

Home, Family, and War: Images of Home in the Ukrainian Novel About the War in Donbass

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This article focuses on one of the most pressing issues in Ukraine today, the ongoing war in the Donbass. Using selected examples of Ukrainian prose, the authors analyze the impact of the war on the fate of individuals and their families. However, the theme goes far beyond the literary text and touches on important social and political issues facing Ukraine today. The authors understand prose as one of the narratives of culture, which not only conceptualizes reality in a certain way, but also has a real impact on social attitudes. Contemporary Ukrainian prose about the war in the Donbass analyzes many stereotypes about the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, shows them in their complicated family relationships, and also takes up one of the most universal literary motifs, namely the figure of the house in the face of a disruption of its everyday order. Characteristic of this prose is the individualized perspective, which aims not only to present events on a broad political level, but above all to draw attention to the impact of these events on the individual. Such an individualized perspective is an effective means of reaching the recipient and making him aware of the multidimensionality of the military conflict taking place before our eyes.

Keywords: literature and war / Ukrainian literature / war in Donbass / home / family relations

Introduction*

The war, dragging on in eastern Ukraine since 2014, the emergence of the separatist DRN and LNR republics and the annexation of Crimea are extremely important events not only from the point of

* Editorial note: the journal has received and accepted this paper before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The editorial team believes that the recent war in Ukraine makes the type of research conducted in this article even more pertinent.

view of defense and national integrity, not only exposing a number of yet unsolved social, identity and awareness related problems, but also exerting dominant influence on contemporary Ukrainian culture and literature. Topics related to Ukrainian-Russian armed conflict, and the situation in the area referred to by the Ukrainian authorities as temporarily occupied territories (Separated Territories of Donetsk and Lugansk Districts) are naturally and increasingly so becoming important motifs in films (both fiction and documentary), drama and stage performances, journalist and biographical texts, as well as literary fiction and poetry. The texts analyzed here raise problems related to the armed conflict going on in Ukraine, but it should be emphasized that the issues discussed in the article have a more universal overtone and are pertinent to areas and populations affected by war.

The many meanings of a home

Culture in its several dimensions is not just a running commentary on reality, it can also be an instrument of true change, even in the sphere of awareness. To some extent, it also applies to literary fiction being an example of building a narrative about current events, based on in-depth reflection. What is characteristic for literature (or at least for many of its instances) is a personal, individualized outlook intended to not only show events in a broad political perspective, but above all to draw attention to the impact that these events have on a human being and on families, especially—but not only—on those who live in the area of warfare or in the occupied territories. The prose dealing with the war in Donbass dismantles stereotypes about the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, shows them in the context of complicated family relationships, and embraces one of the most universal literary motifs, namely that of a figure of a home confronted with a situation which ruins the day-to-day accepted order of things. Here, the concept of home includes both literally understood space inhabited by an individual or a family, but also extends to the shared cultural, linguistic and historical background. So, home can be both a house, the proverbial “roof over my head” and the people who live there, and a specific region, village, city or the entire country. The war destroys the home space in all its aspects.

This brings us to the main subject of this text, to the images of home (understood both in the literal sense—as a place of residence of an individual or a family—as well as in the broader sense of the home-

land) at the time of the escalation of conflict and the outbreak of war. We are going to discuss this motif basing on the example of two novels: *Internat (The Boarding House)* by Serhiy Zhadan and *Shidnyi syndrom (The Eastern Syndrome)* by Julia Iljukha. In this article, we will try to show that the relationship between the protagonist and his/her home space is a kind of compass, an indicator of their identity transformation under the influence of external events. Although we will trace these processes on the examples of Ukrainian novels, several may turn out to be characteristic of other literary works written in countries torn apart by war.

The current situation in Ukraine has transformed the subject of war: now it is not just an element of historical memory, but a prevailing problem. No wonder, then, that it occupies a significant place in Ukrainian literature—both in books which document the past and recall its witnesses, and in fiction and poetry. As much as they are tragic, military developments of recent years have contributed to the growth of war narratives, and have deepened them—probably for the first time in Ukrainian literature—adding anthropological, existential, and psychological contexts that allow for an in-depth analysis of the situation of individuals engaged in combat, and those that have become accidental participants of skirmishes. The new way of writing about war is a phenomenon going beyond the Ukrainian context, and embraces a wider space of post-Soviet states.

