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SNIZHANA ZHYGUN

**TO TELL IN ORDER TO FORGET:
NADIYA SUROVTSOVA'S MEMOIRS OF THE
REPRESSIONS OF 1927–1953**

Introduction

State-building processes in Ukraine in the early 1990s were accompanied by the publication of testimonies about the traumatic experience that Ukrainians had undergone during the Soviet Union's rule. Nineteen volumes of the National Book of Memory of the Holodomor Victims of 1932–1933 (containing information on more than 805,000 names out of at least 3 million dead); the multi-volume edition of *Rehabilitated by History*, which contains information about the victims of the Bolshevik terror in each of the 25 administrative units of Ukraine; numerous publications about the writers of the "Executed Renaissance" (1920s–1930s) and memoirs of Gulag survivors came out during the years of independence. These testimonies about the crimes of the Soviet Union against humanity formed a sharp condemnation of Stalinism and its adherents in Ukrainian society. Awareness of the scale of human losses pushed Ukrainians to resist any attempts to impose an aggressive regime and encroachment on rights and freedoms. At the same time, this great narrative of national tragedy during the dictatorship, which helped Ukraine adhere to democratic values, absorbed the individual narratives of the victims. As Nadia Kaneva defines the problem of large narratives, criticizing the work of Tzvetan Todorov, "[a]lthough it may help readers to imagine the dehumanizing aspect of the camps, it harms the survivors' attempts to reclaim their subjectivity through the act of telling their personal stories"¹.

The case of Nadiya Surovtsova demonstrates the dominance of the great narrative over the individual one. In journalistic and accompanying texts she is presented as "an example of the struggle for the freedom of the Motherland" or as a symbolic example of moral victory, "[w]e get to know a brave and courageous soul that the cruel ugly system failed to overcome. There is irrefutable proof: nothing can break a human soul that has faith and purpose. The purpose was great: it was about honour and dignity"². However, the impression from reading the memoirs is depressing rather than glorifying.

¹ Nadia Kaneva, "Remembering Communist Violence. The Bulgarian Gulag and the Conscience of the West", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 31, 2007, 1, p. 54.

² Olena Sergienko, "Ale zori i nebo – moi" ["But the Stars and the Sky Are Mine"], in Nadiya Surovtsova, *Lysty [Letters]*, Kyiv, Vydavnytstvo imeni Oleny Telihy, 2001, p. vi. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

The story of her stay in the Gulag is part of her autobiography, covering a period stretching from her childhood (early 1900) to her release from prison in 1950s. The text is compositionally divided into two parts. The first one, “The Chronicle of a Short Happiness”, covers the period before her arrest: her childhood, education, the national revolution, her emigration and return to Ukraine, and her life in Kharkiv. The second part is called “On the other side” and consists of three sections of different volumes: “Lubyanka 2”, “Yaroslavl” (subtitled “Memoirs from the Grave”), “On the road. Arkhangelsk-Golgotha” (within this largest subsection, the episodes “Vologda”, “Irkutsk”, “Vladivostok”, “Golgotha”, “Kolyma Adventure” are singled out).

As Emily Sun, Eyal Peretz, and Ulrich Baer argued, “it is commonplace to think of literature as something that gives expression to the voiceless or to that which could not make itself heard before”³. Surovtsova’s *Memoirs* is one of those texts whose authors insisted on their right to be heard. These memoirs belong to the “literature of testimony”. Ruxandra Petrinca describes it as follows:

They are not based on historical documents so much as they constitute them by recording, this is to say “documenting”, what their authors have witnessed [...] [they] can therefore be given the meaning of “eyewitness account”, whether or not the author intended to give evidence for or against specific people or institutions⁴.

But in Surovtsova’s case, her testimony could lead to her renewed arrest, which complicated her writing strategy. Gilmore stated that “conventions about truth-telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language”⁵. In my article, I propose to consider how trauma influences the narration of an autobiographical text written in the context of a still-present threat.

Surovtsova’s experience in the Gulag was extremely traumatic and writing as an act of verbalizing her experience of suffering could be a therapeutic act⁶ transforming traumatic memories into narrative memoirs. Jodie Wigren has mentioned that the task of therapy with victims of trauma is to help in the shaping of a completed narrative⁷, that contains and organizes their experience:

³ Emily Sun, Eyal Peretz, Ulrich Baer, *The Claims of Literature: A Shoshana Felman Reader*, Yale, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 1.

⁴ Ruxandra Petrinca, “Halfway between Memory and History: Romanian Gulag Memoirs as a Genre”, *Slovo*, 29, 2017, 1, p. 8.

⁵ Leigh Gilmore, “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity”, *Biography*, 24, 2001, 1, p. 129.

⁶ Suzette A. Henke used the term “scriptotherapy” to name “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment”. In her opinion, writing an autobiography can be a therapeutic tool – see Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing*, London, Macmillan, 1998, pp. xii–xiii.

⁷ Jodie Wirgren, “Narrative Completion in the Treatment of Trauma”, *Psychotherapy*, 31, 1994, 3, p. 422.

It requires, first, attention to an experienced sensation. Next, it involves a cognitive-perceptual selection process, in which various elements of the internal and external environment are screened for relevance to the felt sensation. Then causal chains are constructed, that locate events as causes and as consequences of other events... Events are also organized episodically, which divides the stream of consciousness, and links certain experiences while separating them from others. Finally, conclusions are drawn from these episodes that will guide future behavior, and contribute to the ongoing formation of a worldview and a personal identity⁸.

