

“No! We Won’t Die!”: Rediscovering Emil Kubek

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As you travel east on Pennsylvania Route 54, it is impossible to ignore the sublime ruins of the abandoned St. Nicholas Coal Breaker, once the largest of its kind when it opened in 1931. Located just outside the town of Mahanoy City, St. Nicholas had been the home to anthracite mines since the 1860s, and a large contingent of its miners were Slavic immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The early days of mining were the most treacherous, and the anthropologist Peter Roberts, one of the first scholars of Pennsylvania’s Coal Region, estimated that there were over 28,000 injuries and 12,000 fatalities in the area during the latter part of the 19th century. For this reason, Roberts hoped that someone would come along to memorialize the sacrifices of the miners in art. “The soldier on the battlefield, amid the blare of trumpets and a wave of patriotic enthusiasm, has wrought deeds which have been immortalized in song and poetry: but miners have exhibited equal bravery and self-abnegation without the sound of trumpets or the excitement of patriotic ardor,” Roberts writes: “they acted from motives of pure humanity, and most of their deeds are buried with their bones.”¹ A few years after Roberts penned these words, the Carpatho-Rusyn priest Emil Kubek arrived in Mahanoy City to serve at the pastor of St. Mary’s Byzantine Catholic Church. For nearly 40 years, Kubek would work tirelessly to represent the lives of his working-class parishioners in poetry and prose and arguably became the most significant Rusyn-American writer of his generation.

Despite his considerable literary output, the residents of Kubek’s adoptive hometown remember him primarily as the priest of St. Mary’s rather than as a writer, largely because the vast majority of his work, written in Carpatho-Rusyn, has yet to be translated into English. In the summer of 2015, I spent three months in the Coal Region researching Kubek’s career in order to reconnect Mahanoy City with its most accomplished writer. With the help of Erin Frey, an undergraduate student at Bucknell University, and Paul Coombe and Peg Grigalonis from the Mahanoy Area Historical Society, I launched the Emil Kubek Project, which includes a digital archive of his work in my translation and a virtual tour of the areas of Mahanoy City that inspired his poetry and prose. What makes Kubek’s story worth telling is that he was someone who made significant contributions to the Carpatho-Rusyn canon and is a unique example of an American writer who represented the hopes and dreams of Slavic miners during the first half of the 20th century.

Emilii Anton Kubek was born on November 23, 1857 in the village of Štefurov, Hungarian Kingdom (now Slovakia), where his father, Anton, served as a Greek Catholic priest. The young Emil began reading the works of the great Carpatho-Rusyn poet Aleksander Dukhnovych at the age of five, and by the age of six he was able to recite the entire liturgy by heart. He went on to study in the Alumneum of St. John the Baptist in Prešov, where he was ordained a Greek Catholic priest in 1881. Before his ordination, he married Maria Shirilla, the daughter of a Greek Catholic priest from Ruzsóly, Hungarian Kingdom (now Kružlová, Slovakia), and the young couple would go on to have four children together: Maria, Anton (Anthony), Anna, and Alžbeta.

After serving in a number of villages in the Prešov Region, Kubek and his family ultimately settled in the village of Snakov, where he established himself as a Carpatho-Rusyn Renaissance man. He developed the village infrastructure by leading the renovation of the old chapel, building a new parish building, opening a school, and prompting the construction of a

¹ Peter Roberts, *Anthracite Coal Industry* (London: MacMillan, 1901), 152-153.

new road into town. He became an amateur agronomist, introduced fruit trees and beekeeping, and taught the impoverished villagers about new farming methods.² Finally, he began to develop his talents as a writer and scholar and published an extensive comparative dictionary, *Church Slavonic-Hungarian-Russian-German Dictionary for Holy Writing*, which was published in 1906. His considerable talents caught the attention of the Greek Catholic Church, which gave him a new challenge and reassigned him to St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church in Mahanoy City in 1904. Naturally, Snakov was sad to lose the priest who helped transform their community in so many different ways, and the entire village held a teary-eyed procession to wish him a safe journey.

After Kubek arrived in Mahanoy City, St. Mary's grew rapidly under his leadership. Like in Snakov, he immediately opened a reading room and parish school, which taught first through eighth grades six times a week. The opening of the school drew praise from the newspaper *Svoboda*, which called for all Carpatho-Rusyn priests "to follow the example of Father Kubek" in tending to the spiritual and cultural enlightenment of their parishioners.³ The arts also flourished during Kubek's tenure at the church, as St. Mary's produced numerous concerts, dances, and plays. Amidst all of his commitments as a priest, community leader, husband, and father, he nonetheless found time to establish himself as one of the most powerful literary voices in the Carpatho-Rusyn diaspora.

