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**Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island*:
An Ongoing Commentary**

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Abstract. A study of the currently existing translations of Anton Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island (From Travel Notes)* (Luba and Michael Terpak – 1967, Brian Reeve – 1993) shows that the reason for some errors in translated texts is not always due to the negligence of translators, which is so clearly noticeable in the first translation, but rather in the incomprehensibility for foreigners of some realia in the original text. Reference to two available *Commentaries* on Sakhalin Island, by M.L. Semanova (1985) and M.S. Vysokov (2010), as well as to the works of other Chekhov scholars, did not give the sought-after explanations of certain vague excerpts from the book. Those obscure excerpts are also poorly understood by the Russian readership. In particular, we are talking about Chekhov's mention of the use of a naval rope in the surgical department (Chapter VII) and the perception of the status of a class feldscher/paramedic (Chapter XII). The author of the article offers her own commentary on difficult-to-understand passages and thus fills the gap that has arisen. Conclusions are drawn about the need to continue to provide Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* with commentaries and notes. Such commentary should serve two purposes. Its linguistic and cultural character should help to clarify the realias not only for representatives of a foreign linguistic culture – in order to prevent gross errors in translations, but also for the present-day Russian reader, separated from the time when A.P. Chekhov's book was written by almost one hundred and thirty years.

Keywords: A.P. Chekhov, Sakhalin Island, commentary, Luba and Michael Terpak, Brian Reeve, translation

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«Остров Сахалин» А.П. Чехова: в продолжение комментария

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Аннотация. Изучение существующих на сегодняшний день переводов книги Чехова «Остров Сахалин (из путевых записок)» (Люба и Михаил Трепак – 1967 г., Брайан Рив – 1993 г.) показывает, что причиной многих погрешностей переводных текстов является не небрежность переводчиков, столь явно заметная в первом переводе, а непонятность для них целого ряда реалий в тексте оригинала. Обращение к двум имеющимся комментариям к «Острову Сахалин», М.Л. Семановой (1985) и М.С. Высокова (2010), а также к работам других чеховедов не дало искомым разъяснений данных мест, мало понятных также и для отечественного читателя. В частности, речь идет об упоминании Чеховым использования морского каната в хирургическом отделении (глава VII) и восприятия статуса классного фельдшера (глава XII). Автор статьи предлагает собственный комментарий трудных для понимания мест, который заполняет обнаружившуюся лауну. Делаются выводы о необходимости продолжения комментирования текста книги «Остров Сахалин». Такой комментарий должен иметь двустороннюю направленность. Его лингвострановедческий характер должен способствовать разъяснению реалий не только представителям иной лингвокультуры – с целью предотвращения грубых ошибок в переводах, но также и современному отечественному читателю, отделенному от времени написания книги А.П. Чехова уже почти ста тридцатью годами.

Ключевые слова: А.П. Чехов, Остров Сахалин, комментарий, Люба и Михаил Трепак, Брайан Рив, перевод

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Introduction: Commentary on *Sakhalin Island*

Anton Chekhov's non-fiction *Sakhalin Island (From Travel Notes)* / «Остров Сахалин (из путевых записок)» (1895) [1] is not an easy reading even for native speakers. As it is of a scientific and documentary character, a compilation of his travel notes, it is still not an ethnographic or sociological study but, as Akhil

Sharma, an assistant professor in creative writing at Rutgers University (Newark) calls it, rather a work of investigative journalism: “*Sakhalin Island* is often mistakenly seen as medical anthropology instead of what it always was: investigative journalism” [2]. The uniqueness of the book can hardly be overestimated, the translators faced a very difficult task. The lexical composition of the book is extremely complex and consists of terminological vocabulary, realities of everyday life in the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century. Time, which separates us from the events in the book, creates the need for a historical and cultural commentary. Anton Chekhov was the first to comment on his story, since Siberia and Sakhalin were not considered Russia in the public eye of his time, life there was not familiar to the population of the Central Russian Upland. A.P. Chekhov added more than 200 commentaries and notes to the text of his published book. After the first commentary by the author himself there appeared two more commentaries – by M.L. Semanova (1908–1995) [3] and M.S. Vysokov (born 1955) [4].