The formation of an individual narrative about trauma allows a person to distance herself or himself from the experience and push it into the past. But the circumstances of the constant threat of new repressions, in which Surovtsova wrote, prevented her from forming a logical and consecutive narrative that could be integrated into the biography. After all, the completeness of the narrative is not possible without giving events meaning. Usually, this process is easier for those experiencing collective trauma, as collective discourse forms a common sense, but Surovtsova could not rely on it in the situation of Soviet officials' resistance to the dissemination of information about the Gulag in the USSR. For these reasons, the presentation of her memoirs ceased to be consistent.

Holocaust researcher Lawrence Langer insisted that trauma should be discussed only in the most literal ways, otherwise there is a risk of denying it⁹. But Surovtsova's memoirs contain many silences and euphemisms. Her story about the Gulag reproduces the characteristics of trauma narratives, in particular, those identified by Laurie Vickroy: "fragmentation", "dissociation" of the characters' identities, the capacity to produce "metaphors", "static images" and "dialogical conceptions of witnessing"¹⁰. Surovtsova's tale of repression begins as the story of a wrongly convicted but faithful communist woman who promises to be steadfast in order to prove her allegiance. However, this narrative ends as the story of a woman whose life and opportunity of self-realisation as a wife and mother were stolen. The reader is unable to understand how this transformation occurs because of the lacunae, omissions, and deliberate distortions.

At the same time, it is important to note that the memoirs were written in a different order than they are presented in the text. It is known that Surovtsova began writing her memoirs in 1946 with the episode "Golgotha"¹¹, the most traumatic period of her life. In 1949 she postponed the camp history and wrote childhood memoirs. She ended the last episode of her story in the Gulag ("The Kolyma Adventure") in 1958. After coming back to Ukraine, she returned to the

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 415-416.

⁹ Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Virginia, University of Virginia Press, 2002, pp. 24-175.

¹¹ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Lysty*, p. 299.

beginning of her arrest and completed the fragment of “Lubyanka 2” in 1959. The second fragment, “Yaroslavl”, has remained undated. There are gaps of several years between the fragments of this part, unlike the memoirs of the first part, where the presentation is consistent and coherent. This fragmentation testifies to the impossibility of forming a coherent narrative by inscribing it in the history of her life.

Next, we will consider how the themes of 1) a falsely accused communist and 2) women’s experience in the second part of her memoirs (called “On the other side”) are developing and conflicting.

“Lubyanka, 2”, “Yaroslavl” – The Story of a Communist Woman

The first subsection tells of the first arrest on charges of espionage in 1927. Surovtsova was not a spy, but the fact that she returned from abroad where she had communicated with foreigners was sufficient reason for the Bolsheviks to arrest and imprison her. Surovtsova’s memoirs of the Yaroslavl detention centre record a period when the Soviet penitentiary system was not yet fully formed. This particular prison isolated, but did not exploit prisoners. The administration of this prison, in use since Tsarist times, allowed inmates to read newspapers and books, walk, correspond and even protest. This liberal “pre-revolutionary” regime evoked a literary parallel in Surovtsova’s memoirs, as she often referred to the memoirs of Tsarist revolutionary Vera Figner.

In her *Return from The Archipelago, Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, Leona Toker defines one of the four common features of the Gulag memoirs as follows: the presentation of the imprisonment story as a fasting time, as a test of their faith¹². Surovtsova also mentions this motive in the introductory text to the part of her memoir that deals with imprisonment:

And if there is one main idea here, it is to show how, after thirty difficult years, a person can remain deeply committed to their ideals, and remain a communist after enduring all the hardships that I am writing about. The most important thing to note is that I am not an exception: I have not seen a single communist who renounced their convictions despite dying in our Soviet prisons, surrounded by strangers, ideologically hostile people. Innocently, tragically-mysteriously condemned, they did not waver from their ideals...¹³.

It seems that declaring herself as a communist arises from the desire to circumvent censorship, to justify her story, to give it significance in an ideologically biased society. The story of persons in the Gulag was marginalized in

¹² Leona Toker, *Return from The Archipelago, Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 94.

¹³ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady [Memoirs]*, Kyiv, Vydavnytstvo imeni Oleny Telihy, 1996, p. 213.

Soviet society; most of the former prisoners were silent about their experience, fearing repression and neglect. The story of a communist woman could be told as a story of unwavering loyalty to ideals. This motif of loyalty to communism is the strongest in this fragment of her memoirs, written after the rest of the text. Despite the high pathos with which the author asserts her views, the narrative of the vainly accused communist woman contains both obvious and hidden contradictions.

A clear contradiction is revealed in the author's structuring of the world (individuals) into "one's own" and "another's". In those fragments that deal with ideological loyalty, "one's own" means communist, and "another's" means representatives of other political views: "There were mostly enemies around, political opponents, people with completely different political convictions"¹⁴. Surovtsova characterizes people primarily by political affiliation: socialists, Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, Doshnaks, Musavatists, anarchists: "I, the anarchist Dubensky, two Trotskyist soldiers and a Menshevik pharmacist"¹⁵. Naming the prisoners according to their political preferences created the impression that, on the whole, the punitive system acted correctly by isolating the numerous opponents who encroached on the Bolshevik power. Moreover, the presence of a Bolshevik in a detention centre could look like an unfortunate mistake. However, this chosen form of ready-made ideological narration does not suit her real experience: she did not experience people as opponents but as companions.

She risks her health by starving for other prisoners' sake, she risks being punished by violating regulations in order to help or please others. And therefore, the real "we" are not the communists, but the prisoners: "But to us, who knew what bondage is, it seems a crime to keep silent about someone left in one's merciless memory. After all, this is the only thing that can be given to those very often innocent people who have left irrevocably. Maybe this is the responsibility of the survivors?"¹⁶. It is noteworthy that Surovtsova feels her duty not only to the communists but also to those whom she calls "enemies". This position drives her story in which party principles do not apply. Thus, Lenin's imprisoned comrades-in-arms are barely mentioned, and the main stories are about "enemies" with whom she had warm relations.

