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**THE MULTY-GENRE QUALITY OF CAMP LITERATURE**Elena Vladimirovna Narbut (a), Andrei Evgenievich Krasheninnikov (b)\*  
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**Abstract**

The article presents the findings of a genre analysis of contemporary camp literature. The scientific need for genre analysis is associated with the increasing complexity of this literary phenomenon. It has already developed multiple layers and become heterogeneous, as can be seen from the various genres developing within it: in addition to major genres, such as novels, novellas and plays, it embraces memoirs, chronicles, short stories, documentaries, reminiscences, notes, diaries, letters, poems and academic studies. The material of the study was the works of the camp literature, which have been published recently and enjoy a wide readership, as well as works that have been recently reprinted, this testifying to their popularity. For our analysis, we selected the most popular works of this literary movement recently published or reprinted. We also took into account contemporary translations of since these evidences their popularity both in their country of origin and beyond. Our analysis demonstrates that, as of today, camp literature is both an established phenomenon that has firmly entered world literature and an actively developing genre. We selected and analysed the works of Dina Rubina, Sergei Dovlatov, Viktor E. Frankl, Heather Morris, Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina, and Art Spiegelman. We observe further development of such firmly entrenched literary genres as the novel, the short story, etc. At the same time, characteristically, there are works that belong at the juncture of the novel and memoir genres, and the established humorous comic fiction genre is being transformed into a literary genre in its own right.

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## **1. Introduction**

Camp literature may be considered as a phenomenon that, in essence, is essentially. The entire world knows such writers as Varlam Shalamov or Alexander Solzhenitsyn, not to mention other authors who are not household names but whose works also convey profound internalisation of the existence of a person stripped of freedom.

## **2. Problem Statement**

At the same time, scholarly research into these works is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was in the late 20th century that Russian literary scholars began developing the concept of camp-themed literature as a special literary phenomenon. Lev Timofeev's article "Poetics of 'Camp Prose'" published in one of the Soviet magazines in 1991 may be considered one of the pioneering studies of the time. This article presents an earnest, even if somewhat controversial analysis of the works of Varlam Shalamov, who described life in the Kolyma prison camps (Timofeev, 1991). Yulia Malova's (2003) dissertation *The Genesis and Development of "Camp Prose" in Russian Literature of the 19th–20th centuries* constituted a certain scholarly breakthrough in studies of camp-themed literature. For instance, Malova viewed Anton Chekhov's prose on Russian convicts and the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, who had himself been imprisoned, as a prologue to contemporary camp literature.

Foreign literary scholarship uses different terms for this phenomenon, the following being the most comprehensive: Camp Literature, Gefangenenliteratur, Gefängnisliteratur, which also include such concepts as Nazi Concentration Camp, KZ-Literatur; then there is also Holocaustliteratur (Artwińska & Tippner, 2019; Filipkowski, 2019; Keßler, 2001; Weigel, 1982).

## **3. Research Questions**

Camp literature is not just an established phenomenon. It has already developed multiple layers and become heterogeneous, as can be seen from the various genres developing within it: in addition to major genres, such as novels, novellas and plays, it embraces memoirs, chronicles, short stories, documentaries, reminiscences, notes, diaries, letters, poems and academic studies.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

So, we selected camp literature works that have been: 1) published recently and enjoyed a wide readership; 2) have been recently reprinted, this testifying to their popularity.

## **5. Research Methods**

In conducting our study, we based our selection on the above criteria and applied genre analysis methods.

## 6. Findings

Before proceeding to an immediate overview of recently published camp literature, we would like to note that readers' interest in the subject is not waning. This can be seen from, among other things, the fact that various literary works with plots not directly related to imprisonment still feature prison episodes and also reference camp literature themes. For instance, Dina Rubina, a well-known master of "women's prose", inserts into her novella *Zoom In* an episode where her main female character takes a walk around a prison yard with a friend. The character herself labels this episode "exotic". Rubina paints the life of that place with rather laconic strokes: a cart loaded with barrels of pickled cabbage; an old horse harnessed to the cart; and, suddenly, a song coming from behind the bars of a cell window, "Whether it was the acoustics of the confined space that gave this voice such a flowing power or whether, indeed, the invisible singer possessed remarkable vocal chords, at that moment, I was greatly touched by that song, which was sentimental to the point of mawkishness (as all criminals' songs tend to be)". This female character was amazed by the song, which created a special harmony with the filthy prison yard and the barrels on the cart filled with stinking pickled cabbage. She was no less struck by the fact that, as her friend explained to her, the song was sung by an inmate who had committed an aggravated felony – killed a railway lineman. Rubina suggests that the readers themselves resolve the conflict between the moving prison song and the singer being a cruel murderer. It should be borne in mind that readers from different cultural backgrounds may arrive at different resolutions to the conflict: for instance, Russian culture has a powerful tradition of pitying any criminal apart from particularly egregious cases, such as Chikatilo, the proverbial serial killer.

