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Khatyn  
By Ales Adamovich

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“According to documents of the Second World War, more than 9,200 villages were destroyed in Belarus, and in more than 600 of them almost all the inhabitants were killed or burned alive; only a few survived.” *WWII Archive*.

“I jumped out of the car and began elbowing my way through microphones. ‘Lieutenant Calley, did you really kill all those women and children?’ ‘Lieutenant Calley, what does a man who killed all these women and children feel?’ ‘Lieutenant Calley, do you regret not having killed more of women and children?’ ‘Lieutenant Calley, if today you could go back to killing women and children...’” Lieutenant William L. Calley (responsible for My Lai massacre in Vietnam) in his book *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story*.

“It is incomprehensible, unfitting to think that on this planet there could be war that brings grief to millions of people.” Soviet cosmonauts Georgiy Dobrovolsky, Vladislav Volkov, Victor Patsaev in their *Public Address to the People of Earth from Space*, June 22, 1971.

“There’s already a whole platoon here!” the man in dark glasses, holding a white metal cane in his hand, said loudly. The boy in a light-blue raincoat sprang into the noisy bus in front of him, looking around for an empty seat.

The man in glasses lingered by the door, listening to the silence evoked by his voice; there were deep lines round his mouth, his face, which narrowed towards his chin, was unattractively pointed, while his forehead was wide and bulging like that of a child. His mouth quivered with the guilty smile of a blind man.

"Daddy, there's a seat over there," said the boy in the transparent raincoat and he immediately touched the trembling hand that was held out to him.

Once again the bus buzzed with noise and shouts, but that recent, sudden silence also remained like something beneath it all. The voices, the cheerful shout were too hasty.

"Gaishun, come over here, old man!"

"Flyora, come and sit with us!"

"Come on, over here!"

The man with the fixed quiet smile of a blind man was waiting for someone. The metal cane tinkled dryly and hollowly as the blind man brushed against the seat support.

A man in a sweat, wearing a crumpled cloth suit, had put a sack down on the bus steps.

"Where's this bus going to?"

"To Khatyn."

"Where?"

"Khatyn."

"Ah!" the wearer of the cloth suit drawled in an uncertain voice, picking up the sack.

A woman appeared in the doorway, wearing a flowery summer dress and carrying a bag and

a raincoat on her sunburnt arm. She climbed onto the step, her dark-complexioned face smiling at the side of the absolutely white cropped hair of the blind man.

“Glasha, come over and sit with us!”

“Come and sit here with the third platoon!”

“She’s got fed up with your lot in the forest, haven’t you, Glasha?”

Softly saying “hello”, the woman touched the blind man’s elbow, and he walked down the bus. There immediately became noticeable the leisurely manner forming a bond between them and the strained smoothness that one finds when two people are carrying a full bucket.

“Come over here, Daddy, there’s a seat here,” the little boy shouted to the man; he had already settled down with his back to the driver’s cab, pressing his palms down on the seat on both sides of him as children often do.

A very young-looking and noisy passenger got up from his seat and grabbed the blind man by the shoulder.

“Flyora, you sit with my missus, and I’ll sit with Glasha.”

“Kostya,” said the wife of the noisy passenger, reproachfully. She gave the blind man a friendly smile. “Don’t get in the man’s way. Look what you’re doing!”

The man in dark glasses held his hand out in front of him as he usually did; people greeted him, touching those thin fingers, which slightly trembled in response.

“Things all right, Flyora?”

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"Who's that? Is that you, Stomma?"

"You recognised me? Yes, old man, it's me."

"Whose head is that?"

"It's Rusty's. Do you remember who he is? Say something, Rusty."

"Make yourself known," the blind man pulled his hand back. "Make yourself known. Is it really you, Rusty?"

"Hello, Gaishun." The passenger got up a little and shook the hand of the blind man awkwardly as if it were a child's hand.

While the process of recognition was going on, the woman stood behind her husband. She was smiling, too, but she was not looking at anybody, while the dark glasses of the blind man focused on each voice attentively.

A thick-set passenger with a squint in both eyes caught hold of the blind man's hand.

A camera strap was cutting his soft shoulder in two, and he seemed somehow to be all oval in shape, bulging out of his new dark-blue costume.

"Do you recognise me? It's Staletaw."

"And you're here as well," the blind man was surprised.

"Where else should I be?" Staletaw sounded offended.

But the woman had already led Gaishun further down the bus. He brushed against the knee of a stout man, who was tall even when seated. Like a pupil who was too big for his desk, he was sitting sideways, blocking the gangway.

"Hello," said the stout passenger softly and very calmly. "Hello, Flyora," he said again.

For a moment his voice caused everything to fall silent again, as if the silence had shown through the noise like the bottom of a shallow lake.

The expression on the woman's face changed immediately and she quickly caught hold of Gaishun and whisked him forwards. She sat him down and she herself took a seat facing the driver's cab and with her back to everyone.