The hidden contradiction is this: in the Yaroslavl detention centre, Surovtsova falls in love with the Socialist-Revolutionary Dmitriy Olitsky, because of whom she refuses to leave the detention centre even after her release, and whom she marries during her exile. The text conceals this event: the name of a loved one is not mentioned even casually among other prisoners. She only hints at it: "Thus

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 240.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 241.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

began the acquaintance that determined my personal destiny”¹⁷, “And personal life only now smiled at me. I met a man whom it would be infinitely hard for me to lose”¹⁸. These are the only mentions of Olitsky in her memoirs. Whatever the reasons why Surovtsova keeps silent about her story of love in prison, they help her avoid the contradiction between her desire to assert her loyalty to the communist ideals and her “ideologically incorrect” love for a man whom the communists have recognised as an enemy.

Failure to reflect this contradiction between the real structuring of the world and the desired one in memoirs reveals an extreme degree of unfreedom in comprehending one’s experience. The division of the world into “I” and political opponents of Bolshevism reveals another feature of her experience: “They spoke openly, clearly and could evaluate the regime”¹⁹. Instead, her main reaction to the events was a ban. The author tried to convince herself and convince the reader in her memoirs that everything she has experienced (such as false accusations, incitement to denunciations, violations of legal procedures, and the jailers’ cruelty) does not affect her beliefs. Denying the obvious becomes her defensive reaction: “The worst thing for me would be to think that not everything is perfect – I would lose the remaining ground under my feet!”²⁰. The euphemism “not everything is perfect” contrasts with the situation where the innocently accused are dying and losing their sanity *en masse*.

Considering the category of the unsayable, Eneken Laanes points to its connection with language’s possibilities and the symbolic order of time: “The symbolic order offers modes and frames of representation that enable us to make sense of the world. If language lacks modes of representation for helping us make sense of certain events, these events acquire a traumatic nature”²¹. In Surovtsova’s memoirs, vocabulary embodying the Soviet symbolic order conflicts with her experience, making it difficult for her to verbalise the unsayable. Presenting herself as a communist, she needed to speak like them, but the use of ideologically correct frames forced her to silence what could not be squeezed into them in any way. That is the main reason for contradictions in this part of her memoirs.

The use of ideologically correct frames has one more result. The frames imposed by the Bolshevik’s ideology did not leave much room for womanly experiences, so the more effort Surovtsova makes to achieve an ideological narrative, the less she says about women’s experiences and vice versa.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 256.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 240.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Eneken Laanes, “Unsayable or Merely Unsaid?”, in Gabriele Rippl et al. (eds.), *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, Toronto – Buffalo – London, University of Toronto Press, 2013, p. 124.

If love is silenced, then what kind of female experience gets to be told? The daughter's experience is the most tangible in this part. She considers her greatest fear at Lubyanka is that her mother might think she is to blame. And then she blames herself for the death of her mother, which makes Surovtsova feel "irretrievably" lonely. Moreover, she shows an understanding of the inexpediency of establishing herself as an unjustly punished but faithful communist in a world where no one cares about it: "I will never be able to tell how I succeeded in my ordeal because there is no one to tell it to"²².

The rest of Surovtseva's female experience in this part is very limited. Surovtsova is more willing to write about opposition to the system and about self-organization than about a woman's experience. She only recalls trying to equip her space (knitting tablecloth, making a dressing table from a box, buying cologne) and handicrafts (knitting warm clothes for herself and others). She avoids commenting on the humiliation of imprisoned women, just mentioning it in passing:

After a while, I asked him to take me to the toilet. And then a strange thing happened. I had not seen anything like it in all my prison travels: the young man left the door open and refused to even turn his back on me. We were both young. I don't know how he felt, but I had no choice²³.

The experience of other women is also limited in this part of the memoirs. Surovtsova is more willing to tell stories about men, although the following shows that she also knew stories about women:

[in the bathhouse] I met the women of our wing, and we invariably celebrated name days and birthdays together, offering each other a treat stored in advance... It was amazingly fun to drink coffee, tea – whatever we had there – on the shelf in the bathhouse, as naked as Eve²⁴.

The reader will not know who these women were, what they were imprisoned for, and what their story was. Perhaps as soon as women were usually imprisoned, not for their own faults but as members of families of political prisoners, from the point of view of Surovtsova they did not belong to the world of ideological struggle in which she asserted herself. However it may be, she only talks in detail about two women – a revolutionary of the Tsarist times and Catholic believer, and a domestic crime perpetrator.

The latter story belongs to the semantic field of the implicit motive of motherhood²⁵. This story of domestic violence tells about how the desire to

²² Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, p. 247.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

²⁵ Vickroy considers this motif to be one of the most important for women's trauma stories. See Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, pp. 36-80.

provide for her unborn child pushed a woman to murder. Motherhood is the only thing that distinguishes this woman from the many criminals of Butyrka. Surovtsova tells a few more stories that testify to the hidden longing for motherhood (about a bird that she fed in prison and how later on the bird flew in with its chicks; about a doll that she made for herself out of an egg, which forced the warden to call a doctor as he believed that Surovtsova was thinking about a child and going crazy, etc.). The inclusion of these stories in the narrative shows the importance of this topic to the author. In the next fragment, this motif will become more frequent.

“On the Road. Arkhangelsk-Golgotha” – Her Story of Losing Oneself

The second subsection recounts her most difficult period – serving a second term in Kolyma, and previously in the Vologda prison and the Vladivostok camp. Surovtsova was arrested in 1937 and she spent five and a half years in prison. Without permission to leave, Surovtsova had to remain in Kolyma until 1950, when she was again arrested and kept imprisoned for almost a year. She was released only in 1954.