This article will consider several examples of camp literature that are particularly popular with readers today, as evidenced by their repeated reprinting.

Of all the variety of genres and sub-genres, we would like to start our overview with works of a special kind, where the author is both a witness to camp life and the main protagonist in their own work.

Our first work is Sergei Dovlatov's novella *The Zone*, which enjoys steady popularity with readers and is just as regularly reprinted in Russia and abroad. One feature of this novella that we believe sets it apart from many other camp literature works is that it represents events "from the other side of the barricade". The main character is not an inmate but a prison camp guard, and the novella's subtitle emphasises this: "A Prison Camp Guard's Notes". After being expelled from Leningrad State University, where he studied Finnish, Dovlatov was drafted into the army and sent to the small village of Chinyavoryk in the Komi Republic to serve in the Interior Ministry troops as a prison guard at one of the region's penitentiaries. Later, Joseph Brodsky remembered that, when Dovlatov was discharged from the military, he came back "with a somewhat stunned gaze" (Brodskij, 2020); Dovlatov was a former student who had lived in Leningrad, a city nicknamed the "culture capital" (today it is St Petersburg, and still enjoys the same nickname), and now he had to see with his own eyes the many broken lives and to experience first-hand the cruel reality of life in the barracks.

The author prefaces his novella with a letter to the editor, its purpose going beyond describing the novella's arduous journey to its readers. Here, Dovlatov sets the tone for understanding the metaphysical message of his work. He argues against publishers who decided not to publish his novella since. In their

opinion, descriptions of an imprisoned person's existence (be it in a prison camp or a jail) had been exhausted and readers were fed up with it: "After Solzhenitsyn, the subject ought to be closed". Dovlatov remarks that his novella is written on a different subject from Solzhenitsyn's: "Also, our books are completely different. Solzhenitsyn describes political prison camps. I – criminal ones. Solzhenitsyn was a prisoner. I – a prison guard". Dovlatov also contrasts his metaphysical approach with that of Solzhenitsyn: "According to Solzhenitsyn, camp is hell. Whereas I think that hell is in ourselves".

Readers are also offered the excellent insights of Benedikt Sarnov, a well-known writer, literary scholar and critic, into the sources of Sergei Dovlatov's works and their nature. These insights are already manifested in the title Sarnov gave his essay: "Sergei Dovlatov's 'Theatre of the Absurd.'" The writer convincingly demonstrates that Dovlatov immediately latched on to the similarities "between two worlds separated by barbed wire", the world of inmates and the world of prison guards. First, he attempts to find the differences between the two worlds but then finally concludes that these worlds are so intertwined that the boundary between them is utterly elusive. Dovlatov's guards are no longer different from the inmates ("plaintiffs" from "defendants") not only because doom hangs equally over both groups and the tables can turn at any moment, with a guard becoming an inmate and vice versa. The key point in the connection between the two worlds is, according to Dovlatov, that their very nature is the same, this making them virtually indistinguishable: both are made "of the same stuff", of the same human material (Sarnov, 2014, p. 19–23).

Another work where the author is both a witness to prison camp life and the main character is *Man's Search for Meaning* (its original title is ...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager) by Austrian scientist, psychologist and philosopher Viktor Frankl, who was himself a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. The book is regularly reprinted and widely read throughout the world.

This book has a special feature setting it apart from other camp literature works. Its author is not merely serving time. He attempts to view this tribulation as a true scientist would be a monstrous yet scientific experiment. There have been examples in history of scientists using themselves as their own subjects in order to study a particular phenomenon. Frankl, however, had certainly not planned to take part in such a strange experiment yet, once the psychologist was imprisoned in a concentration camp, he both observed and tried to help other prisoners survive.

