

Revisiting Boundaries: Fictionalized and Documentary Memories of the Soviet Occupation in Latvian Women's Writing

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Textual accounts of the Soviet occupation period (1940-1991) in Latvia form the mainstream of Latvian fiction, historiography, and memoir writing in the 1990s, the first post-Soviet decade. So far there has not been any profound critical or theoretical investigation of this writing in its totality. It still remains a problem, to what extent it could be considered an autonomous tendency of Latvian post-Soviet culture to come to terms with this historical period of its own existence, with the ambiguous attitude to it, its problematic relation to the present, and to what extent this tendency is related to the anti-Soviet and dissident discourse that was initiated and sustained in the Central and East European states, in the Soviet Union and Baltics as its last major occupied region.

Memories about the socialist period are of specific importance in the Central and East European writing in the 1990s, as they are related to reflecting on the so-called "transition" period, initiated by the "revolutions" of 1989 and vanishing of the Soviet influence in the region. In the publications dealing with these processes (e.g. Ralph Dahrendorf's *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, 1990, and *After 1989: Morals, Revolution and Civil Society*, 1997), as well as the conferences dedicated to the tenth anniversary of revolutions, the transition period is treated as a gap in which temporality (a gap between past and future) is associated with a certain qualitative model (a gap between failed socialism and successful capitalism, totalitarianism and democracy), creating a clear paradigm and even direction of emerging collective activities: to bridge the gap means, on the one hand, to act along the temporal axis, regaining the continuity with the past in terms of reconstructing the national statehood and cultural tradition, and, on the other hand, to act along the axiological axis, reconstituting it in accordance with the contemporary values, determined by the discourse of Western democracy, civil society, and market economy. Jacques Rupnik, in his paper "Six Hypotheses in Search of a Transition" (presented at the conference "Between Past and Future: the Revolutions of 1989 and the Struggle for Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe" CEU, Budapest, March 26-28, 1999), points out the diversity of legacies of communism in the former socialist bloc that he considers a crucial determining factor of the way transition is carried out and reflected upon in the respective country. His argument may be stretched further back-to the diversity of the prehistories of the socialist era that are no less functional on the temporal axis: the history (or its lack) of the national

state is as important a reference point for the new democratic state to be created as the model of the contemporary Western democracy. Because of the functionality of the temporal axis, memories-of the Soviet, as well as pre-Soviet, past are a decisive element in the reflections of transition and gain a very distinct ideological character. It seems that a new metanarrative has been formed-"The Collapse of Communism and its Consequences for Europe" -which is made especially dramatic by the Balkan crisis and other conflicts in the former Soviet Union. For memoir writing in Latvia, the double dynamics of disclaiming the "Soviet legacy" and restoring the "authentic Latvian" one, related to the pre-Soviet national state and its political spectrum, marked by the social-democratic tradition of the 1920s and the authoritarian rule of the 1930s, is of specific significance.

The investigations of memory and its historico-cultural functioning in 1980-90s demonstrate new tendencies: the main axis of change is related to drawing a line of distinction between memory and history, problematizing the objective character of memories and paying attention to their discursive and textual aspect. French historiographer Pierre Nora, in his "Realms of Memory" (1984-1992), argues against the traditional or pre-modern, in his words, model of memory as a storehouse of history; he emphasizes the imaginative character of memory; for him, the present mode of historical perception is derived from an imaginative form of consciousness based more on myths than on facts (Nora 1996: XII). Memory codifies the historical consciousness, hence, the history is that of the second degree-not resurrection, reconstitution, representation of the past, but remembrance, recreation of the overall structure of the past within the present (Nora 1996: XXIV). The relation to the present makes memory selective, tending to accommodate facts that suit the present goals of the historical reflection, thus framing the past within the context of remembrance, vulnerable to transferences, censoring, projections (Nora 1996: 3). Another important influence, also popularized by Nora, is Maurice Halbwachs's notion of the collective memory (Collective Memory 1925) as related to deep social structures that shape the conscious activities and shared experience of humans, including recollection and memories. According to Irit Rogoff, "Halbwachs sought to weave individual recollections into the cultural fabric that gives them their broader design" and reveals memory as paradigmatic, as it "reconstructs the past in a plurality of coherent, imaginative patterns" (Rogoff: 119). Enhanced by the post-structuralist discussions of historical practice and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and his methodology of genealogy of knowledge, this approach is very fruitful in approaching ideological components of memories. Some authors treat memories as a political praxis (Perks 1998). Richard Terdiman introduces Foucault's concept of the dominant of the discourse to the analysis of memory as the basis of all cognition, perception, and intellection, showing how memory, which he defines as the modality of our relation to the past, sustains the dominant and is, in turn: determined by it (Terdiman 1993). Memory is the agent of reconstructing the past which constitutes the frame of our existence and the

basis of our self-understanding. Terdiman also draws attention to the double dynamics of memory work: according to him, memory functions as "a selective, highly ideologized form of recollection that brackets fully as much as it restores" (Terdiman 1993: 19-20).