The nature of the narrative in this part is significantly different. The theme of loyalty to the ideals of communism is decreasing, and the fate of women in the camp becomes the main one. John Stephan noted that “Kolyma is a river, a mountain range and a metaphor”²⁶. Surovtsova replaces it with an even stronger one – Golgotha. (The subtitle of this part is “Arkhangelsk-Golgotha”, and the names of the fragments are “Vologda”, “Irkutsk”, “Vladivostok” and “Golgotha”). Replacing the real name of Kolyma with the metaphorical one of Golgotha alongside other Russian geographical names becomes a means of characterizing the camp under circumstances in which it was impossible to tell the whole truth.

The metaphorical name of Kolyma refers not only to the personal experience of the author but also to most of the prisoners in this camp. Surovtsova’s story is the story of a “survivor”, meaning that her experience is easier than that of other prisoners. Two circumstances contributed to survival in the camps: luck and easier work. Surovtsova was lucky enough to get to the hospital (out of her 5.5 years, she spent, according to her own words, 1.5 years in the camp hospital), where conditions were better than in the camp. From time to time doctors also employed her in a hospital or in a kindergarten. This, in her own words, saved her life.

However, she also had to work in construction, fell trees according to male quotas, work in land reclamation by pounding the frozen ground with a pick, etc. Each of these tasks ended with Surovtsova’s spending months in the hospital. However, the death rate in “Golgotha” is not as striking as in “Vladivostok”,

²⁶ John Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 225.

where people died by the thousands. Yet exhaustion and death are only part of this suffering metaphor. This means that the dehumanization to which the prisoners were subjected was even more traumatic.

The history of the communist undergoes significant changes here. First of all, it becomes the story of many people. Surovtsova mentions numerous names of Soviet officials and foreign communists whose lives ended in the camp, thus convincing the world of their innocence:

I remember being taken to a dying Italian... And, holding my hand, exhausted, looking terrible but still young, he, as if in a fever, hastily looking for words, mixed them with Italian: "If ever... perhaps... tell your comrades that this is all a lie. I am a communist, I have never been a traitor". The agony began. Holding his hand, I gave him my word that I would relay it to his comrades. I do not remember either his name or his surname; time has erased them from my memory. But I am fulfilling that promise now, twenty years later²⁷. There was a Bulgarian in our hospital, Dimitrov's secretary. There were Czech comrades. Some who survived and some who died. But close to dying they would invariably persuade me of their innocence, as if this made it easier for them to leave this world²⁸.

At the same time, the text also contains a less pathetic, more ironic story, which was probably more in line with the author's mood at the time of writing the initial edition:

At first, I got to the women's ward of doctor Polina Lvivna Herzberg. She was a communist, a Jew from Poland and a political immigrant with a ten-year term. The arrest hit her hard but she remained orthodox and deeply believed that a mistake had been made. Years passed, and grey hairs appeared in her black hair, but Polina Lvivna clasped her hands in exaltation at our meeting and asked: "Tell me what the word is, will they sort this out soon?" True, they sorted it out after quite a long time. After 11 years, she was released when she had served more than her term, and taken by plane to Moscow²⁹.

The slight irony in this story suggests that proving allegiance to communist ideals is no longer a survival goal for the author. Surovtsova does not focus on these changes and is silent about how and when they occurred. Her Bolshevik ideals could have been revised during exile under the influence of Dmitriy Olitsky. Her faith in Soviet justice could have been shattered after her and her husband's second arrest. Yet what she saw in the camps during the Great Terror completely destroyed her previous illusions. The scale of the repression, including that against communists and their families, and the terrible conditions denied any hope for

²⁷ This sentence indicates that the "tragic history of the Communists" was either added or edited in 1957 and does not belong to a text written in the late 1940s.

²⁸ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, p. 286.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

justice in a person forced to experience unjustified imprisonment for the second time.

In the fragment “Vologda”, the author characterizes people by party affiliation, following the model of the section about the Yaroslavl detention centre, but in the subsequent parts, such characteristics cease to be significant. For example, the author first describes her friend Amy Stelzer as a German who did not know Russian, then talks about her character, then about her profession – a dressmaker, and only then – of the fact that she is a communist who escaped from the Nazis and came to the Soviet Union by invitation. Emmy committed suicide in the camp, so Surovtsova considers it necessary to speak about her. But the story of her other friend, the Latvian communist Olga Zvedryn (a Comintern cipher clerk), is not found in her memoirs. She does not single her out from the other prisoners, and she does not mention her name. We learn from the women’s correspondence, which lasted until Olga’s death in 1975, that they spent a lot of time together and were very close. The common history of these unjustly accused women would have increased the revealing effect of her memoirs, but Surovtsova avoids it. I suppose that she did it for ethical reasons.

Obviously, she was well aware of the construction of the narrative about herself and she respected the right of others to create their version of a “usable past”³⁰. The story about Amy Stelzer can no longer harm her, but her story about living friends can contradict their own version of events or remind them of something they would like to forget or hurt their relatives. Therefore, she avoids them, allowing her friends to speak about themselves.

What is new in the story of this communist woman is the motif of dehumanization and separation from ideology imposed on imprisoned party members. Surovtsova indignantly recalls that she was not allowed to read Lenin in the camp; that May Day had to be celebrated secretly, conspiratorially; that it was forbidden to address prisoners as “comrades”. Proving her loyalty to the communist ideals ceases to be indispensable in this part of the memoirs. In a story about her work as a nurse during a typhus epidemic, an extremely non-communist comment appears: “Only Heaven saved me”³¹.