M.L. Semanova’s commentary was the lifetime endeavor of a professional literary critic and scholar. All editions of *Sakhalin Island*, which appeared in the USSR between 1948 and 1985, were provided with revised and updated commentary from Maria Leontievna Semanova. Over the period of more than 35 years the commentary grew in size to almost 200 pages [3], although it has never been published as a separate book. M.L. Semanova started her study of Chekhov’s texts in 1940s and kept adding new commentaries with each new edition of the Russian classic.

In 2010 M.S. Vysokov (Ph.D. in History) published his commentary which contains a lot of additional information on geographical and historical facts in and around Chekhov’s book. As a specialist on the history of *Sakhalin Island* M.S. Vysokov provided a lot of information about the island, its flora and fauna.

English translations of A.P. Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Island*

While Chekhov’s prose and drama can boast of literally hundreds of translation versions, which have been appearing since the beginning of the 20th century, his non-fiction *Sakhalin Island* has been translated only twice. The first complete version *The Island: A Journey to Sakhalin* [5]. appeared more than half a century ago and was done by Luba and Michael Terpak, two graduates of Columbia University (they held Slavic languages degree). The late couple was well known for translations of poetry from Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian, for their articles on theatre and life in the USSR. The translation of Chekhov’s book is not perfect, it received fair criticism, but it does have a historical place being the first one. It took almost 25 years before another version, translated by Bryan Reeve, made its appearance. *Sakhalin Island* has been reprinted many times since 1993. Bryan Reeve is a British scholar, translator, holds a degree in Slavic studies, lectures on Russian music and literature of the 19th century. Bryan Reeve’s translation includes *From Siberia*/очерки “Из Сибири” the six articles written by Chekhov and published by *Novoye Vremya/New Times* (owned by Suvorin) while Chekhov was still travelling. The book is provided with extra material on Anton Chekhov’s life, works, bibliography, a selection of Chekhov’s letters and even a chapter from “Остров Сахалин” in Russian.

Comparison of the two translations revealed that though the criticism received by *The Island: A Journey to Sakhalin* translated by the Terpaks was war-

ranted, the newer version, *Sakhalin Island*, does not lack mistakes either. And, although, some are just slips, misprints (or with the Terpaks a result of mere sloppiness) there are a few places where the translators do not understand the Russian text. It turned out that Russian readership did not grasp the full meaning of the mentioned passages either. We have identified two cases of major misinterpretations and the following is an attempt to give the much needed commentary and explanation.

Ship cord for the surgical department

In chapter 7, giving an overview of Korsakovka, Chekhov mentions a small infirmary where, as he was told, some medieval practices were carried out. Here is the Russian text: “В Корсаковке есть школа и часовня. Был и больничный околоток, где вместе помещались 14 сифилитиков и 3 сумасшедших; один из последних заразился сифилисом. Говорят также, что сифилитики приготавливали для хирургического отделения морской канат и корпию” [1. P. 114]. Let’s compare two versions of the translation. The Terpaks: “Korsakovskoye has a school and a chapel. It used to have a medical center where fourteen syphilitics and three lunatics were housed together. One of the latter became infected with syphilis. They also tell me that the syphilitics *produced hawsers for ships and lint for the surgical department*” [5. P. 83]. Brian Reeve: “At Korsakovsk there is a school and a chapel. There had also been a small infirmary in which were lodged together fourteen syphilitics and three lunatics; one of the latter was infected with syphilis. I heard, too, that the syphilitics *used to prepare ship’s cord and lint for the surgical department*” [6. P. 111].

Both translations are almost similar except for the toponym “Корсаковка”. “Korsakovskoye” (Terpak) and “Korsakovsk” (Reeve) are two different place names and the Terpak’s version is closer to Chekhov’s “Корсаковка”, while Reeve’s version is, obviously by mistake, a transliteration of the present-day administrative center in Sakhalin – Корсаковск.

It goes without saying, that keeping lunatics and patients with an infectious disease in the same room is against any rules of hygiene and healthcare as they were already formulated in the second half of the 19th century. Neither was it acceptable to have them produce materials for the surgical department. The question arises, what was it in particular that both syphilitics and lunatics ‘produced’ (the Terpaks) or ‘prepared’ (Reeve)? Let’s see about the ‘hawsers for the ships’ or ‘ship’s cord’ first. The Terpaks do not give any commentaries and leave it to the reader to figure the whole thing out. It would be impossible to imagine that a few sick patients would produce real hawsers for real ships, especially since hemp, which was used as the staple material for the production in the 19th century, did not grow on the island.

