

IN MEMORIAM  
ALEXANDER KAUN

To that circle of Slavic scholars in this country, always few in number but firmly united in the fellowship of learning, the sudden death of Professor Alexander Kaun on June 22, 1944 came as a sad shock and an irreparable loss. For the qualities of both his mind and spirit he endeared himself to all who knew him, and all who knew him will mourn his passing as that of a warm friend and a constant inspiration in the community of Slavic scholars.

Alexander Kaun was born in Russia on October 30 (November 11, new style) 1889 in a family that had long possessed traditions of learning — his grandfather had been president of a rabbinical college in the Province of Vilna, and his father was a teacher of Hebrew in private schools. The young Kaun began his early education in Russian private schools and later continued his studies (1905–1907) at the Free University of St. Petersburg. These were momentous years in Russia, years of popular agitation and uprisings against the oppressive measures of an autocratic government. The sympathies of the youthful Kaun led him to oppose oppression in any form, and he continued to oppose it for the remainder of his life. Like so many university students at that time, he took an active part in the revolutionary movement. But the movement was then crushed and driven underground by the government of Nicholas II. There was little hope for a revolutionary university student in the reactionary Russia of those days, and hence Alexander Kaun decided to come to America.

He first settled in Chicago, where for a time (1909–1916) he taught Hebrew in the Chicago Hebrew Institute. In the spring of 1913 he studied at the Lewis Institute, and in the fall of that year he entered the University of Chicago, from which he graduated in 1916 with the degree of Ph.B. In the summer of 1916 he gave lectures on Russian literature at the University of Chicago, and on January 20 of that year he married in Chicago the artist Valeria Graetchen Tracewell, of Columbus, Kansas.

While in Chicago Kaun began to exercise a literary talent of considerable merit. Between 1912 and 1917 he contributed a long series of book reviews, essays, and short stories to various publications, including the *Chicago Literary Monthly*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation*. Most of these efforts were on Russian themes. Three of his short stories, published by the *Boston Transcript*, were mentioned in

"The Best Short Stories for the Year 1915." During 1915–1916 he reviewed books on Russia and on general literary subjects for the weekly Literary Supplement of the *Chicago Evening Post*. And in 1917 he translated from the Russian the two volumes of A. Kornilov's *Modern Russian History*, supplementing this work with two chapters of his own on "The Reign of Nicholas II."

Because of the state of his health, Alexander Kaun left Chicago for California early in 1917. After lecturing on Russian literature in the summer of that year at the University of California, he was appointed an Assistant in Russian (1917–1918). Entering the Graduate Division of the University of California, he received an M.A. in Slavic Languages in 1918 and the degree of Ph.D. in 1923. His dissertation, *Leonid Andreyev, a Critical Study*, was published in 1924, and to this day the book has remained the best extensive treatment of Andreyev in English. For the remainder of his life Kaun continued as a member of the Department of Slavic Languages at the University of California, becoming an Instructor in 1919, Assistant Professor, 1923, Associate Professor, 1927, and Professor of Slavic Languages in 1943. From 1942 to his death, he was Chairman of the Department of Slavic Languages.

Professor Kaun traveled in Europe, mainly through Slavic countries, from May, 1932 to January, 1933. In Budapest he attended the Tenth World Congress of Pen Clubs as a representative of the Pacific Coast. He was a member of the Modern Language Association and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; he was also an honorary member of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London and an Honorary Advisor of the Roerich Museum of New York.

In 1931 Professor Kaun published a comprehensive study, largely biographical, entitled *Maxim Gorky and His Russia*. This book opened up entirely new vistas on Gorky's development as a man and artist, and in addition, it revealed a side of revolutionary Russia not commonly known or understood in America. This book is a piece of scholarly research of first-rate importance. One looked forward to similar studies from Professor Kaun, but from 1933 much of the time he could spare from his teaching was absorbed by the position he accepted as contributing editor of the quarterly publication, *Books Abroad*. In this capacity he reviewed scores of recent Russian books and books on Russia. In this difficult task he brought home to Americans who do not read Russian the wealth of excellent literature and scholarship being produced in Russia. With his wide and deep knowledge of the whole range of Russian culture, he was able to contribute

much that was original and important in his reviewing. He possessed a well developed literary taste and an independence of judgment that added spice and personality to his reviews. During the last few years of his life he became deeply interested in Soviet Russian literature and he made himself a master of the field. He planned a large history of Soviet Russian literature, but he lived only long enough to publish a portion of this extensive work, *Soviet Poets and Poetry* (1943), the excellence of which only makes one regret all the more that fate did not permit him to complete the larger project.

My own insight into the qualities of his mind and his exacting scholarly standards was furthered by my collaborating with him in editing *Slavic Studies* (1943) in honor of Professor George Rapall Noyes. With his scholarly aptitude he combined an artistic sense and talents rarely found in those who spend their lives teaching. There was something in him of the extremes commonly associated with the Russian temperament. His warm, generous nature, so attractively spontaneous in its expression of feeling, was also capable of dark melancholy and sadness.

Although he was warned by doctors in 1943 of the danger from a weak heart, he continued actively at work. The effort obviously taxed him too much. Returning home from a public lecture he gave (June 22, 1944) at San Francisco, he lay down in his room to rest. Coming into the room at six o'clock, Mrs. Kaun found him dead with his pencil in his hand. His colleagues cherish his memory as a man of courage and conviction and a delightful companion, and they pay tribute to his significant and enduring contributions to the field of Slavic studies.

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