The war in Donbass in the literature

The literature on the currently ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbass is written from many points of view, not only by Ukrainian authors (Polishchuk, “Zobrazyty”), nonetheless, it seems that the context of micro-stories or “grassroots narratives” mentioned by the Polish researcher, in which the ethical dimension is most important, constitute an adequate interpretation framework for most works. Notwithstanding the events presented by the authors from the point of view of individuals actively participating in military operations or from the viewpoint of accidental victims of war, most narratives focus on the individual and the emphasis is on the destructive effects of war, both on the personal level (family, professional, social), as well as in a wider social dimension. Such an optics—the perspective of the participants of military operations—is shown, among others, in an excellent novel *Slidy na dorozhi* by Valery Ananiew (2018), as well as in *Tochka nul*

(2017) by Artem Chekh. In both novels the authors describe personal, individual war experience. Showing without embellishments the reality of war, as well as the ruthless and embarrassing truth about the condition of the Ukrainian army, both authors emphasize wartime influences exerted on a sensitive and intelligent individual, torn out of his life and “thrown to the front lines.” Both Serhiy Zhadan in his novel *Internat* (2017) and Tamara Horiha-Zernia in her *Docia* (2019) describe the war from the perspective of people experiencing loss, trauma, breakdown of home and family, and necessity of resettlement. The latter work is one of many examples of literary reflection on the situation of women and children during the war. Another is Julia Iljuha’s novel *Shidnyi syndrom* (2019), discussed later in this article, where the author touches upon the topic of post-traumatic syndrome experienced by war veterans (including female soldiers), previously absent in Ukrainian prose. Poetization of military experiences is another interesting phenomenon. Those experiences are shown from an extremely subjective, unreal perspective—this type of narrative is represented by the extraordinary work *Lito ATO* (2015) by Olaf Klemensen. *Ilovaisk* (2015) by Yevheniya Polozy is a kind of journalist investigation on the borderline of reportage and fiction. The same author, analyzing the causes and course of the tragedy at Ilovaisk, refers to individual testimonies of participants of the “Ilovaisk siege.” Texts written by Russians or authors writing in Russian, including Serhey Loyko and Volodymyr Rafeenko, deserve special attention. The first Russian writer and *Los Angeles Times* war correspondent is the author of a text on the borderline of fiction and reportage which testifies to the dramatic 242-day defense of the Donetsk airport which took place at the turn of 2014/15. In spite of the reportage flair, the author introduces personal themes here as well, creating a fictional hero who, on top of his war ordeals, struggles with personal dramas. Although from the literary viewpoint the book leaves much to be desired, it undoubtedly constitutes an important narrative about the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war. Another author, Volodymyr Rafeenko, is a Ukrainian writer from Donbass, who spoke and wrote only in Russian until the outbreak of the war and was deeply immersed in the context of Russian culture and literature (Yurchuk). This tradition is evident in his excellent, multi-layered and enigmatic novel *Dovhi chasy* (written in Russian and translated into Ukrainian in 2017). Sparkling with quotes and allusions to Yefofeyev, Bulgakov, Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, and written in the spirit of macabre grotesque bringing to mind, for example, the prose of Victor Pelevin, Rafeenko’s text is one of the most interesting voices of the ongoing war to be

heard in contemporary Ukrainian prose. Rafeenko's demonic vision, in which war is a kind of absurd with death as the only way out, was appreciated by critics and other Ukrainian authors, among others by Yulia Yurchuk: "The famous Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych praised *The Length of the Day* as the best Ukrainian novel in many years, and Zhadan said that this was the most important novel about the war where reality is shown from the perspective of an inferno." (Yurchuk) A Polish-Ukrainian scholar, Agnieszka Matusiak, has a following comment: Rafeenko's novel is "the most important Ukrainian book since the publication of Yuri Andrukhovych's *Moscoviada* and Oxana Zabuzhko's *Polovi doslidzhennja z ukrainskoho seksu*. What's more, this is truly intellectual prose, which Ukrainian literature has not known since the times of Viktor Domontowych/Petrow's *Bez gruntu*." (Matusiak 81)

