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Lake of Love – Literary Space Transcending Cultural Boundaries: Tania Alexander's *Memoirs of a Lost World*

In my paper I argue that the influences of international community and of supra-national cultural territories in Estonia have provided an excellent opportunity for the emergence of multi-polar national identities, both fictional and factual. The former, especially, when structured around a topic or a person of significant popular interest, and set into an autobiographical frame of a memoir may develop into a stereotype and have a persistent effect on a reader.

If in Estonia it has been commonplace to stress the importance of German literature and German cultural space to the development of Estonian identity and national image, then the acknowledgment of Russian cultural influences has mostly been limited to recognizing forced russification in the Tsarist and Soviet eras.

This kind of one-sided approach risks misunderstanding identity construction, for it defines the “West” as civil, rational and supportive of individual rights and liberties, while the “East” denotes dominant, aggressive, culture-blocking ethnic-based societies clamouring about their political and cultural superiority to other people. However, when maintaining the East/West dichotomy on the perceptual political and cultural landscape of Estonia, the influence and memory of the ethnic Russians of the pre-Second World War independence, should not be underestimated. In this regard, books like Tania Alexander's *An Estonian Childhood. Memoirs of a Lost World* (1987) constitute an extraordinarily enriching piece of literary discourse on the formation of Estonian and Russian identities.

Any literary scholar familiar with the historical situation in Estonia at the beginning of the 20th century can immediately situate Tania Alexander's memoir in relation to the significant movements following World War I and the 1917 revolution in Russia, and the providential consequences these movements had in leading to the newly independent Estonia.

My aim is to illuminate the dialectical relationship between these movements and their effect on various national images created in the text which, in combination, offer different narratives to an extended identity discourse. In this article, I also argue that certain literary texts (e.g. memoirs) as well as works of visual art (paintings, photos) shape Estonians' inner sense of themselves and Estonian identity abroad much more than an isolated advertising campaign for brandy. In an ideal sense, these memoirs, paintings, and photographs can even become part of an identity-forming environment (in this context one might mention Baltic Danish artist Lorenz-Heinrich Petersen and his *Biedermeier*-style painting of the 1840s *On the Way Home*, which at the beginning of the 1990s found its way in poster form into every home in newly-independent Estonia, bringing with it a contemporary message about upholding the nation: *Let us preserve the healthy Estonian family!*)

According to Gerald Gillespie, a well known American comparatist, "all of our home cultures can be analysed as some amalgam resultant from earlier or even more recent imperialist movements" (Gillespie:5) As if following his suit, Tania Alexander, the author of *The Memoirs of a Lost World* constantly weighs the influence of Russian, German and British cultures on her own perceptual landscape and on that of the country (Estonia) in the course of 22-year interwar period (1918-1939).

Tania (von Benckendorff) Alexander (1915-2004), the author of the memoir, was of Russian and Baltic-German descent, and spent her childhood and early adolescent years in Estonia, mostly at its secluded and breathtakingly beautiful place Kallijärv near Yendel (German version of Jäneda). In 1934 she emigrated to Great Britain and was, as a result, spared the forced exodus of the Balts from Estonia in 1939.

It was also in 1939 that she visited Kallijärv for the last time, though the spell this place cast on her life proved everlasting. Tania's mother Maria (Moura) Zakrevskaya von Benckendorff Budberg – a renowned beauty and adventuress, “a Russian among Russians,” as described by her contemporaries – was connected to many political and literary celebrities of the time: Bruce Lockhart, Maxim Gorky, Herbert George Wells, to mention only a few.

In the preface of her memoir, after briefly admitting her sense of confused identity common to all the Baltics, the author nevertheless, firmly specifies her own nationality: “And yet, although I technically became an Estonian citizen, I have always felt myself to be more Russian than anything else” (Alexander, in further references A: xv;). And it is not through language that she first identifies herself, but through the place of birth, through the country itself: “Both my parents were Russian citizens by birth, my father was of Baltic origin, and my mother was a Russian from the Ukraine” (*Ibid.*) With this statement she simultaneously informs the reader about the fact that both the Ukraine and Estonia were originally Russia “...and despite the political changes [...] remained always, for me, *essentially* (my bolding – T.A.) Russian” (*Ibid.*).

