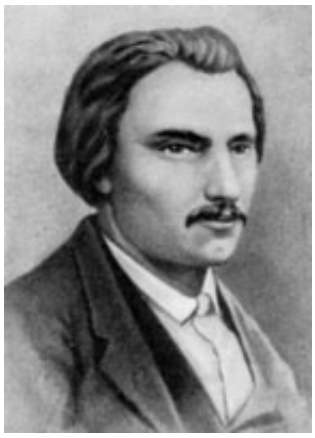

Stepan Rudansky
(1833-1873)

Born in the Podilia region, near the town of Vinnytsia, Rudansky was the son of a priest. He studied for the priesthood himself, but turned to medical studies, which he completed in St. Petersburg. Rudansky struggled with poverty all his life, and his difficult medical practice in Yalta, Crimea, further undermined his precarious health. In spite of the stumbling-blocks the tsarist censorship placed in his way and the fact that his father forbade him to write in Ukrainian and virtually disowned him for abandoning theology, Rudansky continued to use the vernacular to express his tender poetic feelings. It is to be noted that quite a few Ukrainian authors of the time wrote their works in Russian as a matter of political and mercenary expediency.

Rudansky's relatively extensive literary output consists of lyrical and narrative (historical) verses, translations from foreign poets (particularly from Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid)*, and a body of humorous folklorist quatrain anecdotes, known as *Spivomovki* (Light Ditties). It is anomalous that despite his tragic life, ill health and repressions suffered from Russian censorship (he saw but a few of his poems actually in print), Rudansky often managed to be comically buoyant to the extent of becoming known as the one who "laughed hardest" in all Ukrainian literature. However, it is as a lyricist that he established himself among the foremost Ukrainian poets. His life and work are symbolic of the entire Ukrainian race which, in spite of centuries of hardship and oppression, never lost the joy of life and the gift of laughter.

Blow forth, O wind, to my Ukraine,
Where for a maid my heart is fain;
A dark-eyed beauty claims my youth . . .
Blow forth, O wind, from out the south.

A valley there will greet your sight,
A cottage in it, sparkling white;
And in that cot my darling dwells
For whom my heart in rapture swells.

Blow, as the young sun shows his edge,
And reach at dawn her window-ledge.
Within, a white bed you'll surprise,
And in that bed my darling lies.

Blow then, O wind, with silent grace,
Over her white and rosy face;
Above her eyes your vigil keep;
See if my sweetheart is asleep.
And if no waking she has proved,

Whisper to her of one she loved
So deeply, when we came to sever,
She swore she would be mine forever.

Then if her heart begins to beat
And heavy sighs its faith repeat,
And those dark eyes are filled with tears,
Return, O wind, to bless my ears!

If I'm forgotten and her charms
Are clasped within another's arms,
Then lose yourself across the plain
And come not back from my Ukraine . . .

The south wind blows, and blows, and blows,
My pining heart no respite knows;
The south wind blows with cloudy wrack
But from Ukraine it comes not back.

KHMELNITSKY'S[1] SONG

Hey, brother Cossacks, come saddle our horses!
And quaff off some wine that our courage endorses!

Gird on our sabres, the reins let us feel,
And steady our feet in our stirrups of steel!

We arc not fated to bend our brave necks
Under a yoke with which aliens vex.

We are not destined the vile smoke to smell
That reeks from our land through the kindling of hell!

Have we not strength like the strength of our sires?
Have we not sabres as keen in their ires?

Have we no longer swift steeds at our shout?
Who dares to say that our pipes have gone out?[2]

Lead forth our steeds in the grass and the heather,
There let them charge and neigh fiercely together!

So let our comrades, young Cossacks of might,
Gallop afield and be first in the fight!

There let us clash with our well-tempered brands,

[1] Zenobius (Zinoviy) Bohdan Khmelnitsky, born probably in 1595, became the commander of the Cossack troops in 1648, and ruled as hetman till his death in 1657. He distinguished himself as a great military leader in the Cossack wars against Poland. His statesmanship revived the claim of Ukraine to an independent status, but the political vicissitudes of the times led him to sign with tsarist Russia the Treaty of Pereyaslav (1654) which, contrary to his expectations, put an end to Ukraine's hopes of achieving the freedom he desired.

[2] One of the Cossack customs was to light their pipes with the fire of the conflagration which they had set, this gesture being symbolic of the success of their expedition or campaign. A pipe was usually considered an "indispensable" part of the Cossack accoutrement.

Grasped in the iron-strong grip of our hands!

Again let the bones of our enemies lie
Heaped on our steppes and be bare to the sky!

Ne'er let our pipes without fire be found!
Burn every fort of our foes to the ground!
Still let our foemen remember with pain
He must pay dear who molests our Ukraine!

OXEN! OXEN!

Oxen, my oxen! O why have you halted?
What! have the weeds choked our field[3] to the full?
Tell me if rust has corroded the ploughshare.
Or has the coulter grown useless and dull?
Onward, my oxen! The grain stalks are dry now,
Easily, too, will the weeds all give way,
Coulter and ploughshare are shining and ready . . .
Oxen, my oxen! O why do you stay?

Oxen, my oxen! Break down all the stubble,
Trample the festering weeds into dust;
Root that bad growth from the fields of our fathers!
It has no place in the land of the just!
Here on my left is the conquering coulter,
Here on my right the stout ploughshare is propped,
Ready to hack out the foul infestation –
Oxen, my oxen, pray why have you stopped?

Oxen, my oxen! The field we shall furrow,
Plant here the wheat of our jubilant spring;
Quickening rains will soon fall on our sowing,
Life in the earth to our seed grain to bring.
Seeds will awaken, and sprout, and see daylight,
Then like the wreaths that our maidens exalt,
Fields will grow green with the magic of springtime –
Oxen, my oxen, pray why do you halt?

Oxen, my oxen, the grain stalks will ripen,
Flooding our fields with a harvest of gold;
See, once again in our holy land flowing
Honey and milk as was promised of old.
All that was bitter will pass into darkness,
Years will sail forward, with Glory as cockswain.
Why have you stopped then, my resolute comrades?
Now is the season! March on, mighty oxen!

[3] The field here is symbolic of the national, economic, political fields of endeavour. Oxen denote the common labour of all the people for their common good.

ONE MUST HAVE FRIENDS EVERYWHERE

THE OLD WOMAN IN THE CHURCH

A grandam came to church and bought
A fair supply of candles;
To each old icon round the church
A taper's light she handles.

There still remained a pair of them . . .
Where should these lights be stuck?
"Perhaps," she says, "I'll find that saint,
Mikita, with some luck!"

At last she found his icon out –
The Saint was thrashing Satan!
One light before the Saint she set,
One for the Fiend did straighten. . . .

The people saw, and scolded her
With looks that could dishevel;
"Why, granny, can't you see," they said,
"You've placed it for the Devil?"

But granny turned and said: "My friends,
Don't speak with hasty breath!
A person never can be sure
Where he will go at death –

"Whether to heaven or to hell
His ghostly path he'll fare.
You see, good people, it is well
To have friends everywhere."

Translated by
C.H.Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkonnell
The Ukrainian Poets, 1189-1962.
University of Toronto Press 1963