The novels discussed above, and two novels presented further in the text, show war as a destructive factor ruining the lives of individuals. This perspective makes it possible to place these novels in the context of "grassroots narratives" with an ethical dimension mentioned earlier, that is, in the stream of war narratives introduced into the post-Soviet space by Svitlana Alekseyevich. This approach is diametrically opposed to the trend mythologizing warfare, and giving it the status of a heroic legend strongly associated with political ideologies (Stomma 7), or pointing out the sacred reality features (Caillois) of the war in the understanding of Otto's sacrum as *tremens* and *fascinatis* (Otto). Yaroslav Polishchuk wrote in detail about the fact that the currently emerging Ukrainian war literature is dominated by subjective, individual, ethical perspective, in which the experiences of individuals, "minor" human tragedies, reflections and attitudes are emphasized. The poetics of "minuscule stories" about the war is part of the tendency to study literature from the ethical point of view, a perspective that has dominated English language literary studies since the 1990s.

Assuming the perspective of grassroots narrative, it is impossible to avoid the theme of the house as a space summing up basic values which constitute an individual. As a result of the shock of the experience of war this space is destroyed, and attempts to rebuild it are tantamount to man seeking his own place in the world, redefining his own identity in the face of a traumatic experience.

Zhadan: anti-death in non-homes

Zhadan shows residents rooted in Donbass with all their problems, identity conflicts and all their baggage of experiences. It is not only a physical space, but above all a mental one, because it is most strongly defined by the human mentality. The topic of Donbass and its inhabitants is not new to Ukrainian literature, it has existed in it for over a century. In the article “Donbas: crisis of identity,” Yaroslav Polishchuk quotes *Almanac Literary Donbass* and reminds that Donbass began to be written in the 1940s (Polishchuk, “Donbas” 16). More publications and magazines were created over time. As we have already written, the situation of the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine has caused an extremely lively interest in the history, culture, and identity of these lands. A good example of this are the novels we analyze, in which the authors deal with the image of Donbass developed over the years. These are mainly metaphors relating to the steppe landscape, Soviet industrialization, extremely hard physical labor, the crisis of the post-Soviet period, dehumanization and existential void (Polishchuk, “Donbas” 14–15). The works analyzed by us make extensive use of them, trying to deal with the history happening in front of our eyes. They are characterized by the creation of an inextricable weave of modernity and Soviet times. The authors, as it were, stand apart between the two realities, trying to find a place for themselves in them. As noted by Yulia Ilchuk, Zhadan “shows the persistent presence of transit zones between the present and the past” (Ilchuk 259). This is clearly visible not only in the *Internat*, but also in the collection of poetry *Zhyttja Mariji* published in 2015, in which the author combines the spiritual dimension with the struggles of war life. In it, the writer also uses the metaphor of the house, showing how its meaning is gradually transferred from the sacred sphere to the profane. Zhadan moves from the image of the house to the non-home, and also, as Alla Demchenko notices, “an anti-death bearing death or acting as a hellish space belonging to the Devil” (Demchenko 217) and force them to confront the traumatic realities of combat, of taking lives and putting their own in jeopardy. In the orderly life of a local teacher, he finds an apparent stabilization of his home, he temporarily renounces his home only when he can try to save his humanity. Himself temporarily homeless in his three-day journey, Zhadan’s main character comes across homelessness all around.

Iljukha: Donbass dreaming

Literary figure of home house figure is at the foundation of Julia Iljukha's novel *Shidnyi syndrom*, published in 2019, which—in the form of a manuscript—received second place in the “Коронація слова” competition in 2018. What the novel shares with Serhiy Zhadan's *Internat* is a picture of quite complex family relationships and the fate of those who happened to be living or stayed in Eastern Ukraine during the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian armed conflict and the emergence of separatist republics. Another aspect shared by the two novels is that their protagonists remain in a state of suspension, torn out from everyday life, forced to abandon their homes and families, and to begin their own agonizing journey. Due to this state of suspension or a form of eradication, in both novels, the figure of home refers less to the present fictional time and more to the past (in reminiscence) and the future (in dreams and fears). Like in Zhadan's novel, the protagonists' dream is to return to the safe space of the abandoned home or build a new place that could be called a home. However, because in Julia Iljukha's novel the lives of three main characters intertwine, and only one of them is originally from Donbass, their attitude to memories of home and their dreams and fears vary dramatically. At the intersection of the two novels, there is also lack of declarations of political commitment and indefinite world outlook of the main characters. The war forces them to revise their attitudes and reflect on the way they act and, at the same time, everything they do is driven by private, personal motives and their main longing is to return to a normal life rebuilt in the conditions of peace.

