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UKRAINIAN LITERATURE VICTIMS OF POLITICAL REPRESSIONS: VASYL STUS

*"But I was not going to bow down no matter what
they had prepared for me. Behind me was Ukraine,
my oppressed people, in honor of which I must stand till I die".*

Vasyl Stus

Many Ukrainian "enemies of the people" in 1937 were labelled "nationalists". A whole array of sometimes mutually exclusive "crimes" was added as well, of course. Nonetheless, the repressions accompanied by the lack of food in Ukraine and Kuban in 1932–1933, was directed against "petlurivtsi" [supporters of Simon Petlura) or simply "nationalists". 70 years later we read in the Russian newspaper "Izvestia" the headline: "Lecturers of Donetsk National University stop it being named after Ukrainian nationalist". Nowadays the primitivism and ignorance of the article really impresses. It took long period of time to ruin Soviet clichés.

Vasyl Stus was born on January 6, 1938 in a peasant family in the village of Rakhnivka, Haisyn Raion, Vinnytsia Oblast (province), Ukrainian SSR. Next year, his parents Semen Demyanovych and Iryna Yakivna moved to the city of Stalino (now Donetsk). Their children joined them one year later. Vasyl first encountered the Ukrainian language and poetry from his mother who sang him Ukrainian folk songs.

After secondary school, Vasyl Stus entered the Department of history and literature of the Pedagogical Institute in Stalino (nowadays Donetsk University). In 1959 he graduated from the institute with honours. Following graduation, Stus briefly worked as a high school teacher of Ukrainian language and literature in Tauzhnia village of Kirovohrad Oblast, and then was conscripted to the Soviet Army for two years.

We should mention that he started to write poetry while studying at the university and during his military service in the Ural mountains. Moreover, he translated into Ukrainian more than a hundred verses by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Rainer Maria Rilke. The original copies of his translations were later confiscated by the KGB, and were lost.

After his military service, Vasyl Stus worked as an editor in the newspaper «Sotsialistychnyi Donbas» (Socialist Donbas) in 1960–1963. In 1963, he entered a Doctoral (PhD) program at the Shevchenko Institute of Literature of Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kiev. At the same time he published his selected poetry.

In 1965, Stus got married; his son, Dmytro was born in 1966.

On September 4, 1965 during the premiere of Sergei Parajanov's film “Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors” in Kiev's Ukrayina cinema, Vasyl Stus took part in a protest against the arrests of Ukrainian intelligentsia. As a result, he was expelled from the Institute on September 30 and later lost his job at the State Historical Archive.

After that, he worked as a building constructor, a fireman, and an engineer, continuing his intensive work on poetry. In 1965, he submitted his first book “Circulation” (Круговерть) to a publisher, but it was rejected due to discrepancy with Soviet ideology and artistic style. His next poetry book «Winter Trees» (Зимові дерева) was also rejected, regardless of positive reviews from the poet Ivan Drach and the critic Eugen Adelgejm. In 1970, the book was published in Belgium.

On January 12, 1972, Stus was arrested for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda". He served a five year sentence in a labor camp, and two more in exile

in Magadan Oblast. In August 1979, having finished his sentence, he returned to Kiev and worked in a foundry. He spoke out in defense of members of the Ukrainian Helsinki group (UHG). Stus himself joined the UHG in October 1979.

“In Kiev I learned that people close to the Helsinki Group were being repressed in the most flagrant manner. This at least had been the case in the trials of Ovsiyenko, Horbal, Lytvyn, and they were soon to deal similarly with Chornovil and Rozumny. I didn’t want that kind of Kiev. Seeing that the Group had been left rudderless, I joined it because I couldn’t do otherwise. When life is taken away, I had no need of pitiful crumbs. Psychologically I understood that the prison gates had already opened for me and that any day now they would close behind me – and close for a long time. But what was I supposed to do? Ukrainians were not able to leave the country, and anyway I didn’t particularly want to go beyond those borders. Who would become the voice of indignation and protest in Ukraine? This was my fate, and you don’t choose your fate. You accept it, whatever that fate may be. And when you don’t accept it, it takes you by force. However I had no intention of bowing my head down, whatever happened. Behind me was Ukraine, my oppressed people, whose honour I had to defend or perish”. (“Z tabornoho zoshyta” [“From the camp notebook”], 1983).

