

Factuality and Fictionality in A. Adamovich's *Khatyn Story* and *Out Of Flames* and J. Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*

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Abstract

*The essay addresses the traumas of World War II in the books *The Painted Bird* by the Polish-born American writer J. Kosinski and *Khatyn Story* by the Belarusian writer A. Adamovich. These works are largely based on the authors' wartime and Holocaust experiences, but they are different in their depiction of post-traumatic consciousness, especially because the war is seen through the eyes of an adolescent in his formative years. Of special interest is the connection between the real and the imaginary, the factual and the fictional, which determines the genre characteristics of the books.*

Keywords: fact, fiction, non-fiction, genre, Second World War, the Holocaust, Belarus, Poland.

Introduction

The paper will explore the books *Khatyn Story* (1977) and *I am from a Burning Village* (*Out of Flames*, 1977, another translation of the title: *Out of the Fire*) by the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich (the latter co-authored with Y. Bryl and U. Kalesnik) and *The Painted Bird* (1965) by the Polish-born American writer Jerzy Kosinski. The books are landmarks in World War II literature. They draw on the dramatic wartime experience of their authors and show the war through a teenager's eyes, reconstructing the greatest tragedy of the 20th century. The fictional representation of the war ordeal, based on the real facts of life under

the Nazis on the territory of the “bloodlands” (T. Snyder’s term¹), brought the writers immediate popularity, but also aroused strong criticism both in and outside their countries as their books challenged the established tradition of dealing with the theme of the war. The paper will discuss the interpretation of the war by the writers belonging to different cultures, having a different world outlook and different personal histories, which is evident, among other things, in their choice of genre and literary techniques.

The body of critical evaluation of the literary heritage of Adamovich and Kosinski is impressive but contradictory, as both writers challenged not only the literary canon but also socially accepted views and attitudes. After graduating from the University of Łódź and studying at Moscow State University, Kosinski emigrated to the USA where he soon became a famous writer and public figure. Commenting on his role of a prophet, Z. Kolbuszewska writes, “[t]he author creates the persona of a man who has experienced everything in every dimension of human life – ‘Jerzy Kosinski’” (73). He raised his voice against censorship in the communist bloc and actively fought against repressions in Eastern Europe, especially when he was elected President of the US Chapter of the PEN Club. One of the writers whom he sought to release was Vaclav Havel. For reasons which are not yet quite clear, he committed suicide on the Polish Constitution Day, May 3, 1991. His widow, Ms. Katherina von Fraunhofer-Kosinski, was sure that he chose the day “very deliberately; he was gratified and proud that Poland and America, the two countries he called home, have the two oldest constitutions in the world” (7).

His relationship with Poland was complicated. He had been subjected to slanderous attacks in communist Poland, and his books were banned, *The Painted Bird* being regarded as a malicious anti-Polish book discrediting the country. Kosinski is known to have been making a myth of his life, and a number of critics viewed *The Painted Bird* as autobiographical fiction, thus misreading the book and approaching it from a purely ideological perspective (M. Błażejczyk, K. Zbyszewski, W. Górnicki, E. Morawiec, etc.). However, in the late 1980s Kosinski became an iconic figure, an intellectual who had survived both the Holocaust and the communist regime to become a major voice of the fighters for a free and democratic Poland, and the tone of critical reviews changed dramatically. Henry Dasko (Henryk Dasko), Kosinski’s close friend, observed that the “substitution of the literary for the real characterized Kosinski’s reception in Poland” (704), which is evident in the heated discussion of J. Siedlecka’s book *The Black Bird* (1994). The journalist showed that the events in *The Painted Bird* had not really happened in Kosinski’s life. However, it would be not quite correct to interpret the book from the point of factuality. According to E. Kasperski, the writer tried “intended, invented autobiographism, not necessarily reflecting reality” (57) with the aim “to defictionalize literary fiction and to create the illusion of verism and the so-called personal documentary” (59). Kosinski himself warned that the book should not be read as autobiographical, because this would limit the scope of vision, reducing it to “a single life”, while his intention is different: “A fictional life... forces the reader to contribute: he does not simply compare; he actually enters a fictional role, expanding it in terms of his own experience, his own creative and imaginative powers” (xiv).