What distinguishes Kubek's literary production is its generic, tonal, and thematic diversity. Kubek is at once a 19th-century epigone and a 20th-century modernist, and his work straddles the border between being traditional and experimental, nostalgic and forward-looking, romantic and realistic, rural and urban, serious and satirical, highbrow and lowbrow, European and American.

First of all, Kubek viewed himself as a Rusyn writer, one who was strongly influenced by the titans of the 19th-century Carpatho-Rusyn Renaissance. The Rusyn Kubek strove to make his fellow countrymen proud of their heritage, and we can feel his nationalist orientation most strongly in his lyric poetry, such as his "On the Anniversary of the Death of Dukhnovych" (1915), a tribute to the great Rusyn awakener, or his nostalgic farewell poem to the Carpathians "My Native Land" (1916). Kubek the nationalist also turned to large, ceremonial forms as well, such as his wide-ranging novel, *Mark Šoltys* (1915) about Rusyn village life at the end of the 19th century, his New Year's ode "Last Year's Night" (1916) about those suffering during the First World War, or his "March of the Sokols" (1930), the theme song of the Rusyn youth organization.

At the same time, as a Greek Catholic priest, Kubek did not shy away from addressing religious issues, and the Catholic Kubek revealed himself in different genres. While he did write religious poetry about the Eastern Rite ("Three-Bar Cross!", 1922) and miraculous power of prayer ("A Mother's Love," 1930), Kubek the moralist most frequently appeared in didactic non-fiction works, such as children's literature, editorials, and epistles. Perhaps the most interesting of his religious texts is a long exegesis of the Lord's Prayer, *Our Father* (1917), which he wrote as a commentary to a painting produced by his son Anthony.

Finally, his immigration to Mahanoy City forced Kubek to grapple with the realities of life in a mining town. This third identity – the American Kubek – was primarily a realist and gravitated towards the short story. He parodied the discourse of local newspapers, incorporated Rusyn-American speech patterns, and drew upon the individuals and institutions of Mahanoy

² František Dancák, *Emil Kubek, 1857-1940* (Prešov: Vydavateľstvo Petra v Prešove, 2004), 4-7.

³ *Svoboda* (December 22, 1904): 1.

City to dramatize the difficulties of assimilating into American life. His short story, “An Easter Gift” (1922), tells the story of a Carpatho-Rusyn who emigrates after losing the love of his life. Another, “Palko Rostoka,” in part, parodies the life of Ioann Žinčak, a Mahanoy City businessman who concealed his Rusyn identity by Americanizing his name to John Smith. And “Merry Christmas” (1930) addresses the conflict between first- and second-generation immigrants over the value of education. Kubek was also particularly skilled at embodying the perspectives of working-class Rusyns in his lyric poetry. His lyric “Lullaby to a Miner’s Child” (1907) inhabits the voice of a mother as she comforts her son while her husband works in the mines, “The Good Dad” (1922) is written from the point of view of a young child whose father is a drunk, and “Adam in Paradise” (1923) rewrites the Garden of Eden story from the perspective of Adam, who pleads with God to turn his nagging wife back into a rib.

Although Kubek invested a great deal of energy into his writing, he encountered a number of difficulties in bringing his literary output to a general public. A large portion of the Rusyn-American community was illiterate, and many of those who could read had difficulty with the Cyrillic alphabet, which forced him, much to his chagrin, to write in Latin script. Furthermore, the readership that did exist generally lacked an appreciation (and the time) for literature. Since money was hard to come by for the publication of his longer works, he often had to resort to publishing them for free as detachable sections within Rusyn-American newspapers, which were easily damaged and quickly decayed. As a result, Kubek speculated that one third of his works ended up in the fireplace, another third existed only in manuscript form, and the rest were published but almost immediately lost.⁴ Nonetheless, those who knew his work immediately acknowledged its quality, and by the end of his life, his reputation as an author was well enough established that the sentiments expressed in his poetry and prose, he wryly joked, even “were endorsed by many who had never read my writings.”⁵