The main theme of this part is the women’s experience in the camps, which Surovtsova portrays in many ways, but not without prudence. Moving through camps and various areas of work allows her to show a wide panorama of portraits of women and men imprisoned in the Gulag. In her book *Gulag. A History*, Anne Applebaum observes that women’s stories are defined by the narrator’s sex: men tell it as a story of fall and women tell it as a story of survival³². The point is that

³⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past”, *The Dial*, 1918, 64, pp. 337-341.

³¹ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, p. 287.

³² Anne Applebaum, *Gulag. A History*, New York, Anchor books, 2003, pp. 307-308.

the life of women often depended on the favours of male authorities in the camp. In Surovtsova's presentation, this is rather a story about the deprivation of rights, a loss of subjectivity which she simultaneously exposes and conceals. On the one hand, she recalls how the powerful men in the camp used women as concubines. For example, during her work in the taiga, a group of women in transit stopped for the night in their temporary settlement: "They were tired, cold, and the soldiers brought them to us to rest... I was indignant in the morning when I learned that, with the knowledge of their commander, one of the women spent the night with the taskmaster, brightening his leisurely hours"³³. She writes directly: "Women were bought, they were raped and they were rarely loved"³⁴.

But at the same time, she unexpectedly endows women with an agency that they did not have:

[Kindergartens] were created due to the growing number of illegitimate children. The women were doomed to loneliness by being sent to camp. However, nature was taking its toll and, despite the heavy punishment, despite the hell, physical and moral, that awaited the mothers, there were more and more children and the state was forced to take care of these unexpected boys and girls³⁵.

She describes this "care" quite truthfully: having completed breastfeeding, mothers saw their children once a month, on condition of exemplary behaviour. The children did not enjoy enough attention and, because of epidemics, they died *en masse*. It is not surprising that many women tried to avoid giving birth: "they were carrying heavy things, jumped from heights, drank cinchona, getting it by any possible means, had abortions, died, and if nothing was successful or there was not enough courage in them, then they confessed"³⁶. The fact that dying was a better alternative to confessing says a lot, but the author avoids a direct assessment of the Soviet regime as inhuman and criminal. However, by generalizing the types of imprisoned mothers, Surovtsova again resorts to avoidance.

Noting the "heterogeneity" of the contingent, she singles out young girl prisoners who want to get an easy job in this way, older women who try to exercise their right to motherhood at any cost, and married women. But she forgets to mention the numerous – according to the rest of her memoirs – category of women who have to give birth after forced sex.

Surovtsova avoids writing about the "generally brutal atmosphere" in relationships where "rape and prostitution became, for some, part of a daily routine"³⁷. One would assume that she was lucky in the camp. But the recollections

³³ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, pp. 315-316.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 317.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Ann Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 314.

of her friend and relative Katerina Olitskaya, who was serving her sentence in the same camp, show that rudeness and violence were common there. However, her memoirs were written for Western readers, so the author did not censor them.

Surovtsova's story about rape in the camp is perhaps the only one in this part of her memoirs:

There was an elderly German woman, Olga D. Her love affair was somewhat unusual and a story worth hearing. She was under forty. A virtuous German woman, she began a relationship with a male prisoner she loved very much. [...]. And at night, several prisoners broke into the hut to kill him [...]. She begged, and pleaded, all in vain. This angered them even more. Even though they respected her and saw her as a maternal figure. She shielded him, he escaped ... he returned with help and took her to the hospital where she recovered. In the court case that followed the perpetrators received punishment. And here the actions of the camp husband are worth noting. He was not shocked by the reputation of the dishonoured Olga. He literally prayed for her³⁸.

In addition to the humane behaviour of Olga's husband, this story is also notable for the omission of a central event, which the reader can guess from the phrase "the reputation of the dishonoured". Since behind these words is the horror of gang rape, every expression like "a child from an unloved man" or "spent the night, brightening his leisure time" also hides a crime.

Metaphorically, this story provides an understanding of the general strategy of Surovtsova's writing: she is silent about the most difficult moments. This silence looks like an attempt to forget traumatic events, to wipe them out of her past by creating a less traumatic version. According to Nadiya Koloshuk, silence is a common strategy in women's texts about the Gulag:

Most of the published memoirs lack the most intimate and painful details. There are only faint allusions to the violence experienced. In general, there is much more silence in women's memoirs than in men's; these gaps are sometimes not easily noticed by the eyes of an outsider, but those involved in the camp experience saw them³⁹.

Surovtsova deals with her own story in the same way: while describing in detail her movement through the camps and the specifics of the work she did, she avoids talking about personal relationships. Although she mentions her husband by name in this part, she does not talk about her experiences. The reader does not know when and how Surovtsova learned of his death. Once the author says that she was picking berries for a "friend", and later she recalls that after her dismissal she

³⁸ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, pp. 318-319.

³⁹ Nadiya Koloshuk, "Zhinocha 'emansypatsia' v GULAGu (za zbiramy tabirnoi poesii ta spogadamy vjazniv): zворотnyj bik komunistychnoi utopii" ["Women's 'Emancipation' in the Gulag (According to Collections of Camp Poetry and Memoirs of Prisoners): The Reverse Side of the Communist Utopia"], *Filologichni nauky. Literaturoznavstvo*, 2016, 8, p. 71.

was at the theatre with her husband, but who were these persons (or person), and how they appeared in her life, the reader of the memoirs will not find out. The author also hides the experiences of her closest friends.

