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Putting pieces of (Hi)Story Together in Ludmila Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (2006)

Dorota Nowak

Abstract

The following paper explores the theme of the Holocaust in Ludmila Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein Interpreter* (2006). Although the Holocaust is not Ulitskaya's main focus, this theme is very much present in the text. The author of the following article explores the relationship between the structure of the text and the complexity of historical research of the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union. In the analysis, the author touches upon such issues as the commemoration of the Holocaust victims from the Soviet territories and the Russian national memory of the Holocaust, and the way they both are represented in the novel. The article searches for an answer regarding the role of Ulitskaya's novel in the public debate about the Holocaust in today's Russia.

Key words

Holocaust; Ludmila Ulitskaya; commemoration; memory; Soviet Union; Russia; Oswald Rufeisen; collective memory; national myths; representation of the Holocaust

Abstrakt

Skládání kusů dějin a biografie v románu Ljudmily Ulické: *Daniel Stein, překladatel* (2006)

Autorka studie se zabývá analýzou tématu holokaustu v románu Ljudmily Ulické *Daniel Stein, překladatel* (2006). Přestože se téma holokaustu v centru pozornosti autorky románu nenachází, je pro text podstatné. Autorka studie zkoumá vztah mezi strukturou textu románu a komplexností historického výzkumu holokaustu na území bývalého Sovětského svazu. Ve své analýze se autorka mimo jiné zabývá tématem paměti obětí holokaustu ze sovětského území, či ruskou kolektivní pamětí na holokaust a reflexí těchto témat v románu *Daniel Stein, překladatel*. Přítomná studie se zároveň pokouší nalézt úlohu románu Ljudmily Ulické ve veřejné debatě o holokaustu v dnešním Rusku.

Klíčová slova

holokaust; Ljudmila Ulická; paměť; připomínka holokaustu; Sovětský svaz; Rusko; Oswald Rufeisen; kolektivní paměť; národní mýty; reflexe holokaustu

[...] меня, во обще говоря, интересует только человек, не проблемы, не явления, не задачи а именно собственно сам человек с его хрупкой единственной короткой жизнью.¹

(Людмила Улиская)

Holocaust in Russian Literature

*Why was there no Holocaust in Soviet Russia?*² With this shrewd question Harriet Murav begins her pondering of the presence of the Holocaust theme in post-war Soviet and Russian Jewish literature. Scholars seem to agree that this topic has been ignored by both Soviet academia and Soviet literature.³ The fate of Soviet Jews was forgotten. Their voice was shouted down by the Communist universalistic narrative, in which the nationality of the Nazi victims was not important,⁴ and by the narrative of the “Great Victory”⁵ and heroism, in which even the suffering and death of millions of Red Army soldiers was silenced. In contrast to Western academia – where, as Murav notices, the Holocaust grew into a separate field of studies, where scholars dealing with this topic examine it not only as a historical event but also explore such themes as commemoration of the Holocaust, limits and crisis of representation, and “post-memory” – Soviet and Russian academia is still concerned only with the *contours*,⁶ the outline. This stage is reflected also in Soviet and Russian literature.

However, as Mordechai Altshuler notices, [*even Holocaust research in the West concerned itself very little with the Jews of the Soviet Union.*]⁷ What little interest in this topic there was in the Holocaust research in the West was primarily limited to of the Baltic states and annexed Polish territories, present-day western Belorussia and western Ukraine.⁸

Murav, answering her opening question – yes, the Holocaust happened in Soviet Russia – emphasizes that, in discussions, neither did the killing take the same meaning or form as in the West, nor do the commemoration and memorialization practices resemble those in the West.⁹ Soviet and Russian literature, as Murav’s study proves, did not

1 TEPPER, Anderson: *Interview with Ludmila Ulitskaya*, PEN World Voices, In Conversation: Ludmila Ulitskaya, Accessed on-line on 03.09.2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIJNdeZ1c1o&list=PLLazwENu13GwAFwdzVwO0JkE7Dq9PeeU9>

2 MURAY, Harriet: *Music from a speeding train: Jewish literature in post-revolution Russia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, 150.