Brian Reeve’s translation is closer to the Russian text, he uses the equivalent ‘prepared’ which is exactly the word Chekhov used – “приготавливали”. The confused and honest translator makes a note: “*Ship’s cord*: The meaning of this expression is obscure. Chekhov uses it in another medical context later in the text: see p. 320 and its fifth note for more information” [6. P. 352]. Reeve sends the reader to his translation of another place in Chekhov’s text where ship’s cord is mentioned for the second time. Chekhov: «У хирургических больных повяз-

ки грязные, морской канат какой-то, подозрительный на вид, точно по нем ходили» [1. С. 369]. Reeve’s translation: “The bindings of the surgical patients were filthy; they consisted of some kind of thick ship’s cord, which had a suspect look about it, as if people had been walking all over it” [6. P. 320].

The syntactic structure of the Russian sentence clearly suggests that bandages are metaphorically compared to some kind of ship’s cord, dirty as if being walked upon. Brian Reeve got confused and added ‘they consisted of’ thus changing the meaning of the sentence. The translator clearly understands the misinterpretation and gives his commentary: “*The binding... ship’s cord*: The reference to the “ship’s cord” is obscure. The term used in Russian is actually ‘sea hawser’ (*морской канат*), but an intact hawser would seem rather too weighty to tie round an arm or leg as a binding; therefore I have translated it as “cord”. Possibly the cord was being used for ligatures or tourniquets: in modern times deep wounds are packed with lint or gauze in long thin ribbons which little by little are removed as the edges of the wound begin to heal and knit together. Maybe the twine was being used for this filling of wounds in the absence of other material. The reference may also be to thicker rope, which would have been unpicked, and the oakum used to pack the wound, since this material is extremely absorbent and was at one time widely used for binding wounds in military hospitals and on ships. Presumably, being ship’s rope, the cord, to render it waterproof, would have been dipped in tar or creosote; both of these are strong antiseptics and were used to cauterize and disinfect wounds in the army and navy up until the middle of the nineteenth century. Possibly what Chekhov is suggesting is that the prison hospital was so archaic and so poorly provided for that it was still using materials which had become obsolete elsewhere forty or fifty years previously” [6. Pp. 444–445].

Russian commentaries by Semanova and by Vysokov do not say anything about how the ship’s cord was used in the surgical department. Vysokov does explain that a ship’s cord is a thick, dexterous rope [4. P. 252] but this explanation does not help to clarify the situation. We think that the explanation can be found in medical books on surgery, which were used in Chekhov’s time. The Russian translation of the 8th edition of J.F. Malgaigne’s “Guide to Operative Surgery” says that diverse substances and materials used for ligature were: silk, hemp and cotton threads, iron and calcinated silver wires [7. P. 23]. Manuals for surgery students published at the beginning of the 20th century would not mention hemp threads any longer, but would recommend mostly silk, sometimes string thread (catgut) and silver or iron wire [8]. So, the commentary given by Brian Reeve is mainly relevant except that it is given in the wrong place in the text. We don’t think that ship’s cord was ever used to tie round an arm. The only plausible explanation is that the ship cord was taken apart for hemp threads used as ligature.

‘Lint’ is also mentioned in the same excerpt from “Sakhalin Island” and the Vysokov commentary, as many other dictionaries and encyclopedias do, includes the explanation of the word. In our opinion, it would be necessary to add that plucking lint was a common occupation for patients and convalescents in hospitals and medical institutions until the 1880s. Russian stories and novels by Leo Tolstoy (“*Sevastopol Sketches*”), N. Uspenski (“*Rural Drugstore*”), A. Apukhtin (“*Unfinished Story*”) dedicated to the Crimean war (1856–1858) period mention lint plucking as charitable activity to help wounded servicemen.