The little boy called out, "It's better over here, Daddy."

"Well, you sit there then!" his mother snapped at him.

The stout passenger, too, would have been more comfortable sitting by the driver's cab, facing everyone. But he did not sit there either.

...Kasach! That was his voice. The confidently quiet voice, of a man who knows and is accustomed to people always listening to him. That was a voice that I would discern among thousands.

Look what Glasha's hand was like now—it was as if she had stopped me being run over by a car!

What is Kasach like now? Well, whatever he is like, he, at least, is not blind like her husband.

The noise of the motor and the tinkling sound of the bucket under the seat drowned any general conversation. Only the most piercing or the most cheerful voices reached them, clinging to one another and overlapping:

"Last year...", "You've already got grandchildren...", "A bomb will explode, a cloud will rise...", "Well, Kostya, who do you think you are! Don't keep interrupting...", "There are Kasach's

men everywhere, I tell you...”, “No, I’ll tell him, our Chronicler, that...”, “Heh, Staletaw...”, “He’s doing exams for the Institute of Foreign Languages...”

Unreally, impossibly familiar voices from way, way back in the distant past flooded the bus. The accidental words of the present day floated on the surface like pieces of rubbish, and the familiar voices are pouring into me apart from the words, brackish and scorching....

There were about twenty of our partisans. I had already heard some of them, had picked them out: Kasach, Kostya, our chief of staff, Stomma, Rusty, Staletaw....

Kostya still had that same little boyish voice that would break into any conversation: he would guffaw, shout out surnames, nick-names, intentionally meaningless words (“You haven’t forgotten Grandpa?... Staletaw, take a photo of us for history. You do that really well... Grandpa, where did you get that hat from?... Mensch!... Don’t interfere, old girl...”).

Yes, that is what he was like, our chief of staff, Kostya; with him around, it’s crowded even in the middle of an open field; he will bump into everyone, embrace them and immediately make fun of them. He was not very respectable for his post. Twenty-two or twenty-three, he must have been. They liked him then as now for he knew his job and he knew how to fight. Just as well as Kasach.

Kasach was here, close by, behind me. “Hello!” That “hello” was meant for Glasha as well, but he detected something in Glasha’s look, and excluded her from his greeting saying, “Hello, Flyora.” Now what had happened to Glasha’s hand. It shook

with fear and became hard as it tensed up. She was sitting next to me, bolt upright and tense. I may not be able to see but I knew.

Was he still as huge and strong? His voice sounded the same anyway.

I have always wanted to know whether he himself noticed his constant irony which sometimes appeared to be involuntary.

"I can tell him straight!" a voice came from somewhere behind him. "We pulled him out from behind the stove where he was hiding, made him a partisan by force, and now..."

Who were they talking about? Whose voice was that? It was nervous, and irascible. The lads were already egging him on, our lot always knew how to do that.

"His secretary won't let you in."

"But you'll ring him up, won't you, Zuyonak? Or you'll send a telegram." Of course, it was Zuyonak. He had been the guardian of our partisan heraldry. Zuyonak always remembered exactly when, in what year and even what month people came to the partisans. And who deserved to be respected and how. The whole of Zuyonok's family had been wiped out by the Germans when in 1941 he went away into the forest. Many of our monuments have been erected thanks to his long and persistent letters. And the one we were going to unveil, too. It is the first time that I was going; when I could still see, such things were not yet common practice. Zuyonak even used to get into trouble for trying to get us together. "What kind of meetings are these? Who needs them?" they would ask.

"We'll be crawling along till nightfall at this speed!"

"Oh, Grandpa here is used to aeroplanes!"

It was Zuyonak's idea as well that we should call at Khatyn at the same time although it was not exactly on the way to our partisan country. For me it was especially important to visit Khatyn. Although what would I see there? I would not see what there is there now, but what was there before. I know our Khatyns... I know that..."

Grandpa who had been in charge of supplies in our partisan detachment kept on worrying whether we would manage to get there and back in time, and whether that would make us late. How old was he? He had seemed an old man to us even at that time. When he spoke it was like someone eating a hot potato, making hoarse sounds, blowing and wheezing after every word. And there was the uncertain chuckling of a bustling, good-natured peasant. Somehow Zuyonak had managed to get us all together in this coach, those from the town and those from the surrounding area.

"Never mind," someone responded (it appeared to be Rusty), "they have waited longer for us."

You could even detect certain irony in Rusty's voice. This is probably something he had acquired after the war. Formerly they had all played tricks on him and he had just snuffled through his peeling nose and promised:

"Next time you try it I'll punch your nose!"

"What kind of monument is that, Zuyonak?" someone asked from the back seat.

"A burial mound built up by schoolchildren."

“And what kind would you have liked?” shouted Kostya Chief of Staff.

“For some reason I did not think about it when we were walking—do you remember—through the burning marshes. We walked round in a circle as if on a string.