The reception of the book in the USA was just as ambivalent. James Park Sloan’s biography of Kosinski (1996) was biased and focused on negative aspects, while major literary critics like Jonathan Yardley praised the writer highly. The problem of this controversy

may be that, as Welch D. Everman writes, “Kosinski is a bothersome writer – disturbing, upsetting, unconventional, not only in terms of subject matter but in formal terms as well” (113). *The Painted Bird* raised the question of the relationship between fact and fiction, history and memory, historical event and its imaginative representation, which is especially important in the discussion of Holocaust literature as the survivors’ memories of the war were so appalling as to be beyond description. In her discussion of the novel, Sara R. Horowitz points out that “the purported confluence of the author’s own childhood experiences and the novel’s boy protagonist’s fictional experiences helped to ensure the book a place in what has evolved into a ‘canon’ of Holocaust writing” (8). On the other hand, Lawrence L. Langer warns: “Although fictionalized historical material may alienate the reader, an adequately imagined *invented* center of consciousness can draw him against his will into the net of atrocity, where his own sense of normal reality struggles to escape from the lure” (423). The problem lies in the status of books like *The Painted Bird*: is it at all possible to represent actual events, or those witnessed by the author, not only truthfully, but also artistically keeping the delicate balance between extratextual reality and narrative strategies? The international reception of the book shows polarized attitudes, which are understandable in view of the short historical distance that has elapsed since the end of the war, when the Holocaust is still a living memory.

In spite of Kosinski’s status in the West, his name is still little known in post-Soviet countries. The first translation into Russian of the novel *Being There* was made in 1997 by the poet, music critic and publisher Ilya Kormiltsev, who later translated *Steps*, *The Devil Tree* and Kosinski’s *Afterword to The Painted Bird* and published an essay about Kosinski’s life and myth (1999). The first publication about Kosinski in Belarus, by the author of this paper, dates back to 1998, in the book “100 US Writers” (Minsk). So far there has been only one PhD dissertation on Kosinski’s work in the Newly Independent States (former USSR) (E. Stulova, 2003).

Some of the issues that have been dealt with in connection with Kosinski are also relevant for the study of Ales Adamovich. Langer’s term *the literature of atrocity* may be also applied, with some reservations, to Adamovich’s writing. The protagonist of *Khatyn Story* survives the death of his mother and sisters, fellow partisans, the destruction of nearby villages, and narrowly escapes death in the village of Perekhody, which was burnt with all its inhabitants. The writer determined the genre of his books as an “account from the historical event locality” (Adamovich, “Poshuki” 5)². Most of the critics in the USSR and post-Soviet states explore his novels within the limits of the “war novel” and define them as documentary/autobiographical/confessional (L. Lazarev, L. Sin’kova, T. Tarasava). T. Tarasava points to “a tendency in contemporary autobiographical prose (both national and foreign) towards a writer’s self-exposure and self-revelation through intertext, meta-textual inclusions and epistles” (6), of which Adamovich is an example. M. Tychyna calls *Khatyn Story* and *Chasteniers*, which along with *I am from a Burning Village* form a kind of sequence, “documentary imaginative books” (24). A. Belski explains that the books are a “documentary imaginative exploration of the brutal nature of fascism, a stern, cruel and painful truth of the war, moral degradation of a human in the conditions of obscurantism, evil and hatred” (20). The approach of Belarusian scholars falls into Leonora Flis’s

description of the documentary novel, which “speaks of real people and real places, yet it is a dual narrative, namely, a narrative characterized by its adherence to novelistic strategies, associated with nonfictional modes of discourse” (82).