An important tendency of recent historiography is to treat history as a discursive practice and focus on its textual aspect, promoted by Hayden White in "Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism" (1978). His arguments are closely related to the broader context of the post-structural, hermeneutic, semiological interest in textuality and its interrelation with discursivity. One of the basic tenets of these investigations is deconstruction of the binary of historical/fictional text which from the perspective of hermeneutics and semiology opens up new insights into the referential and truth-value aspect of fiction, while for historiographers, like White, it allows for a more flexible approach to the textual aspect of history and memory. White treats historical text as a verbal artifact and draws attention to the functioning of four tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony in the textualization of the historical consciousness; he writes also about the patterns of employment of historical narratives according to the regularities of literary genres (tragedy, comedy, romance, satire) (White 1992). According to White, historical text is constructed using the tools that are traditionally attributed to fiction; foregrounding this aspect of historiography, which has always been repressed, makes it possible to focus on the discursive features of historiographical and memory writing.

The first significant investigation to use this methodology is Paul Fussell's book about World War I, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) in which the author does not deal with war as a sequence of events—military operations and strategies—but writes about rituals and myths surrounding it, analyzing the factors that have determined certain discursive figures (the figure of enemy, romantic friendship of soldiers, etc.). This methodology also dominates in the investigations of 1980-90s about World War II, Holocaust, and the fascist occupation in Europe. Its main advantage is the possibility it provides to turn to novel aspects of war and occupation, such as traumatic memories, transgenerational trauma, survival guilt (Young 1993), traumas and the sense of guilt of the children of collaborationist parents (Taylor 1997), etc. This methodology is successfully enriched by the elements of gender theories, especially taking into account the ideological and political aspect of memory writing: the category of gender has an important role in the discourse of war and occupation, as well as the post-occupational (or postcolonial) national reconstruction (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Women's memory writing forms a considerable part of the vast textual body of memories of the Soviet occupation that appeared in Latvia in 1990s. The present paper is envisaged as a study of specific features of women's memory narratives, analyzing two texts, produced by women writers from Daugavpils. This town is a significant topos or, using Pierre Nora's concept, a site of memory: as a town on the south-eastern border of Latvia, Daugavpils gained the function of a symbolic border in the context of the

Soviet occupation, as the last major national event of Latvia's state before the occupation took place here on June 16, 1940—a day before the invasion of the Soviet army—namely, the regional Song and Dance Festival of Latgale. (the south-eastern region of Latvia), regional and national song and dance festivals being an important expression of Latvian national identity since the end of the nineteenth century. Anita Liepa, the author of the novel *Exhumation* (1990), is a well-known Latvian writer, yet probably is not considered to be a major literary figure, who started her writing career in the 1970s by publishing stories in periodicals. Her first collection of stories, *Cross Dance*, was published in 1982, and her novel *Exhumation* initiated a prolific period in her writing—eight novels, all written and published in 1990s, of which "Exhumation" is considered to be her best one. The second text, *Remembering Andrejs Shvirksts* (1997) is a compilation of memories about Andrejs Shvirksts, who was the mayor of Daugavpils during the last two years of Latvia's existence as an independent state, and was arrested and deported in June, 1941. The memories, dedicated to his centenary, are written by his daughters Ligija Plotka and Astrida Petashko, each presenting her own account of the tragic episode of their father's arrest, as well as his personality and activities as a representative of local power. Their memories are framed by the text produced by Josif Shteimanis, professor of history at Daugavpils Pedagogical University, with an aim to provide a wider context of the daughters' vision, thus making the whole collection appear as a piece of regional history of the occupation period. Both texts manifest the structural function of the post-Soviet discourse as the dominant ideological matrix of emplotting and temporal framing of the memory narratives. Soviet occupation is regarded as a fatal interference in the process of national formation, which deprived Latvian nation of its state, full use of its language and cultural identity, and its national symbols (anthem and colors); and brought the nation to the verge of extinction, from which it escaped by a narrow margin. The major propositions of the post-Soviet discourse are thus related to interpreting the changes and, more particularly, the deformations of Latvian national and cultural identity under the Soviet regime, and the historical analysis of certain episodes of the occupation. Thus, the beginning and the end of the occupation period are the temporal boundaries structuring the story of the nation's survival under the alien regime: the beginning—a sudden and violent termination of the "natural" existence of the Latvian state, the end—as providing the conditions for recreating the historical continuity and returning to the broken point of the historical development with a hope for a future perspective. This temporal frame is set within the wider context of the myth of gradual development of national identity: in the Latvian case, this is the "three awakenings myth" (Benedict Anderson mentions awakening as a traditional trope used by new nationalisms to imagine their coming into existence (Anderson 1993); this metaphor is also deeply rooted in Latvian national Romantic culture of the nineteenth century, relating the idea of emerging national self-consciousness