Like the majority of Baltic German and Baltic Russian men/women of letters she constantly accentuates her intellectual belonging to the mother country: “I was born in St Petersburg in Russia, but as a young child I was taken to Estonia, a province of Russia” (*Ibid.*).

The author's identity construction begins from the premise that the political and economic collapse of the Baltic Russian and German nobility created a kind of *anomie*. Indeed, as a result of the land reform of 1919, about 550 baronial families lost their rights to their land, and over 1000 manorial properties were dismembered and parcelled out.. Large estates were divided into small family farms. Alexander describes how this situation increased the discursive power of exclusive identities among the Baltic aristocracy. “The Baltic society of Tallinn represented a curious paradox: while obsessed by notions of honour and feudal traditions exemplified by the Ritterschaft [...] they were now a

ruling class with nobody and nothing to rule [...] this was a world of too much drinking and easy promiscuity. The prevalent mood was one of *après nous le déluge*” (A:73). The situation of Russian nobility did not differ much from that of the Germans. Only, for them the collapse of the Tsarist regime meant the end of mother country’s support, as well. From now on the relevant context for their identity construction had to be created outside the national homeland, within the boundaries of a foreign country. This in its turn, created a feeling of dissipation, “a feeling that so often occurs when a society has lost its central reason for existence” (Ibid.). To describe this feeling, Tania Alexander provides the reader with exclusive and unique tropes.. These tropes bind space, time and memory into the production called *A Lost World*. In this context, through frequent references to the glory of a mythical golden age, the reader can trace not even one but at least three images of “a lost world” within the text – Tsarist Russia, the precious childhood of the author and, finally, the main *topos* of the memoir – Kallijärv (Lake of Love) as a symbol of independence and freedom.

According to F.A.Yates, the art of memory seeks to memorise primarily through a technique of impressing *places* and *images* on memory (Yates: xi) Tania Alexander makes the best of this strategic device, foregrounding Kallijärv, a place in the periphery of Estonia which becomes enshrined as “homeland”; a place by which ideas of “us” and “them” come to be deeply felt and nations categorized. Setting her childhood memories into a fixed time-place frame, the author, thus, creates certain structural constants to her identity representation. Her national and cultural images are often predetermined by Kallijärv and obey certain built-in rules, quite independent of the social and political reality of the period.

An old lakeside summer cottage in the woods, “isolated from the rest of the world”(A: 9) represents a kind of a “neutral territory”, a no-man’s land where people of hostile parties and different cultures meet for a short breathing spell to disappear again into the wider reaches of Russia or Europe. The value of this peripheral place to the author’s identity formation lies in its traditional, timeless, backward and natural

character which, according to the writer's aesthetic intention, has been linked exclusively to positive traits of human nature. Describing it as "the only world I knew and loved", as a "lively enchanting place with a special quality of the atmosphere" (A:86), a place which is "precious and special", it is for her "exactly what a house should be" (A:10) Even the slightest hints for its improvement evoke protests: "We all thought Kallijärv wonderful as it was, and the idea "improving" it horrified us" (A:102).

Yet, even this place of "intellectual gaiety", the place where "most people seemed to become more interesting and more gentle" (A:88), a meeting ground for "relatives, friends and visitors of all ages and a variety of nationalities" (A:86) remains contradictory in a certain way, its most characteristic attributes always involve its own opposite. Safe and peaceful, it nevertheless awakens memories of violent brutality – a matriarchal household where the menfolk has been killed;

There are also numerous passages where exclusive and chauvinistic nationalism would inflate the virtues of Russian culture, reawaken the sense of superiority towards the cultural achievements of the past, and denigrate other nationalities: the place was "more Russian than Baltic in character, and its members [...] had wider interests than those of other Baltic households in Estonia" (A:86) "An extra viewpoint" of the inhabitants of this secluded place, their "wider outlook" and "difference from the families of German origin" as an inseparable part of *auto-image* has constantly been stressed by the author.

