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Kharkiv of the 1920s–1930s in Ukrainian Autobiographies of the Twentieth Century

In the 1920s–30s Kharkiv was the capital of Ukraine, a powerful intellectual, cultural, scientific, industrial and financial center of Ukraine. State authorities, numerous scientific and educational institutions, theaters were located in the city. Thanks to constructivism, the architectural style of Kharkiv was changing. There were many literary and artistic associations in the city (Pluh, Hart, VAP-LITE, VUSPP, Prolitfront and others). The literary portrait of Kharkiv of that period appears from numerous autobiographies of Ukrainian scientists, writers, cultural figures who lived and worked in this city in the 1920s–30s. From the Ukrainian autobiographies of the twentieth century, Kharkiv of this period appears as a place populated by active, effective, creative people who constructed a new reality, built a new life according to new rules. Significant literary loci of the city for Ukrainian autobiographers of this period are the House of Blakytnyi, the Peasant House, the Literary Fair quarter, the Slovo House, the Berezil Theater. From 1933, all spheres of life were strictly controlled by the authorities, many leading figures of that period were repressed, and every mention of them was prohibited. The Soviet system gripped the city.

Autobiography, as a story of the life of a real person, reproduces various content stages, such as: the author's family life, his everyday, cultural, intellectual, professional, social, political life. One of the components of the autobiographical text is autobiogeography,¹ which includes all the geographical areas that somehow affected the life of the autobiographer. The geographical space in which the autobiog-

rapher was at one time or another could significantly influence them,² because the autobiographer was not just in a certain geographical space, but also in the historical, social, cultural space. The autobiography of each autobiographer is unique and inimitable, however sometimes the autobiographical markers of different autobiographers can overlap in one geographical space, which becomes

¹ There are other terms for this concept, such as autogeography, author's geobiography, personal geography of the author.

² More about this in the publications Regard 2000, Soubeyroux 2003, Collot 2021, Dupuy 2019, Westphal 2007, Lévy 2016, Moretti 2000, Cherkashyna 2022.

decisive for those who share it at the same time. This is what Kharkiv of the 1920s–30s became for a significant number of famous Ukrainian figures of that time.

Kharkiv is a large city in the north-east of Ukraine, founded in 1654. It is the main city of Sloboda Ukraine (Slobozhanshchyna). During the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries Kharkiv was a city with its unique material and spiritual culture, the center of the Kharkiv Cossack regiment, later Sloboda-Ukrainian province.

In 1804, with the foundation of the Kharkiv Imperial University,³ Kharkiv became a university city, thanks to which it received a significant further development. Already in the late nineteenth century the city was a powerful trade and industrial center, and the center of active intellectual and cultural life.

Many events in the history of Ukraine were connected with Kharkiv. The city survived revolutions, civil war, interventions of the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1919, the Bolsheviks proclaimed it the capital of Ukraine, in 1923 this status was officially confirmed by the decision of the Council of Peo-

ple's Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR and the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, and a new stage of development of the city began.

Kharkiv of the 1920s absorbed the best that was in Ukraine at that time. Extraordinary figures, creators of a new intellectual and cultural reality were gathered in one city at one time.

The city paradoxically combined two mutually opposite sides. On the one hand, the all-powerful state apparatus, represented by numerous government agencies, security agencies, industrial departments, trade unions, which regulated and strictly controlled the construction of a new post-revolutionary Soviet life. On the other hand, the development of free intellectual and artistic life, which, in turn, also created a new reality.

Since the 1920s, the city housed the Central Executive Committee, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, the Council of People's Commissars, the headquarters of the Southwestern Front. According to Iurii Shevelev's recollections, the move of state authorities to the city significantly changed the mental landscape of the city:

The commissars were the bosses, they ruled because

³ Now the V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University.

they had mandates to do so, they issued decrees, they carried out requisitions and confiscations, they wanted peace without annexations and contributions. The workers themselves even became proletarians, and their class enemies were the bourgeoisie and individual bourgeois. The program was to reconstruct the country in order to build socialism and communism, and to destroy capitalism and the remnants of feudalism (Shevelev 2001).

