

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STORY OF ARTIST JOHANN KÖLER (in the wake of Jaan Kross's Novel "The Third Range of Hills")

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My analysis of Jaan Kross's novel "The Third Range of Hills", about Johann Köler (1826–1899), prompted me to dig deeper into the biography of the founder of Estonian professional painting, a professor of the Imperial Academy of Art in Petersburg; with this goal in mind, I undertook to find new archival sources. The artist's archive is located in the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, which houses many curious and as yet unpublished documents about the life of this bright and original person¹. However, the most significant discovery was found in the manuscripts section of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, since it concerns the most important source of information about Köler's life: his autobiography².

For more than one hundred years, the text, published in two issues of the journal "Russkaya starina" («Русская старина») from 1882 and 1886³, were regarded as "original". Its first part contains information about Köler's childhood and youth (till 1846), while its second part relates the artist's years of study in Petersburg, travels abroad, and his activities until 1882. A rather serious source study problem lies, however, in the fact that only the second half

¹ For example, letters from Paris to P. N. Semenov regarding the so-called "Crimean" matter, see: ЕКМ. Fond 69. J. Köler. M 11:18; and others.

² See: Биография профессора г. Келлера // РО ИРЛИ. Ф. 265. Оп. 1. Ед. хр. 44. Л. 417–491 об.

³ See: Иван Петрович Кёлер, профессор живописи. 1826–1882 // Русская старина. 1882. № 6. С. 743–754; Иван Петрович Кёлер, профессор живописи. 1826–1886 // Русская старина. 1886. № 11. С. 333–378 (the second issue contains some duplicate material from the issue of four years prior). Passages from this autobiography were translated into Estonian. From here on, "Russkaya starina" will be abbreviated as "PC".

of the text is autobiographical in nature (that is, written in the first person), while the first half is a retelling written in the third person.

Relying solely on the “*Russkaya starina*” publication, no one among the many scholars of Köler’s work turned to the journal’s archive. As it turns out, the archive contains a transcript of stenographic notes taken from the artist’s oral narration in the presence and with the participation of the journal’s editor, M. I. Semevsky. As an employee of “*Russkaya starina*” attests, such a practice was typical for the journal: the stories of I. K. Aivazovsky, A. G. Rubinstein, F. G. Solntsev and many others were recorded with the help of a stenographer⁴.

And so the text has been found, which, although not written with the artist’s own hand, has much greater reason to be called the “original” first part of his autobiography. A book of autographs stored by the M. I. Semevsky Fund establishes that the exact dates of the recordings were March 2, 1881 and April 10, 1884. On the first occasion, Köler’s hand is fixed as: “1881, March 2nd,⁵ professor of historical and portrait painting Ivan Petrovich Köler (born 24th February, 1826) related his life to M. I. Semevsky”; on the second occasion: “Professor of historical and portrait painting, member of the Council of the Imperial Academy of Arts Ivan Petrovich Köler. Born in Livonia 24th February 1826. Saint-Petersburg, 10th April 1884”⁶. However, there were more than two stenographic sessions: a third part of the text published below is dated March 21; in Semevsky’s Album there is one more autograph from Köler from April 23, 1886⁷. The editor was not only present at the sessions, but also asked probing and clarifying questions (the text published below clearly follows a pattern of dialogue). Moreover, the transcripts were later reviewed, augmented with notes in the margins, and also edited, since there are several places in the journal’s version containing clarifications that are absent from the manuscript (they will be noted in my footnotes to the text). In addition, the article published in the journal is a shortened and adapted version of Köler’s story; one can only regret that the full version is not to be found.

⁴ See: Тимошук В. В. Михаил Иванович Семевский. Основатель исторического журнала «Русская старина»: Его жизнь и деятельность. 1837–1892. СПб., 1895. С. 132–133.

⁵ It is notable that this recording took place the day after the assassination of Emperor Alexander II, which apparently did not disrupt the stenographic session.

⁶ See: Семевский М. И. Знакомые. Книга автографов. 1880–1888. II // РО ИРЛИ. Архив М. И. Семевского. Ф. 274. Оп. 1. № 396. Л. 104 и 204. These notes are published in the book: Знакомые. Альбом М. И. Семевского, издателя-редактора исторического журнала «Русская старина». Книга автобиографических собственноручных заметок 850 лиц. — Воспоминания. — Стихотворения. — Эпиграммы. — Шутки. — Подписи. 1867–1888. СПб., 1888. С. 160, 206.

⁷ Ibid. С. 253.