3 Cf.: MURAY, Harriet: *Music from...* Op.cit., and SUTCLIFFE, Bert: “*Liudmila Ulitskaia's Literature of Tolerance*”. *The Russian Review* 68, 2009, 3, 495–509, esp. 498, and ALTSHULER, Mordechai: “The Unique Features of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*. London: Frank Cass, 1995, 171–188.

4 Cf.: MURAY, Harriet: *Music from...* Op. cit., SUTCLIFFE, Bert: “*Liudmila Ulitskaia's Literature...*” Op. cit., and ALTSHULER, MORDECHAI: “*The Unique Features...*” Op. cit.

5 See: MURAY, Harriet: *Music from...* Op. cit., 152.

6 See: *Ibidem*, 151.

7 ALTSHULER, Mordechai: “*The Unique Features...*” Op. cit., 172.

8 See: *Ibidem*, 172.

9 See: MURAY, Harriet: *Music from...* Op. cit., 150.

completely omit this topic, and some works, such as *Babi Yar* by Yevgeny Yevtushenko or *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman, are well known all over the world and became part of the Holocaust literary canon. However, let me stress it again, the debate about the Holocaust in *Russian mainstream literature* and, more importantly, *national consciousness*¹⁰ was and still is limited.

Christina Winkler's research seems to support this thesis. In her study *The Memory of the Holocaust in Contemporary Russia*¹¹ she calls the history of the Holocaust in the Soviet period a "blank spot" and shows that even after the fall of Communism not much has been done on a national scale to bring the horrific events of the Holocaust to light.¹² As an example of such negligence, Winkler brings up the fact that to this day there is one official national memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, despite the fact that the commemoration of the war with the Nazi Germany is central to Russian national consciousness.¹³ Winkler further mentions 2008 research initiated by the Russian Jewish Congress and the Russian Academy of Sciences in which high school history texts books were analyzed, and in none of them was the discussion of the Holocaust present.¹⁴ Only in 2012, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science decided that teaching the Holocaust should be included in the high-school curriculum.¹⁵

This situation is reflected in the Holocaust historiography of the Soviet and post-Soviet period. Soviet and Russian history scholars did not utterly ignore the Nazi genocide nor were they concerned with this issue in particular. According to Ilya Altman, the first studies in Russian completely devoted to the Holocaust in the Soviet territories were published only during the perestroika period.¹⁶ And, only in 2002 Altman himself published the first book which summarized the history of the Nazi genocide in the Soviet Union. In a review of Altman's *Victims of Hatred. Holocaust in the USSR, 1941–1945* Leonid Smilovitsky wrote that *[the book] without exaggeration, can be considered the first attempt in the Russian language to include the entire territory of the former USSR*.¹⁷

10 SUTCLIFFE, Bert: "Ludmila Ulitskaia's Literature..." Op. cit., 498.

11 WINKLER, Christina: "Pamyat o Kholokoste v sovremennoy Rossii, Kholokost na territorii SSSR". *Materialy XIX. Mezhdunarodnoy ezhegodnoy konferentsi po iudaike*, Akademicheskaya seria. Moskva, 2012, 131–144.

12 In her study Winkler confronts the national memory of the Holocaust with the Rostov-on-Don regional memory of the Holocaust. Rostov-on-Don being in this case an example of the fact that in the places of mass murder the memory of the Nazi genocide is still alive, as oppose to the national memory of those events.

13 See: WINKLER, Christina: "Pamyat o Kholokoste..." Op. cit., 132.

14 See: *Ibidem*, 135.

15 See: *Ibidem*, 136.

16 ALTMAN, Ilya: „Kholokost kak ob"ekt issledovaniya. § 2. Istoriografija i istochniki“. In: *Kholokost i evreiskoe soprotivlenie na okkupirovannoi territorii SSSR*. Moscow: Kaleidoskop, 2002, 14–27.