The best known corpus of Kubek’s writing appeared in his four-volume collected works, *People’s Tales and Verses (Narodny povísti i stichi, 1922-1923)*. The first volume features a selection of his lyric poetry and short stories, and the final three volumes are dedicated to his most significant literary accomplishment, the first novel written in Carpatho-Rusyn, *Marko Šoltys*. Set in Subcarpathian Rus’, *Marko Šoltys* tells the story of the trials and tribulations of Marko Furman against the backdrop of Central European history from 1860s until World War I. Orphaned at a young age, Marko is forced to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army and make his own way in life as a farmer. Through hard work and perseverance, he manages to become a successful landowner and by the end of the novel comes to “believe firmly that this poor nation of mine will come to life, will be raised by their national spirit towards a happy future!”⁶

While *Marko Šoltys* occupies a central place in the canon of Carpatho-Rusyn literature, its publication took a significant emotional and financial toll on Kubek. Although he had completed the novel in 1915, he had trouble finding a publishing house that was willing to incur the substantial cost of producing a lengthy saga for a Carpatho-Rusyn community that was not at all inclined to read – let alone purchase – *belles lettres*. The literary committee of the Greek Catholic Union, the largest Carpatho-Rusyn fraternal organization, accepted the novel in 1916, but only prepared 100 pages before they pulled out of the project. A few years later, Kubek gave the manuscript to Peter J. Maczkov, the head of the GCU youth organization “Sokol” (The Falcon), who distributed parts of the novel to its members. The Rusyn-American youth

⁴ Josif Perovič, “Predislovie,” *Vozhd’ | The Leader* (February 1930): 4.

⁵ Emil Kubek, “Autobiography,” *The Emil Kubek Project* (2015), www.kubekproject.wordpress.com.

⁶ Emilij A. Kubek, “Marko Šoltys,” *Narodny povísti i stichi, tom 4* (Scranton: Obrana, 1923), 177.

responded so positively to *Marko Šoltys* that they pleaded with Kubek to publish it in its entirety, so he decided to finance its publication himself.

Kubek spent \$4,000 of his own money to print 3,000 copies of the four-volume *People's Tales and Verses*, which would turn out to be the only commercial print run of his work during his lifetime. The publication turned out to be a family affair, for all four volumes were illustrated by his son Anthony, who was a classically trained painter, and edited by his son-in-law, Nikolai E. Petrik. In the preface, Kubek proudly announces that *Marko Šoltys* is “the first long tale (novel) of a writer from Subcarpathia in the Rusyn language,” but the fact that Kubek felt the need to explain that a “novel” was “a long tale” (*povísta dol'ša*) reveals that the Carpatho-Rusyn readership was largely unprepared for this pioneering work. Indeed, *People's Tales and Verses* did not sell nearly as well as Kubek had hoped, and the poor sales were exacerbated by his principled refusal to pay for advertising in Rusyn-American newspapers after he had worked as a contributor for free for nearly twenty years. To add injury to insult, Kubek soon developed respiratory problems, which left him broke in body as well as in spirit. In December 1925, his daughter Mary urged him to take some time off from his duties as a priest and writer and spend a few months with her in Florida. After some initial resistance, Kubek decided that he deserved a vacation, his first after forty-five years in the priesthood.

Kubek's trip to Florida was a transformative one, and he published an account of his adventures called “My Journey to Florida” (1926). Kubek's travelogue is a fascinating look at America in the 1920s through the eyes of a man who feels liberated from the burden of his familial, literary, and pastoral duties, if but for a few weeks. He drinks wine on the side of the road in Pennsylvania during Prohibition, investigates Southern Baptist churches, talks with the homeless, smokes in line at the post office in Fort Meyers, is deeply moved by the terrible living conditions of Southern blacks, and reaches a level of profound joy and deep sadness at the thought that he could have bought a plot of fertile land in the south – if only he hadn't just spent his life's savings on the publication of *Marko Šoltys*! As a result, Kubek's “My Journey to Florida” begins with a scathing critique of the Rusyn-American reading public, which he excoriates for wasting the money and time of Rusyn artists. “We have writers, poets, composers, actors, on the level of the most educated, magnificent peoples,” Kubek writes: “And their work is in vain – there's nobody to write for, to compose for, to paint for, to work for.”⁷ With great frustration and bitterness, he revealed that “My Journey to Florida” will be his “last appeal to the Rusyns” and announced his retirement from writing.

As the years went by, Kubek's silence in the Carpatho-Rusyn press was noticed by a number of readers who missed seeing his articles, poems, and stories. Ironically, his retirement from writing created the space for the assessment of his legacy as a writer, and he began to be celebrated in a number of retrospective tributes to his life and work.