A comparison of the presentation of events in memoirs and Surovtsova's letters confirms the omission as a textual strategy. Her letters to the teacher Kira Danylova, who became her closest friend after her mother's death, were written during her stay in the camps and accurately reflect the author's emotional state. Because of the camp censorship, Surovtsova avoids writing about camp life but writes about her emotional experiences. Her letters to her camp friend Olga Zvedryn were written after the latter left for Latvia, but the status of a close friend provided them with emotional authenticity and frankness. One of the first of these letters even begins with the phrase: "Do not read the letter to anyone and burn it" (1953)⁴⁰.

Letters to Kira Danylova reveal Surovtsova's worries about the fate of her husband Dmitriy Olitsky⁴¹, which fill each letter:

And I hope to find out where Dima is⁴².

And where my Dima is I still do not know... is he alive, and is it not in vain that I live here?⁴³

Is he alive? To know only this! I'm so tired of living through this time that it's a shame not to know if there is any point in waiting for something⁴⁴.

It's hard for me to live now – without Dima, without news of him – after all, there is nothing to live for. For nothing. I live in the hope that he is alive, that, therefore, we will meet⁴⁵.

I'm afraid to remember the year with Dima – it hurts too much. It hurts inhumanly – how do I seem to have got used to suffering⁴⁶.

There is also a ray of joy – however sharp – we managed to get Katyushka, Dima's sister, transferred here, and now we are spending rare moments of rest together. And we carefully avoid painful places – her husband is also somewhere in the dark... There is no hope of finding out anything anymore, everything has been tested – only something accidental, perhaps. The personal somehow dissolves into the general, and so a strong ring of hopelessness surrounds us⁴⁷.

The last two quotations confirm that avoiding and silencing painful memories was Surovtsova's overall strategy. The meeting with Katerina Olitskaya, not described in the memoirs, intensifies the drama of the experience: "I recognize my

⁴⁰ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Lysty*, p. 299.

⁴¹ Dmitriy Olitsky was shot in 1937, 7 months after his arrest.

⁴² Nadiya Surovtsova, *Lysty*, p. 28.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

favourite features in Katya's face (they are similar). And it hurts so much, and I don't want to live. And then I 'forcibly' wait and hope again"⁴⁸. A letter dated 1942 captures the frustration of unsuccessful searches, breakdown, and despair. In 1944 she wrote:

In fact, if I had known at that time that he had died, I certainly would not have prolonged my life by another six years. I lived in hope. But to live, it turned out, had no reason. That's it. How he died, I do not know for sure, and probably will never know. Well, "approximately" – oh wow, I can only imagine⁴⁹.

Thus, in letters conveying direct experiences, another motive for survival in the camp appears: her desire to see her beloved husband replaces her desire to prove her loyalty to communist ideas.

These letters also reveal a second silenced plot: despite the irony with which Surovtsova commented on the camp husbands, she was also trying to start a family with the released Latvian Andriy Krumin, but within a few years this relationship fell apart. In a letter to Danylova, she characterizes these relationships as the ones without which she could not live, "and there was no point"⁵⁰. However, she avoids talking about her loneliness and the need for close relationships in her memoirs.

Avoidance of talking about her friends removes another dramatic conflict from the text of her memoirs, which is restored in the letters to Olga Zvedryn. The fact is that many prisoners were married before their arrest and new relationships arose from the hopelessness of reuniting with their family someday. Therefore, these relationships carried both support and self-reproach. This is Olga's story, too. Her husband escaped arrest and she nourished feelings for him for a long time, but she returned to Latvia with the man she met in the camp.

Comparison with reality in memoirs and letters makes it possible to assert that in the part "On the way. Arkhangelsk-Golgotha" the narration strategy is influenced most of all by the desire to forget the worst, cut off her past and form a self-affirming version by distancing herself from the events depicted.

The pinnacle of frankness in the analyzed part of the memoirs is the story of her illness. The conditions of imprisonment led to incessant menstrual bleeding⁵¹. She lost a lot of blood and needed surgery, which could not be performed because of the doctor's being arrested. Surovtsova miraculously recovered, but probably this was what made motherhood impossible for her. Its importance for the author is evidenced by her mentions of many "camp daughters" – young girls whom she supported and helped. Work in the kindergarten brought her both easier conditions

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Of course, Surovtsova avoids specifying the nature of her bleeding; the reader understands this from the details.

and severe psychological torment: “And it weighs so lonely on my consciousness that I do not have even such a camp child, one that’s been taken away. And the warm children’s sleepy arms that hugged my neck, the children that clung to me in confidence, they too did not belong to me”⁵². The hardest episode of this part is the fate of the children from the kindergarten – despite all efforts, only few survived.

Bitterness as a result of her non-realisation is the main emotional motif at this part’s end. The author complains about loneliness and longing,

without affection, without someone to whom I would still be dear or needed in the world. This loneliness saved me from much disappointment and bitterness and made my stay in the camp too bleak on the one hand, while on the other hand it gave me confidence that absolutely no one needs me and that I cannot be needed. I have lost the idea of myself, of my intellect and my appearance in the camp⁵³.

Surovtsova concludes this part with the words: “Cinderella has grown old. The prince did not show up. Everything was coming close to its end...”⁵⁴. Lack of reward for the trial and a ruined life – these ideas contrast sharply with the evaluation of trials in the first part, as a test of faith that should have been passed with dignity.

The fact that the author began to write memoirs from the Golgotha part (not from the first and not from the second arrest, but from Kolyma) testifies to her desire to “work through” the trauma, to comprehend this terrible period in her life. Kolyma becomes Golgotha not only because of the hard work and high mortality there but also because of her dehumanization and loss of identity, which are perceived as a metaphorical death. Vickroy has pointed out that the metaphorization of death is an important feature of the trauma narrative: “The key link between literature and trauma is explained by this confrontation with death as a universal/essential element of human experience that cannot be fully confronted but can be symbolized”⁵⁵. The camp system deprived Surovtsova of the right to political views, to maintaining her cultural level and to self-realization. In addition, it took away from women the right to dispose of their own bodies and the right to motherhood.