On class feldschers, military medical assistants (paramedics)

Chapter XIII of Chekhov's book is dedicated to settlements in the Korsakov district. In one of them, called Bolshoye Takoe, there lived a medical assistant who was held in high esteem among the local population. Here is a quote from *Sakhalin Island*: здесь “живет постоянно классный фельдшер, которого поселенцы называют первоклассным” (Рр. XIV–XV, 208). In the Russian quote there is a play on words ‘классный – первоклассный’/‘class – first class’, which in itself is very difficult to render in translation. This stumbling block is almost an iceberg since the word ‘классный’ in combination with the word ‘фельдшер’ had in the 19th century Russian Empire an additional meaning which is lost in the translation. This sentence caused difficulty in both translations. The Terpaks: “A man who was formerly a surgeon's assistant at a medical school resides here permanently and the settlers regard him as a first-rate doctor” [5. P. 185]. Reeve: “Here a college-trained doctor's assistant resided permanently” [6. P. 195].

The Russian word ‘фельдшер’ originated from the German Feldscher and was used to mean doctor's assistant, paramedic. ‘Классный фельдшер’ was a rank in the Imperial Russian Army. According to information from the Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary, military paramedics served in military medical institutions and in all military units, they belonged to the non-combatant lower ranks of the senior category. Class Feldschers were divided by specialty into medical, pharmacy and veterinary paramedics. In the Russian Empire Class Felschers were called medical assistants until 1871; they belonged to civilian officials of the military department and were promoted to ranks, but not higher than 10th class [9. P. 443]. The possibility to be promoted was connected with the Table of Ranks, where ranks were called ‘classes’/‘классы’. Thus the title ‘классный фельдшер’ was awarded to the graduates of military schools and gave them the opportunity, beginning at the bottom, to rise through their service up to the 10th grade/class. If we try to word Chekhov's sentence differently it might look as follows: a graduate of a 4-year medical military school was awarded with the rank of Class Feldscher and had the right to give paramedical help, he was considered to be first-rate by the inhabitants of the settlement.

Chekhov's pun, with its irony and humor is lost on the present-day reader both in Russia and abroad. The Russian respondents of different age-groups were unanimous in thinking that ‘классный’ was a colloquial adjective meaning ‘cool’ and ‘первоклассный’ means ‘first rate’. Vysokov's commentary does not have any explanations. In Semanova's commentary there are no explanations either, but she uses ‘классный фельдшер’ as a formal rank: “В рапорте начальника Корсаковского округа начальнику острова дана такая характеристика классному фельдшеру М.Е. Шубину: ‘Знает свое дело и аккуратно, добросовестно выполняет свои обязанности’ ” (Д/В, ф. 1133, оп. 1, ед. хр. 49, л. 89). О самоубийстве жены Шубина писал Чехову М. Дмитриев 27 сентября 1890 г.: “Свободного состояния жена классного фельдшера Прасковья Шубина, женщина 28-ми, молода, не дурна собою, приняла яду <...> отравилась” (ЦГАЛИ) [3. С. 875]. It is obvious that at the time when this commentary was written educated readership had no problem understanding the rank.

Conclusion

Commentary as an analytical genre of present-day journalism has made its appearance at the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century, but as a genre of literary criticism it has existed as long as written texts and translations exist. The Encyclopedic Guide *European Poetics from Antiquity to Enlightenment* [10] has enough evidence to prove that as soon as the main texts, such as Canonical Scripture, of modern culture made their appearance, commentary was used to explain the texts. Sometimes these explanations were considered to be even more important than the original texts since the eternal salvation of humans depended on correct understanding and interpretation. The Renaissance, especially in Italy, was rightfully called the Age of Criticism [10. P. 130]. There appeared hundreds of writings commenting Aristotle, Horatio, their translations and adaptations, to say nothing of the Scriptures. One could find anything from grammatical explications and philological commentary on syntax, similar paragraphs from other writings, and historical and mythological explanations of encyclopedic character. This tradition, which continues to be fruitful and in great demand today, is an essential part of Chekhovian philological studies.

We hope that the two commentaries suggested by the paper will make it easier to understand Chekhov's text in Russia and beyond its borders. Commentary is a very special genre of literary criticism and while the classical literary texts themselves should not be subject to change, correction, renewal and revision of commentaries are and should be a routine, part of regular philological work. Time flows and what was clear yesterday becomes vague and obscure today. The two Russian commentaries of *Sakhalin Island* contain rich and varied facts and data, the much needed explanations. This work is not complete since new generations of readers require new explications: commentary must go on.

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