The most effusive testimonial to Kubek's career may be that of Michael Yuhasz, the president of the GCU, who in 1929 called Kubek “the lamp” of the Rusyn people. Yuhasz urges Rusyn-Americans to appreciate the unique gift of having an author of Kubek's caliber and to acknowledge the regrettable consequences this has had on his fame and fortune. “If he wasn't born a Rusyn, if he would have been the son of a different people, then he would have had great worldly glory, his name would have been written in golden letters in the book of hymns, our dear poet-writer would have had worldly riches,” Yuhasz writes: “But God gave him to us, the poor Subcarpathian-Rusyn people, and although we value him higher than anything else, although

⁷ Emil Kubek, “My Journey to Florida,” trans. Nick Kupensky, *The Emil Kubek Project* (2015), www.kubekproject.wordpress.com.

with sweet and bitter tears we read the work of this creative genius of ours, nevertheless we're not in the position to honor or materially compensate Father Kubek for the work he has done for us."⁸

A year later in 1930, the Rusyn-American literary magazine, *Vozhd' (The Leader)*, also ran a tribute to Kubek. Josif Perovič, who wrote the preface to the issue, paints a sweeping and heartfelt portrait of the writer. He calls Kubek "a joyful" man "full of amusing jokes and stories," a "highly educated" priest who "passionately loves his flock", and a writer who is "a rigorous expert on the soul of his people, a sharp critic of all sorts of sins and vices that are prevalent among the populace, and abundantly reveals his noble qualities and thoughts for the sake of praising and cultivating virtue to raise up his poor, downtrodden people."⁹ For these reasons, Perovič calls on the Rusyn-American community to collect and publish all of Kubek's works in time for his golden jubilee, which would be held the following year. While this particular appeal wasn't answered, Kubek did celebrate his 50th year as a priest in style.

In 1931, Kubek launched a wide-reaching expansion of St. Mary's, which included a complete reconstruction of both the exterior and interior of the church and the building of a new rectory. On Thanksgiving Day, the parish held an extravagant day of festivities to give thanks for the completion of the new church and its dedicated priest. The day began with a street parade led by two local marching bands, and the procession led into the church for the first liturgy in the new building. The crowd proved to be so large that an amplification system had to be installed to broadcast the service to those left standing in the street.

After the liturgy, the party continued into the evening, where a dinner was held at the Mahanoy City Elks Club to celebrate Kubek's 50th year as a priest and his 74th birthday. The banquet featured multiple musical performances and speeches by a number of priests and local dignitaries. But it was Kubek, naturally, who stole the show. The Mahanoy City *Record American* describes the culmination of the banquet:

The most amazing address of the afternoon was given by the beloved Fr. Kubek himself, who addressed the assemblage fluently in six languages, namely, Latin, Rusyn, English, German, Slovak, and Magyar. In Latin he addressed the reverend clergy, in Rusyn his beloved parish, in English the guests, in German and Magyar several distinguished guests. As Father Kubek rose to speak he was given a rising ovation, the approximately four hundred guests joining as one in according tumultuous acclaim to the veteran of Christ and the church.¹⁰

While the broader Rusyn-American community did not always appreciate his poetry and prose in the way that he felt he deserved, it was overwhelmingly evident that, after twenty-seven years in Mahanoy City, Kubek had earned the respect, admiration, and love of his friends and neighbors.

In addition to the unveiling of the new church, Kubek also moved into a new residence that November, and St. Mary's current rectory was where he spent the last nine years of his life. During the 1930s, Kubek began to delegate more and more of his pastoral duties to his son Anthony and dedicated most of his time to a new profession – grandpa. In 1938, he wrote his final work, a brief autobiography, in which he reflected on his life and career. In his

⁸ Michail Yuhasz, "Holos odnoho iz najl' ipšich narodotružennikov našich," *Amerikansky russky viestnik* (January 17, 1929): 4.

⁹ Josif Perovič, "Predislovie," *Vozhd' | The Leader* (February 1930): 4.