17 SMILOVITSKY, Leonid: "Review of: Ilya Altman, *Zhertvy nenavisti. Kholokost v SSSR, 1941–1945 gg. (Victims of Hatred. Holocaust in the USSR, 1941–1945)*. Foundation „Kovcheg“. Moscow, 2002. 541 pages." Accessed on-line on 11.17.2015: <http://www.jewishgen.org/Belarus/newsletter/AltmanReview.htm>

Therefore, when Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (*Даниэль Штайн, переводчик*¹⁸) was published in 2006, it naturally got the attention of the literary scholars dealing with the Holocaust. Some of them, like Harriet Murav or Bert Sutcliffe, focused their analyses on the main motif – that is, on the interreligious dialogue, the interreligious *translation*, Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations. They also explored Ulitskaya's take on the story of Oswald (Daniel) Rufeisen. Others, like Jasmina Vojvodić, focused on the theme of *transfers* in the novel. In my paper, I explore the Holocaust theme in *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* and answer the following questions: How and why is the Holocaust theme present in the story? How is the Holocaust in the Soviet Union as a historical event represented in the story? What does this text say about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and the presence of the Holocaust in Russian public debate?

Novel in documents¹⁹

*Я не настоящий писатель, и книга эта не роман, а коллаж. Я вырезаю ножницами куски из моей собственной жизни, из жизни других людей, и склеиваю «без клея» – цезура! – «живую повесть на обрывках дней».*²⁰

Ulitskaya's massive text is indeed, as she calls it, a collage. It is a literary mosaic comprised of archival documents, letters, telegrams, diary entries, memoirs, conversations, interviews, tape recordings, phone calls, press news, notes, and sermons. This mixture of forms makes *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* a multi-dimensional and a multi-voiced text (it includes voices from different periods of time and geographic spaces²¹). And, the pieces which Ulitskaya cuts out *from her own life and other peoples' lives*, and glues together *with no glue*, are brought together with the intention of drawing a thorough, broad portrait of an exceptional human being – Daniel Stein, a literary incarnation of a man who Ulitskaya, in the interview conducted for PEN, called: *Святой XX века*.²² The biography of this *saint of the 20th century* – Oswald (Daniel) Rufeisen – is inseparable from the events of the Second World War, from the Holocaust. The way Nechama Tec introduces him in the book *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen* is very telling. In a few sentences Tec manages to convey the strange dynamics of Rufeisen's life:

High on Mount Carmel, in a Gothic-like monastery overlooking the Mediterranean from the Holy Land, live san enigma. A World War II hero turned monk. A Christian who is a Jew. An Israeli who wore a Nazi uniform. A Polish Jew who as an officer with a German police unit

18 ULITSKAYA, Ludmila: *Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik*, (Moskva: Eksmo, 2006).

19 TEPPER, Anderson: *Interview with Ludmila Ulitskaya*. Op. cit.

20 ULITSKAYA, Ludmila: *Daniel' Shtain...*, Op. cit., 469.

21 See: VOJVODIĆ, Jasmina: "Transfery Danielya Shtaina". *Russian Literature* 69, 2011, 1, 141–155, esp. 143.

22 TEPPER, Anderson: *Interview with Ludmila Ulitskaya*. Op. cit.

organized a ghetto breakout. A fugitive from his erstwhile Nazi colleagues who found refuge with Polish nuns and became a Catholic. A pacifist who became a resistance fighter. A priest who insists on his Jewish identity. A Zionist who chooses to live in Israel and identify with it. A fighter for Jewish survival who devotes his life to establishing bridges between Judaism and Christianity.²³

Is there a specific message about the Holocaust Ulitskaya wants the reader to get from Daniel Stein's – Oswald Rufeisen's – life story, full of paradoxes and transfers? Perhaps that there were no "black or white" decisions, situations, and people in the Holocaust. And, that the issues of national, religious and language identification in the discussed territories were very complex. We talk about Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Jews (many of whom identified themselves with one of the aforementioned nationalities), and we talk about families mixed in terms of nationality, religion and language. We have to consider the complexity of the relationship between Gentiles and Jews, as well as between Gentiles and Germans. We talk about changing borders:

В годы войны, не совершая больших переездов, я оказывался то в Западной Украине, которая до того была Восточной Польшей, а потом стала частью СССР, затем в Литве – в независимой, оккупированной русскими и оккупированной немцами, а потом в Белоруссии, которая прежде была частью Польши и тоже оказалась под немцами.²⁴

Finally, we have to acknowledge that the line between the perpetrators and the victims was not always sharp. As in the story of the German major Rheingold who saved Daniel during the war:

Представь себе: в немецкой группе был мужчина, один из самых старших, потому что в основном была молодёжь, и оказалось, что он сын того самого майора. Поскольку курсанты задавали вопросы, Даниэль всегда просил называть своё имя, и тот назвался – Дитер Рейнгольд. И Даниэль тогда сказал – отец Дитера Рейнгольда спас мне жизнь во время войны. Они пожали друг другу руки и обнялись. Никто ничего не понимал, да и немец этот понятия не имел ни о чём – ведь его отец погиб в 44-м году на Восточном фронте, и он знал только, что отец был майор и служил в гестапо. То есть военный преступник. [...] Я подумала, что это простое разделение: фашисты – евреи, убийцы – жертвы, злые – добрые, оно не такое уж простое.²⁵

There is something that is being revealed about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union not only in the plot itself and Daniel's life story but also in the way Ulitskaya constructs

23 TEC, Nechama: *In the lion's den: the life of Oswald Rufeisen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 3.

24 ULITSKAYA, Ludmila: *Daniel' Shtain...* Op. cit., 469.

25 Ibidem, 223–224.

the narrative. The author's position is crucial in the text;²⁶ Ulitskaya is in control of the text, she commands it and makes it visible for the reader.²⁷ The six letters, which close each part of the novel, written to Elena Kostyukovich by a character bearing the author's name – Ulitskaya's alter ego – constitute the frame for the plot. In those letters Ulitskaya exposes the details of her work as a writer (*Я попытаюсь на этот раз освободиться от удавки документа, от имён и фамилий реальных людей, которых можно уязвить, причинить им вред, но сохранить то, что имеет «нечастное» значение. Я меняю имена, вставляю своих собственных, вымышленных или полувывмышленных героев, меняю то место действия, то время события, а себя держу строго и стараюсь не своевольничать*²⁸) which, despite the fact that she is writing a fictional story, to a great degree is tantamount to being a historical researcher. Ulitskaya shows readers her struggle with the vast material, with organizing and prioritizing documents and making sense of them. She admits she has doubts about whether the task she took on makes any sense and whether it is accomplishable. Ulitskaya leads readers through the intricacies of the historians' work; together with the author, readers dig through the endless piles of documents with one aim – to get the full picture, to discover the past.

Therefore, those six letters are the evidence of the author's struggle with both her fictional story and History. But, there is another dimension to it, perhaps even more important than the aforementioned one, which should also be stressed. Namely, that thanks to the novel's form and the impression that this work is being created before readers' eyes, it can be seen that the issues Ulitskaya is writing about need to be worked through and that the effort of dealing with the Holocaust on the territories of the former Soviet Union has not yet been made. Russia has not yet dealt with this chapter of its past. It is time to do that, but it is a process, a process like writing a book – difficult and painful.

The heritage of the Holocaust

Almost every character in *Daniel Stein* has a post-Holocaust scar. Ulitskaya expresses it through Daniel's words: *Война ужасные вещи проделала с людьми, даже если они уцелели физически, но души у всех покалечены. Кто стал жесток, кто труслив, кто отгородился от Бога и от мира каменной стеной.*²⁹ Those wounded souls are an important motif in the book.