On June 1, 1923, after the item 'Kharkiv as the capital of Ukraine' appeared on the agenda of the meeting of the political bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine, several research agencies where famous scientists of that time worked – such as the Academy of Sciences, the Ukrainian Institute of Physics and Technology, the Ukrainian X-ray Academy, the Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion and other scientific institutions – opened in Kharkiv.⁴

⁴ More about this in the autobiographies of Dmytro Bahalii (Bahalii 1927),

At the same time, an education reform was carried out. Numerous institutes emerged from the Kharkiv Imperial University, which was closed in 1920 – the Law Institute, the Medical Institute, the Veterinary Institute, the Pharmaceutical Institute, the Institute of National Economy, the Institute of Engineering and Economics, the Institute of Political Education, the Kharkiv Institute of Public Education, in total 23 new higher educational institutions were created on the basis of the former faculties of the Kharkiv Imperial University.

Many autobiographers, including Vasyl Mynko, the author of the autobiographical story *My Mynkivka* (Mynko 1981a) and the book of memoirs *Red Parnassus: Confessions of an Ancient Pluhman* (Mynko 1981b), recount this 'new' Kharkiv, now a capital. Describing his trip to the city in 1921, he left an interesting topographical portrait of Kharkiv of that time:

The window of my room on the fourth floor overlooked a wide square. In its center stood a clumsy wooden building – a tram

Mykhailo Hrushevskiy (Hrushevskiy 1926), Dmytro Zatonskyi (Zatonskyi 2007), Iurii Shevelev (Shevelev 2001).

control room [...]. To the right, across the square, there was a long banner with the inscription: 'Peace to houses, war to palaces!' And to the left, on the bank of the Lopan, there was a large multi-storey building with a sign along the entire facade. On a red background it read: 'All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee', the highest body of Soviet power in Ukraine (Mynko 1981a: 175).

As Dokiia Humenna recalled in her multi-volume autobiography *The Gift of Eudothea*:

At that time, Kyiv was stagnating and sinking deeper and deeper into provincial life. No industry was developed in Kyiv, no construction projects. What was started before the war was overgrown with grass and woods, like in my neighborhood on Levashivska Street. This was explained by the fact that Kyiv was a center of reactionary petty-bourgeois elements, while Kharkiv was full of dynamism and new revolutionary forces (Humenna 1990: 99).

According to the famous researcher of Ukrainian literature of the 1920s Yaryna Tsymbal, 'Kharkiv, or rather the metamorphoses that it experienced during some ten years, really captivated, fascinated and "dictated" itself as a theme' (Tsymbal 2020: 55), as a result, the city quickly got its literary biography. The 'Kharkiv text' has firmly entered the literary imagery of the time: 'Kharkiv was the center of literary life at that time, and writers could not but refer to the image and theme of the city they lived in, so every second urban work is about Kharkiv' (Tsymbal 2010: 55). The literary biography of the city was also reproduced in numerous autobiographical texts written and published during the twentieth century in Ukraine and abroad.

Some of the autobiographers (such as Mike Johansen, Yurii Shevelev) were native Kharkiv citizens, the new history of the city was created before their eyes and in their autobiographical works they could compare the life of Kharkiv in different periods of its existence.

Kharkiv as a theme of a large canvas has been of interest to me for a long time, and it interests me not because I know it

best, I was born there, spent my childhood, studied. Of course, this also matters, but the theme of Kharkiv prevails over the others mainly because this place – which today hosts industrial giants, who meet at the former meeting place and gathering place of merchants – more than any other, was affected by the creative and life-giving power of the proletariat. Where there was an old city with dilapidated shacks and huge garbage dumps, a new and gigantic city has appeared, equal to, and in some ways even exceeding European ones. Those who know the old Kharkiv will not say that this is an exaggeration. I am not talking about the tremendous changes in life that have occurred during this time. Even in our new buildings, I have not seen such amazing metamorphoses in life as in Kharkiv (Johansen 1936: 2).

Other autobiographers (such as Volodymyr Gzhytskyi, Dokiia Humenna, Vasyl Mynko, Yurii Smolych, Vasyl Sokil, Volodymyr Sosiura) came to Kharkiv when it became the capital of Ukraine, so their autobiographies are full of references to the first acquaintance with the city, the first impressions of it. For them, as, for example, for Vasyl Mynko, post-revolutionary Kharkiv

was associated, first of all, with the capital of Soviet Ukraine, ‘a symbol of a new life, a better future and the inevitability of revolutionary transformations in the social, economic, and spiritual spheres of human existence’ (Mynko 1981b: 39), because ‘the brightest pages of the national history of the early twentieth century were written in this Slobozhanskyi city: Mykola Khvylovyi, Les Kurbas, Oles Dosvitnyi, Volodymyr Sosiura and others lived and worked here; the literary and artistic organizations, the VAPLITE, the world-renowned Berezhil theater were formed and broadcast their ideas here’ (Mynko 1981b: 39). Yurii Shevelev, a native Kharkiv citizen, was convinced that the city of that time was not suited to be the capital:

The large industrialized village of Kharkiv was not built to be the capital of Ukraine, much less was it provided for this purpose, because the new regime was a regime of unheard-of centralization and bureaucratization of life. In particular, with the cessation of private initiative, all enterprises, except for small crafts, were subject to a central apparatus that had to manage every

plant, factory, and commercial establishment. This apparatus had to be placed somewhere (Shevelev 2001).

The lack of premises to accommodate public administration, industrial associations, for the life of numerous people who daily filled the capital city was very noticeable and all autobiographers without exception mentioned it.

There were essentially only two large and modernly equipped buildings in the city – the ‘Salamander’ and the ‘Russia’. True, they were residential buildings, and their bathrooms, kitchens and storerooms were not provided to the institutions, but there was not much choice. It was decided to throw all the residents out of the ‘Salamander’ and transfer all the accommodation to the ‘heads’, then to the ‘trusts’. [...] It was the time of so-called ‘densification’, a family should not have more than a room, and it was a blessing when they could have a room. All kitchens became communal. Other rooms were given to whoever hap-

pened to have a warrant, and suddenly the residence became a cluster of families that had nothing to do with each other, and the kitchen became a communal hell (Shevelev 2001).

In 1923, the legendary lines of the Ukrainian poet Pavlo Tychnyna appeared, who, having arrived in the capital city, asked him ‘Kharkiv, Kharkiv, where is your face?’. And gradually, thanks to numerous constructions, it began to appear.

The Old Kharkiv, merchantly multi-storeyed in the center and miserably one-storeyed on the outskirts [...] was slowly changing its face. At first, when a new building appeared, it was the number one event. Such events related to buildings were: the palace of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee, which appeared in 1922 on Tevelyev Square, on the site of the former house of the noble assembly; the stock exchange (not the labor exchange, but the stock exchange that existed during the NEP) – in 1925, the sunny and slen-

der Derzhprom, which was built in the pasture behind the university garden. Simultaneously, new residential buildings appeared here and there (Mynko 1981b: 270).

We can also find a portrait of the new capital city in the autobiography of Dokiia Humenna, a writer who lived in Kyiv at the time, but often visited Kharkiv on editorial and literary matters:

Kharkiv was growing and expanding into the steppe. Here, away from the border, plants and factories grew, here were the capital's buildings, at least the House of Industry, which Kharkiv residents were so proud of as a miracle of modern construction, with a colossal square in front of it... these new streets and houses in the steppe [...]. This is an industrial capital in the steppe, and I am walking in a new city... I don't know anyone here yet. But I feel this other atmosphere, other people. It is no longer a dreamy, forested Kyiv with blooming canes in the streets, with blossoming chestnuts, with sanatorium air, but a dynamic industrial

steppe city with streets lined with buses and trolleybuses, with fast cars (and in Kyiv you will see cars here and there), with accelerating and stubborn winds, with dust, with two faces: the provincial city of yesterday, disappearing before our eyes, and modern slender buildings, squares in the distance, surrounded by factories and plants. Kyiv suits me better and I immediately began to long for Kyiv. But... Here is life, writers have already fled here, here is the pulse of the whole Ukraine... (Humenna 1990: 111–12).

During the 1920s–30s, a new face of the city was formed, a new city center was built with the largest square in Europe, the Dzerzhinskii Square (now Freedom Square), a complex of buildings in the style of constructivism⁵ was built around it, such as Derzhprom (House of State Industry), the House of Projects, the House of Cooperation, the first Soviet skyscrapers, which became a symbol of the power of the Soviet Union.

⁵ More about this can be found in the project 'Constructivism. Kharkiv' (Constructivism. Kharkiv n.d.).

The unusual plan of its construction was caused by the need to fit the building into a semicircle of a round square. The building of Derzhprom consists of three H-shaped blocks with long, radially arranged buildings connected by a kind of passages-bridges. There is a legend that the different heights of its blocks correspond to the notes of the 'International'. Reinforced concrete, from which Derzhprom was built, was a relatively new material, so the methods of calculating its structures were developed directly during construction (Formuvannya ukrai'ns'koi' identychnosti 2006).