Serhiy Zhadan's *Internat* is firmly rooted in the climate of the positional warfare in eastern Ukraine. The author shows the tragedy of military operations from the perspective of an ordinary inhabitant of the territory affected by the political conflict, who finds out that suddenly his house is in the middle of a very sensitive area. The inspiration for the final form of *Internat* was the Debalseve offensive.

The novel *Internat* is spanned by the protagonist's departure from his family home to bring back his nephew from the boarding school under fire and come back home with him. The domesticated space occupies an important place in the narrative; however, the writer is far from idealizing it. On the contrary, showing the life of the house and its inhabitants, it reveals various aspects of the existence of a post-Soviet man, a resident of Donbass which continues to be a theatre of war. Traditionally, home was the center of the world which revolved around

it. Home gave shelter, a sense of security, being the most important point of reference. Józef Tischner emphasized the fact that home constituted an area of private familiarity (see Tischner). It provided opportunities to withdraw from the world and shelter from other people, strangers, from what was yet undomesticated. In Zhadan's novel home is the only part of the protagonists' "own territory," it separates them from the rest of the world and allows to apply their own rules. Even if not everyone accepts them.

Beata Spieralska, in "Dach nad głową. Pojęcie domu w językach indoeuropejskich" draws attention to the connection between human personality and the inhabited space. Moreover, the researcher points to the notion of home as a form of reflection of the personality, embedded tastes, concepts, and ideas (Spieralska). Such construct of home is one of the aspects of the world of Donbas described by Zhadan, because it is in the description of the way it functions that we learn about Pasha's mentality, his values and everyday life of his family.

The home and the homeland

By constructing the space of home in his novel *Internat* the way he did, Serhiy Zhadan endowed the space with the task of a detailed description of life in Donbass. He used the space of the house to create a symbol of the condition of the people of Donbass. It is tightly knit with the history of this land and with the persistent questions about the identity of its inhabitants. These issues are also part of the image of the main protagonists. They constitute a part of the main character's internal debate, the subject of Pasha's conversations with his nephew, but they are most likely to make themselves felt when Pasha is stopped at successive checkpoints and he must answer the question—"Who are you?". His teaching profession identifies him more accurately than nationality. This attitude prevails not only because of fear but is also a reflection of the way his family home has operated for years, which, unlike many other literary images, is not a model of the cultivated Ukrainian tradition.

Magdalena Sulima writes: "[T]he word 'home' sounds similar in many languages: in Farsi it is *dam*, in Greek *domos*, and in Latin *domus*. We associate them all in with the concept of construction or building: a man is at home because he built a house or had it built. A house is a specific space, separated and inhabited by people where they feel at home, protected from the outside world." (Sulima in Cisło 82) The

house that the Pasha family lived in was not built with their own hands. Its history is closely linked to the history of Donbass. The house was built after World War II by German prisoners of war. The protagonist values it highly because he associates the fact with solid construction and meticulous execution of the building works.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the house is stigmatized by someone else's history, and not always easy. It is not a place in keeping with Ukrainian traditions and customs, not a house and location carefully chosen by later residents. The writer has shown this cutting oneself off from one's tradition of being rooted in the land when he gave an account of what happened to Pasha's family next-door neighbor. When the part of the building he lived in burned down, he did not try to rebuild anything or settle in again, he simply boarded a train and left, thus cutting himself off from the space he had inhabited for years. The building was part of a housing estate built around the station and subjected to its rhythm. The collapse of the industrial and railway infrastructures associated with the socio-political changes of the nineties was closely connected with hard times for the inhabitants of the area. The next storm they had to face was the Ukrainian-Russian war. It was the war that forced the main protagonist, against his will, to leave the family home and set off on a journey to bring home the nephew from the boarding school. The journey, however, contrary to his expectations, became a symbolic comeback, a discovery of true values of home.

In the foreground of the account of what happens at home, there are complicated family relationships. This space seems to be lacking warmth and love. The hearth and home of the house is the TV which is never turned off. Home has been deprived of important codes, signs, meanings, and symbols attributed to an abode for centuries. One could say, quoting Le Corbusier, that it became a "Machine for Living." Residents treat it instrumentally and it may seem they sometimes treat themselves instrumentally, too. During his journey across the war-torn territories Pasha realizes, however, that the family relations are not the result of wrong attitudes, but rather the effect of struggling and hardships that people living in this territory were not spared. He remembers his childhood and events which alienated the family and which strengthened his belief that regardless of what he might do or plan, his life would take its own course.