to its desire for freedom from oppressors-Germans and Russians alternatively). The first awakening laid the basis for Latvian national identity (second half of the nineteenth century); the result of the second awakening was that the nation gained its state (1918); the third awakening reconstituted national statehood (1991) after the "singing revolution." The most agonizing manifestations of the Soviet power politics according to the scheme, also realized in both texts, are related to mass arrests and deportations in 1941 and 1944, not only of military officers, civil servants, and members of government bodies, but also of intelligentsia and peasants-people from different social strata, of varied economic and political background, just because they could relate to the very idea of the Latvian state of 1920-30s. Both A. Liepa's novel and the memoirs of A. Shvirksts' daughters bring out the private, family side of the story: loss of father as a sudden, painful initiation of the girl into an adverse and threatening power of an alien order of things that must be faced and lived. Yet, metonymically, the family story grows wider due to the father figure as a symbolic representative of the Latvian state as it was before the Soviet occupation: Anatolijs Sondors-an officer, captain, military commandant of the Daugavpils fortress-a foster-father of Nameda, the heroine of A. Liepa's novel; Andrejs Shvirksts-mayor of Daugavpils. Their victimization symbolizes the victimization of Latvian statehood under the alien regime, and the daughters' affectionate relation to father brings out inter alia the nation's desire for its own state. The sustenance of memories-daughters' memories of their father, nation's memories of its state-as a token of continuity, the crucial element of any tradition, is fostered into a kind of anxiety and determines the affected and ideologized character of the memory narratives.

A. Liepa's novel *Exhumation* (1990) might be considered the initiator of the tradition: according to its genre (the author has specified it as a documentary novel), *Exhumation* spans the spectrum of documentary-fictional extremes, characteristic of memory narratives. The spectrum is marked by the heroine's name, used to disguise the author: the disguise is revealed in enclosed photographs showing Nameda Lapa, the heroine, as Anita Liepa, the author. The novel is supposed to be her family chronicle in four generations, yet the author has chosen to sustain the distance between the biographical life space of heroine and her family, filled with historical processes of almost a hundred years' duration (the action of the novel starts at the beginning of the century and embraces the total history of the formation of Latvian statehood, thus "naturally" fitting into the "three awakenings myth"), and the fictional space in which the story of the Sondors family gains distinctly symbolic features. This distance between the historical and the fictional which, according to Hayden White, is potentially existent within any text (supposedly including the documentary (White 1992)), allows in the process of reception for a more nuanced and free interpretation of the text's ideological constructions that are organized around the symbolic father-daughter dyad.

The novel chronologically spans the life-stories of four generations of the Sondors family, with the focus on the second generation-two sons,

Aleksandrs and Anatolijs. These brothers became officers and took part in World War I, after which Aleksandrs remained in Soviet Russia and was arrested in 1937 and executed during Stalin's campaign of ideological cleansing. Anatolijs, however, returned to Latvia, and after a successful military career became the commandant of Daugavpils fortress, a major place of dislocation of Latvian infantry and cavalry corps. Anatolijs's career was interrupted by the Soviet occupation, and his fate was similar to the majority of Latvian army officers: shortly after the introduction of the Soviet troops, Latvian army officers were assembled into military camps, as if for regular training sessions, but in fact many were shot and killed, and others deported. Litene was the most notorious of the camps. Anatolijs Sondors was one of those who was deported to the Far East and died of poly avitaminosis in 1944. The long chronological perspective provides an overview of Latvian history in the twentieth century with many painful episodes-political tension in 1905; World War I, when many Latvians were fugitives in Russia fleeing from the ' German invasion; difficulties such as unemployment and poverty after the fugitives' return to the new post-war Latvian state; a period of well-being; the termination of this peaceful period by the Soviet invasion prior to World War II; and the adversities of the violent changes that the invasion introduced.