In parallel, at the same time, a complex of other city buildings (administrative, educational, residential) was also built in the style of constructivism, in particular, the residential quarter 'New Life', now known as Zaderzhprom (modern Science Avenue, Chichibabin street, Romain Roland street, Culture street of Kharkiv) was built directly behind the Derzhprom. The transport system of the city was also being rebuilt:

They dismantled the horse-and-track city road. The tram network was slightly extended [...]. In winter, the trams were not heated, the windows were covered with a thick layer of ice, and the floor was covered with icy snow. But trolleybuses were brought, and they ran from the station along Katerynoslavska and then Sumska streets, in the wake of the former horse-drawn carriage, and two or three taxis even appeared on Mykolaivska Square (Shevelev 2001).

According to the autobiographers, under the pretext of the arrangement of the capital city, there was also destruction, especially of churches.

One of the first churches to be blown up was St. Nicholas Church, which had previously been a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church and enjoyed unusual popularity among Kharkiv residents. It was destroyed under the pretext that it was obstructing the straightening of the tram line, and it was also written that it was against

the building of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee, and this could not be tolerated. Many more churches followed. I had to witness the destruction of the Myrrh-bearing church,⁶ the closest to us (Shevelev 2001).

Despite the great development of the city, the enthusiasm for the creation of a new post-revolutionary Soviet reality, the native Kharkiv resident Yurii Shevelev defined grey as the typical colour of the city:

Grey took over the behavior of people and their clothes, and it harmoniously entered the cityscape. Women's hats disappeared, no one could even think of going out with a veil on their face, manicure was forgotten. Men's so-called caps replaced hats. Ties became rare. Surdutas were forgotten, the so-called sweat-

shirt or plain shirt, of course not embroidered, spread. In winter, both men and women wore cotton woolen jackets, and leather jackets became a sign of the new elite in the process of formation. [...] In the grey city, it was not possible to be colourful, people had to become grey, and they did (Shevelev 2001).

According to Vasyl Sokil, 'the cultural life of the capital was developing rapidly, dynamically, promisingly and diversely. Literary life was full of discussions, oral and printed' (Sokil 1987: 69).

The researcher of Ukrainian literary life of the 1920s Rostyslav Melnykiv noted that

From the summer of 1921, in Kharkiv, the capital of Soviet Ukraine, Volodymyr Koriak, an active participant in the literary process of the first revolutionary years, a former fellow party member of Ellan and a recent tsarist political officer, has been gathering around the newspaper, *News of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee*, edited by the famous poet Vasyl El-

⁶ The Myrrh-bearing Church has existed in Kharkiv since the end of the seventeenth century, it was named in honour of women-myrrh-bearers. It was rebuilt again during the era of independent Ukraine, during 2013–15, away from its historical place, because during the Soviet era another building was erected in its place.

lan-Blakytnyi, a leading figure of the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionary Party, Mykola Khvylovyi, a volunteer of the First World War, a rebel against the Hetmanate and a communist since 1919, Volodymyr Sosiura, a recently demobilized Red Army soldier, and not so long ago a Cossack of the Army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, and Master Mykhailo Johansen are all almost the same age, with such different and at the same time characteristic destinies, in love with the word and full of creative, bubbling energy and faith in themselves, in the Ukrainian word, in the renewed Ukraine. It is with their direct participation and assistance that the literary process begins. It is already interpreted by literary critics as one of the most interesting phenomena in the history of Ukrainian literature (Melnykiv 2013: 15–16).

A significant role in the literary life of Kharkiv of that time was played by the House of Blakytnyi, the Peasant House, the quarter called 'Literary Fair',

literary loci that are mentioned in almost every autobiography.

