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UKRAINIAN WRITERS' COLONIES: SUBCULTURE OF UKRAINIAN SOVIET WRITERS

Maryna HRYMYCH
Doctor of Historical Sciences,
leading research fellow of the Cultural Studies Department of RIUS

Annotation*. The research discusses an episode of the everyday life of Ukrainian Soviet writers – their stay at writers' colonies, called "Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv". Written mainly on the basis of the author's fieldwork (observation and interviewing), the article deals with the structure of the writers' community and its main features.*

Key words: *Ukrainian Soviet writers, subculture, writers' colonies, corporate folklore.*

БУДИНКИ ТВОРЧОСТІ: СУБКУЛЬТУРА УКРАЇНСЬКИХ РАДЯНСЬКИХ ПИСЬМЕННИКІВ

Марина ГРИМИЧ
доктор історичних наук,
провідний науковий співробітник відділу культурологічних досліджень НДІУ

Анотація*. У дослідженні висвітлюється один з епізодів повсякдення українських радянських письменників, а саме проживання в Будинках творчості письменників. Написана на авторських польових матеріалах (інтерв'ю та включеного спостереження), стаття визначає структуру письменницької спільноти, а також основні його риси.*

Ключові слова: *українські радянські письменники, субкультура, Будинки творчості письменників, корпоративний фольклор.*

ДОМА ТВОРЧЕСТВА: СУБКУЛЬТУРА УКРАИНСКИХ СОВЕТСКИХ ПИСАТЕЛЕЙ

Марина ГРИМИЧ
доктор исторических наук,
ведущий научный сотрудник отдела культурологических исследований НИИУ

Аннотация. *В исследовании освещается один из эпизодов повседневности украинских советских писателей, а именно проживание в Домах творчества писателей. Написанная на авторских полевых материалах (интервью и включенного наблюдения), статья определяет структуру писательского сообщества, а также его главные черты.*

Ключевые слова: *украинские советские писатели, субкультура, Дома творчества писателей, корпоративный фольклор.*

Everyday life (subculture) of artists and creative personalities, including writers, is one of the hot topics of the modern cultural anthropology.

The topic was analyzed as a qualitative study using observation notes and interviews gathered by the author. The author grew up in the Soviet writers' environment, living in a so-called "writers' village" in downtown Kyiv and spending school vacations in different *Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv* (residences where writers could stay and write). Later she herself became a writer and a member of the Ukrainian Writers' Union and had spent many hours interviewing the older generation of Ukrainian writers, on the one hand, and actively participating in the literary life of modern Ukraine, on the other.

In Soviet times, the social / professional group of writers was a corporate one, due to their belonging to the corporate organization called *Soyuz sovetskikh pisateley* (The Union of Soviet Writers), or *Spilka pysmennykiv Ukrainy* (The Ukrainian Writers' Union). The corporation of Soviet writers obtained semi-distinctive features of a separate subculture: on the one hand, it had very good connections with authorities, but on the other, it created a sort of an alternative lifestyle with values and a communicative system which allow us identifying it as a separate subculture. Not only writers were part of this communication system but also a big army of publishers, editors, journalists, and even to some extent – censors.

Stay at *Budynok tvorchosti pysmennykiv* was just an episode of the Soviet writers' lifeway, but it was essential in regard to the subcultural issue because the subculture reveals itself when its carriers are located within a closed/isolated space. For example, one of the most distinctive features of the writers' corporate subculture – corporate folklore – was transmitted and shared in the most efficient way at these social institutions. This topic in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space has been mainly presented in memoir literature and periodical press [1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11].

A network of writers' residences (as well as composers', artists', moviemakers') existed in the Soviet Union. Some of them were located in the territory of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Irpin, Odessa, Koktebel, Yalta).

Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv were maintained by the Literature Fund (Literaturnyi fond) – a writers' corporate organization which subsisted on Writers' Union membership fees [6]. The Literature Fund covered approximately 90% of the expenses for writers under the condition that they were members of the Writers' Union.

Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv might be somehow affiliated with the North American *writers' colonies* – residences providing a room, board, and an opportunity for an uninterrupted creative work (writing). Writers apply for a stay in residences at a very moderate cost which covers approximately ¼–½ of real expenses, the rest being covered by the hosting organization which collects money through fundraising.