The faces flash in my memory as if they are being shuffled like cards but none of them fits the voice with the quiet cough.

“It’s all the same for the lads now.” (Grandpa.)

“All the same, no, not quite!” (Stomma.)

“I would not like to lie under one like the one we saw last year.”

“Zuyonak, take people’s wishes into account!” (Kostya Chief of Staff).

“No, but do you remember Chertovo Koleno, how we walked around through the smoky marshes? When you tell people, they don’t believe you!”

Who is recalling that burnt-out swamp at Chertovo Kolyeno? That voice has such a familiar, gently subtle cough. Can it be Vedmed?

Well, of course, it is! What is he like now, I wonder, without his cartridge belt across his chest and round his waist? It was very uncomfortable and impractical to carry cartridges like that for they used to go rusty and in battle you had to pull them out one at a time and push them into the magazine, into the cartridge-chamber. By the First World War a convenient cartridge clip had already been invented; you put it in the slot, pressed it with your thumb, and immediately the

rifle was loaded with five cartridges. But Vedmed stubbornly dragged his belt around with him as if he were dressed for some film, and he himself was thin and stooping and wore glasses. His thoughts were not about impressing the girls like those of the scouts and aids-de-camp who sported weapons and belts for the purpose, but on being fed. Any peasant woman immediately saw that he was a fighting man and gave him something to eat or was it perhaps a passion for the cinema already burning in Vedmed's sickly chest? We went to the cinema once and when the film started Glasha exclaimed softly, "Oh, Flyora, our Lev Vedmed must be the producer of this film!"

I usually go to the cinema with Syarozha. We would go in right at the beginning of the performance, so that the audience was not bewildered by the fact that someone who cannot see has come to the cinema.

To begin with Syarozha whispers to me what is happening on the screen until I catch what the authors are trying to say and then I help him to watch it, listening to the film as if it were on the radio. Some films seem to be made for me for everything is explained out loud and is obvious. But when the audience suddenly fell silent in front of a screen that had become dumb—and all that could be heard was hundreds of people breathing, just as happens before you cry out in a dream—then my own screen would switch itself on and light up, I would perceive my own picture against the background of the sudden shouts and shots coming from their screen. I could see what no one else could see.

"Are you a partisan as well. Uncle?" Syarozha pestered Staletaw who had moved over to the driver's cab, and now I could hear that he was sitting opposite me.

"We're all partisans here, laddie." Staletaw had not appreciated the question. "And are you a Pioneer?"

"Of course, I am." Syarozha was indignant as well.

"Don't get your shoes on the gentleman," Glasha warned Syarozha. From the moment she had seen Kasach, everything in her seemed to have hardened; I could hear it in her voice.

"Were you one of Kasach's men, too?" Syarozha tried to find out. If he starts bothering you, then you've had it.

"Oh, no," Staletaw was gladdened by the question. "I belonged to the Stalin Detachment."

Staletaw was now sitting facing Kasach; and they could see one another. He had a peculiar sort of squint, towards the sky and towards the ceiling.

"Nor is your Dad any kind of Kasach man, he's from the Stalin Detachment."

It is one and the same: according to our papers we belonged to the Stalin Detachment, but in the villages they probably remember Kasach's men now."

That Staletaw was a fairly exotic specimen, even among such a variety of people as the partisans were.

At first, when the mischievous instructor from Germanised schools who had travelled around the area giving lectures on "Hitler the Liberator", was

brought into our camp at Zamoshievo, he was a podgy fellow with eyes that appeared at that time to be squinting with fear. But they did not shoot him; they left him in the brigade (he proved that he had supplied those in the landing force with a typewriter and some kind of stationery to boot), and then we found out that his eyes were naturally like that. Naturally like that and, as it turned out, very much in keeping with Staletaw's nature.

In the wake of that fear-filled squint Staletaw was overtaken by a rush of enthusiasm that swamped us all to such an extent that the lads did not know how to get away from him. He would steal up to Rusty, Zuyonak or Vedmed and would stand in front of them, looking adoringly at them and squinting at the sky. Their heads definitely, it seemed, were up there somewhere in the tree-tops of the forest. He made you feel like an idol basking in worship.

"What do you want?" the partisan would ask, surprised by this attitude towards him.

"Me?... Nothing. Perhaps you'd like some lunch as well? I'm going over to the cook-house."

"Why not, get me some. Yes, get me some, old chap."

Once we returned from an operation and Staletaw was nowhere to be seen, either in our dug-out or anywhere close by. He was at the camp but he no longer seemed to be taking any notice of us. It turned out that Staletaw was already working as a clerk at headquarters, or to be more exact, as a chronicler. He had managed to persuade someone who had come to us from the brigade

HQ that it was absolutely vital to write down the histories of our detachments. The front was already rolling forward, other brigades will suddenly start thinking about it and there we are, ours will be all ready.