Ulitskaya actually begins her novel with this theme. The first chapter of *Daniel Stein* is an entry from Eva Mankuyan's diary from December 1985. This fragment of the character's diary might be seen as her short autobiography. Eva was born in a partisan family camp in the Belarusian forest, *в непроходимых лесах, в тайной поселении сбежавших из*

26 See: VOJVODIĆ, Jasmina: "Transfery Danielya..." Op. cit., 143.

27 See: Ibidem, 143.

28 ULITSKAYA, Ludmila: *Daniel' Shtain...* Op. cit., 123.

29 Ibidem, 139.

*земто евреев.*³⁰ In August 1942, Eva's mother, six months pregnant, took her six year old son Vitek, and together with some other 300 Jews they fled from the ghetto of Emsk.³¹ Eva's mother took her children and left the family camp shortly after she gave birth to Eva. Her father stayed in the ghetto where together with all the Jews who did not flee he was shot to death. Eva knew only the outline of those events, and her whole life she was longing to discover the past that was taken away from her. She lived under a burden of this secret: *У меня странное чувство – я всегда очень хотела знать обо всех тогдашних обстоятельствах, о моём отце. А теперь я вдруг испугалась: я одинаково сильно хочу знать – и НЕ знать. Потому что столько лет я волоку на себе своё прошлое.*³²

For Pawel Konczynski, Eva's mother's friend, a pre-war Communist, the legacy of the Holocaust lies in the understanding that ideologies are deceiving, and demoralizing: *я в своей юности был носителем такой идеологии, а позднее, оказавшись на оккупированной фашистами территории, – её жертвой.*³³

Daniel's brother, on the other hand, lost his faith in God because of the Holocaust:

И все эти разговоры – есть бог, нет бога. У одних есть доказательства того, что бог есть, у других – что нет. А по мне, шесть миллионов закопанных в землю евреев самое главное доказательство, что нет никакого бога.³⁴

For Daniel, however, the fact that he did not die in the Holocaust is a miracle and sheer proof of the existence of God:

С этого первого задержания 13 июля 1941 года до конца войны я мог быть убит каждый день. Даже можно сказать, что я много раз должен был погибнуть. Каждый раз чудесным образом я бывал спасён. Если человек может привыкнуть к чуду, то за время войны я привык к чуду. Но в те дни чуда моей жизни только начинались. Что вообще называют чудесами? [...] Исходя из моего опыта, я могу сказать: чудо узнается по той примете, что его творит Бог.³⁵

Thus, Ulitskaya manages to convey the complexity of the influence that the war experience and the Holocaust had on the survivors' post-war lives.

30 Ibidem, 8.

31 Emsk is a fictional town, which represents existing Belarusian town of Mir. See: SUTCLIFFE, Bert: "Ludmila Ulitskaia's Literature..." Op. cit., 498.

32 ULITSKAYA, Ludmila: *Daniel' Shtain...* Op. cit., 16.

33 Ibidem, 58–59.

34 Ibidem, 46.

35 Ibidem, 94.

Unwanted memory

Is there a Russian collective memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union? Are the Jewish victims of the Nazi policy commemorated? Is Holocaust present in Russian national consciousness?³⁶

Ulitskaya's work gives some answers to those questions. She touches upon the problem of commemoration, or rather lack of commemoration, of the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union when describing the 50th anniversary of the fleeing of the Jews from the Emsk ghetto. In the novel there are almost no Jews left in Emsk. All that is left from the pre-war Jewish life are bones buried under the ground: *В Эмске, как я слышал, вообще никого не осталось, но остались кости наших родителей, родни всей.*³⁷ The memory of the Jews who perished in the ghetto is just an unwanted memory. For the local authorities the victims of the Nazi regime have no nationality. It is the Soviet narrative in which only the soldiers of the Red Army deserve to be commemorated:

На мой запрос городским властям города Эмска относительно установки памятника погибшим евреям из гетто мне сообщили, что в городе уже имеется памятник погибшим во время освобождения Белоруссии советским солдатам, и второго им не нужно.³⁸