The transcript of Köler's oral story captures the period up to 1864; that is, it fully covers the first part published in "Russkaya starina" as a retelling, as well as the beginning of the second part. The archival text differs significantly from the published one: it is longer and contains many curious details that the publication passes over. Unfortunately, starting from 1864, the oral telling either was not preserved or is housed in some unprocessed part of the "Russkaya starina" archives, inaccessible to scholars. However, even in its truncated state, the archival autobiography is an invaluable source. It contains the voice of the living Köler, fixing in text his *oral speech*, including repetitions and several characteristic mistakes and Estonianisms preserved in his speech despite his excellent fluency in Russian: *тех пор, как я запомнил себя* (себя помнил); *знал* (умел) *по-эстонски читать*; *учитель умер, а другого сейчас не было* (сразу не нашли); *устраивали театры* (спектакли), among others. Köler learned his Russian from listening to the speech of those around him. His admission that he "had forgotten" Russian grammar is reflected in the fact that his Russian speech was "oral" rather than "literary" in nature. Thus, his speech is characterized by such colloquialisms and vernacularisms as *оттудова*; *откудова*; *ндрав*; *яйцы*; *на узеньку дощечку*; *стекла были вспотевши*, among others.

The artist had an excellent memory; in describing his childhood and youth, his period of study at the Academy of Arts, and his travels abroad, he recalls a plethora of vivid and varied details. Some, though not nearly all, of the details of Köler's European travels had been established from his letters to N. P. Grot from Paris and Rome, discovered in the archives of the Academy of Science and published in Estonian in 1972⁸.

The story clearly displays the artist's personality, his honesty and straightforwardness, and his light humor. He graphically describes his first "artistic" experiences: creating the theatrical set decorations in the home of the painter Faber, where his leaves hung on the trees from threads; the first praise his art received: the cannon, the audience agreed, turned out well. Köler's assessment of people is impartial, he tries to speak truthfully and honestly, without embellishing himself or those around him.

⁸ Kiri Pariisist, kaks — Roomast: J. Köleri õpiaastaist / Publ. M. Lepik // Tartu Riikliku Ülikooli Kunstimuuseumi almanahh, III. Tartu, 1972. Lk 25–35. Further references to this publication are to «Письма», with page numbers indicated. The originals are in German. Publisher M. Lepik, comparing the letters to what was known about Köler's travels from "Russkaya starina", came to the conclusion that memory failed the artist in his old age, that he had forgotten details that were vividly described in the letters to Grot. The text reproduced below refutes this hypothesis. Vivid details that flesh out his story were simply excluded from the published version of the tale.

No less important, Köler's sincere tale reveals valuable details about the daily lives of Estonian peasants in the first half of the 19th century⁹. Köler speaks with deep respect about his parents, and although he regards the family situation as relatively prosperous ("we were not particularly poor"), he admits that their bread was stretched with chaff and they lived with strict frugality. It is impossible to remain unmoved when reading Köler's narrative about how his father, a half-blind peasant (in fact, a farmhand), tried to provide an education to at least one of his five sons, giving all of his savings, which were sufficient for only three years of study. The future professor and court artist "hammered away" at German lessons in the Viljandi district school, poorly understanding the lessons taught in a foreign language, but nonetheless trying not to fall behind, and even receiving a Russian Grammar as an award for his diligent study. At the age of 12 Köler began his career path: at first he worked in a manager's office, then as a housepainter in Cēsis (then called Wenden); from there he set off for Petersburg, selling his coat for travel money, with the hope of entering the Academy of Art. Then followed work under the "signboard-painting" master, attendance at evening classes at the academy, and his first successes in art. Only through his own hard work and persistence did Köler attain a higher education, career, and knowledge of foreign languages (French and Italian in addition to German and Russian).

Köler's story about his years of study in the Imperial Academy of Arts gives an impression of the prevailing customs of the time, as well as of the proud and independent character of the young artist, whose reluctance to curry favor and make requests was often to his own detriment. However, the honest Köler all the same admits that he could not have managed without protection in his own life. Once the Academy of Arts gave him a gold medal, not through the decision of the Council (as was usually done), but through the direct order of the president, daughter of the Emperor Nicholas I, Grand Princess Maria Nikolaevna, to whom the artist became known in a "domestic" fashion — through the royal physician. Many years later, Professor Köler, not without bitterness, reminded his colleague, Rector of the Academy of Arts F. Jordan, how he had been unfairly overlooked by the Academy Council when they distributed the medals, and how the Grand Princess had restored justice.