If we attempt to define the genre of Frankl's work, we could use Alexander Solzhenitsyn's (1977) approach to defining the genre of *The Gulag Archipelago*. He defined it as an experience in literary research: "Literary research means such use of factual (untransformed) material of life that individual facts and fragments combined by the artist's capabilities would present the main thought as fully proven, in no way weaker than in a scholarly study" (Solzhenitsyn, 1977, p. 99). Then *Man's Search for Meaning* can be classified as memoirs, with the specification that we are dealing here with an "experience of scholarly study" or even with a "living through experience in a scholarly manner".

Frankl opens up to his readers a little-known aspect of Nazi Germany's concentration camps. He does not describe their horrors, which the entire world knows to be so cyclopean that, as the author himself remarks, they have been described often enough (though less often believed). He turns to the

routine agony of everyday concentration camp life and focuses on those states and experiences of the soul of the average camp prisoner.

At the same time, Frankl touches upon dimensions of human behaviour that the reader initially would not expect to encounter in camp literature. For instance, there is a short chapter on camp humour. At first glance, this situation seems unusual and Frankl describes it as both as an eyewitness and as a psychologist. He calls upon the reader not to be surprised that, even in the midst of the concentration camp horrors, prisoners retain their ability to find humour in some moments of life. It is precisely the ability to find humour that helped many prisoners distance themselves from their situation, rising, as it were, above it even for a short time.

Frankl himself states that his book is an attempt to provide a psychological description and a psychopathological explanation of certain negative transformations wrought in the prisoners' psyches by the daily coercion and violence; at the same time, he raises the question of inner freedom as a crucial factor motivating a person to survive. Frankl notes that the state of a person's psyche in a concentration camp, their attitude to the world and to themselves are a result of their own resolution: "Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp".

Dmitry Leontiev wrote a wonderfully substantial and emotional preface to Frankl's book, giving it the telling title: "Perseverance of Spirit". Using as his epigraphs Karl Jaspers' words that a book is one of mankind's few greatest creations and Tyutchev's verse "Blessed is he who visited this world in moments of its fateful deeds", Leontiev starts by saying that the readers are holding in their hands "a great book written by a great person". Stressing Frankl's religiousness, he specifies that the book does not dwell directly on this because a person's spirituality is not limited to how religious they are: one must help people no matter which god they believe in or whether they believe at all. Leontiev (2019) recalls the lecture that Frankl gave in Moscow where he said, "In the long run, if there is a God, He cares more about whether you are a good person than whether you believe in Him" (p. 14).

The next book we deemed necessary to include in our overview is *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. It is a relatively new book, but it is already gaining popularity around the world, including Russia. It may also be classified as belonging to a special sub-genre at the junction of the novel and memoirs: the author is not only Heather Morris but also the main protagonist, the actual concentration camp prisoner Lale Sokolov, who had told Morris about his life behind the barbed wire of a death camp.

The plot of the book is not entirely common for camp literature of various genres: the conflict arises from a love story between two prisoners in the inhuman circumstances of a concentration camp. The main character, aka Lale Sokolov, is taken to one of the death camps, Auschwitz, with its cynical wrought-iron motto over its gate: "Arbeit macht Frei" (Works set you free). He swears to himself that he will survive and leave this monstrous place behind; he swears he will survive and emerge free: "If there is a hell, I will see these murderers burn in it".

One of the crucial moments in his camp existence is when he falls ill with typhus, yet miraculously survives. He was watched over by the camp tattooist and, once Lale recovered, the tattooist suggested he become his assistant. Now Lale's work is much easier: he is do the tattoos on newly arriving prisoners.

Now he is entitled to some privileges that few others have: he has his own corner to live in, he eats better food than other prisoners, and he is exempt from some restrictions on moving within the camp.

The breaking point comes when new prisoners arrive in the camp, including a young woman named Gita. Lale and Gita fall in love and, even though every day threatens death, they want to believe that they can survive in these inhuman conditions. Although Lale's situation as a tattooist is relatively better than that of other prisoners, he is not protected from the cruelty of the SS. Again and again, he risks his life to help his fellow sufferers and particularly his beloved Gita and her friends.