Ulitskaya seems to be pointing here to the notion expressed by Lev Gudkov that every move away from the official view on World War II, or rather the Great Patriotic War, and its aftermath, was and for the most part still is considered to be *an insult to the memory of the fallen and a crime against the highest national values.*³⁹

Therefore, there is no memorial, and the site of the ghetto is abandoned and forgotten, the same way as the memory of the Jews is:

9 августа мы приехали в город Эмск к полудню и сразу же пошли по городу. Замок стоит как стоял — такой же полуразрушенный, как был, когда нас туда переселили в конце 41-го года. Пришли местные жители, но тех, кто помнит о событиях, осталось очень мало. Молодые люди, как оказалось, вообще не знают о том, что здесь произошло 50 лет тому назад.⁴⁰

Young people in Emsk don't know what happened there during the war. And, this image is even more sorrowful when contrasted with the meeting Daniel has with the German youth in Freiburg. It is here where Ulitskaya lets Daniel give his testimony and

36 Although Ulitskaya's text deals with the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, it was published in Russia and Ulitskaya is a Russian author. Therefore, by using the terms *Russian collective memory* and *Russian national consciousness* I refer to Russia only, not to Former Soviet Republics or Russian speaking countries.

37 Ibidem, 410.

38 Ibidem, 417.

39 GUDKOV, L.: „Die Fesseln des Sieges. Russlands Identität aus der Erinnerung an den Krieg“. In: Osteuropa 04-06. 2005, s. 61. After: WINKLER, Christina: „Pamyat o Kholokoste...“ Op. cit., 133.

40 Ibidem, 422.

talk about his Holocaust experience. It is Ulitskaya's critique of the lack of the commemoration and discussion of the Jews who perished on the territories of the former Soviet Union. It seems that Ulitskaya sees an answer to that problem in rising awareness in young generations and educating them about the past through testimonies. Daniel epitomizes the need for dialogue, for interreligious and intergenerational translation, for communication. Daniel's talks with school children remind the reader how important it is to not forget. It is here that the educational aspect is emphasized, and it is also here that Ulitskaya touches upon the issue of preventing genocide.⁴¹

Conclusions

Daniel Stein is not the novel about the Holocaust. Never does Ulitskaya put *phenomena, problems, tasks* in the center of her work. She is *interested in human beings with their fragile, unique, short lives*.⁴² And, indeed, the text analyzed in this paper is a portrait of a human being, of Daniel Stein, the literary incarnation of Oswald Rufeisen. However, this portrait would not be complete without acknowledging and recognizing the importance of Stein's/ Rufeisen's Holocaust experience. Ulitskaya keeps coming back to this issue. Even though Holocaust is not the main theme of the novel, it is very much present in the text, and Ulitskaya tells the story of the Holocaust (as a historical event and the subject of research), its influence on survivors' lives, and the memory of it both through the plot and the structure of her text.

The theme of the Holocaust is present in Ulitskaya's novel as a part of the main protagonist's biography. It plays a crucial role, and Ulitskaya uses it to make some important statements. First of all, *Daniel Stein* is a literary evidence of how complex, from the historical point of view, the Holocaust was in the former Soviet Union and of how difficult it is to grasp the war stories of Jews living on the territory of the Soviet Union. Second of all, it shows how little has been done to commemorate Soviet Jews who perished in the Holocaust, and that they, in fact, are still an unwanted memory. The fact that Ulitskaya's novel is based on a true story is very important, for it reminds the readers that those events really took place. Ulitskaya's text is a living novel. She gives a voice to the victims and makes the memory of them alive.

Thus, Ulitskaya's novel can be considered one of the first steps to opening a public debate about the Holocaust in today's Russia and to questioning the Soviet universalistic narrative of the events of the Second World War. That two million copies of the book sold have been perhaps the best proof that there is a need in Russian society for such a debate.

41 See: SUTCLIFFE, Bert: "Ludmila Ulitskaia's Literature..." Op. cit., 580.

42 See: the opening quote on the first page of the article.

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