Mass deportations of civil inhabitants and the massacre of Latvian army officers are two major manifestations of the violence of the Soviet regime against the Latvian nation. These stories constituted the anti-Soviet discourse that was shaped during the period of glasnost or openness, officially initiated by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, after his election in 1985. This discourse began to develop in Latvia at the end of the 1980s. The accounts were supported legally by decrees of the Supreme Soviet of Latvian SSR in 1989 concerning the rehabilitation of the politically repressed and deported citizens. They were further supported by the criminal case for the murder of officers in Litene, instituted by the Office of Public Prosecution of Latvian SSR in October, 1988, and the reburial of the murdered in the Brethren Cemetery in Riga on December 2, 1989. The title of A. Liepa's novel *Exhumation* actually refers to the reburial of the officers as the act of restoring their honor and status. Her novel, completed in 1989 and published in 1990, was a burning issue in the context of these events, yet its political significance cannot be dismissed as the product of glasnost only, as this published version of the novel was in fact the fifth one. The writer states in her postscript:

The first variant of the novel, which was written in my early youth, was burned by the relatives. Because of the second version I was imprisoned. The third one, produced in transit prison, was taken away by the searchers. The fourth one was destroyed by mice. The reader is offered the fifth variant, materials for which have been gathered for 45 years. (Liepa

1990: postscriptum) (here and afterwards the translation mine-S.M.)

Thus, the history of writing the novel goes back to the mid-1940s and symbolically embraces the whole period of the Soviet occupation, making the writer a dissident. The dissident figure as an important mytheme of the post-Soviet discourse is the central organizing element of the memory story. Crucial is the mirroring of the author as a dissident, constructed as such by the very fact of writing the novel, and by the heroine, which is the author in a thin disguise; this effect enhances the distance between the biographical and fictional space, creating at the same time a double ideological code: the author's story about herself in the third person inscribes her as a character in a narrative of a higher organizational level. The story about Nameda's opposition to the regime becomes the manifestation of the author's opposition, having real consequences in her life, as revealed in the postscript. Nameda is the representative of the third generation of the family whose lot is to live under the Soviet regime in its everyday manifestations. She is forced to withdraw from her studies at the department of journalism because she expresses ideas too straightforwardly; she is continually persecuted by the authorities later in her teaching career when she has to give up several positions because she belongs to the family of the politically repressed. Her most daring action is a trip to Siberia in 1953 in search of traces of her foster father, Anatolijs Sondors, as there was no information about whether he was dead or alive. Unfortunately, the trip coincided with the rebellion of political prisoners in Norilsk, which Nameda describes in her diary; on the basis of these notes, as well as the evidence of her meeting the ex-prisoners settled in Norilsk, Nameda was accused of collecting anti-Soviet information and collaborating with foreign intelligence services. She was arrested and sent to labor camps in the Arhangelsk and Perm regions. Surprisingly, Nameda's imprisonment and the time spent in camps (the autobiographical part of the text) is presented in a much shorter account than the fictionalized version of Anatolijs Sondors' s experiences in Litene, on the way to Norilsk and in the camps. Instead of self-dramatization, the author prefers the imaginary dramatization of her foster father's experience, inscribing it into the masculine heroic plot. She organizes her own experience around the dissident figure whose greatest "betrayal" from the standpoint of the Soviet regime is keeping memories of the previous era alive, and a continuity with the past. Hence the symbolic significance of Nameda's search for father, denial of oblivion, and resistance to the false memory-image created by the official version about Latvian officers as criminals and enemies. Her Antigone-like opposition gains sense and becomes functional only within the masculine plot of resistance and victimization, centered around the figure of the defender of homeland, though impotent and dysfunctional, which explains the centrality of A. Sondors to the plot line. The plot's culmination is the episode when Sondors and other officers, as they are secretly transported in cattle vans across the border of Latvia, sing the national anthem:

-God, bless Latvia,-the young officers sing. One word in that song is not quite precise, it seems to the elderly men. Not bless, but protect Latvia-that's what is needed. It had been their task and duty, of these youngsters and men, but they were deluded and betrayed. (Liepa 1990: 275)

In the collection of memoirs of A. Shvirksts's daughters, the father figure attains even a stronger degree of symbolization. In his daughters' memories, Shvirksts is an ideal statesman and affectionate husband who, after his wife's death, diverts all of his loving to his daughters; he is an ideal father who teaches, guides, and protects. The trauma of his loss is revealed as the central childhood event of the daughters, and the episode of his arrest is described emotionally in the text of Ligija Plotka, the younger daughter. The stoic calm with which her father leaves his house and family, in contrast to the agonizing despair of his daughters and other family members, construct his victimization as a heroic deed in which he sustains the symbolic function of the patriarch. He is not only patriarch of the family but also of the nation, as his aristocratic composure is opposed to the nervous and aggressive behavior of the representatives of the alien power:

Strange people with guns searching the house. Father finds his suitcase packed and hidden under the bed and comes to us. He comforts us and suggests saying common prayers. The chekists do not understand his wish to spend the last minutes with his daughters alone. Father closes the bedroom door once, twice, but the uniformed men push it open again. Then father stands up and shouts in Russian, so that the faces of the armed men twitch and the door remains half-closed. We are crying, trembling like leaves, stuck to our still-alive tree, but he says pater noster and blesses us with a cross.

Nobody is let out of the room. Only god-father is told to drive the horse to the door. Surrounded by chekists, father puts his suitcase into the carriage. Behind it he goes into the yard and stays opposite the living-room window at which we all stand lamenting. Then he steadily approaches the blossoming lilac bush. The armed men get excited, shout, wave guns, but father returns with a wonderful blossoming bough in his hands and, composed, waves us the last farewell.

Calm and stately, he leaves his house along the alley, once planted by him, with the blue lilac blossom in his hands. (Plotka 1997: 26-27)

Writing about the construction of gender stereotypes in post-colonial discourse, Nira Yuval-Davis argues that the image of the woman is often used as the symbol of a collective identity and the values related to it; she calls it "the burden of representation" and mentions the collectivity's honor as the most usual value woman is supposed to represent (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). In the post-Soviet discourse in Latvia, as well as in other post-Soviet and post-socialist countries, the end of the occupation is imagined as the return to the "natural" development of the nation. Within the widely accepted framework of the transition period, with its master plot of reconstructing a national identity, the woman functions as the token of historical continuity. Both in A. Liepa's novel and memories about A. Shvirksts, the figure of the daughter marks the temporal boundaries of the occupation: the father's victimization initiates its tragic beginning and it is the daughter's function to pick up the broken bond with the past and ensure the return to the fatally interrupted life course, expressed by the motif of the return to the father's home. In the Latvian context, the notion of "father's home, father's house" is related to the reality of 1920-30s when the state promoted a program for the development of agricultural economics and rural culture. Through this program, the state provided loans for acquiring real estate in the form of land and building family houses; the positivist "back-to-the-land" motif was dominant in the literature and culture of the period, and after the Soviet occupation, it functioned as an important point of reference for sustaining the national identity in which the element of the rural culture has traditionally been considered as crucial. The nationalization and expropriation of land and collectivization of agricultural production (the notorious "kolkhoz" phenomenon, modeled on the village or communal type of farming, alien to what is considered to be the traditional Latvian style of agriculture), accompanied by mass deportations of Latvian landowners in 1941 and 1944, was an important policy of the Soviet regime. These practices were not only aimed at the introduction of a unified type of agricultural production all over the Soviet Union, but, as perceived from the post-Soviet perspective, finally amounted to impairing a vital element of the national identity. Hence, regaining the real estate property (land and houses) of the pre-Soviet period at the beginning of 1990s within the privatization program was not only an economic phenomenon, but acquired a political significance-the more so because in most cases the newly gained property, due to its damaged and deteriorated state, turned out to be more of a burden than benefit. A. Shvirksts's elder daughter Astrida Petashko writes in her memoirs about the painful return to the father's house as a half-ruined place, the rebuilding of which turned out to be a very hard job:

When, with the long-desired changes in Latvia came also the possibility to return to father's house, the return was very hard. (...) The only wish was to close eyes and not to see the damage left by these years. (...) Nevertheless, we realized that

this place, tortured and almost destroyed, was impossible to forsake. (Plotka 1997: 71)

It is clear that the necessity to return and take up the reconstruction efforts is not determined by the nostalgic childhood memories (also present in the narrative, which is organized chronologically, starting with the early memories of little girls, in which the family house is an important topos); the return is a symbolical gesture which manifests the daughters' mission. A. Liepa develops the motif of the return in her more recent novel, *The Windstorm* (1996), where, keeping to her characteristic genre of third-person autobiography, she depicts the desperate efforts of a middle-aged woman to regain and cultivate the land which belonged to her family. This process is so hard and fruitless that it seems absurd, unless its symbolic significance is taken into consideration: it is a ritualized action, through which the daughter performs her function as the reconstructor of the national tradition and the continuity with the past.

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Pluralism in Progress