Like Kosinski’s, Adamovich’s life was full of dramatic events. Though he became a famous novelist, a distinguished literary scholar, and a member of the USSR Supreme Soviet during the years of perestroika, he was forced to leave Belarus for his criticism of the Belarusian *nomenklatura*, which he held responsible for their inefficiency and lies about the Chernobyl disaster, prior to which he had had to abandon his position as a professor at the Moscow Lomonosov State University for refusing to sign a letter condemning Y. Daniel and A. Sinyavski. He died of a heart attack after making a fiery speech in court in defence of Writers’ Union property that was being confiscated (January 26, 1994). He had a pronounced anti-totalitarian stance and was known as the Belarusian Havel, displaying a unique example of morality in politics. His main theme was World War II and the human predicament, and his treatment of the theme of war was contrary to the ostentatious stories of courage and valour that made up much of Soviet literature about the Great Patriotic War. His *Khatyn Story* was severely censored, and the complete text was published only much later. E. Klimov’s film *Come and See*, based on the book, was made only after an interval of over ten years, and it was released only after it had been supported by P. Masherov, a former partisan, Hero of the Soviet Union and First Secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus; it was one the greatest films about the tragic events of WW II. Adamovich’s truth about the war was different from what Soviet ideologists allowed. Both the writer and the film director refused to introduce changes that the censors had insisted upon. The writer S. Bukchin says, “[i]n him some kind of thoroughness and peasant’s grip were combined with idealism; the romantic spirit lived side by side with a sober appreciation of the situation... And above all was the irrepressible spirit that called for self-expression, freedom of life and creative work” (2).

The historical background for both books is World War II, which was called the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) in the Soviet Union. It occupies a very special place in the arts and literature of Eastern Europe. WW II brought severe damage and enormous casualties to Belarus, which lost over a quarter of its population. The atrocities of the Nazis provoked a strong partisan movement, which was met with enormously cruel retaliation. Frank Biess points out that “Wehrmacht units committed countless massacres against Soviet civilians including women and children. These murderous practices occurred under the guise of ‘antipartisan’ warfare and were part of the systematic economic exploitation of the occupied territories” (3). 628 villages were burnt with their inhabitants. One of them was Khatyn, only 40 miles away from the capital city Minsk, now a national memorial to commemorate all those Belarusians who were killed during the war³. It becomes the destination of the pilgrimage of former partisans in Adamovich’s book.

Human suffering and the wartime trauma determined not only national mythology, but also people’s mentality. The memory of the war is central in the identity construction of the Belarusian people, as the war was the most painful event in the country’s history and led to the internalization of the traumatic past. Though there still remain many gaps concerning the truth about the war in Belarusian historiography and literature, one thing is recognized by all scholars: “The ethos of the war in Belarus became a basis for constructing

the history of the nation – and its national identity” (Gapova 647). Swedish historian Per Anders Rudling reiterates E. Gapova’s conclusion, “[w]artime suffering remains an important identity marker, shared by both the current regime and the opposition alike” (45).

Poland, Belarus’s Western neighbor, also suffered terrible losses with about 6 million people dead, almost half of them Jews, Auschwitz becoming a symbol of the Holocaust. The large-scale Polish resistance movement, the unprecedented heroism of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and the drama of the August 1944 Warsaw uprising are among the phenomena that shaped 20th-century Polish history and accounted for the concept of martyrdom that features so prominently in the national mentality. Later the war’s trauma was intensified by the post-war totalitarian regime and the ideological division in Polish society that led to social unrest and various instances of resistance to the communist rule.

The historical trauma that determined the life of the war generation helps to understand what happens to a human during the events of wartime, showing both the potential and mechanism of destroying the humane in human nature. The war experience is appallingly shocking. Both Adamovich and Kosinski were quite young at the time of the war: Kosinski was six years old when the war started, and Adamovich was thirteen. Kosinski, born into a Jewish family, survived the war under a false identity in a remote Polish village, and Adamovich along with his relatives took part in partisan warfare. Human memory keeps revisiting the most dramatic events, and when they became writers both Adamovich and Kosinski wrote their first novels about the war ordeal. US scholar Nina Tumarkin maintains that the war “... like all wars, revealed the extremes of human behavior – bravery, self-sacrifice, sadism, treachery, cowardice” (26). Adamovich and Kosinski denounced the war and the aggression, violence and devastation it brings, though their purpose was different. Like his fellow writers who belonged to the so-called “lieutenants’ prose”,⁴ the Belarusian writer focuses on the human spirit, which manages to overcome enormous suffering, and the everyday survival routine. The book *Out of Flames* is a collection of oral histories of over 300 survivors of the massacres in Belarusian villages and towns during the war that Adamovich and his colleagues had been gathering for years, moving from place to place across the whole country. Deming Brown is of the opinion that the purpose of the writers was “to augment and correct the record by providing largely eyewitness accounts of the facts about military events and wartime conditions that have heretofore been kept secret or distorted by official myth” (393). Having been a witness and participant of the most tragic episodes of the war in Belarus, Adamovich saw his mission in questioning Soviet war mythology. He focuses not so much on the heroism of the people (as was the Soviet tradition), but on the people’s attempts to retain their humanity in inhuman conditions. The writer “exploded the war cult’s “Glory to our partisans!” myth” (Tumarkin, 40), showed that the two totalitarian leaders did each other’s work, and focused on an individual who is thrown into the disaster of the war and is called upon to make a moral choice that will determine his life. In one of his last stories, *Venus*, Adamovich describes the destruction of the village, which had given shelter to the partisans, by an NKVD⁵ squad.