Leaving the camp did not change much. Most importantly, her release did not provide an opportunity to talk about her experience. The threat of being arrested again did not disappear for the rest of her life. Therefore, omissions, metaphors, and euphemisms were the main strategies of the narrator in this story.

⁵² Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, p. 319.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 324.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

⁵⁵ Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, p. 224.

The “Kolyma Adventure” – The Story of an “Experienced Old Rat”

The subsection called “Kolyma Adventure” completes the second section, but differs from it so much that it requires a separate section in the study. The author began writing this subsection in Kolyma and completed it in Ukraine in 1958. The fragment is about the events of 1950 when Surovtsova was suddenly arrested again and imprisoned without charges for almost a year.

The peculiarity of this part is that Surovtsova does not use omissions and euphemisms. She does not avoid evaluating events and talking about herself at the center of them. The story of the communist completely disappears in this part, but a picture of the dehumanization of a person in the Gulag becomes concrete, and the author depicts it from the position of a witness. In this part, the important characteristics of the protagonist are the experience and old age (in fact, at that time she was only 54, but by camp standards and her own feelings, she was old). Surovtsova’s experience in the camps becomes her advantage in opposing the system and the criminals. She recounts how skilfully she uses her knowledge of laws and procedures to defend her rights, as well as how ingeniously she protects a young cellmate from attacks by criminals, and she eventually invents cancer for herself in order to move from prison to a camp hospital. Old age becomes her amulet against sexual violence, the constant presence of which she speaks without euphemisms: “Masha... is waiting for the unhappy fate of the ‘tram’ (collective rape – author’s note); it is so common here in Kolyma”⁵⁶. In the previous section, she did not talk about this. The author is somewhat more careful in her statements about prostitution in the camp because it was not the criminals who were responsible for it, but the jailers:

And the household criminals were usually taken to work in the village before their trial and sentence, and sometimes afterwards until they were sent to the camp. They went to the apartments of the military prison authorities to wash the floors. [...] But in the end, we all understood what was really happening...

Our income grew. I embroidered countless Richelieu pieces, and the girls earned their unhappy bread by going to the village. Adultery was highly regulated and it was somehow permitted. This surprised only me. However, the facts spoke for themselves. Even in prison, one cell was constantly “accidentally” left empty; at night, by agreement, the duty officer took one of my cellmates there and left in the morning⁵⁷.

In general, she becomes much bolder in her statements, testifying not only about prison crimes but also against Soviet laws (the story of a woman who got a seven year sentence under “the act of five ears of corn”). If in the previous text she avoided evaluating the sentences, often characterizing them as erroneous, then in

⁵⁶ Nadiya Surovtsova, *Spohady*, p. 342.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 346.

this part the motifs of absurdity, injustice and arbitrariness appear. The narrator abandons the strategy of avoiding and distancing herself from difficult topics and traumatic experiences. On the contrary, she positions herself as a reliable witness, a person who has the right to testify and accuse. However, she avoids writing about the conflict between her youthful communist sympathies and her own experience as a victim of Soviet crimes.

Developing the metaphor of the previous fragment, this part confirms that after Golgotha resurrection is possible, but not of the communist woman. Surovtseva considers her resurrection (without using this word) to be her rehabilitation, but the reader has the feeling that her resurrection has already happened – she regains herself and the ability to talk about authentic experiences. In this part, she contrasts her right to remember and testify with the pressure exercised by power.

But age and experience imply not only courage in actions and statements but also despair and hopelessness, which determine her life in prison (“Out of habit, I tried to survive, although now it was somehow very unclear why, in fact, I was doing this”⁵⁸) and after her release (“All dreams collapsed, the light of the weakest hope to live in order to return home sometime went out, we were finally seized by the tenacious paws of hopeless lawlessness in which we had to wallow to the end of our days”⁵⁹).

Surovtsova’s return from prison is very disappointing. The former pigsty where she had lived before and which she had arranged for housing as she could, was ruined, so she was forced to spend the night with unfamiliar neighbours. She was overwhelmed by loneliness and the realization that “no one was happy” about her return, that “not a crumb of personal life” remained. And the only thing that moved her that night was the return of the cat, which had lived without her for a year, “as a greeting from a life where, it seemed, there was nothing left”⁶⁰. However, the end of this story (and hence of her memoirs as a whole) is optimistic. Surovtsova describes the destruction of the prison to erect an ordinary store, and this local story is perceived as the destruction of the entire system of lawlessness.

Conclusion

Surovtsova’s memoirs of the Gulag represent a narrative of unresolved trauma, reflecting a woman’s inability to talk about what she experienced and to fit her traumatic experience into her life.

The fact that the author began to write her memoirs starting with “Golgotha” indicates that Surovtsova wanted to overcome her trauma and rediscover herself

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 344

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

with the help of scriptotherapy. Writing memoirs was supposed to help forget the experience and create a less traumatic version of her past, for herself and for the ideological society that refused to discuss the crimes of the authorities. However, the desire to “tell in order to forget” creates a conflict between the object and the technique of narration. The narrative of Surovtsova’s memoirs of the Gulag is characterized by: fragmentation (a composition in which the parts are separated according to the place of imprisonment; the periods of exile are left outside the story, forming lacunae); internal contradiction (as a result of the clash of the declared identity with the injured one); omissions (of the emotional and physical experience and the criminal objectification of women in the camp); metaphors (“Memoirs from the grave”, “Golgotha”). The narrative is also characterized at the level of utterance by: omissions (not verbalizing part of the message) and euphemisms (“spent the night, brightening his leisure time”, “a child from an unloved man”, “organisational conclusions”).