Staletaw no longer toadied to Vedmed, his squinting eyes moved to others; somehow they did not seem to pick us out any more.

That man did indeed have strange eyes. He seemed to be measuring you, setting you up against something invisible, pulling you upwards slightly like a tailor straightening out your collar or the back of your coat; but his eyes seemed to sentence you, even exhibiting disappointment, as if saying, oh dear, you're just not up to it! Not good enough for history, is that it? He would pull you up straight yet again with his glittering black eyes, which seemed at times like those of a madman, but there was a smile in those eyes, so subtle and derisive. You cannot deceive me, you know. He would cast his eyes upwards to the sky one last time, leaving you standing there as if in front of a swiftly departing lift. Any phrase would make him prance with excitement as he enthusiastically incriminated people: "Oh, no-o!" If you were to tell him that it was 12 o'clock, he would immediately incriminate you by saying, "Oh, no-o! It's two minutes to twelve!"

No one knows how the chronicle of the brigade turned out. He was suddenly thrown out of Kasach's headquarters just as rapidly as he arrived there. Kasach made no bones about doing things like that, and his protector in the brigade HQ did not help Staletaw either.

It came to Kasach's ears (they had been grumbling in the villages) that "one of your lot with a squint" had beaten up some old fellow, had threatened the womenfolk with a rifle, and had tried to put someone up against the wall.

"We are fighting here," Staletaw tried to justify himself, "and some chap is sitting over there, hiding behind his beard, and you're supposed to go and liberate him. I wouldn't let them all go back."

"Fighting, are we?" Kasach inquired again. "Well then, go and fight. You can compile your history later on. To begin with, put him in the guardhouse!" So Staletaw did "make history", only not the kind of history he was so anxious about.

We joined up with the army. Some went to the front, others started to get the economy going, and suddenly there was a hitch with those who had stayed in the area to work. Staletaw's file came to the surface and it turned out to contain such things (especially about Kasach and about the others, too) that when they summoned the lads, they did not even begin to read it out loud, but just ran their fingers along the lines. They could not bring themselves to utter the phrases that Staletaw claimed to have heard in our detachment. It is hard to say what he actually heard there and what he made up. The partisans really did discuss all sorts of things, sometimes very heatedly and openly. He possibly heard something at headquarters as well. But, it appears, he put too much arsenic in it: one deadly dose of arsenic is fatal, but ten doses may just cause vomiting and clean out your stomach straightaway. You couldn't bring half a detachment back from the front anyway. The matter was dealt with by someone who was no fool. Staletaw had

to try to vindicate himself, for the “Hitler the Liberator” lectures as well. For a long time, nothing was heard of our Chronicler but suddenly he turned up reading essays on the radio and writing articles. He had come to life! He even published a brochure on the heroic deeds of the members of the landing force (those to whom he had handed over the typewriter). Soon Staletaw began to appear at meetings. I did not go to the early meetings but I heard that Staletaw had appeared, that the eyes of the Chronicler, squinting towards the sky, were again filled with rapture and adoration. At first, I don’t think they stood on ceremony when it came to reminding him of the brigade’s “history”, but it looks as if they have got used to him again. Our hot-heads do not bear grudges.

“Oh, no-o,” Staletaw drawled, as if testing the reaction of those in the bus, “No-o, your Dad and I are partisans, and not some kind of” (Kasach’s men, but he did not say it).

They were already singing songs, two or three at the same time.

It was a while before it dawned upon Syarozha that his father was different from the others. And when his child’s heart finally perceived it—he once looked up and suddenly understood—he screamed and cried; it was as if from that moment on that everything happened to me: “Who did it to you, Daddy? Don’t be afraid to tell me. It was the Germans, wasn’t it, the Nazis? Tell me, please tell me!” He ran over to his corner, grabbed his German-made red clockwork windmill and began to break it, crying loudly, and threw it on the floor. Glasha and I tried to assure him that his toy was made by other Germans quite different ones....

From that time on, not a day passed that Syarozha did not begin to talk about my “little old eyes”. He and I discussed a plan as to how I would be cured and see him with his freckles and his black eyes. Syarozha laughed uncertainly when I told him how he would appear before me and I would fail to recognise him.

The first operation three years before was a failure. I decided to have another one for Syarozha’s sake. He and Glasha came to see me at the clinic and talked a lot. Syarozha laughed excitedly, lie was quite sure that, when they took off my bandages, I would be able to see him and to see everything again. Then they took me home still in that same darkness. Glasha wept softly and stroked my hand. Syarozha sat in front, next to the taxi-driver, and I could not hear a sound from him.

Syarozha never spoke about “my little old eyes” any more. Sometimes I could discern from the way he breathed, from his sudden sigh, that he was looking at my face, studying it sorrowfully. My eyeballs began to hurt me and they definitely became rounder. It was even suggested to me that I should have them removed to stop the pain, but I did not consent, for Syarozha’s sake, as well.