The traumas of the war

Both Zhadan and Iljukha talk about families and individuals affected by the war conflict, raising several issues related to the identity of the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, with ideological differences dividing the Ukrainian society, they both analyze the impact of war trauma on the human psyche. They also point at the positive aspect of increasing self-awareness as a result of a huge shock of being confronted with a situation as extreme as war. The main difference between the novels is that Iljukha draws attention to the psychological effects of the war trauma on participants of combat operations. In her interviews, the author, who herself worked as a volunteer at the front lines, says that her book is about people returning from the war with their bodies but spiritually never left the war theatre. In spite of the fact that they do not declare specific political views or attachment to the broadly understood cultural tradition, the protagonists of *Shidnyi syndrom* are involved in armed struggle, supporting the Ukrainian army, though not for patriotic reasons, they experience a threat to their own lives and taking someone else's life. The war fundamentally affects their future, condemning some to fall, leaving others in a void, and giving yet others an unexpected chance for a new life.

The author avoids duplicating stereotypes and simplifying patterns that distort the image of Ukrainian society. She highlights a huge diversity in word viewpoints and extreme differences in attitudes in the assessment of current events which restricts, if not prevents communication, at the same time creating non-obvious characters which combine many contradictory attitudes. One example is Vasil, a Ukrainian-speaking young boy from the town of Rivne, who even while studying in Kharkiv, the Russian speaking city, does not give up using the Ukrainian language, which obviously causes problems. He is treated with a mixture of indulgence and contempt, like a freak: "Everyone happens to talk about him. Someone grows Madagascar cockroaches, someone does not clean teeth for years. And our Wasia speaks Ukrainian. Everyone has their quirks." (Iliuha 15) Despite the mockery and even problems with passing exams, Vasil does not give up his native language. However, he is not, as might be expected, a truly positive hero and patriot, defending his homeland with nothing else on his mind.

The plot of *Internat* develops within the space of three days, when the main character Pasha, a Ukrainian language teacher, travels across war-torn areas. Kostiantyn Wozdvestenskoy wrote: "It is a novel about

responsibility, however grandiose it could sound. Behind the line of everyday events is not difficult to see all the rest. Social conflicts in which Donbass and the entire contemporary Ukraine live. And the choice is simple: will you run away from responsibility your whole life or will you take on a little bit?" (Vozdvyzhens'kyi)

He recalls the times when he started college in the big city, and a poignant sense of alienation that he experienced there, and longing for home. Whenever he could, he would come back home but, as if in spite of what he had felt in the city, he separated himself from the family and locked him in his room, building a wall between the past and the present. The protagonist's reflections during his journey, when he faces danger every now and then, make him aware that his home, although not perfect, is the center of his world. It is where he feels safe. It is a space where every corner is familiar, a territory saturated with emotions and memories.

A house filled with a thousand meanings [...] known by heart [...]. The family you were used to as you are used to your own body. Parents—still alive and healthy, from which you are moving away more and more, who understand you less and less, although it does not worry you at all: it is enough that they are just somewhere there, not far from you. (Zhadan, *Internat* 227)

The family situation has changed significantly. His mother passed away, his sister is never there, traveling, but his father is at home all the time, and his presence consolidates this space and makes the home a safe haven: "Silent evenings, dark nights. How much fun there is in all this, how much warmth." (Zhadan, *Internat* 308) Those who travel, experiencing the horrors of war, more and more often think of home as promised land and a lost paradise. Inna Bulkina wrote that there is not so much around "hybrid warfare," but "hybrid reality that pulled Pasha out of his comfort of balancing himself into 'his' and 'not his.' These are terribly conventional categories: for him 'not mine' is everyone who is on the way home" (Vasylenko and Bulkina). The protagonists' dream is to see familiar faces. Their fear and anxiety are that their home may no longer be a safe space, that the brutal war may have crossed the threshold, they would like to prevent it at all costs and protect all the residents. The residents of the house by the station hope to save it from the war, and the experience of their travels also means that a change in perception of their own internal wars. They want to make the house and the days, weeks and years spent in it an alternative peaceful world. They realize, however, that as a result of military action, the house, too, may be destroyed.