The history of these literary loci began with a small room located in the central part of the city at Sumska Street, 13, where at that time the editorial offices of the newspapers *News of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee* and *Peasant's Truth* were located. Vasyl Ellan-Blakytnyi was the editor of the *News of the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee* newspaper. He became the founder of the Union of Proletarian Writers 'Hart' and held the first literary parties of Ukrainian writers in a small room of the editorial office. Here was organized the union of peasant writers 'Plough', whose chairman was Serhiy Pylypenko.⁷

According to Vasyl Sokil, 'the most prominent center of cultural and public life in general, not only in Kharkiv, but in fact, throughout Ukraine, was the House of Blakytnyi' (Sokil 1987:

⁷ Subsequently, other literary associations emerged, such as VAPLITE (Free Academy of Proletarian Literature), VUSPP (All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers, which later became the Union of Soviet Writers of Ukraine), 'Avangard', 'New Generation', 'Molodniak', and others. As Rostyslav Melnykiv noted, 'each of the organizations had its own printed organ, which were formed according to artistic, aesthetic and political preferences' (Melnykiv 2013: 18).

69), located at 4, Kaplunivska Street (now 4, Arts Street). 'All the main events related to the development of Ukrainian literature of that time took place in it. There were fierce debates in the stormy passions, at that time especially sharply caused by the combat pamphlets of Mykola Khvylovyi <...>. Mykola Skrypnyk was an indispensable participant and active speaker. And especially important meetings were attended by several secretaries of the Central Committee and members of the government' (Sokil 1987: 70).

In 1929, the World Congress of Progressive Writers of Capitalist Countries was held here, among the participants were French writers Henri Barbusse and Romain Roland. Maxim Gor'kii repeatedly performed in the House of Blakytnyi. It was in this house that the legendary billiard duel between Mike Johansen and Vladimir Maiakovskii took place, in which the latter lost and was forced to crawl under the table, which was mentioned by almost all autobiographers of that time.

In 1922, the Union of Peasant Writers 'Pluh' also received a separate spacious room for 200 people on the ground floor of the former inexpensive hotel with rooms for peasants who came to local fairs, at 4, Rosa

Luxemburg Square (now 4, Pavlivska Square). This locus was then known as the Peasant House. Literary parties, known as 'Pluzhanski Mondays', chaired by Serhii Pylypenko, also took place here.

The 'Literary Fair' quarter⁸ quarter was the name given to the area of the central part of the city, from Sumska Street to Pushkinska Street, from Theater Square to Myrrh-bearing Square, the place where numerous newspaper and magazine editorial offices were located, as well as the large 'State Publishing Association of Ukraine'. According to Iurii Smolych's memoirs, 'on the sidewalks of these three blocks, one could always meet someone from the writers and editorial staff: literary news and editorial sensations were exchanged here. Here one could 'sell' and 'buy' poems, short stories, plays and novels' (Smolych 1968: 25).

In autumn 1926, Les Kurbas's theater 'Berezil' moved from Kyiv to Kharkiv. Before that, according to Yurii Shevelev, 'there were actually two theaters in Kharkiv: a drama theater on Sumska Street and an opera the-

⁸ From 1928, the name 'Literary Fair' was also given to the literary revue of the literary organization VAPLITE and its supporters. It was published from December 1928 to February 1930.

ater on Rymarska Street' (Shevelev 2001). These theaters staged plays exclusively by foreign playwrights, and Russian troupes were frequently on tour. The appearance of the 'Berezil' theater in Kharkiv was perceived by the citizens ambiguously. According to Yurii Shevelev, Kharkiv citizens did not accept the first performance of the theater, the hall was almost empty, but over time Les Kurbas and his troupe were able to win the love of the public and each premiere of the theater became a real event in the cultural life of the city.

According to Vasyl Sokil's observations, it was 'the time of enthusiastic hobbies! The first Ukrainian opera house! The first state theater! Ukrainization! Urbanization! We are creating a new culture, a new theater, a new art!' (Sokil 1987: 65), 'freedom of relations, freedom of behavior, freedom of creativity, freedom of discussion, that is, everything that is inherent in a democratic system' (Sokil 1987: 82).

We are reading the advertising page: in the 'Berezil' theater, from November 29 to December 5, 1927, there will be performances of the opera *Mikado* by M. Johansen and O. Vysh-

nia (after Salivan), the drama by I. Dniprovskiy *The Apple Captivity*, the tragedy by Karpenko-Kary *Savva Chaly*, the eccentricity by V. Yaroshenko *Hooligan*, the melodrama by V. Hugo *The King is playing*. New premieres are announced: *Armored Train* by V. Ivanov and *Sadie* by V.S. Moem, in which, as Mykola Khvylovyi later wrote: 'Uzhviy was going crazy and "Berezil" gave the illusion of an exotic downpour' (Sokil 1987: 66).