For example, the Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow is a residency program for writers and composers in the historic arts village of Eureka Springs (Arkansas). The colony "hosts more than 50 established and emerging writers a year for residencies that vary in length from one week to three months" from mid-March through mid-December. Colony serves either as a subsidized general residency or a

Fellowship-funded stay "in the privacy of separate, individual writing suites fully equipped with bedroom, writing area, wifi, a/c, private bath, private entrance and mini-kitchens, and with all meals provided" [7].

Let's compare this information with what *Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv,* located in Ukraine, obtained in the 1960–1990s.

One *Budynok tvorchosti* could host 50–200 writers at the same time. Writers could stay there either for 1 day, 1 month, or 1 year (except summertime and winter holidays – the period of "invasion" by writers' children and wives when it was almost impossible for them to write). Usually one residence had 5–10 bedrooms, one mutual living room / lounge with comfortable couches and television. One house usually had 2 washrooms (for ladies and gentlemen). It didn't include kitchens because all writers were fed in the eating house / canteen. The canteen was the central point of a writers' colony. It was a place to eat, to read (served as a library), to watch movies, communicate, etc. In a word, it was a communal residential venue. An important requirement for all writers' colonies was their placement in very picturesque localities. The living conditions in Soviet writers' colonies can be identified as a high level of *sovok* communal life.

Writers' colonies lifestyle was non-ritualized, mainly middle-aged and elderly men oriented (except for the summer period). Its aesthetics was based on a mish-mash of *sovok* and *bohemianism / bohemia*.

There was only one time regulation at the writers' colonies: time for meals (breakfast, lunch, and dinner) was precisely restricted. The rest of the day was spent by writers according to their biological or creative rhythms: daytime or night was assigned for writing, while evenings were appointed for communication.

The process of communication included:

- customized "promenades";
- "fruit and wine" parties;
- tough male drinking parties.

The process of communication didn't only include news exchange – it was also a fruitful field for sharing the corporate folklore which is an important part of any subculture.

The dress-code in writers' colonies was informal; there was practically no special dress-code for men. For ladies (both writers and writers' wives and daughters), especially in the summertime, some customs existed: during the day, they wore whatever they wanted, but in the evening (for promenades and parties) it was appropriate to adopt a bohemian style of clothing – long romantic skirts, kerchiefs / scarves / shawls, a lot of jewelry, fancy (funky) hair-cuts.

A good knowledge of literature, the ability to participate in literary and art discussions were expected even from writers' housewives.

As we mentioned above, a very important part of the writers' subculture is folklore. Folklore performed by writers was of two types: a) general / common (writers loved to sing folk songs, romances and share jokes, including political ones); b) corporate. Corporate folklore predominantly consisted of corporate narratives: personal experience narratives, on the one hand, and legends, on the other.

Personal experience narratives' fund contained:

- scary stories,
- professional stories,
- funny stories (jokes).

Legends (predominantly contemporary legends) were of etiological / explanatory nature.

Scary stories covered such topics as: who and how passed away (suicide stories, stories about unusual death); houses writers live (lived) in; "second generation" problems.

All suicide stories in the world are very similar. The differences in the plot appeared in reasons of the suicide. In the Soviet times the phenomena of depression, overstress, etc. were not discussible. The official version was: he or she was a drinker; he or she was a sick person. But Ukrainian Soviet writers' corporate folklore explained the reasons of taking somebody's own life by political / ideological reasons. Within the Ukrainian writers' communicative system, gossips, stories, and even legends about somebody's death didn't contain the expression of the conflict between the writer, the system (authority), his patriotic (nationalistic) views, and a developed socialist "happy" reality, etc. Folklore and semi-folklore texts contained statements such as "*yoho vyklykaly v KGB"* (he had an appointment at KGB).

In our times all those stories are being told officially, publicly [3]. But in the 1960–1970s they were part of the writers' "secret" folklore.

The suicide stories within Ukrainian writers' folklore expanded on their children, which is not coincidental. Ukrainophone writers' children (children of Ukrainian writers who wrote and spoke Ukrainian at home) often lived in a stressful atmosphere of being different from other children, being little liars and conspirators since early childhood. The frequency of suicide (as well as abnormal behaviour) among the Ukrainian Soviet writers' children was also very high.

Funny stories from Ukrainian writers' corporate folklore were mainly created and narrated by men. The Ukrainian writers' community had a bunch of exceptionally talented storytellers and jokers. Some of them were very famous authors, like Oleksa Kolomiiets, while others were practically unknown as writers, like Kost Volynskyi, who was an extraordinary keeper and carrier of the Ukrainian Soviet writers' oral history.