Kosinski’s novel addresses dehumanization caused by war, ignorance, superstition, moral corruption and the psychological effects of violence and cruelty on a Holocaust survivor. The writer attempts to provide an insight into the feelings of a terrified boy who is lost and alienated in a godforsaken Polish village.

According to M. J. Martínez-Alfaro, “[t]here are topics which, because of their very nature, demand from the novelist a different kind of imaginative and ethical involvement” (154). In the case of the two writers examined here, their “imaginative and ethical involvement” found its expression, among other things, in the choice of the protagonist – a child or a boy in his teens. Remembering the massacre in the village of Beraznyaki, an uneducated old peasant woman in *Out of Flames* laments:

“Well, one son who is at the front, well, he will be killed, but he has been fighting, hasn’t he? But a poor small child? A boy, he, poor thing, had never been anywhere. But they beat him... This small child is running – why? He is so small, he is a child, running like an apple... But they kept beating him so hard – that he saw stars before his eyes!..

What was this, what did they have in their hearts – I don’t know.

They were beasts, not people.

They were not people, they were beasts.” (Adamovich, *Ya z vognennai* 199)

The writers turned the war ordeal into a literary act. Though these texts are works of fiction, they strike the reader with an exceptional power of authenticity as they are based on the memory of the war. According to Daniil Granin, an outstanding Russian writer and WW II veteran, “a human’s personality is first of all memory. There can be no personality without memory” (1). Memory is what determines the protagonists’ attitudes and behavior in the face of the horrors of the war where they turned out to be not only witnesses but also agents of history – in spite of their young age.

The figure of the adolescent protagonist was chosen by the authors intentionally – not only because they were minors themselves when the war started, but also because the child helps readers to see the tragedy of the human predicament more clearly. The *Times* literary critic Tom Gatti points out that the child narrator is “a device that offers a level of emotional and imaginative directness unavailable to the baggage-laden adult” (14). The world seen from his perspective looks larger than life, but this is exactly what contributes to the dramatic nature of the war child’s mindset. This is a formative age, and seeing the violent struggle between good and evil, which he understands in a straightforward way, the adolescent comes to discover the appalling darkness of the human heart.

In the “Afterword” to the second edition of *The Painted Bird* Kosinski wrote that “man would be portrayed in his most vulnerable state, as a child, and society in its most deadly form, in a state of war” (xii). The child can hardly defend itself; it is threatened and bewildered by what it sees around it, the violence and cruelty towards those who are weak and helpless. Kosinski chooses as his protagonist a displaced, alienated boy who travels the roads of the war-torn land with no one to guide or protect him from injustice and pain. And that is why the writer says: “I hoped the confrontation between the defenseless individual and overpowering society, between the child and war, would represent the essential anti-human condition” (xii). Young as they are, the boys in the novels are active performers, directly involved in the events that are going to change not only their lives but also the world around them. They are shown as actors of history, and the “innocent-eye point-of-view narration” as Z. Kolbuszewska calls it (75) is most effective in problematizing the issue of the nature of experience. This knowledge of good and evil acquired so early is

devastating, and the protagonists go through terrible pain and moral anguish before they can resume an ordinary life in the first post-WW II years. The writers explore how the tragic ordeal of the war affects young people who can hardly come to terms with the world and themselves.