Today Syarozha was cheerful and full of beans; he was going to the former haunts of the partisans and he was, moreover, among people who needed no explanation as to who his Daddy was. On the contrary, he could listen to what they had to say and ask them questions.

The noise of the engine drowned the voices in the bus. We were going into the forest, and, when the trees parted, a field opened out. I could clearly

discern the voices, even on the back seats. All the time, I was trying to imagine what each of the people looked like. I compelled myself to make allowances for time, for it was twenty-five years since I had seen them.

I imagined myself just a decade ago as well, what I was like when such a thing as a mirror still existed in the world, and reflected in the mirror was a pale, narrow-faced man with swollen eyelids, with the hair on his temples turned white and with deep, arched lines round his mouth which sustained a guilty smile.

Glasha married a man like that but she probably saw me in some other mirror, not such a pitiless one. In her memory I was connected with her girlhood. And with many other things as well, with Kasach, too. But how she hates him! Or she is afraid of him? She is afraid of herself. No, it is I who is scared. A cowardly and envious blind man! And an ungrateful one.

While I was still like everyone else (my eyes only began to become red and hurt suddenly from time to time). Glasha and I did not get on very well together: what brought us together, divided us and tormented us, was our time in the partisans together, it was Kasach. We did not talk about it, we did not recall it aloud, but it was ever present. When the most awful thing happened to me (over a period of six months), it was as if Glasha had become someone else, her voice, her hands, the way she touched me had all changed. And she herself wanted to give birth to Syarozha.

Once again Kasach was next to us. He was behind us, he had sat behind us all the way. I could

feel that Glasha had not forgotten that even for a moment. How silent she kept, all tensed up. I myself had insisted that we should go to this meeting when Zuyonak wrote to us. Glasha did not want to, but Syarozha and I insisted. I was doing it in revenge for all that had happened before, to spite myself. That is a blind man's gratitude for you....

The bus buzzed with loud, cheerful conversation. It is always easier for me when people are distracted like that, then I could observe them instead of them observing me.

"Under him even that one sat in the waiting-room as good as gold." (Zuyonak.)

"That's how it was, one in front of the other! In our village there was one..." (Grandpa.)

"Suvorov talked about China... Do you know what Suvorov used to say?..."

He was here, too, Ilya Ilich, our company commander. Gypsy-like with that small beard of his, he always had a little book in his pocket or in his bag... God alone knows where he used to get those books. In the villages they had smoked the last bibles already in their hand-made cigarettes.

"Let's have a singsong!" Kostya, our chief of staff, shouted now and immediately began singing "Oh, what a welcome there will be at the station when we come back with flying colours!..."

Kasach remained silent. He alone was not drawn into the loud conversation. It was interesting what he would have said and how, what he had been thinking all those vociferous years. Immediately after the war he worked at the local Soviet's executive committee, then he was made manager of the peat factory and later chairman of a state

farm. What he was doing now I did not know, nor did Glasha. For all that, they had incriminated him for being taken prisoner by the Germans and possibly for something else contained in Staletaw's notorious file. He himself was a sufficiently complicated person with surprising traits of character. It was the first time that I was attending a partisan meeting, but I could already see (from the conversations, the rejoinders, and from his deep silence) that they were not making much of an effort to converse with him, nor he with them, for that matter. He had never been sociable and companionable, he was not like Kostya, our chief of staff. It was probably because in our minds Kasach was linked with much that did not dispose one to cheerful gossip, things that were buried deep down in our memories. War is war, but in the company of Kostya, it was a completely partisan war, with noise, anecdotes and recollections of all kinds of adventures; with Kasach you recalled something quite different, more drastic and poignant. Kasach was not inclined to pride himself upon and boast about his exploits as a partisan like the rest of his men did, nor did he tend to see those partisan days in an increasingly romantic light as others did, as the years went by. He was going to this meeting like a stranger. Anyone regarding him from outside would decide that he was the only one who was not one of Kasach's men.

I have heard or read somewhere that people who have known each other in especially agonizing and degrading circumstances are not very keen to meet afterwards. It happens now and then, but not more often. It is difficult, even impossible to live with your secrets constantly, bared as if they are

concealed in an open basket. The families of such people are seldom friends. I myself was acquainted with two men who had survived Auschwitz in the same barrack. They would bump into each other in the corridor or the smoking room at the teacher-training institute and would sometimes check the camp numbers stamped on their arms with a definite lack of concern ("I'm 120 thousand people younger than you..."), but you could tell from their conversations that they knew nothing about each other, not even on which street each one lived.

What's the use talking about it, I would not tell Syarozha everything either (even when he becomes a student), although we do not apparently have anything to hide or be ashamed of. I know for certain from my own students that there are some things that you cannot communicate to those who have not experienced anything like it.