The favourite plots of funny stories were:

- a jealous wife coming to *Budynok tvorchosti* at night to check on her husband;
- the *yurodyvi* (holy fools);
- drinking stories.

Vasyl Didenko – the author of the poetical masterpiece "Na dolyni tuman" ("Fog in the Valley") – was a person with a specific (let's say nomadic) lifestyle and eccentric behaviour. He lived in his own spiritual world and was absolutely vulnerable and inadequate in practical issues. He himself became a hero of Ukrainian writers' corporate folklore. Many stories about him have been transmitted even among modern writers.

The most popular plots among the professional folk stories were:

- who became a writer and how;
- who used to write and how;
- mischief in writers' colonies;
- publishing and censorship stories (Aesopian language stories; "writing etiquette" stories; honorarium stories);
- stories about writers' widows.

Other folklore pieces of Ukrainian writers' oral tradition contain:

- etiological legends,
- everyday life / family stories, gossip (love stories, romance stories: extra-marital affairs; narrations about animals living in the writers' colony);
- legends about origins or how things came to be.

For example, one of the favorite legends inside the writers' community is a story about the origin of one of the fancy buildings of Irpin writers' colony. The legend contains some romantic details which vary in different interpretations. The history of this folklore text is very interesting. For many years it has been part of Ukrainian writers' corporate folklore, and namely the folklore of the mentioned writers' colony. But in our days it has become a source for tourism business projects as an attraction to the locality. Besides, our writers still like to share this legend with a wide audience [8].

As we can see, the Soviet writers' colonies have created their own subculture which can be correlated with professional subcultures, Bohemian (*bohemia*) subcultures, and the Soviet resort (*kurorty*) tradition. The Ukrainian Soviet writers' subculture, on the one hand, contained general (all-Union) features of the writers' lifestyle, but, on the other hand, it had its own national specificity, strongly expressed in the corporate folklore by means of humour and the so-called "Aesopian language".

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old system of writers' unions was almost ruined, and its subculture (let's say old writers' subculture) began to disappear. Old-style writers' colonies lost their functions as places for creative work and professional / bohemian communication; they became commercial institutions, such as hotels or recreation centres for the broader circle of tourists.

In 20 years the new generation of Ukrainian writers has obtained new forms of corporate communication called "tusovky", "prezentatsii" (clubbish sets, presentations), etc. The writers' community is less isolated, that is why it lost the features of the "writers' subculture". The life of modern writers encompasses different official and non-official organizations, bookstores, award institutions, publishing houses, etc. The young generation of writers has strong intentions and inclinations to incorporate in art-projects, show business, youth movement, etc. Some of the literary organizations, like "Ostannia barykada", have created their own type of literary-artistic life, but it is still too early to identify it as a writers' subculture.

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M. Hrymych

Ukrainian Writers' Colonies: Subculture of Ukrainian Soviet Writers

Abstract

The subculture of Soviet writers had an ambiguous character: on the one hand, it had very good connections with authorities, but on the other, it somehow created alternative values, lifestyle, and communication system. "Budynky tvorchosti pysmennykiv" as a phenomenon can be compared to the North American writers' colonies. Ukrainian writers' colonies lifestyle was non-ritualized, mainly middle-aged and elderly men oriented, seasonal. It contained the features of "sovok" and bohemia at the same time. An important part of writers' subculture was folklore. Folklore performed by writers was of two types: a) general (writers love to sing folk songs, romances and share jokes, including political ones); b) corporate. Corporate folklore consisted of corporate narratives: personal experience narratives (scary stories, professional stories, funny stories / jokes) and legends. Scary stories included texts about the KGB and suicide or unusual deaths of writers. One of the funny plots about writers was about holy fools.

As we can see, the Soviet writers' colonies have created their own subculture which can be correlated with professional subcultures, Bohemian (bohemia) subcultures, and the Soviet resort (kurorty) tradition. The Ukrainian Soviet writers' subculture, on the one hand, contained general (all-Union) features of the writers' lifestyle, but, on the other hand, it had its own national specificity, strongly expressed in the corporate folklore by means of humour and the so-called "Aesopian language".

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old system of writers' unions was almost ruined, and its subculture (let's say old writers' subculture) began to disappear. Old-style writers' colonies lost their functions as places for creative work and professional / bohemian communication; they became commercial institutions, such as hotels or recreation centres for the broader circle of tourists.