Kharkiv citizens accepted the innovative theater of Les Kurbas, his bold directorial decisions, original interpretation of roles by actors, colourful stage design. 'The performances of "Berezil" were really the holidays of Ukrainian cultural life of those times. And everyone was impatiently waiting for new premieres, new creative discoveries of the famous theater directed by Les Kurbas' (Sokil 1987: 76).

In the late 1920s, the 'housing issue' became important for the writers of that time, who mostly lived in rented rooms or were 'crammed' in communal apartments in Kharkiv. For example, Pavlo Tychyna, who moved from Kyiv to Kharkiv to head the *Red*

Way magazine, lived in a small editorial room.

In the mid-1920s, writers living in Kharkiv at the time appealed to the government to build them a cooperative house. The government agreed, part of the funds for the construction of a cooperative house for writers was allocated by the state, the rest of the writers had to raise on their own and pay off within fifteen years. In 1927, the construction of this house began in the upland district of Kharkiv (at the time the outskirts of the city) in Bairachnyi lane (later Red Writers Street, now 9, Culture Street). The house was built in the style of Kharkiv constructivism.

In 1930 the construction was completed and 66 apartments received their first owners.

The house was built in the shape of the letter 'C', which is why it was called 'Slovo' [Word] ('Слово' in Ukrainian). According to the memories of one of the first residents of this house Volodymyr Gzhytskyi:

The House of Writers 'Slovo' deserves close attention and to be remembered dearly. Sixty-six writers with their families lived in this beautiful house. It was like one big family. For the three years

that I lived there, I do not recall any conflict between families or individuals. The angel of peace seemed to hover over the house. [...] People of different literary groups lived in 'Slovo', but this could not affect human politeness. Meeting in the courtyard or in the city, the inhabitants greeted each other amiably as cultural people, although they may have been fundamental antagonists (Gzhytskyi 2011: 305–06).

'It was a cheerful, friendly, joyful house. Open to all, hospitable' (Sokil 1987: 85), wrote another first inhabitant of this house, Vasyl Sokil, who at the same time noted that

this house is waiting for a chronicler who will be able to write everything about this house, from its first days to the last.⁹ I

⁹ The chroniclers of this house will appear later. The history of the life of this house during the first seven years of its existence will be written by Volodymyr Gzhytskyi (Gzhytskyi 2011), Yurii Smolych (Smolych 1968, Smolych 1969, Smolych 1972), in 1966 Volodymyr Kulish's memoirs *Word about the House Slovo* (Kulish 1966) will appear. Already in our time, the Internet projects 'ProSlovo' (ProSlovo n.d.) and 'Con-

confess that I am incapable of doing so, because it is impossible to contain in one work all the short-lived joys of the early years with the endless tragedies that took place within the walls of this famous and God-cursed house (Sokil 1987: 84).

The autobiographies of the first inhabitants of this house provide a detailed description of it:

The house had five floors and 68 rooms. It also had five stairwells, or entrances, as they were called in the 'Slovo'. Each entrance had access to the street and the courtyard. [...] Each dwelling consisted of five or four rooms. The rooms faced the yard and the street. [...] All dwellings had a bathhouse, a dressing room, a kitchen with a small stove and it had to be heated with coal or wood. [...] The house

structivism. Kharkiv' (Constructivism. Kharkiv n.d.). In 2017, a documentary film directed by Taras Tomenko *The House 'Slovo'* will be shot about the history of this house and its famous inhabitants, in 2019 Taras Tomenko will shoot a feature film of the same name. Kharkiv Literary Museum will prepare and publish a board game dedicated to the Slovo House and its inhabitants.

had central steam heating (Kulish 1966: 10).

There are basements and semi-basements around the perimeter of the house. A bomb shelter was made under the first entrance before the war. Under the second and third there was the stoker of the house. And in the semi-basement of the fifth entrance, two apartments were turned into a dining room for the residents of the house. [...] A solarium was built on the roof above the first and second entrances. The front door was made of massive oak. A large garden with flower beds was laid out next to the house. It had a spacious yard, part of which was intended for volleyball, and in winter this area was flooded with water for skating. The whole house, garden and yard were surrounded by a low brick fence (Sokil 1987: 85).

Among the first inhabitants of the house 'Slovo' were primarily writers, poets, playwrights, artists, composers, actors, people who knew each other well, who together created a new reality.