Zhadan shows Donbass residents, rooted in the area, with all their problems, identity conflicts, and all their baggage of experiences. It is not only a physical space but, above all, psychological because it is most strongly defined by the mentality of man. The leitmotif of Donbass and its inhabitants is not new to Ukrainian literature, it has been present there for over a century. Yaroslav Polishuk, in his article "Donbas: crisis of identity," recalls Literary Donbass and reminds the reader that Donbass appeared in narratives in the 1940s. With time, more publications and magazines appeared. As we said before, the armed conflict in the Eastern Ukraine resulted in intense interest in the history, culture and identity of these territories.

The home and homelessness

The war and its effects make the protagonists homeless, drag them out from familiar territories and force them to confront the traumatic realities of combat, of taking lives and putting their own in jeopardy. The main protagonist of Zhadan's novel is not a type of free spirit who sees the joys of life in travelling the world and looking for adventure. Pasha values peace of mind and predictability. He finds apparent stabilization in the orderly life of a local teacher. He temporarily renounces his home when it is the only way to save his own humanity. Himself temporarily homeless during his three-day journey, Zhadan's main protagonist comes across homelessness all around. He encounters homelessness both in his meetings with people forced to abandon their homes, and in deserted buildings along the way. Standing blocks of flats with no signs of life, no light, with broken windows; empty houses, some concealing traces of recent crimes instill fear and disgust in him. Sometimes, however, in their temporary homelessness, the characters in the novel attempt to find shelter in such places. Nevertheless, more often they seek places that are hidden away, considered safer, consequently overpopulated, for example, basements and cellars. Their inhabitants, hiding from artillery and air force attacks try to make those closed and cramped spaces their home, camping out, as if they wanted to settle down there and feel at home for a moment, securing bedding on the floor or creating a makeshift kitchen with a camping stove.

It is the railway station which becomes the clearest symbol of homelessness, filled with women and children who have nowhere to go, regarded to be temporarily displaced persons. Terrified, tired, clutching to all their meagre belongings, as if suspended in time and space. When

they watch the horrors of war, looking out of the windows, sometimes watching their own homes burning, their belief that outside the walls of the station there is only chaos and death becomes stronger, “they sit there as if in a church in a besieged city, they think that no-one will grab them or get to them there, they look through the windows and see the world that which is becoming ever narrower” (Zhadan, *Internat* 52). Zhadan vividly compares this space to a prison for women, a prison from which they can, in fact, escape but with a high probability escape may be a true encounter with death.

Alla Demchenko finds an image of the homelessness also at the railway station in the volume *Zhyttia Mariji*. According to the literary researcher, it becomes the image of a lost paradise and a lost homeland (Demchenko 210). The researcher also emphasizes the borderline character of the space located between what is known and familiar, and all what is alien, evident also in *Internat*. As much as in the poems she perceives hope interwoven in this space, in the novel the image of the train station is terrifying and depressing.

Homelessness is at the heart of the very institution of *Internat*. After all, a boarding school is a space inhabited by children abandoned by their parents. The headmistress does not try to make it a substitute for a family but is dedicated to creating a safe space for her pupils, where they could develop to the best of their abilities. Their experience of abandonment and the stigma of being unwanted children undermines their belief that the world is a nice place. With the horrors of war, it becomes unbearable. The headmistress is trying hard to shield the young people entrusted to her care and prevent external circumstances from breaking their humanity. The boarding school metaphor applies not only to abandoned children, but to all of the Donbass’ novels. As we read in the novel, “these people have also lived for a long time in a kind of a boarding school, in a situation resembling an orphanage ...” (Zhadan, *Internat* 182).

This feeling of abandonment and desperate clinging to memories, and often also to the habits inherited from the Soviet era, has the power to save what was best in their lives: their childhood, stabilization, relative prosperity. This nostalgia becomes a kind of weapon against the uncertainty of everyday life and helps preserve the dignity of the inhabitants of a strong country, understood in its own specific way.

Yaroslav Polishchuk suggests that the boarding school metaphor should be viewed as a category of a non-place, therefore, a space devoid of any sense or destiny. An individual cannot take root in this space, remaining lonely and homeless, losing his identity (Polishchuk,

Hibrydna). This view is shared by Alla Demchenko who emphasizes the fact that “staying in such a place brings about spiritual homelessness which leads the protagonists to a symbolic anti-home” whose image “extends its limits to the concept of destroying identity [...] we are talking about a destroyed mental landscape that turns into a landscape of trauma” (Demchenko 215).