Kosinski's nameless protagonist's heart is hardened like rock. As a result of the shock the Child experiences at the hands of the superstitious and illiterate peasants he loses his power of speech; he no longer can, or is no longer willing to, communicate with people, thus becoming isolated from the external world. S. Kolář insightfully writes that "*The Painted Bird* is a construction of the author's experience of the loneliness of a child in wartime, or, in other words, of his displacement from any kind of home" (44). He becomes as cruel as his torturers, but the problem, which aroused a wave of negative responses in Poland, is that they are the frightened miserable peasants from the villages where he tries to save his life during the Holocaust. They refuse to understand this strange Gypsy-looking boy who speaks literary Polish and tells "funny" stories. To them, he represents an alien world, which symbolizes negativity and menace. They refuse to accept him; there is no room for him in their world. All his attempts to become closer to them, to belong, end in disaster. It is impossible for him to be integrated into their world. It is only natural that after the dramatic scene in the church, when the angry peasants nearly drown him in filth, he should fall into silence. Sara R. Horowitz maintains that "[M]uteness instantiates a consistent movement of displacement – geographic, historical, linguistic, symbolic – that characterizes both the event and its subsequent reflections and depictions" (38). The trope of muteness emphasizes the impossibility of communication in a world shattered by violence and hatred: the trauma is too deep. Even a reunion with his family, which is hopelessly trying to reconnect him with his home, will not bring back his speech. Years will pass before something breaks through and he will feel an urge to speak, pouring out his heart to someone anonymous on the phone. In a way, he is reborn into a new identity, and this gives hope that he will begin a new life:

"I felt an overpowering desire to speak.

I opened my mouth and strained. Sounds crawled up my throat. Tense and concentrated I started to arrange them into syllables and words. [...] The voice lost in a faraway village church had found me again and filled the whole room. I spoke loudly and incessantly like the peasants and then like the city folk, as fast as I could, enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning, as wet snow is heavy with water, confirming to myself again and again that speech was now mine and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony." (234)

Bernhard Malkmus makes an interesting observation, claiming that "[t]he intermeshing between the voices of the traumatized boy and the post-traumatic adult suggests a sense of composed selfhood that perpetually deconstructs itself" (94). The boy reinvents his identity; he has been trying to invent different identities that are imposed on him, but none has proved adequate. Paul Lilly observes that "by channeling the emotional pain he suffered as a child through the eyes of the boy, Kosinski forces the reader to make painful inferences" (194). The novel's open ending is intentional, as the reader knows neither who the boy is

speaking to, nor what he is saying. He saw so much cruelty and injustice that he became crippled by his wartime experience. Will he be able to start all over again?

Flyora is also physically affected: he loses his hearing in a battle, and there is a deeper meaning to this: he does not want to hear the sounds of the war and, above all, the news that his mother and sisters were killed: “I could hear no shooting, no human voice – dead silence that is falling into an invisible abyss (but it is nearby)” (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 183). This silence is like that of Andrei Bolkonski in L. Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, when he suddenly realizes that death is around the corner. It is an exceptional experience for an adolescent, and Flyora is transformed; after the terrible shock, he comes to realize that if he has remained alive it is not in vain. With effort, he regains his hearing when he understands that not only his, but also his beloved Glasha’s life depends on his ability to get his bearings and find a way out to the partisans. Later he will lose his sight, keeping in his mind’s eye only the sight of the burnt village of Perekhody. It will be forever connected with the sun, the infinity of the universe, and the brevity of human life. It will acquire mythological powers, adding a deep existentialist meaning to what the boy has gone through. The last thing which the people in the barn are going to see before being burnt alive is “the stripes of the sun, the pillars of light falling down.” (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 132) Similarly, waiting for the attack, the exhausted Flyora is looking at the bright sun thinking of what might happen in a couple of minutes:

Even the second of death is the same eternity as a million years ago. And a live sun is running its way above our heads; it has gone the bigger part of its semi-circle while we have been rolling up our millstone. It has been rolled up a lot of times before us... We shall walk around the forest a few more times before the sun sets down behind the smoky hills. And what then? It is not known what will happen then.” (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 192)

The colours of the bright sun and the burning barn, as well as the screaming of the women and children locked inside it, will keep coming back in his dreams, never allowing him to forget what happened in the village. Flyora will never be the same again, constantly returning to that day in his memory.