My third-year students heard about an incident when the commander of a partisan detachment, ambushed by the Germans and trying to avoid an encirclement which meant sure destruction, allegedly ordered a child to be killed that kept on crying in its mother's arms and betraying the detachment's movements. They told me the story indignantly. But it was an interrogation as well to find out how I would be able to answer with my "universal science of psychology". They were convinced that after this incident the detachment would most certainly break up, for people who have betrayed and lost sight of the purpose of their struggle would come to hate each other and themselves and their very lives bought at such a price. Just as indignant as they were that such a thing could happen, I could not agree for all that

that it would have ended like that. I reminded them of the defensive mechanism of the psyche without which war would be unthinkable in general, unendurable for man.

I did not see the faces of my students, but for the first time I sensed—from the tone of some of their voices, and from the reticence of others—not simply disagreement, but antagonism. It seemed as if my blindness itself, my dark glasses were unpleasant, repulsive. No, they would not have given way to any “defensive reaction” if they had been in the place of that detachment.

And thank God for that. Although too many things recur in life, they were right in not wanting to believe that such a thing had happened for all that. Spring that does not wish to know that autumn and winter recur is right. Youth is right which does not want to believe that life began in just the same way for others. Blessed is the river that takes its source from a pure, clear spring; even if the spring were to know that the lower reaches of the river are befouled, this would not make its waters turbid. The river can be cleansed. That would be quite pointless, however, if it were not for the initial purity of the spring and the underground sources that fed it.

The first person I was in love with in the partisans was not Glasha at all. My love for Glasha which came later seemed to take source in my adoration of Kasach. Yes, Kasach! Boyish and funny as it was, with its reveries, fantasies, grievances and joys, you could not call it by any other name but love.

Even before I joined the detachment, I had heard a lot of things like: “Kasach’s men, oho, they don’t

take just anyone!", "Armed like commandos", "All Kasach's men are experienced soldiers, they know how to fight!", "Kasach's men are waging battle", "Kasach's men, Kasach's lads..."

I did not simply dream of becoming a partisan, for quite a few of them passed through our village, but one of Kasach's men for sure.

I managed to get hold of a weapon without which you could not even ask to join him. Fedka Sparrows' Death told me how to do it. He, the son of the collective farm's book-keeper, had freckles all over his face like the speckles on a sparrow's egg. He was only fourteen years old, two years younger than me and, in order to make my constant advantage in that appear less, Fedka kept on trying to find things to boast about. This time he pulled two small hand grenades, out of a hollow in a tree trunk and showed them to me as I stood under the tree.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked with a proud ring in his voice.

My amazement must have been so delightfully gratifying to him that he decided to finish me off. He took me into the marshes. From beneath an uprooted tree stump he pulled out, wrapped in a piece of tarpaulin, what I had long dreamed of, a rusty rifle, its butt rotting slightly, but the genuine article nevertheless. Now even a fool could have seen that the advantage I gained from being two years older was sheer presumption and effrontery on my part.

"All right," said Fedka, becoming kinder, "they've got plenty where this came from."

I was perplexed.

“The little old dead men,” Fedka explained. “So what?”

Involuntarily I glanced at my fingers which immediately opened out and which had suddenly become sticky. This was why the wooden parts of the rifle were so black, as if they had been scorched.

The next day we set out for the graves. There were many of them in the pine forest on the sand dunes. This is where they buried them in 1941. They were interred where they were killed, each in his own trench. The battle thundered on for a long time here in Polesye, among the forests. The Germans had already taken Smolensk, but here in the forests and swamps they were checked by armoured trains and the cavalry of Oka Gorodovikov with his big moustache.

The yellow sandy mounds of the trench graves had settled, grown over with heather like a camouflage net disguising them. Fedka sat down under a bush and had a smoke.

I stood in front of him with the spades, ready to beg “Better not do it!”

“Well?” he inquired sullenly,

I did not know what he meant.

“Have you hired me? Arbeiten!”

I, most likely, blushed.

“Give it to me!” he tore the spade out of my hand. “Dead men don’t get tooth-ache!”

The damp yellow sand, bright like fresh blood, gradually built up around us and we kept going deeper and deeper down into the ground. I sprang out of the trench suddenly for the earth seemed

to be moving away, sliding slipperily under my bare heels.

“You running off for some water?” Fedka shouted scornfully.

“It’s cramped with both of us in there,” I explained, choking on my sticky saliva.

Fedka threw something black like a piece of burnt paper out onto the yellow sand.

“This is a German the buttons are German there’s not a thing here!”

“Why?” I forced myself to take an interest, although if I had been alone now I would have liked to have left, to have run away. I had the feeling that I had lost something for ever.

Fedka banged about in the pit with his spade, trying to detect the sound of metal.

“I’ve already told you! They don’t have them in their graves. It’s a proven fact. They buried their dead without weapons.”

A sound like the thud from wood thundered in my cranium. Fedka looked me in the eyes.