'We all had great hopes... We had great hopes. It was a time of great hopes and unfulfilled expectations. And even some believed (as I am a sinner) that it was a time of great opportunities' (Sokil 1987: 88). Numerous stories of love, hunting, and mischief of the first inhabitants of the 'Slovo' house are described in detail in the autobiographies of Ukrainian authors¹⁰. The free development of literature and art lasted until the end of the 1920s, and in 1930 the state system began to strengthen punitive measures. One after another, high-profile public trials began to take place, the participants of which were accused of espionage and harmful counter-revolutionary activities. In 1930, the infamous trial of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine took place on the stage of the then Capital Opera (Kharkiv Opera House), tickets to which were distributed free of charge through trade unions to employees, workers, students.

¹⁰ See the autobiographies of Ostap Vyshnia (Vyshnia 1927), Mike Johansen (Johansen 2009), Valerian Polishchuk (Polishchuk 1997), Volodymyr Sosiura (Sosiura 2010), the memoirs of Volodymyr Kulish (Kulish 1966), Volodymyr Gzhytskyi (Gzhytskyi 2011), Dokiia Humenna (Humenna 1990), Yurii Smolych (Smolych 1968, Smolych 1969, Smolych 1972), Vasyl Sokil (Sokil 1987) and others.

Many people witnessed this process, so it is documented in many memoirs of eyewitnesses.

On the dock, you see, there were pests in various spheres of life: science, culture, medicine, education, industry, agriculture with detailed branches such as agronomy, seed production, mechanization, livestock, beet growing, etc. Sitting on the stage of the opera house were the main leaders, under whose leadership, allegedly, hundreds and thousands of members of criminal organizations were acting in schools, institutes, collective farms, hospitals, factories... Everywhere and anywhere they 'fiercely resisted socialist construction, sought to disorganize and destroy the entire state system on the instructions of Western intelligence'. The process of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine ended with a famous sentence (Sokil 1987: 89–90).

From 1931, mass arrests began, people disappeared one by one, according to the memoirs of autobiographers:

For five short years, from 1931 to 1936, a lot of disasters were committed in Kharkiv. They extinguished everything good, ignited disaster... The suicides of Mykola Khvylovyi in May and Mykola Skrypnyk in July 1933, [...] the removal of Kurbas and the renaming of 'Berezil' to the state-owned T. H. Shevchenko Theater (yes, it must be T. H., Taras, probably, would sound too nationalistic) were loud events. But no less, and maybe more terrible for us than in their incomprehensibility and meaninglessness were the quiet events, the disappearance of people at night, the disappearance of organizations and institutions, the uncertainty – 'Is it my turn today? Or tomorrow? Or maybe never?' (Shevelev 2001).

People could be arrested even by accident, not finding someone at home (and the plan of arrests had to be fulfilled) or confusing the names, arresting the wrong

people for whom the warrant was issued.¹¹

Experimental theatrical productions were curtailed, literary organizations were liquidated, the number of literary newspapers, magazines, revues were reduced, party 'purges' open to the public began, during which the accused publicly confessed all his sins to the Soviet society.

The sinner repented and promised to reform, and each of those present had the right and was encouraged to use this right to speak against the sinner and repentant, to cite their other anti-party acts or statements, the repentance was proclaimed insincere and incomplete, the accused had not only to express all their faults, but also to 'reveal their methodological roots'. These public torture sessions dragged on for hours and hours, deep into the night, lasting many days, driving the victim to hysteria and despair, and the accusers to sadistic frenzy (Shevelev 2001).

¹¹ Thus, instead of Vasyl Mynko, Vasyl Mysyk was arrested and sent into exile (Nykonorova 2012).

In 1933, the life of the inhabitants of the 'Slovo' house changed dramatically. The period of state control, supervision, prohibitions, and restrictions began. 'Later it became worse. Control and supervision is only a stepping stone to the final reprisal against unwanted people. Mass arrests, prisons, exile began. And executions' (Sokil 1987: 101).

The real tragedy of the 'Slovo' House began in late April 1933, when Mykhailo Yalovyi, a friend and associate of Mykola Khvylovyi, was arrested. On May 13, 1933, Mykola Khvylovyi committed suicide. The residents of the house stopped visiting each other, playing volleyball in the yard and hunting together, it became dangerous to meet more than two people. The House of Blakytyni closed. According to Vasyl Sokil, 'dark nights, black days' are coming. In the house 'Slovo', each of its residents was under strict control according to all the laws of the punitive machine.