Shidnyi syndrom, on the other hand, best describes the category of homelessness as the relationship between an individual and the state in the context of war and the realities of existence following the return from the front lines. The two protagonists undergo a kind of uprooting and are deprived of what is most important to them. For both Maksim and Vasil, family life and a safe, familiar space of home had been the foundation of existence and the center of all thoughts, motivation and actions. Maksim found happiness in this space and Vasil, though the family he started was not very happy and living with his wife was rather an imitation of intimacy, he felt an obsessive attachment to the idea of the family as the only permanent point of reference. His addiction to his wife was largely due to his conformism and the need to feel safe, but the home space was a place where he wanted to return, regardless of the difficult relationships at home.

Maksim loses his family, Vasil returns to his wife, however, their post-front life together inevitably runs into dire straits because his wife cheats on him and because of a mental trauma, which the protagonist is unable to cope with. Tatiana is thrice homeless, as she has never had a real family, and the spaces in which she lived belonged rather to the category of anti-houses. Tatiana first abandons her family home, running away from the drinking and never-ending violence, then leaves her sadistic husband and also leaves Russia, in the eyes of which she is now a traitor, having joined the Ukrainian army. Tatiana has never had a real home, but the dream of home drives all her actions and influences her decisions.

The loneliness of the veteran

The motif of homelessness, feelings of being estranged and having no support is particularly important in the context of those returning from the front lines. The state for which they fought turns out to be inefficient, incapable to provide the veterans with adequate help and psychological support. Tatiana, who is trying to legalize her residence status faces mounting bureaucratic problems, making her reflect bit-

terly on the dysfunctionality and a specific “ingratitude” of the state, “those numerous legionaries who fought on the Ukrainian side initially cherished the hope that the country they were ready to die for [...] would repay them, by granting citizenship for example. But even this timid hope quickly dissipated” (Iliuha 162). The state which she and others fought for turns out not to be the home where they wait for you with open arms. Although it is dysfunctional and in many respects pathological, Tatiana finally finds shelter in her new country and a hope for fresh, and finally peaceful and normal existence. When she is given permanent residence, she tries to adopt a boy from an orphanage, beginning a new part of her life.

Administrative paradoxes are intertwined with a particularly unpleasant negative attitude of some people towards members of the armed forces, experienced by the protagonists right after they return. When Vasil steps out of the train at Kharkiv railway station, a passer-by throws insults at him, calling him “Bandera gang member” and “murderer.” These social divisions, as well as impunity for war criminals and administrative inefficiency, paint a pessimistic picture of a state torn not only by war with an external enemy but also unsuccessful both at systemic or social levels. Such a state cannot be and is not a real and safe haven for the protagonists returning from the front lines. This is clearly demonstrated by Vasil’s despair who, blinded by drunkenness, kills some people in the bar, recognizing in one of them a mercenary hired by the separatists. Vasil’s reflection, on the senselessness of war and his own (though not voluntary) sacrifice, underlines the situation in which veterans after returning from the front lines have found themselves: “Why did he give the war a year of his life, what were the secrets, shots when the enemy returns so easily to the streets of the city he defended? Why did the war take him away from himself, why did it take my soul, leaving behind a wound that would never heal again?” (Iliuha 233)

The situation of war veterans outlined in the novel is reflected in political, sociological and press analyses, whose authors point out the problems faced by soldiers returning from the front lines. Bartosz Pachuta writes:

In the soldiers voice one can hear hostility towards the authorities, there are accusations of inaction, corruption and inefficiency in finding a settlement to the conflict. It is often difficult to say where the enemy is really hiding: [...] All this negatively affects not only their physical condition but above all their mental state. [...] Will they be able to function properly again after the war? (Pachuta)

In the context of these novels, “homelessness” should be understood in a metaphorical rather than in the literal sense, since inadvertent loss of home and associated psychological processes characteristic of homelessness are not typical experiences of any of the protagonists. What should be taken into account, nonetheless, is that the very concept of homelessness is extremely complex and may be defined in various ways, while the experience of sudden political and social shock can be, and very often is one of the many reasons for losing a space considered to be home (regardless of whether it is a real home/apartment, region or state). Barbara Moraczewska, quoting the classification of homelessness, points at a category that may be defined as “short-lived,” “acute,” and “embracing people who lost their place of residence as a result of a special coincidence” (Moraczewska 115). The coincidence is not necessarily a war, confronting people with a dramatic change in living conditions, taking away familiar places and their loved ones, forcing them to stray, hide, look for new places to live, is often associated with a long-lasting trauma of adaptation to new living conditions in a foreign country, culture, or language.