Similarly, the sun looks down indifferently on the sufferings of the Child, who is panicky as he cannot get out of the river into which he was thrown by a group of peasants, who wanted to entertain themselves at the cost of his life. He is trying hard to find a force that could save him, a God, something to believe in and rely on, but “[t]he sun was slowly setting. Every time the bladder turned, the sun shone straight into my eyes and its dazzling reflections danced on the shimmering surface. It grew chilly and the wind became more turbulent” (Kosinski 27). The emotionless registration of the changes in nature runs contrary to the boy’s extreme situation, intensifying the feeling of universal loneliness; this is precisely Kosinski’s goal, as he wants to show the universality of violence in human history. After the terrible scene when the jealous miller blinded the young ploughboy in front of the miller’s wife and the Child, the seven year-old boy comes to the dramatic conclusion that “[t]he world seemed to be pretty much the same everywhere, and even though people

differed from one another, just as animals and trees did, one should know fairly well what they looked like after seeing them for years” (Kosinski 40).

The victimized Child is made to look into the darkness of the human heart to learn of the fragility of humaneness in a world that is based on the oppositions “strength” – “weakness”, “we” – “they”, “superior” – “inferior”, a world where difference, be it race, ethnicity, gender, or whatever, is a constant source of danger. He understands that the only thing that matters is power. Everything and everyone that looks suspicious, dangerous and undesirable does not have a chance to survive, because those in positions of power will not tolerate difference. And it makes no difference if power is represented by the Germans or by illiterate peasants who represent the majority. It is significant that the few characters who are sympathetic to the Child, helping him in his ordeal, also belong to the suspicious Other, full of their own superstitions, prejudice and challenging attitudes. They live in forests, marshes or huts at the back of the village – away from the local people who are afraid of them but would not dare to do harm to them, believing that they possess the so-called “magic spells.” It should be noted that in spite of references to time (WW II) and setting (Eastern Poland), the novel acquires a universal ring: it could be the Middle Ages or it may be the future in any part of the world where people are subjugated and live in poverty, misery and hopelessness. Primeval instincts take over civilizational norms.

Persistent questioning of moral values is often manifested through details that refer to the world of nature – which is not only the background of the events in the protagonists’ lives, but also presents a powerful metaphor of the opposition of “war” vs. “peace”, “acceptance” vs. “rejection”, “harmony” vs. “chaos”. From early childhood, children take a special interest in animals, learning about the world by observing animals in different situations. Both Kosinski and Adamovich make use of this childish attitude, which helps us to understand how the innocent eye begins to see evil. Near the beginning of *The Painted Bird* there is a scene describing a hawk (a symbol of aggression) attacking a pigeon (a symbol of peace):

The black ball fell like a stone on the flock. Only the pigeon had no place to hide. Before he even had time to spread its wings, a powerful bird with a sharp hooked beak pinned him to the ground and struck at him. The pigeon’s feathers were speckled with blood. Marta came running out of the hut, brandishing a stick, but the hawk flew off smoothly, carrying in its beak the limp body of the pigeon. (Kosinski 6)

This scene is obviously an overture to what the novel will be about. The animals fall prey to human cruelty, aggression and violence – which are inevitable when one group of people is at war with another: a red squirrel burnt by peasant boys, rats eating one another, birds killing a bird of a different feather... The Child will go through terrible suffering; in his attempt to survive he is struggling to belong, not to be an outcast, but this is not to be, because he is the painted bird that is destined to be killed by the flock which cannot recognize their like in the brightly painted creature.

Most of the events in Adamovich’s book take place in the woods. The writer is very careful about the description of the areas where Flyora finds himself – they are places connected with Adamovich’s partisan past. Local people had to move to the marshes to save

their lives, taking with them their domestic animals and cattle. Scenes with animals also contribute to the book's message, creating a metaphorical plane. Aggression and violence are associated with dogs. During the punitive operation in the village of Perekhody, two sheepdogs of the punitive squad bite each other to death, and the soldiers cannot do anything about it; the dogs are no longer under control. The taste of blood is overpowering.