The Tattooist of Auschwitz also has an unusual afterword written by Gary Sokolov, Lale and Gita's son. In broad strokes, he presents his readers with memories of his family's life in the post-war years, when he was a child. He remembers their special attitude to food; he remembers hospitality and his parents supporting all Gary's hobbies.

Even so, his parents wanted their son to know what they had lived through. And Gary remembers them taking every trouble they encountered in their post-war life with equanimity. When Lale went broke once and the family had to sell off virtually everything, Gary was surprised to hear his mother singing as she was packing the remainders of their belongings. She gave him a broad smile and said, "As long as we are alive and healthy, everything will work out for the best".

Our next work is Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina's novel *Uranium* published in 2019. Its publication may mark a new trend in the development of camp literature. Some critics define the genre as a spy crime story (Yuzefovich, 2019). The novel is set in a Baltic republic of the USSR, on the construction site of a classified uranium-manufacturing plant required for the military industry. A new town is built next to it as well. As Pogodina-Kuzmina herself explains in an interview with *Literaturnaya Gazeta* newspaper (Anufrieva, 2020), major government construction projects always used prison labour to some degree. Today, however, it is generally believed that the population of those prison camps consisted mostly of political prisoners, members of the intelligentsia. Such a slanted perception emerged because the most popular memoirs about their harrowing experiences were left by Varlam Shalamov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniya Ginzburg, that is, political prisoners from among the intelligentsia. However, as Pogodina-Kuzmina notes, most inmates had been convicted for criminal offences of various degrees, ranging from criminal negligence to manslaughter.

Pogodina-Kuzmina even engages in a polemic with Shalamov and his *Kolyma Tales* to some degree: "Shalamov writes about convicted felons, 'They are not people', and it seemed to me that someone had to let those criminals speak, too". She studied memoirs of prison guards, doctors, former inmates, which allowed her to create the novel's consistent "criminal background": "Some characters, such as the enforcer Porfiry and his ideological opponent King Hunger, had real-life prototypes. Others, like Lyonechka Mai, were created by the author from the fleeting lives of many people frequently recalled only in official paperwork, in dates of birth and death" (Anufrieva, 2020, p. 10).

We decided to conclude our overview of recently published camp literature works with an example illustrating the genesis of a contemporary genre: when this particular genre became part of camp literature, some of Russia's readers were somewhat surprised. We mean the most vivid example of camp literature written in this particular genre, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: a Survivor's Tale*,

devoted to concentration camps in Nazi Germany and the subject of the Holocaust. In 1992, this graphic novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

The graphic novel is a sub-genre of the comic book genre. Naturally, comic books (the genre's name derives from the English word comic) have long time been perceived in Russia as funny creolised works. So it was not surprising that, in 2015, Moscow Book House, Russia's largest bookstore, removed the novel from its shelves. This decision was motivated by the following argument: such a grave subject should not be treated in the language of a comic book, especially since this graphic novel presents various ethnicities as different animals: Jews are depicted as mice, Poles are pigs, Americans are dogs and Germans are cats.

Although we believe that Spiegelman's choice of mice for Jews as the main characters of his comic book is no accident. As a hint, he chose as an epigraph for the second part a quote from the Pomerania Nazi newspaper: "Mickey Mouse is the most miserable idea ever revealed ... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honourable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal .... Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!".

## 7. Conclusion

Recent years have indubitably seen a large number of new camp literature books, as well as reprints of works already familiar to readers. These new works are written in a variety of genres and are also regularly translated into various languages: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* of J. Boyne (2014, 2016), *Escape from Camp 14* of B. Harden (2013), *The Choice: Embrace the Possible* of E. Eger (2017, 2020), *The Librarian of Auschwitz* of A. Iturbe (2014, 2018, 2019, 2020), *The Children's Block* of O. Kraus, (2002, 2019). Yet, the selection presented in our article also allows us to form the concept of the poly-genre genesis of camp literature. Today, camp literature is seeing both development of the established genres that are already well-known and familiar to readers and emergence of new genres and genre combinations, as well as transformation of the known genres.

Indeed, we observe unflagging interest in camp literature so we can hope for steady development of this global literature trend focused on topics that are both peculiar and crucial to understanding the human being.

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