Conclusion

In Zhadan’s and Iljukha’s novels, the concept of homelessness refers more strongly to the loss of the sense of security, to being temporarily uprooted and having no support, it is associated with a sense of helplessness in the face of the collapsing reality as one has known it. In the end, the protagonists either return to their homes or create new familiar spaces. Nevertheless, the war-induced condition of homelessness in both texts goes beyond the experiences of the characters and, although not explicitly expressed, suggests and is a reminder that, as a result of hostilities, including the war in Donbass, thousands of people really and irrevocably lost their homes and their loved ones. War and other social and political upheavals are incomprehensible and somewhat abstract to those who have not experienced them. Perhaps this is also why it is worth remembering that, as the author quoted above writes: “To become homeless it is enough to find oneself in an unfavorable situation which one cannot cope with alone. After all, every homeless person once had a home, family, friends, a job, dreams and hopes which were annihilated ...” (Moraczewska 123–124)

Both the discussed novels, using literary plots and protagonists, try to tell a tale about the war in Ukraine. Serhiy Zhadan depicts people

who face the war only at one of its stages. They don't know what may happen next, whether or not their homes will survive or they themselves will survive. They return home, breathe in the fragrance of fresh sheets, a symbol of love and care of the oldest inhabitant, but how long this fragrance is going to hang around in the house at the abandoned railway station remains an open question. A war, especially one that is not yet over, is difficult to describe. Urszula Jarecka says: "[With respect to] historical wars, ended and closed, their features are easier to discuss than in the case of recently ended wars or those that are still raging. This is also one of the main problems associated with discussing modern wars. Interpretation of the events cannot be entirely certain, because not all facts are known and not all contexts have been revealed." (Jarecka 96) If it is at all possible. Perhaps literature presenting individuals involved in the conflict may draw an objective outline of war, and help unravel the tangle of stereotypical ideas about residents of Eastern Ukraine, or Ukraine in general. Bartosz Pachuta said: "The conflict in Eastern Ukraine is the greatest European calamity of the 21st century to date, and its effects will be felt for a long time." (Pachuta) Contemporary Ukrainian literature is trying to confront this problem, describing several of its aspects, showing the proportions of individual tragedies and failed attempts of the government, incapable of securing safety or providing assistance. Indeed, literature is not only fiction, neither a mere comment on or reaction to events, but an attempt to change that reality.

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Dom, družina in vojna: podobe doma v ukrajinskem romanu o vojni v Donbasu

Ključne besede: literatura in vojna / ukrajinska književnost / vojna v Donbasu / dom / družinski odnosi

Članek obravnava eno najbolj perečih aktualnih vprašanj Ukrajine, trenutno vojno v Donbasu. Na izbranih primerih ukrajinske proze avtorici analizirata vpliv vojne na usodo posameznikov in njihovih družin, čeprav tema presega literarni tekst, saj se dotika pomembnih družbenih in političnih vprašanj, s katerimi se danes sooča Ukrajina. Avtorici prozo razumeta kot kulturni narativ, ki ni le način konceptualiziranja realnosti, temveč tudi realno vpliva na družbena stališča. Sodobna ukrajinska proza o vojni v Donbasu analizira številne stereotipe o prebivalcih vzhodne Ukrajine, jih prikazuje v njihovih zapletenih družinskih odnosih, zajema pa tudi enega najbolj univerzalnih literarnih motivov, in sicer podobo doma v trenutku, ko se poruši z njim povezani red vsakdanjosti. Za takšno prozo je značilna individualizirana perspektiva, ki ne želi zgolj predstaviti širšega političnega dogajanja, temveč predvsem opozoriti na vpliv tovrstnih dogodkov na posameznika. Takšna individualizirana perspektiva je učinkovito sredstvo nagovarjanja naslovnika in ozaveščanja o številnih razsežnostih vojaškega spopada, ki se odvija pred našimi očmi.

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