



Ales Adamovich

Khatyn

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2nd Edition

КХАТЫН

by Ales Adamovich

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TRANSLATED BY GLENYS KOZLOV,
FRANES LONGMAN AND SHARON MCKEE

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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?”

“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.”

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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 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 Byelorussian 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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