¹⁰ "Dual Celebration Was Held by Members of St. Mary's Greek Catholic Church," *Record American* (November 27, 1931): 1. The original newspaper article says "Russian" – not "Rusyn" – but Kubek would have obviously spoken to his parish in their native language.

characteristic playfulness, he summarizes his current state of affairs as consisting of “swatting flies” and “reading on the porch” with breaks to “feed the sparrows,” “cough” and “play solitaire.” “Now I live like the field lilies,” he concludes: “I like homemade chicken soup with noodles and Florida. That’s all I remember about myself. Signed E. A. Kubek, Great Grandfather.”¹¹

Two years later, on July 17, 1940, Emil Kubek died at the age of 82. In lieu of an obituary, *The American Rusyn Messenger* announced his death by republishing one of his poems, “No! We Won’t Die!” (1922), a lyric which reprises all of the qualities Kubek valued most: an unwavering belief in Christ, a robust dedication to the Carpatho-Rusyn people, and a powerful call for the preservation and development of their cultural heritage. In “No! We Won’t Die!”, Kubek sees the triumph of life over death in the changing of the seasons, as winter’s “blizzards and storms” give way to “spring showers.” Springtime is also the season of Easter, and Eastern-rite Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ by chanting “Christ is risen” (“Christos voskres”), which serves as the refrain of the poem. In Kubek’s lifetime, Carpatho-Rusyn culture came back from near death twice – during the first Rusyn Renaissance of the mid-19th century and again during the interwar period in the First Czechoslovak Republic. Kubek was acutely aware that the fight for political freedom is a hard one and calls upon future generations of Carpatho-Rusyns “to ensure that this freedom survives.” What Kubek could not have predicted, however, was the resurrection of his own legacy fifty years after his death.

Today, courses are taught about *Marko Šoltys* in the Institute of Rusyn Language and Culture at the University of Prešov, the city where he was ordained a priest. The school he helped found in Snakov, Slovakia, was named in his honor in 2008. The Slovak government funded the production of a documentary film about his life, and dozens of books and articles about his work have begun to appear in Europe and the United States. And on November 22, 2015, the Kubek Project, in conjunction with a dozen partners from Bucknell University and the local community, organized a day-long celebration of his career in the town where he made his name. Over 100 guests from throughout the country – including Kubek’s great-grandson – descended upon Mahanoy City to tour the places connected to Kubek’s life. Guests heard a musical performance of “My Native Land!” by Drew Skitko of Opera Philadelphia, took shots of moonshine while reading “The Good Dad” in Mahanoy City’s oldest barroom, explored the sights that inspired Kubek’s short stories, and recited “No! We Won’t Die!” at his grave in St. Mary’s Cemetery. When the clock struck midnight in Central Europe, the crowd celebrated Kubek’s birthday, November 23, by singing “*Mnohaja lita*” the Rusyn “Happy Birthday”. Indeed, while he was born during the first Rusyn Renaissance in the 19th century and flourished during the second in the 20th, Kubek’s work, after being forgotten for decades, is now finding new life in the third rebirth of Rusyn culture taking place today.

“No! We Won’t Die!”

By Emil Kubek

No! We won’t die!
The winter has passed, spring has arrived...
Our race has awakened, and we are alive!
Blizzards and storms become gentle spring showers,
Which brighten the forests and water the flowers;

¹¹ Emil Kubek, “Autobiography,” *The Emil Kubek Project* (2015), *The Emil Kubek Project* (2015), www.kubekproject.wordpress.com.

And the whole world sings from the depth of its chest:
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

No! We won't die!
A spirited nation can never be killed,
So long as we place our faith in God's will!
But we've had to endure and have suffered for years,
Nothing would help bring an end to our tears.
But now rays from heaven slowly ease our distress:
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

No! We won't die!
For the poor are protected from sickness and strife,
By a masculine faith, so we charge into life!
We protect what's been given to us by our fathers,
And we're never ashamed of our hard-working mothers.
We trust in our church and proudly profess:
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

No! We won't die!
No matter how far we carry our cross,
Our father's inheritance will never be lost.
We've starved and went hungry but have persevered,
Our love of our homeland is mixed with our tears,
We're fearless and rugged, and will pass every test.
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

No! We won't die!
The Lord has revealed his justice and truth,
And we will defend his church from abuse.
As Christ walked to Golgotha, the crowds brutally beat him,
From the cross, he promised salvation and freedom.
He'll raise up the poor, the weak and oppressed.
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

No! We won't die!
As a free people, in the land of the free,
We cherish our freedom on this side of the sea.
And so that our children will honor our lives,
We have to ensure that this freedom survives.
Together, in chorus, again we express:
Christos voskres! Christos voskres!

You can read more of Kupensky's translations of Kubek's poetry and prose at
www.kubekproject.wordpress.com.

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