

Jaan Kross's Failed Attempts to become a Soviet Writer. The years of exile 1951–1954

Author: Jaan Undusk

Only sporadic light has been shed on the beginning of Jaan Kross's development as a writer. According to the understanding that remains current to this day, his creative work was rather episodic before the mid-1950s, creating the impression that Kross emerged on the Soviet Estonian literary scene with a "big bang" just when he was given a dignified opportunity to do so for the first time: namely during the political thaw that followed the condemnation of Stalin's personality cult, when his first collection of poetry entitled *Söerikastaja* (Coal Refiner, 1958) was published. Closer examination nevertheless indicates that Kross already tried to make his way into the literary world considerably earlier already and in an altogether different way than it later turned out.

Kross's correspondence from his period of forced Siberian exile (which was first meant to be lifelong) in the settlement of Aban in Krasnoyarsk krai, where he lived in 1951–1954 after his time in the prison camps, sheds new light on the history of his creative work: letters to and from his mother and his first wife Helga Pedusaar-Kross, who remained in Tallinn, correspondence with his second wife Helga Roos and with the art historian Villem Raam, who both were also exiled in Siberia. The letters to Kross's mother from the communist activist Alma Vaarman, who was one of Kross's fellow exiles in Aban and had been sent to Siberia for a second time already, are also of interest. Yet in this and the subsequent two issues of *Tuna*, the joint correspondence of Kross and Vaarman with the Stalinist literary critic Huko Lumet, who lived in Tallinn, will be published, along with Kross's letters to Vaarman in Siberia in 1954 when he himself was already back in Estonia. These letters are found in the Estonian National Archives (Tallinn), the Estonian Cultural History Archive (Tartu), and in private collections.

It becomes apparent from his correspondence with the abovementioned people that it was precisely during his years in Siberian exile that Kross became aware once and for all of his calling as a writer and tried to settle in to the working style of the professional man of letters – this, of course, to the extent to which it was possible alongside the hard physical labour he had to engage in for his daily bread. He had graduated from the University of Tartu as a lawyer and taken a job there as a specialist in international law but his juridical diploma was useless in Siberia. He had to come to grips with the fact that exiles stay in Siberia for the rest of their lives, or at least for a very long time. The only way to feel like a human being and to keep himself in spiritual and intellectual shape was to read as much as possible (books were sent from Estonia) and to work on writing: to translate from foreign languages, to compose critical texts, and to fulfil his own belletristic ambitions. The two years he spent living with A. Vaarman, who looked after Kross as if he were her own son, fostered this pursuit. Kross also tried to publish his work in Estonia by way of H. Lumet but predictably, nothing came of these efforts.

Kross's correspondence provides incentive to seek the creative work from his Siberian period, much of which has been preserved in manuscript form. The more

important original texts on which he had worked in Siberia were the novel in verse *Tiit Pagu* about the transformation of a former bourgeois member of a students' fraternity into a member of socialist society (A. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* served as the example for its form), a socially critical play on an American theme entitled *Marc Edfordi kaitsekõne* (Marc Edford's Defence), and the long poem *Gameš*. None of these were published or put on stage. When he was already back in Tallinn, he received a commission in the autumn of 1954 to write a long poem about the "uprising" of 1 December 1924, actually the attempt to overthrow the government of Estonia plotted by the Soviet Union. Yet this work entitled *Pojad* (Sons) was not published either because editors were afraid of Kross as a former political prisoner.

Kross was later even thankful to the editors for thwarting his attempts to fit in to the trivial system of Stalinist literature. Yet he would not have needed to feel shame about his works later in retrospect because there is a strong humanist aspect in all of these works and they are professional in their form.