Andrei Mryi

The Notes of Samson Samasui

Запіскі Самсона Самасуя

Presented by: Vital Voranau

The Notes of Samson Samasui is one of the few Belarusian novels that can make you laugh out loud even when you know what happened to its author and to the world he describes. Andrei Mryi sets his satire in a small town in Soviet Belarus in the 1920s and lets an ambitious district official tell his own story. Samson Samasui believes his career is worth recording because it shows what a modern, energetic man can accomplish. His notes give readers ample opportunity to judge his accomplishments for themselves. Even his surname suggests someone who pushes himself forward, a habit that serves him remarkably well.

Samasui is proud of his peasant origins and of his potato-shaped nose. He is also anxious to establish that his father is no *kulak*, the Soviet designation for a supposedly wealthy or exploitative peasant. He lists the family's livestock in his defence, though he cannot quite remember how many chickens they own. A schoolteacher points out that the designation may depend on attitudes and conduct as well as property. Before leaving home, Samasui quarrels with his father over the value of working the land and discovers that he has forgotten how to harness a horse. His rural background has become a political credential just as the skills that came with it have begun to desert him.

In Shapialiouka, where he takes charge of the district cultural department, Samasui soon finds ways to impress the chairman of the executive committee. He proposes banning pigs from the streets and registering all dogs and cats within three days so that statisticians can assess their export potential. He also wants police supervision of young people who collect local songs and proverbs. Anyone wishing to record such material should first obtain a permit from his department. Mryi gives these proposals the same earnest bureaucratic tone. A reader can laugh at the idea of a census of cats and still recognize what is at stake when an official decides who may write down a song.

The novel's two surviving sections, which Mryi calls "scrolls," move between official meetings, cultural campaigns, flirtations and quarrels. Colloquial Belarusian rubs against newspaper formulas, political slogans and turns of phrase borrowed from Soviet bureaucratic jargon. Samasui uses the language of meetings and reports even when he talks about his private life, and his moments of candour often give away more than he realizes. This liveliness helps explain why he is such an engaging narrator. It also makes his conduct harder to dismiss as harmless. When he testifies against his former friend Torba, the philosopher, the habits of speech that have made him funny take on a more sinister purpose. An acquaintance can become a political liability, and knowing what to say about him in court is another way of looking after oneself.

In Shapialiouka, officials speak as though ideology governed every decision. Samasui's notes reveal more familiar motives at work: vanity, sexual desire, resentment and the wish to get ahead.

His testimony against Torba is one instance of how readily a private calculation can be expressed as a matter of political principle. These motives are familiar across all political systems. What gives them their particular force in Mryi's novel is an official language that allows a man like Samasui to present his own interests as the interests of the revolution.

The Bolshevik revolution reaches into private life, too. When Kreina says she has come to town to visit her aunt, Samasui suspects that she is there to have an abortion. In a brief scene at the hospital, Samasui, Domna Luzban and a doctor consider five abortion cases. One concerns a farm worker employed by three brothers. According to Domna, they are paying for what would be the woman's eighth abortion. The others agree to Samasui's suggestion that Domna try to talk her out of it. The next case concerns a teacher's sixteen-year-old daughter, who has fallen in love with a member of the Communist youth league and become pregnant. Domna argues that having a child at that age would ruin both the girl's life and the child's. The doctor sides with her, and Samasui is overruled.

Mryi leaves much unsaid. A passing suspicion and a brief exchange in a doctor's office are enough to make life in Shapialiouka feel foreign to the older Belarusian village world we glimpse at Samasui's parents' home.

The Belarusian satirist Kandrat Krapiva reproached Mryi for ridiculing Soviet institutions as a whole. The ending of the surviving text shows what provoked that objection. A party secretary demands that a play be stopped. Samasui, who approved it in his capacity as local censor, refuses to back down. He is arrested, removed from his post and responds by declaring a hunger strike. Higher authorities review his record, reprimand the secretary and give Samasui a more responsible job. The people who promote him read his career much as he has written it, as proof of his energy and usefulness. His rise depends on their judgment as much as on his talents for self-promotion.

The journal *Uzvyshsha* began publishing the novel in Minsk in 1929. The third scroll has not survived. According to one account, Mryi himself may have destroyed it to protect himself as the political climate hardened. A Belarusian émigré edition appeared in Munich in 1953. The novel returned to print in Soviet Belarus in the journal *Polymia* in 1988, during perestroika, when censorship began to ease. Mryi was arrested in 1934 and again in 1940. At the second arrest, the authorities confiscated *Жывы дом* (*The Living House*), a novel he had written in exile. The manuscript has yet to be found. Mryi died in 1943 after his release from a Soviet labour camp.

That history brings out the dark humour in Samasui's anxious account of his father's chickens. The joke briefly keeps the danger out of sight. During forced collectivization, being labelled a kulak could cost a family its home and livelihood. Mryi's own fate gives that laughter a tragic resonance. He lived to see the authorities turn the habits of suspicion and classification he had made ridiculous into instruments of repression.

Readers today may recognize some of Shapialiouka's routines in offices far removed from Soviet Belarus. A department can invent a procedure, make everyone spend time complying with it, then report that compliance as evidence of its own success. Mryi catches the point at which an institution starts consuming its own time and energy and calls the result progress. Samasui has a gift for finding things that can be counted, supervised or put on an agenda. It is still easy to imagine him doing well.

The Notes of Samson Samasui still awaits a full English translation. Soviet censors kept books from reaching readers, manuscripts were destroyed or seized, and writers were persecuted. Policies that

reduced the role of Belarusian also made it harder for its literature to reach readers at home and abroad. Many original works are still waiting to be translated. They tell the story of the Soviet Union from a Belarusian point of view. Some explored themes and used forms that became familiar abroad only later, through better-known works written in Russian.

LANGUAGE: Belarusian/ беларуская

This title was not censored before publishing