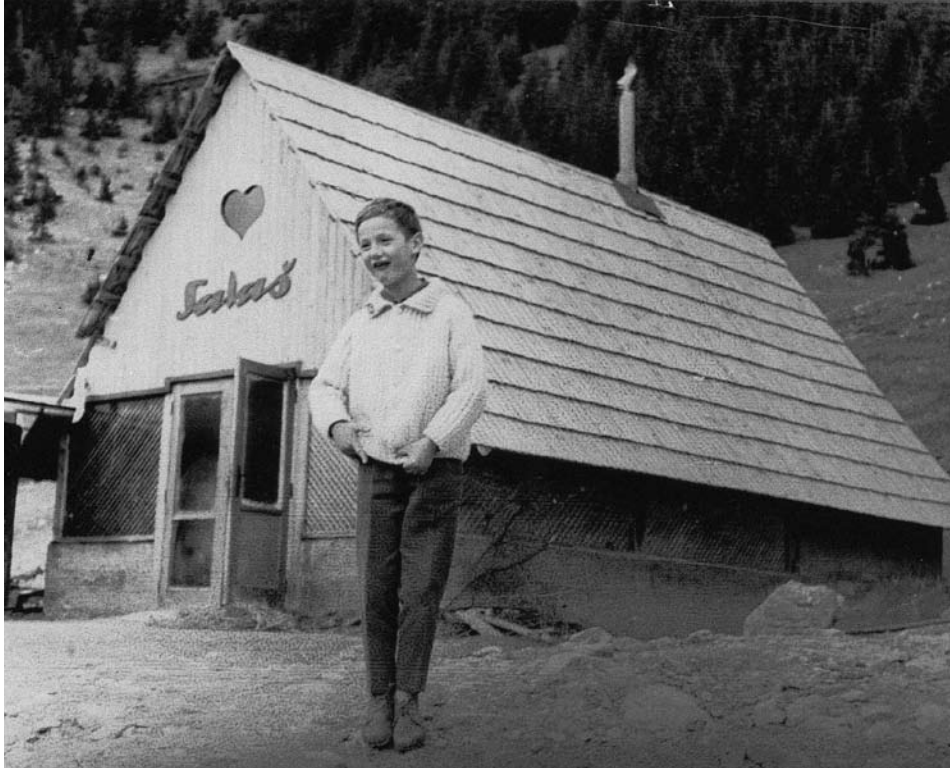
Written for K&K

I met Sveto for the first time in New York when I was giving a reading of a Slovak translation of his poems at an event. Though it was not the beginning of our friendship, it was at the beginning of a friendship his Mother and I shared. In spite of our age gap, we had a lot in common. The beginning of our friendship also coincided with the onset of her battle with a very difficult illness and painful demise. Maybe it was even because of this trying and painful situation that she had a desire and thus the tendency to reminisce about her youth and the joyful memories of Sveto's childhood --and also perhaps as well the difficulties they had to overcome in their new homeland, that demanded so many sacrifices.

Probably just because she was so ill, we got together more often and as a consequence, began to encounter Sveto more often too. The first thing I noticed was how very gentle and loving he was with her. He would entertain her behind a carefree mask of laughter that hid, in fact, the profound suffering of a loving son

watching his mother's unrelenting pain. When she was finally bed-ridden--and knowing that she was very conscious of her appearance--he would wash her and comb her hair with a gentle tenderness that had the same ease and familiarity that he had when he brought her flowers for her enjoyment.

When we saw each other at these somewhat less-than-joyful gatherings, we would always be very polite, and considerate toward each other, but also reserved. But one evening, everything changed. After leaving his mom's apartment late, we got stuck in New York City traffic. He was, as usual, friendly and jovial. While I fought traffic, he entertained me with his unique sense of humor, shy charm and ingenuity. That night he opened the door and gave me a peek into his soul. That evening must have been magical for both of us, for a few days later I found in my mailbox a book - his translation of Trakl poems that included a dedication with memories of that evening and the great time we spent together.



As we would later spend many hours in the car, we had time to talk. Maybe because Sveto loved cars, he would open up and begin to reveal himself slowly. He would talk about his childhood, youth, beginnings, dreams, writing, and friendships and about life. He was comfortable with himself - at times he would poke fun at himself, and other times he was reminiscent, philosophical, and poetic. Yet other times he would sing, argue passionately or just sit quietly and ponder and smile. But there was one thing all these conversations had in common. He would always end with these words: "... and this was Simko's Life: Chapter 14, Book Three." In this way I gradually

learned more and more about his childhood--something which he always connected with Slovakia. For him, childhood represented Slovakia. Even though he came to America as a child, America only meant adulthood, and the harsh reality of growing up. It might sound over the top, but it all reminded me of Sladkovic's Marina and its melodrama: the intense love, the becoming one, and ultimately a painful and unresolved dilemma. By leaving Slovakia, his enchanted and happy childhood had been brutally severed: Then along came exile and not only the physical one. Sveto by default had to grow up suddenly and face problems that do not belong to the realm of

children and furthermore was deprived of his parent's closeness. As they had to fight their own war of survival and emigration and build their lives again from the beginning, emotionally Sveto was left to his own devices. When we met, however, Sveto was nonetheless able to talk about this experience freely, with gentle humor and perspective, remembering this difficult period of his life which later manifested itself in crazy teenager behavior, expressed in intense feelings and disappointments, in friendships leading to bohemian behavior while he was in college. He was thankful for what his life brought him in this period, but would not glorify it, even though it was in this life stage that he realized his passion for writing. Maybe because of that he would talk more seriously and with greater compassion of his encounters with poets and the writers who helped him form his writing. When he did speak of this stage of his life, it wasn't with a smile and understanding. More, he was reliving it fully, as a striptease of the soul - his soul as a poet.

Many of these conversations were held in his home, that wonderful apartment full of books, where all the walls, table, and floor, were covered with books – only in a few spots interrupted with artwork and souvenirs from his travels. Sveto would jokingly say that he would wake up dead one morning buried under his books. Here, in this cozy place, we both had our favorite chairs. His would face his books and had a view of the window, where in the evening he could glimpse the Empire State building lit up--and where, just in front of the window, he positioned a bowl with his beloved stones. I would sit right across looking at my favorite painting - a Robinson based on

Weldon Kees that to this day I enjoy looking at. In his apartment there was never any direct light, but instead, always an inspiring, soft light. He would light one of his favorite cigarettes, pull out a book from one of the poets, and talk about his writing. Or, we would listen to an original recording of one of them.

In that softly lit room on the canvas of the cigarette smoke before me, appeared poets, writers and fragments of all of their lives...but now it was not only a discussion, it was real. I was completely immersed in that reality. After awhile, an evening finally came when these tête-à-têtes became more captivating and intense, and I had a burning desire to know Sveto – Sveto the poet. That night, for the first time, instead of picking a book of another poet, Sveto picked his own handwritten and self-bound book of his own poems and he began to read. In that unforgettable evening, in the twilight of his room and cigarette smoke swirling upward, the most intimate stories and images of his childhood, desires, sufferings, disappointments, pure love, honesty, affectionate heart and old man's wisdom materialized – and in most, the ever present love and tenderness.

His words were pure, true to his feelings, soaring everywhere in his apartment, touching both of us, entering through all our senses and crashing into our souls until they were entirely filled. At that moment Sveto and poet Daniel Simko became one -the fine man and the poet--who both shared the same, profound soul.

*New York July 8, 2008,
on the Anniversary of Daniel's Death*