On the other hand, cows are domestic animals that symbolize peace, everyday routine and life itself. Flyora and his fellow partisan are taking a cow to the partisan camp to save the women and children from hunger, but the cow is killed on the way. It is a victim of war, and Flyora's reaction is intense:

A host of bullets squelched and struck the body of the cow. It looked as if it swallowed them and seemed to hiccup, so big and awkward... There sparkled a rocket ... and suddenly I noticed white streamlets of milk on the cow's udder. Don't know why but these white streamlets that seemed to be asking for forgiveness greatly affected me. I started to cry, no, I shouted in silence as if I had been deadly hurt... There lived in me such boundless childish resentment against the whole world that I could defend myself only by wishing that it could be even worse, that it could be terribly bad and that I could die – to the joy or sorrow of all of them. (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 113)

At this dramatic moment Flyora has his childish memories of his dead mother, his twin sisters, the cow and the milk that was a source of life for the children in the poverty-stricken village.

There is an unusual animal that Flyora's eye follows during the whole scene of the massacre – a monkey on the shoulder of the German officer who was responsible for the burning of the people. This is a very powerful detail in the novel. The officer seemed to be unaware of the criminality of what he and his squad were doing. To him the village people were a dangerous Other, they were inferiors, and their death did not arouse any feelings in him, while the monkey, whom he was gently stroking and who had seen the burning of the barn, "looked sad" (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 134). It is this difference between the responses of humans and animals that is of consequence for both Kosinski and Adamovich.

One might expect that seeing the horrors of the war and participating in the tragic events can make an adolescent de-sensitized; however, instead, awareness of injustice and cruelty is sharpened. The environment of the boys in the novels is different, and this explains the difference in their behavior. Kosinski's boy is always lonely; he feels totally different and alienated from the local people who cannot understand him and treat him as one who can bring them disaster. There is endless hatred and humiliation. It prevents him from acquiring an identity, and he is constantly trying to adapt to the changes in the environment. The Child is tormented by his otherness, realizing that in cataclysmic situations like his only the stronger people survive, and the appeal of force and violence that can ensure survival works its way into his soul, resulting in his transformation from a victim into a victimizer who becomes as cruel as his tormentors, reasserting himself through aggression. The Nameless One sees only injustice and cruelty and, little by little, turns immune to other people's anguish, which is reflected in uncontrollable outbursts of violence.

Flyora's experience is different. He does not allow himself to become locked into his pain. People's empathy, caring and his feeling of duty towards others enable Flyora keep

his dignity and overcome his hatred and wish to destroy, thus saving his soul. Camilla Stein, the editor of the English translation of Adamovich's *Khatyn*, sees one of the greatest merits of the book in the fact that "[t]he novel is composed from a standpoint of a young person, and youth is daring, youth is dashing, youth falls in love and romanticizes everything, even war. Youth is courageous, youth is bright, and youth is ever present on *Khatyn*'s pages. Youth is the future, and the reason why Ales Adamovich did the work – *Khatyn* is written for the next generation to stand strong." It is the mature narrator who remembers the traumatic experience of the burning of Khatyn; Flyora had to live for those who would never rise to life – so that they would not be forgotten and that their testimony would be heard through him. After all the disasters he had gone through, he understood one important thing: "Then I also understood that one may be afraid of one's own hatred which was like pain that had turned into stone: a person begins to distance it, to hold it in check, keep it inside oneself expecting and getting afraid of the moment when it is no longer possible to keep it" (Adamovich, *Khatynskaya* 154).

There are certain similarities in the structure of the books. Highlighting the most dramatic events in the life of the protagonists, they do not follow a logical course; instead they present a mosaic of episodes that look more like vignettes. Adamovich permeates his narration with a number of oral histories of the war years that he had been collecting, as well as various documents referring to the war period, authenticating his narrator's voice. It adds several layers of meaning to the book, making it speak for all those millions who lost their lives in the flames of the war. He embeds the narration with various facts of the Nazi atrocities in Belarus, reports of the punitive squads, philosophical discussions with Flyora's friend Barys Bokiý concerning the lessons of history, and essayistic reflections drawing parallels between the past and the political situation in the world at the time when the book was being written – including the massacre at My Lai in Vietnam, which immediately recalled the tragedy of Khatyn. Traditional plotlines are followed by fragmentary non-linear episodes – which, however, do not lead to a disintegration of the narrative structure. The narration jumps from the present, describing the partisans' journey to the site of their battles, to the past, when the world is seen through the perception of a teenager who is only beginning to acquire the knowledge of life. Even the love which he feels for Glasha is not the usual romantic kind, but something unknowable that bewilders him.