⁹ To the editor of "Russkaya starina", M. I. Semevsky (1837–1892), a historian and social activist, these details were of great interest both due to his involvement in the Head Committee of the Rural Class, and to his personal conviction that peasants in the Russian empire were disadvantaged and their situation must be improved. Semevsky clearly pressed Köler with his questions to provide a detailed characterization of peasant life.

The artist's acquaintance with Maria Nikolaevna, arising in absentia and not through the initiative of the then-student, played a significant role in his life. In order to be noticed at court and become a court artist — drawing teacher to the royal daughters, as Köler was in the 1860s — it was helpful to have “acquaintances”. “Entrance” into court life was granted to Köler not only by his talent and successes in art, but also through his acquaintance with the royal doctors (K. Hartman and P. Karell); his friend, the future academic Y. K. Grot, may also have played a role, as he was teacher to the Grand Prince in the 1850s.

Köler undertook his travels abroad on his own funds, since the Council of the Academy of Arts denied him his right to a travel grant for a trip to Italy. The young artist spent 1857–1862 abroad: he traveled around Germany, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, France, and Italy, living mostly in Rome¹⁰. Köler, a keen observer of manners, makes fun of Russians (for their work on “perhaps”), English (for their excessive touristic curiosity), Italians (for uncleanliness and untidiness), and especially Germans (for their miserliness, vulgarity, and narrow-mindedness). However, his critical views never interfered with his high esteem for everything good and interesting that he encountered, whether people or a work of art. His friendship with A. von Bock was not accidental, and not without reason did Köler keep in closest contact with Germans while in Rome. This was part of his fully deliberate way of life, accurately noted by Jaan Kross in “The Third Range of Hills”. Recalling his time in Europe, the artist more than once mentioned his striving to learn something new (for example, watercolor techniques); hence his desire to live among German artists and intellectuals. He was preoccupied with the constant improvement of his education and the widening of his artistic horizons. Although Köler was not a fan of the renowned German artists Overbeck and Cornelius, he strove nonetheless to acquaint himself with styles of brushwork other than those accepted in the Academy in Petersburg. And there was yet another motive for his contact with the Germans: his determination to prove to himself that he, an Estonian “bumpkin”, was no worse (and in some things better and more successful) than the Germans considered gentlemen in his country.

Speaking about himself, Köler constantly emphasizes his belonging to the Estonian people, and is proud of his “rustic” origin. The artist's tale agrees fully with the central ideas of Kross's “The Third Range of Hills”: Köler's life is the best evidence that the downtrodden Estonian people are capable of rising to

¹⁰ For more information about Köler's time in Italy and about his personality, see: *Киселева Л. Эстонец в Италии (Путешествие художника Й. Келера) // Europa Orientalis, № 14: «Беспокойные Музы»: к истории русско-итальянских отношений XVIII–XX вв.: В 2 т. Салерно, 2011. Т. 1. С. 133–149.*

the heights of culture. However, Kross's Köler reflects constantly on whether he is betraying his humiliated people, since he is busy with art and separate from daily peasant life and the suffering of his people, while the real Köler, as evidenced by the autobiographical story printed below, was not burdened by such reflections. The autobiographical story is imbued with an inner sense that his life — the life of a professor and member of the Council of the Imperial Academy of Arts, of a court artist famous throughout Europe — demonstrated the hidden opportunities available to his people. As to physical difficulty and deprivation, there was enough of that along his way.

Kross's Köler is a passionate and happy lover, with a beautiful, young beloved (invented by the author). The autobiographical tale of the real Köler demonstrates his interest in the fairer sex, but also his resistance against his passions: neither others' matrimonial claims, nor his own passions developed into any adventures in love — everything in his life was dedicated to art and indefatigable work.

In any case, the text published herein will serve as an important source both for the study of the biography of the father of Estonian painting, and for the analysis of the version of Köler depicted by Jaan Kross in "The Third Range of Hills".

Since this text is occupied not with Köler's autograph, but with the transcript of the stenographic notes made by a technical worker, the reproduction of all its orthographic and punctuation details is not expedient. Stenographers often make orthographical mistakes, are inconsistent in their use of upper- and lower-case letters (for example, in the names of months), in the spelling of surnames¹¹, and in the placement of punctuation. Such errors in the text have been corrected without special mention. Distorted forms of proper nouns have been preserved to convey the character of the manuscript and are corrected in the footnote commentary.

¹¹ Most often, the artist's last name is written by the stenographer as «Келлер». The artist's surname was actually spelled in various ways: Кёлер, Келер, Келлер. We have chosen the version used by the artist himself in his autograph (see footnote 7).