On 14 May 1980, prior to the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, he was arrested and received a 10-year sentence for "anti-Soviet activity". The later influential (in Ukrainian politics) Viktor Medvedchuk defended Stus during this trial in 1980. In the closing speech from the defence Medvedchuk stated all of Stus' crimes deserved punishment; however, he also told the court that the defendant fulfilled his daily norm at the factory where he worked at the time, despite serious stomach problems. Stus' requests to get another public defender were dismissed by the court.

Stus started to be especially “pressed” since 1983. On his Birthday, that is, on Christmas, a search was conducted. They took his manuscripts. Stus called the

officer on duty, major Galedin, and asked him to return the manuscripts or devise an act of withdrawal.

– Who took them?

– That new major, I don't know his name. That Tatar.

There was a report that stated: Stus has offended the national dignity of major Gatin. Although he is really a distinct Tatar, but apparently, has already signed up to the superior race – “great Russian People”. Stus is thrown to solitary confinement. At the same time Estonian Mart Niklus was taken to solitary as well:

-Vasyl, where are you?

-In some death chamber of Lenin-Stalin! And Gatin is the Tatar!

In the corridor the loudspeaker is turned on.

Later at work, while vigorously twisting the screws by a mechanical screwdriver, Vasyl improvises: “For Lenin, for Stalin! For Gatin the Tatar! For Yuriy Andropov! For Vanka Daviklopov! And a little bit for Kostya, for Chernenko. How does one rhyme him at all?»

Once I accidentally overheard Stus talking with KGB agent Volodymyr Ivanovich Chentsov:

– So you are saying that you put my manuscripts in the warehouse behind the zone. Of course I know that you want nothing to be left from me after I die... I don't write anything of my own now, only translating. So give me a chance to finish something, at least...

Who could keep himself from writing in captivity – those felt much easier. But an artist, as my cellmate Yuri Lytvyn once said, is like a woman: if he has a creative idea, he must give birth to it. And as it is unbearable for mother to see her newborn child killed, so it is for an artist to see his work destroyed. And also when the child is ripped from the womb prematurely and trampled by overseer's dirty boots...

Vasyl Stus died after he declared hunger strike on September 4, 1985 in a Soviet forced labor camp for political prisoners Perm-36 near the village of Kuchino,

Perm Oblast, Russian SFSR, where he had been transferred in November 1980. Danylo Shumuk reported that the commandant, a Major Zhuravkov, committed suicide after the death of Stus. In the Kuchino camp, out of 56 inmates kept there between 1980 and 1987, eight died, including four members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group.

In August 1990 the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union cancelled Stus' verdict and the case was closed due to lack of evidence.

In 1985, an international committee of scholars, writers, and poets nominated Stus as a candidate for the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, but he died before the nomination materialized. He was nominated by a German writer Heinrich Böll, who publicly stated that he expected Stus to win the prestigious prize.

On 19 November 1989 the remains of Vasyl Stus, Oleksa Tykhy and Yury Lytvyn were brought back to Kyiv and reburied at the Baikove Cemetery. More than thirty thousand people attended the ceremony.

In January 1989 the first non-governmental Vasyl Stus Prizes were awarded for "talent and courage". This Prize was set up by the Ukrainian Association of the Independent Creative Intelligentsia, and is awarded every year on the poet's date of birth in Lviv.

In 1993 Stus was posthumously awarded the Taras Shevchenko State Prize for Literature.

On January 8, 2008 the National bank of Ukraine issued a commemorative coin dedicated to Vasyl Stus and on January 25, 2008 Ukrposhta issued a stamp in his memory.

In December 2008 a group of current and former students of the Donetsk National University published and sent an appeal to the Minister of Education Ivan Vakarchuk asking that the university be named after (one of its graduates,) Vasyl Stus. The Minister supported the initiative and approached the Rector of the university with a request to discuss the issue among staff and at the academic

council. On February 17, 2009 62 out of 63 members of the university's academic council voted against renaming the university to Vasyl Stus or Volodymyr Degtyaryov (61 voted against this), 63 voted for not changing the name of the institute. Earlier (February 13, 2009) representatives of the university's students voted in exact the same fashion.

Stus is highly regarded among intellectuals in Ukraine.

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Abstract. *The study explores the biography of a famous Ukrainian poet and writer – Vasyl Stus. The literary and political career of a poet is analyzed. Special attention is paid to Vasyl Stus political points of view. The paper also describes the awards Ukrainian poet received after his death.*

Key words: *Vasyl Stus, biography, awards, points of view.*