

Gregor Malantschuk

3. September 1902 – 20. August 1978

If Gregor Malantschuk had been asked at “one minute before twelve” what he would do if he could live his life over again, he no doubt would have answered with a Malantschukian twinkle in his eye: “I would bid again – but on the same cause.” – And he promptly would have opened Volume X⁶ of Kierkegaard’s *Papirer* to entry B 121 (*Journals and Papers*, 6574) and read: “Give me my youth again, that twenty-eighth year when I began, and I will bid again – but on the same cause. Make the conditions even poorer, the toil and sufferings more abundant, and I will bid again – but on the same cause.”

Gregor Malantschuk’s stroke of twelve came most unexpectedly on August 20, 1978, at the peak and prime of serving his cause – the interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard’s thought to a world that has so misinterpreted it that even atheistic existentialists call Kierkegaard their father. If there is a Street of the Philosophers or a Dialectical Hall in Eternity, we can be rather sure that Søren Kierkegaard will not evade or repudiate Gregor Malantschuk as one of that abominable band of preachers and professors he detested and called cannibals because they lived cannibalistically on the sufferings and thoughts of others. Just as Kierkegaard saw himself as a humbly serving interpreter (tjenende Fortolker) of New Testament Christianity, so Gregor Malantschuk saw himself as a humbly serving interpreter of Kierkegaard’s thought. Kierkegaard scholars who came from all parts of the world to seek the help of the Nestor of Søren Kierkegaard interpreters were quick to perceive that he was also the most humble of any and all of them. Indeed, Gregor Malantschuk kept himself so scrupulously out of his teaching and writing about Kierkegaard that it is impossible even with a microscopic eye to riddle out one clue for a biographical sketch of his life.

The conditions of Gregor Malantschuk’s life could hardly have been poorer, the trials and sufferings more abundant. He was born September 3, 1902, to a farmer and country storekeeper in the village of Harbusiv in western Ukraine. World War I wiped out every vestige of that village, and when the

evacuated families returned to rebuild their lives typhus struck, killing both Ivan and Maria Malantschuk, the parents. When the future looked blackest for the eighteen year old Gregor, an old kindness by his father to a young neighbor who had emigrated to America bore unexpected fruit. Peter Zilinski sent money from Pennsylvania, enabling Gregor to study for and pass the university entrance exam. Driven or drawn toward philosophy, Gregor enrolled in Friedrich Wilhelm's University in Berlin in 1923 and became the proverbial penniless student. Poverty quickly incapacitated him physically and rendered him unable to study. With the help of the European Christian Fellowship Student Aid Program he was sent to the Danish island of Bornholm for rest and rehabilitation. Here he lived in the home of a bookstore owner and heard the name of Søren Kierkegaard for the first time from a farm mechanic repairing a threshing machine!

On his way back to Germany after living for two months on the manna of good cheer and good living which the Danes provide so graciously and superbly, Gregor Malantschuk was a guest in Copenhagen in the home of a friend of his Bornholm host. This encounter with Pastor and Mrs. Reeh proved to be another turning point in his life, for it was their encouragement and financial aid that enabled him to return to Berlin to complete his doctorate in philosophy (May 4, 1934) and to return again to Denmark, there to begin his full-time, life-time study and interpretation of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard.

It was Professor Eduard Geismar of the theology faculty of the University of Copenhagen who, shortly after our coming to Copenhagen in the fall of 1938, introduced us to his prized and cherished student, Gregor Malantschuk. The impoverished students from America were immediately drawn to this impoverished Ukrainian who was living in a garret room on Kjøbmagergade. After Professor Geismar's death in the spring of 1939, Gregor Malantschuk became our mentor as well as friend, and in the forty years we were privileged to know him there was no Kierke-Gordian knot he was not able to untie for us. His name on every volume of our translation of Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* is evidence of our debt to this beloved friend and collaborator.

Unlike ourselves and some other foreign students of Kierkegaard, Gregor Malantschuk did not impetuously rush into print. Not even his first private Study Circles, which he was not allowed by the government to conduct until 1939, were about Kierkegaard! Psychology, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche were

the topics he discussed with the first Study Circles that gathered informally in homes. Not until 1947 did he allow his *primary* interest in Kierkegaard to slip into a Study Circle on Dostoevsky, and shortly thereafter there were two lively Kierkegaard Study Circles. Later reduced to one Circle by the pressure of other activities, the membership has invariably been varied, ranging in age from eighteen to eighty, in education from high school to university graduates, in confession from believers to non-believers in the tenets of the Christian faith. One thing they have all had in common, however, is the desire to seek beyond the stereotypes of both the orthodox faith and the orthodox unfaith. Honoring this commonality of purpose, Gregor Malantschuk led the members of the Study Circle through a rigorous regime of studying the Kierkegaard text sentence by sentence within the context of the paragraph, the page, the chapter, the book, and the total authorship. By this time Malantschuk knew the total authorship so first-handly and first-handily that he could pluck related ideas from any and all of the published works and journals of Kierkegaard.