Numerous details describing the ordeal of the partisans emphasize the everyday reality of people who were thrown out of their regular routine to defend their home. They are based on Adamovich's real experience and reflect real events that took place in Belarus during the war. Quite often he blurs the line between documentary and fiction, resorting to non-literary discourse, as may be seen from the book's ending – in which the mature Flyora, his wife and son are walking across what once used to be the village of Khatyn when the toll of the bells is accompanied by a guide's story of the tragedy, various data concerning dead towns, villages and people, the son's questions and Flyora's metaphysical speculations about human memory that has to preserve the name of Khatyn.

Both books explore what happens if the ordinary man is – for various reasons – relieved of moral responsibilities and is given a free hand in dealing with people who are officially regarded as being inferior, and therefore are not expected to be treated like humans. M. J. Martínez-Alfaro draws attention to the ordinariness of Nazism, "It is hard to try and put

oneself in the place of a victim, but it is also an ethical exercise to open one's eyes to the terrifying commonality of the perpetrators. [...] The monstrous face of Nazism was all the more monstrous because of its terrible ordinariness" (131). The books contain numerous scenes of massacres and death, but from the point of view of the "punitive squads" those who were doomed to die were worthless inferiors, and it seemed to numb their guilt, just as the peasants in *The Painted Bird* did not feel any remorse persecuting the Gypsy-looking boy or killing Stupid Ludmila, because they were the inferior Other. The result is radical evil. The chasteners use various tricks not to arouse suspicion concerning their aim, making jokes just before they set fire to the barn; after killing Stupid Ludmila the peasant women go away gossiping and laughing.

Both writers asked difficult questions that cannot be easily answered. In his analysis of the English translation of *Khatyn*, T. Snyder points out the target of the book: "Death is to be resisted and life to be prized not because of any good in us, but to thwart the greater purpose of the universe to humiliate and kill us" (10). Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov challenged God because of the sufferings of innocent children. The experience the protagonists of the novels by Adamovich and Kosinski went through had to emphasize the vulnerability of modern civilization and the grotesqueness of the world, which is based on domination, the power of the strong, and the silence of the weak. Adamovich's book is based on real facts, of which he was both a witness and a participant. Twenty years after the war, his blind Flyora revisits the sites of the writer's battlefields and the country's memorials, bringing back the voices of the dead and seeing in his mind's eye the world that is no more. "Never ask for whom the bell tolls," warns John Donne (Donne 108), and so ring the bells of Khatyn. In Kosinski's novel the fictionality of the survival tale intensifies the psychological effect of Holocaust memories that will forever remain traumatic because they mean displacement, persecution, racism, discrimination – phenomena which have not yet been eradicated.

Notes

¹ Snyder defines this as the area lying between Germany and Russia, covering Eastern Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states and Western Russia. According to him, "the bloodlands were no political territory, real or imagined; they are simply where Europe's most murderous regimes did their most murderous work" (XVIII).

² All translations from Russian and Belarusian are mine.

³ The place should not be confused with Katyn Forest near Smolensk, a place where Polish officers were executed on Stalin's orders in 1940. The choice of the village for the memorial in Belarus was deliberate as its name can easily be confused with Katyn.

⁴ The term is used in reference to prosaic works that were written by former Red Army lieutenants who took part in the war when they were about 19, including such writers as G. Baklanov, V. Bykau, V. Astafiev, A. Bek, B. Vasiliev, K. Vorobyov, and others. A. Adamovich was not directly associated with them, but his attitude to the description of the war is similar to theirs; according to

M. Balina, “these writers provided common human dimensions to the tragedy, thus replacing the locality of *patrie* (Russia) with the universal image of human suffering” (156).

⁵ NKVD – People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs Ministry, notoriously known for political repressions under Stalin.

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