This conflict between what is told and the ways of telling emphasized the unspoken and testified to Surovtsova and her trauma no less than her story. Even decades later, when she was forming the story of her first imprisonment as a socially valuable narrative of a faithful communist, she was unable to edit the entire text to remove gaps and conflicts, to create a coherent story of her life, partly because the threat of repression had not disappeared. The text of the memoirs demonstrates not only the way in which “trauma attacks language”⁶¹, but also how constant threat does it. Therefore, what this text does not openly say is also critically important.

The focus on the public circumstances of a woman’s self-realization is due to the influence of the literary tradition (memoirs of pre-revolutionary political prisoners) as well as to the patriarchal prejudices about what is worth telling from a woman’s life (about her opposition to the system and the benefits that she brings). The traumatic physical and emotional experience becomes a realm of the unspoken. But this empty space is filled by men telling women’s stories as stories of moral degradation, and approving that it was easier for women in the camps, which could suggest that, the responsibility of the authorities for crimes against women is removed. Thus, the desire to tell an “acceptable” story harms women, because silencing and omissions acquire important political significance. Women’s stories, shaped by pain, shame, and fear, must be read by a “resisting reader”⁶² capable of decoding the story from gaps and euphemisms.

⁶¹ Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 95.

⁶² Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1978.

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TO TELL IN ORDER TO FORGET: NADIYA SUROVTSOVA'S MEMOIRS OF
THE REPRESSIONS OF 1927–1953

(Abstract)

The article deals with the role of autobiographical writings of women intellectuals and their depiction of the post-war transitions, and focuses on the conflict between the object and the technique of narration in a narrative of unresolved trauma. The study is based on the memoirs of Ukrainian journalist and scholar Nadiya Surovtsova about her unjustified arrest and 27-year stay in prisons, camps and exile. The peculiarity of these memoirs is that they were written in the USSR, when the

author was under the supervision of repressive authorities. Writing memoirs was supposed to help Surovtsova forget the Gulag's experience and create a less traumatic version of her past, for herself and for the ideological society that refused to discuss the crimes of the authorities. The circumstances of the constant threat of new repressions prevented the creation of a logical and consecutive narrative. That is why the narration is characterized by fragmentation, internal contradictions, omissions, metaphors, and euphemisms. The article considers how the themes of 1) a falsely accused communist and 2) women's experience are developing and conflicting in the second part of her memoirs (titled "On the Other Side"). The general strategy of Surovtsova's writing is silencing the most annoying moments. Omitting crimes and brutality, Surovtsova was trying to forget them and write a better story of her past. In the last part of the memoirs, she rejects euphemisms and omissions, regains the ability to talk about authentic experiences and testifies not only about prison crimes but also about the theft of her life and opportunity of self-realisation. The case of Nadiya Surovtsova's *Memoirs* demonstrates how the ideological pressure and patriarchal prejudices about what is worth telling from a woman's life caused the traumatic physical and emotional experiences to be a realm of the unspoken and how it needs to be read, decoding the story from contradictions and omissions.

Keywords: memoirs, trauma narrative, contradictions, omissions, unspoken.

A POVESTI PENTRU A UITA: MEMORIILE NADIYEI SUROVTSOVA DESPRE REPRESIUNILE DINTRE 1927 ȘI 1953 (Rezumat)

Articolul abordează rolul scrierilor autobiografice ale intelectualelor în configurarea tranzițiilor postbelice și se concentrează pe tensiunea dintre subiect și tehnica narativă în constituirea unei narațiuni a traumei nerezolvate. Studiul analizează memoriile jurnalistei și cercetătoarei ucrainene Nadiya Surovtsova despre arestarea sa nejustificată și despre cei 27 de ani petrecuți în închisori, în lagăre și în exil. Particularitatea acestor memorii este că au fost scrise în URSS, când autoarea se afla sub supravegherea autorităților repressive. Scrierea memoriilor ar fi trebuit să o ajute pe Surovtsova să uite experiența Gulagului și să creeze o versiune mai puțin traumatizantă a trecutului său, atât pentru ea însăși, cât și pentru membrii ideologizați ai societății, care refuzau să discute crimele autorităților. Amenințare constantă a unor noi represiuni a împiedicat crearea unei narațiuni logice și cursive. De aceea, narațiunea este caracterizată prin fragmentare, contradicții interne, omisiuni, metafore și eufemisme. Articolul analizează modul în care tematicile – 1) condiția comunistei acuzate pe nedrept și 2) condiția femeilor în societatea totalitară – se dezvoltă și intră în conflict în cea de-a doua parte a *Memoriilor* (intitulată „De partea cealaltă”). Strategia narativă centrală a scrierii lui Surovtsova constă în reducerea la tăcere a celor mai traumatice experiențe. Prin omisiunea crimelor și a brutalității, Surovtsova încerca să le uite și să scrie o variantă mai luminoasă a trecutului ei. În ultima parte a memoriilor, scriitoarea respinge eufemismele și omisiunile, își recapătă abilitatea de a vorbi despre experiențe autentice și depune mărturie nu numai despre crimele din închisoare, ci și despre furtul vieții sale și al oportunității de a se împlini identitar și social. Cazul memoriilor Nadiiei Surovtsova demonstrează cum presiunea ideologică și prejudecățile patriarhale despre ceea ce merită povestit din viața unei femei au făcut ca experiențele fizice și emoționale traumatizante să fie un tărâm al nerostitului, respectiv cum acest nerostit trebuie citit, descifrând povestea din contradicții și omisiuni.

Cuvinte-cheie: memorii, narațiune traumatică, contradicții, omisiuni, nerostitul.