“Little helper, eh! Well, get on and fill it up. Am I your slave?”

He walked away to one side and lay down with his eyes shut, and I began to fill the pit up with the already dry sand.

It was not until we dug the third pit that the spade (his, not mine) rang out as it struck something. At this, point, I forgot about everything else.

The rifle was lying in fresh sand and we were standing over it. The metal, was so rusty that it was yellow like a buttercup in spring, and the

wooden parts of it which were as black as coal were impregnated with the odour and dampness of death.

“We’ve got it,” I cried out.

It was with this very rifle that I asked to join Kasach’s men. (I had to put a new canvas strap on it).

I did not begin by telling Mum, knowing how difficult it was for her to make such decisions, but got straight down to business. Twice we went (and we took Fedka with us) to saw down telegraph posts. The lads we knew who were with Kasach were rewarded with cartridges for taking us with them. Fedka hid them away somewhere. But Fedka was again racked with envy,

“It’s all right for you. You haven’t got a father.”

But I did have a mother. I summed up my courage, summoned all my ingrained fearlessness of a rather unsatisfactory pupil and told Mum that her son was a partisan.

My little sisters, twins of seven, examined the partisan who had suddenly announced himself in their family with enthusiastic and pitying expectation, for they thought that he was going to cry now. Our Mum was quick to go for the belt and even for the stick. Then she herself wept, but you would be likely to howl before she did.

This time she was the first to cry. She wept softly and helplessly, looking at her twins’ little mugs, flat like saucers, casting a glance round at the walls, and the corners of the house, as if the family needed to run away immediately, to leave everything.

She went into the kitchen without uttering a word. She busied herself there around the stove and wept, and we talked in whispers.

“Will they give you a horse?”

“I’ll get one myself. Kasach’s men get everything themselves.”

“Will you let us have a ride on it? Will you sow the seeds in our kitchen garden? Otherwise it will be hard for Mummy.”

“I shall come and do it. You’re a partisan’s family now.”

“Mummy’s crying.”

“She always does... When Daddy went away to fight the Finns she did as well... You were too little to remember that.”

Our twins were not regarded as beauties, even Mum would speak of them with a pitying smile (when they were next to one another it was hard not to smile): “Good heavens, little old ladies are growing; its bad enough having one, let alone two.”

I loved their flat faces with their thick lips although I often used to shout at them, like a bad-tempered lout when they would not leave our band of kids alone. But in our own home we were friends. Anyone would have been touched by that pair of submissive smiles on those kindly little mugs, a double portion of respect for an older brother.

Now, when Mum cried and looked at them in that way and at the walls, I felt guilty. For the first time it struck me well and truly how everything might end. These were times when no family could feel safe, let alone partisan families, who needed a great deal of luck and good fortune if they were

to survive, for the Germans hunted them down all the year round."Come on, let me sew your father's collar on for you. Get up in the loft and bring it here," said Mum, turning towards us from the stove; we had immediately stopped talking. "Some devil will find it and take it anyway. Or they'll burn it."

I rushed out into the inner porch and flew up the ladder. Among some rags near a deck-chair I unearthed the sleeve of an old jersey reeking of tobacco. The sleeve contained the only valuable our family possessed, an astrakhan collar rolled up in tobacco leaves to protect it from the moths.

Mum sewed the collar with its gleaming black curls onto my faded red-brown school coat, while we sat by there in a communion of silence and expectation. Mum's straight, thin shoulders shuddered with the cold, and I ran and brought a warm old shawl from the cupboard. When the shawl was round her shoulders, Mum's figure did not seem so angular and she seemed to become kinder through and through, more sorrowful and pensive. It was when she was like this, with the shawl round her in the chilly dusk, that she would tell us about life in the town, about her youth, and about father. (I came from the town, but my little sisters were born in the country. My father himself had requested the job at the tractor pool and he was manager there right up until the war with Finland started. Then something incomprehensible and stunning happened—he was taken prisoner. Two letters had arrived from somewhere in the north before the new war started.)

Mum's shawl and the astrakhan collar that Father had bought for his coat were all that was

left of our “manager’s” life style. We had begun to sell our things from the town even before the war started.

Mum finished sewing, and she looked at my coat with the luxurious collar and even smiled, “It came in useful at last.”

Gladdened by her smile, we hastened to try on the coat: the twins held it like a fur coat for a rich gentleman to don, and I was ordering them about like valets. The astrakhan smelt of tobacco as if it has already been worn. It probably seemed like it to Mum as well.

“You’ll smell of Dad’s tobacco.”

I breathed in deliberately cheerfully and loudly and smelt it, afraid that she would start crying again. My little sisters poked their noses, in as well, but I ordered them to wipe their noses first, and they wiped them obediently.