Although the text generally avoids the description of national imago-types as wholes, the author's individual statements indirectly aspire to the specification of national character.

In this way the distinction between fact and fiction is constantly blurred. For Alexander there always remains a degree of vagueness as to the truth concerning one's national character, either Russian, British or German. She retains evasiveness even when portraying her mother-substitute Micky as if acknowledging the influence of certain British standards being inculcated into children "without being able to express them" (A:19).

Special attention should be focused on the Estonian stereotype in the given discourse. The image of the Estonians as presented by Alexander is explicit and rather static, not because she considers the alleged national character in itself as dull, but because the writer constantly notes, emphasizes and describes certain fixed aspects of it.

Despite the author's seemingly unbiased aim to demonstrate Estonia's natural affinities to the larger Western European world, there are numerous references in her text that depict Estonian culture as rural, agricultural, self-sufficient, developing. Especially in the passages where Alexander traces her historical trajectory to the time when "the Baltic population first came to our part of the world, [...] to conquer and bring Christianity to this pagan area" (A:101) she has to admit that "though living in Estonia, she knew little of their history" (Ibid.) i.e. the pagan history of the native people. She considers their language as "a developing language" which she spoke "mostly with villagers and servants", "spoke fluently but never bothered to write" (A:11).

The images of the few Estonians occurring in her text are marked not as much by their national identity as by belonging to a certain social stratum. They are great allies in the household, earthy, spontaneous, generous, with plenty of common sense, but their main function is to make "childhood as happy as in the circumstances, it could be" (A:13-14) Although blessed with an "intuitive sense of fun" and "great native intelligence" (A:13), their letters to England are considered "childlike" (A:9) And when in 1950 one of them applies to the gentry to request a written testimonial of work and years spent in their service, it causes only embarrassment in them about the vagaries of the Soviet regime, leaving the whole range of human tragedy imperceptible. The Estonians can be remembered as "working twelve hours a day", by "working harder than anyone I have ever met never complaining" (Ibid.), but as servants they do not deserve much attention.

Standing aloof and deserving what is considered their just deserts in the end – all these native characters undoubtedly influence the foreign reader's hetero-image. As a result, the reader's attitude towards the Estonian people and their cultural values develops mainly on the basis of their expediency as serving people and of their suitability for practical purposes, only. They constitute so called society's borders or

thresholds for Alexander where the rate and forms of communication reach a much lower level. This is important and meaningful for the reader of the memoir to recognize it.

Though the mechanism representing the national image offered by Alexander as a Baltic-Russian writer considerably differs from the nostalgic, often overdramatized identities cultivated by German memoirists, nevertheless, it remains a subjective construct rather than an objective essence.

From the imagological point of view, it is thus very important to study the attitude of specific readerships. Taking into consideration the British reading audience Tania Alexander is addressing, and the time the memoir was written (the 1980s), this kind of one-sided identification may also have deeply influenced cultural and social praxis of the English-speaking world towards contemporary Estonia. An archaizing fairy-tale image as it includes a portrait of Estonian character as “hardworking” and “sceptical” this national image is timeless, a static frame. Such images require careful contextualization to present distortions, and must be interpreted with reference to contemporary social realities.

On this point it is wise to keep in mind Dominick La Capra’s words who calls us always “to raise the question of how texts do what they do – how, for example, they may situate or frame what they “represent” or inscribe (social discourses, paradigms, generic conventions, stereotypes, and so forth)” (LaCapra:38). A literary work is not born in vacuum; it is written and read in a specific cultural space. On the other hand, one must understand that literary spaces, although they are geographically located, are also always imaginary, thus transcending national and linguistic boundaries. In this sense, Tania Alexander’s memoir certainly surpasses its narrowly documentary functions and has transformative relations – both positive and negative – to the phenomena “represented” in it. Her judgements, on the other hand, explicitly reflect back on her own presuppositions and cultural identity, having an impact on more tangible contemporary events.

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