Yet even at this stage in his own relentless studies of Kierkegaard this humble scholar did not feel moved to publish. Not being a faculty member, he did not face the terror of "Publish or perish!" Having his doctoral dissertation on "*Die Kategorienfrage bei H. Lotze*" behind him, he was not seduced or compelled by the siren voices of competition to be the first in the field with a new treatise on Søren Kierkegaard. Two essays ten years apart appeared in the Danish journal of theology. His first book, *Indførelse i Søren Kierkegaards Forfatterskab*, was published in 1953 and was shortly thereafter translated into Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, and English. In this, his first published book, Gregor Malantschuk demonstrated to the reading public what he had been demonstrating for fourteen years in his Study Circles – the rare capacity to communicate difficult and abstract thought to unsophisticated as well as to sophisticated minds. Kierkegaard's humble serving interpreter performed an invaluable service for all non-Danes, who by now had heard the name of Kierkegaard in the most likely of places and did not know where to plunge into that complicated authorship with its ingenious plan and its heterogeneous pseudonyms.

Carefully worked articles and essays on Kierkegaard's concepts now appeared in Danish, German, Japanese, French, Italian, and English journals, the majority of them in *Kierkegaardiana*. Malantschuk's essay "Søren Kierke-

gaard – Poet or Pastor?“ was included in *Armed Neutrality* and *An Open Letter*, and his articles on the basic concepts in Kierkegaard are included in *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, all published by Indiana University Press. His elucidation of the concept of freedom in *The Concept of Anxiety* expanded into a small book published by the Kierkegaard Society. In joint authorship with Professor N. H. Sørensen he published another small book on Kierkegaard's battle with the Church.

Gregor Malantschuk's major works are *Dialektik og Eksistens hos Søren Kierkegaard*, published in 1968 (in English translation by Princeton Univ. Press, 1971, under the title *Kierkegaard's Thought*) and *Fra Individ til den Enkelte*, published in 1978. They are major and matchless in the depth and scope of their understanding of Kierkegaard's thought but equally major and matchless in their corrective of much of the amazingly prolific literature on Kierkegaard pouring off the presses of the world. One is almost tempted to say, "prolific and profligate," for much of this literature completely ignores the fact that Kierkegaard was a Christian and that his whole authorship had but one intention, to lead readers into a fullness of existence in a living relationship to the revealed God in the Christ of the Cross. Malantschuk did not divide Kierkegaard's Christianly upbuilding literature from the philosophic literature and scrap the former by the technique of ignoring it as if it did not exist.

While working steadily on Kierkegaard studies over the years, Malantschuk received various appointments: Instructor in Ukrainian, University of Copenhagen, 1951–61; Lecturer on Kierkegaard, University of Copenhagen, 1962–65; Research Fellow and Lecturer on Kierkegaard, University of Copenhagen 1966–73; International Advisory Board, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, 1977– . Among the awards received were: Swenson-Kierkegaard Fund Scholarship, 1952; Augustinus Fund Prize, 1959; G. E. C. Gad Fund Award, 1965.

In conversations with Gregor Malantschuk in the autumn of 1977, he repeatedly declared that the book he had just finished, which was to be his last, was his most important work. Quite early in his study of Kierkegaard, he was struck with the fact that Kierkegaard published his *Works of Love* on September 29, 1847 and "The Communist Manifesto" by Marx and Engels was published in February 1848. Two diametrically opposed solutions of man's crucial problems were presented at about the same time. Gregor Malantschuk, son of Ukraine, saw more clearly than the rest of us the opposition between the Christian and the Marxist dialectic. For Kierkegaard the mass



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man signified a step backward in the development of the individual. As Gregor Malantschuk told a London audience in May 1974, Kierkegaard believed “that the mass must first of all become single individuals who cannot be influenced by external powers or trends but must learn to obey the power that is higher than the party or the nation or another external authority. Accordingly it will not be manipulation of the masses and dividing men into classes that will lead men out of their confusion, but the single individuals who stand responsible before God.”

Acutely and painfully aware of the inevitable showdown between these two irreconcilable views of existence in the world, it is not to be wondered at that Gregor Malantschuk considered *Fra Individ til den Enkelte* to be his most important work. He did not know it would be his last farewell, but so it is – and a most fitting one.

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