According to Vasyl Sokil: 'From the point of view of the punitive bodies, it was a fortress of the nationalist counter-revolution, an environment of anti-Soviet conspiracies, a bastion of espionage activities of residents of all foreign intelligence agencies

that were possible at that time' (Sokil 1987: 110).

Having all Ukrainian writers in one pile, it was easier to control their lives. The NKVD¹² had its ears and eyes here, with the help of those who knew in great detail everything that was happening in the house. To this we must add telephones, which in those days were simply impossible for individuals to get. And suddenly one day, whether you wanted it or not, they were introduced in all homes. Is it worth mentioning that during the investigation against this or that writer, their telephone conversations were cited word for word as evidence for the prosecution? (Kulich 1966: 12)

One by one, the residents of the house began to disappear. During the day, they usually did not come to arrest them. Every evening the residents of the house would listen out for any noise, trying to understand who they came for this time. They went to bed in tension with

¹² People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

things prepared in advance. Psychological tension was growing, not everyone could stand it. Volodymyr Sosiura, unable to withstand the tension, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital,¹³ before that he repented in unconsciousness before the punitive machine:¹⁴

When the arrests of Ukrainian Soviet writers began, I was afraid that my faith in people was shattered. I, we all knew this person as a good, honest, Soviet man. Suddenly he is an enemy of the people. And so blow after blow, and all in the soul, the soul of the people, because writers are the expressors of the people's soul. I believed the way the deaths of Khvylovyyi and Skrypnyk were officially interpreted, and I sincerely said that I loved these people and that it was very hard for me to be disappointed in them. That I condemn their suicide as a horror of responsibility before the Tribunal of the Commune, as a shameful desertion.

¹³ This psychiatric hospital is known in Kharkiv as 'Saburova Dachka'.

¹⁴ However, even public repentance did not save him later from persecution for the poem 'Love Ukraine'.

The secretary of the district committee said that the speeches of Kulish, Dosvitnyi and Kasianenko were unsatisfactory, but she found my speech sincere and that it satisfied her. Others agreed with this (Sosiura 2010: 152).

According to the memoirs of the autobiographers, it was impossible to leave the house, to escape to other places, because it would automatically be interpreted as an admission of guilt. The doors of the entrances to the street were locked tightly, and the NKVD officers were constantly on duty at the entrance to the courtyard. The house plunged into an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, gradually turning into a dead house.¹⁵

It was dangerous for the residents to keep ego-documents (diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies), as each personal document could become accusatory material in the subsequent court case.

Many years later, with the opening of the KGB¹⁶ archives and the publication of the materials of investigative cases, researchers received more information

¹⁵ At that time, it was called by local residents the 'House of Pre-trial Detention', and later – 'Crematorium'.

¹⁶ State Security Committee.

about the fate of the residents of the 'Slovo' house. According to statistics, during 1933–1938, residents of 40 apartments out of 68 were repressed, 33 of them were shot, 11 of them (the most talented artists such as Les Kurbas, Mykola Kulish, Hryhorii Epik, Oleksa Slisarenko, Mykhailo Yalovyi, Valerian Polishchuk, Valerian Pidmohylnyi, Antin and his sons Bohdan and Ostap Krushelnytskyi, Andrii Panov) were shot in the Sandarmokh tract in Karelia on the same day – November 3, 1937, a few days earlier Mike Johansen was shot in Sandarmokh, and two more residents of the house died in exile. Some of them managed to survive and return home many years later.

During the Soviet era, references to repressed Ukrainian writers of the 1920s–30s were banned, their literary works were removed from school and university curricula and textbooks, libraries and bookstores, their publications were resumed in the era of independent Ukraine.

In 1934, the capital of Ukraine was transferred to Kyiv, and the systematic construction of a conscious Soviet society began. Kharkiv became a powerful industrial, scientific, educational, trade, transport center, which in February 2022 had one and a

half million inhabitants, was repeatedly recognized as the best Ukrainian city for living standards, had a full set of awards from the European Council. During the Second World War, the city went through occupation and destruction. Kharkiv suffered and continues to suffer significant damage due to the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. However, the period of 1920s–30s remained one of the most significant stages of the city's life, the period that determined the vectors of further development of Kharkiv, formed its modern portrait. Literary mapping of the city continues in the ego-texts of the next generations of autobiographers, and therefore can become the object of further scientific research.

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