The first days and weeks at the partisans’ camp were for me a veritable feast of things to learn. Discipline in the detachment was almost like that in the army, Kasach’s men prided themselves on this for all their neighbours to see. But they were partisans all the same; everything they did was with inventiveness, cheerful swearing and with a small portable gramophone with one record for all moods “Stop being angry, Masha”. This “Masha” sounded different when things were going well and when the dead were brought back and the partisans wandered round the camp gloomily and without saying a word.

We, Kasach’s men, loved to see ourselves as others saw us. Once a captured polizei man, told us how he had hidden in the cellar and how he

had heard us attacking from there, what we had shouted, our very words. We used to make a special effort to go and listen to the man and, being aware that he had hit the nail on the head, he did his utmost to make up the most complicated swear-words that we were supposed to have said.

It was considered obligatory to fight in a cheerful manner. It was only the beginners who described the fighting seriously and in detail; Kasach's experienced men talked of it as amusing, almost ridiculous adventures. Someone would come tearing along, having barely hooked it from the Germans, his eyes each as big as an apple, but he was already thinking up a story, trying to find something funny in what had happened just as if he had been playing some kind of cruel, but cheerful game with the Germans. If it had not turned out all right and the Germans had made our tails hot, that was made out to be funny too. And only when the dead were brought back, it was best not to go near if for some reason you had not been involved in the fight, for they would bite your head off as if you had been a stranger. In the evening they would sing songs softly and listen pensively as a prewar baritone assured Masha that "our life is splendid on sunny days".

Kasach was respected in the detachment, perhaps even feared, but feared very much in a partisan way, too: they would say that that was just the kind of handling they deserved, that you should look sharp and be able to slip away even from Kasach, otherwise you were not Kasach's man!

All the same, there was something about him they did not understand, even I noticed that. Yes,

he was tough, perhaps even too tough, but then he was brave, and Kasach's men knew that he would never leave them lying there wounded as others sometimes did; even when we were ambushed no one would have dreamed of breaking loose and running unless commanded. The courageous man would not run because he was courageous, nor would the coward run because he was a coward and he knew that Kasach would decide his fate for him.

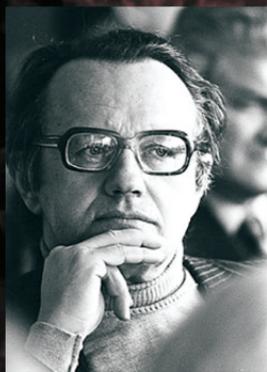
But that mystifying smile of his, the ironical attitude it revealed towards everything, whether good or bad! That smile annoyingly made everyone and everything level. It was as if Kasach only saw and remembered you when you were in front of him. Each time he appeared to be noticing you for the first time.

But perhaps this did not disconcert others. But I, I was in love, you see!

There I was, standing at my post near the headquarters' dug-out. The camp was slowly falling asleep, and the unsaddled horses under the awning were sonorously sorting through the dried clover. Someone was walking towards the headquarters, making the last year's leaves, which were slightly stiff with frost by evening, rustle loudly. In the chilly twilight I recognised the big figure of Kasach in his short sheepskin jacket and cap with ear-flaps.

"Who goes there?" I called menacingly, glad that he would hear me, my partisan's cry, but I was a little shy. For I had recognised him, and he knew that I had recognised him; it was as if I was suggesting we played a game. "Password!" I demand, more softly this time.





## Ales Adamovich

Known for his straightforward character, Ales Adamovich (1927-1994), an award winning Belorussian author, screenwriter and literary critic, was an active public figure and teacher in the former Soviet Union where he wrote his most influential war novel *Khatyn*. During WWII he fought as a partisan; this experience became the basis for *Khatyn*. After WWII he went on to receive his PhD in philology from Belorussian State University and also took graduate courses in directing and screenwriting

at the prestigious Moscow film school VKSR.

Ales Adamovich's works are still read widely and his legacy continues to be an important milestone in Belorussian history. His fiction and non-fiction titles make a profound case against the necessity of war, and are a testament to the kind of knowledge and wisdom being vastly sought after today.



Based on previously sealed war archives and rare witness records of the survivors, *Khatyn* is a heart wrenching story of the people who fought for their lives under the Nazi occupation during World War II. Through the prism of the retrospect perception as narrated by the novel's main character Flyora – a boy who matures during the war – author Ales Adamovich beholds genocide and horrific crimes against humanity. The former teen partisan goes back in time and remembers atrocities of 1943. The novel's pages become the stage where perished people come to life for one last time, get to say their last word, all at the backdrop of blood chilling cries of women and children being burned alive by a Nazi death squad that, accompanied by the Vlasov's unit, surges a Belorussian village.

The first edition of *Khatyn* was censored and the reader outside USSR never saw the original. Forty years later Glagoslav Publications releases the unaltered version of the novel as was the author's intent. Today the book is part of Belorussian cultural heritage and its actuality is even more so apparent - having marked the zones of fire on the world map, the ongoing blood baths have scarred the surface of our planet, begging mankind to "never again".

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