War, Child and Wartime Holidays in Latvian Writers' Childhood Memory Narratives

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Abstract Autobiographical memory narratives reveal not only subjective perceptions of reality, individual or family history and recollections, but also function as historical evidence that provides an overview of the shifts in public discourse, political objectives, and cultural paradigms. This paper focuses on depictions of World War II as seen through from the perspective of a child in childhood memory narratives written by Latvian writers born in the late 1920s and early1930s. The research analyses depictions of holiday celebrations during turbulent times of war in the territory of Latvia and examines the role these narratives play in representing the experiences of child characters and their sense of (in)security. In the prose works of the selected authors'—Harijs Gāliņš, Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne and Andrejs Dripe—literary portrayals of wartime holidays are presented in the context of both surviving the dramatic events of the present and nostalgia—a yearning for the past that attempts to restore "normality" and offers a way to improve children's feeling of safety and psychological wellbeing. Literary texts of war memories may be studied in conjunction with factual historical documents and life-story interviews to gain a holistic picture of the traumatic events, experiences, and resilience of the so-called "fatherless generation."

Keywords autobiography; war; trauma; festivities; continuity; psychological safety

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I. Introduction

Dedicated to Rudolf Karl Wendt
1932-2021

Since 24 February 2022, almost eight decades after the end of the wars in Europe, such notions as "orphans," "displaced children and refugees," "the missing" and "the dead" have recaptured global attention. The open wounds of Russia's war in Ukraine have shattered the once intense hope that the children of World War II would be "the last witnesses"[1] of such brutal hostilities. They have also triggered painful reflections on the destinies of wartime children, as well as the role childhood experiences and memories play in survivors' lives and creative writing. War is not merely a man-made disaster; due to being so common in human history it has been defined as a "core human activity" (Leaning "Radcliffe Examines...") causing immediate-term harm (death, separation of family members, loss of physical assets, destruction etc.) and longer-term damage (subjection to ongoing fear, threats, intimidation, violence, hunger, etc.) (Leaning "Understanding War Trauma…" 34-35). Although the human brain tends to edit out negative experiences (Bogdan et al.) and "[b]ig ideas trump details, peripheral features concede to central ones, and specific moments are cut loose from their context" (Dolcos in Kurtzweil), the longevity of painful memories, including those of turbulent war years, is influenced by the magnitude of negative stimuli and increased physiological arousal during negative experiences (Kark and Kensinger).

Memory has typically been viewed as a faculty of acquiring, encoding, storing, retaining and retrieving information and a repository of multi-layered associations. However, it represents more than recollection within a stimuli-response model and it is "much, much more than an archive of the past; it is the prism through which we see ourselves, others, and the world" (Ranganath 7).

1 A reference to the 2015 Nobel Prize-winning writer and oral historian Svetlana Alexievich's collection of reminiscences of war as seen through the innocent eyes of children *Poslednie svideteli* / *Last Witnesses: Unchildlike Stories (An Oral History of the Children of World War II)* (first published in Russian in 1985, translated into English in 2019). In 2021, it was translated into Latvian and is known under the title *Pēdējie lieciniekі: Bērni Otrajā pasaules karā* [Last Witnesses: Children during World War II] (Aleksijeviča; Sprūde).

Remembering is a process of "imaginative reconstruction, or construction built out of a relation of our attitude towards the whole active mass of organised past reactions and experience"[1] (Barlett 213), whereas forgetting is a functional, goal-directed and strategic process (Bjork et al; Conway; Harris et al.) "where certain memories are actively gated from consciousness" (Harris et al. 256). Both remembering and forgetting are major components of the self and participate in identity formation (Conway). Therefore, considering memory scholars' statement that "[i]n a world of constantly changing environment, literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant" (Barlett 203-204), instead of asking why we forget, we should be asking why we remember (Ranganath; Robson). The shift in approach from focusing on accounts of what events occurred to why and how they were remembered, reconstructed and filtered by time—that is, the shift in focus towards how memories are interpreted and transmitted—testifies to a cultural shift in how we see our relation to the past and contributes to the debate on cultural memory as "a shared storehouse of collective experience, skill and knowledge" (Donald 19).

By fulfilling directive, self and social functions[2], autobiographical memory plays a significant role in perceiving and understanding each given time and space over multitude of timescales. It gives shape to the epoch lived by the author from narrative, philosophical, psychological, and anthropological perspectives (Brockmeier; Wang).

Autobiographical remembering has been viewed as "mental time travel" (Tulving) in which people relive "the best, the worst, and the everyday occurrences" of their lives (Harris et al.). From the perspective of cultural dynamic theory, autobiographical memory is a cultural practice unfolding in the developmental dynamics of the interplay between memory, self and culture (Wang and Brockmeier;

1 According to a theory of reconstructive memory, remembering involves "1) An original sensorial pattern; 2) An original psychological orientation, or attitude; 3) The persistence of this orientation or attitude in some setting, which is different from the original at least in a temporal tense; and 4) The organization, together with orientation and attitude, of psychological material (Barlett 195).

2 Most researchers agree on the tripartite function model of autobiographical memory. The directive function is related to past experiences and lessons impacting and directing the future behaviors. The self-function is associated with identity formation that begins in adolescence and refers to "the use of personal information to maintain a sense of being the same person during one's lifetime or to update the self while maintaining continuity," thus, autobiographical memories are the means for expressing conveying one's sense of identity to others. The social function is viewed as "umbrella dimension" and is generally being associated with social interaction—facilitating and building bonds (Vranić et al. 2).

Wang); thus, "it develops in the process of children acquiring cultural knowledge about the self and the purpose of the past through early socialization" (Wang 295).

Early childhood memories are episodic and "almost exclusively family memories"; they represent simple family routines and may include sounds, smells and images (Shore and Kauko 94). As a child gets older, these emotionally charged sensory memories are evoked not only by the repetition of family events but assessed within the binary opposition "common/ expected" *vs*. "unique/ unexpected." It is the latter that may produce vivid positive (joy, happiness, peace) or negative (fear, terror, anxiety, frustration) emotions, or both. Such memories of experiences and feelings can selectively be included in autobiographical writing. They not only reveal subjective perceptions of reality, individual or family history and recollections, but also function as historical evidence that provides an overview of the shifts in public discourse, political objectives, and cultural paradigms. Thus, autobiographical accounts and their fragments are a medium and a symbolic form of social and cultural memory (Erll).

Similar to oral history sources, autobiographical memories may present tragic life events and depict war-related trauma in the interconnectedness of remembering and forgetting. Trauma—defined as a feeling of lost security— is the result of violence and destruction of the individual (and collective) harmonious and orderly world (Hernández). Trauma influences the author's choice of themes, narrative structures, and representation of human within the juxtapositions "life" *vs.* "death," "now" *vs.* "then," and "times of psychological, emotional and physical pain" *vs.* "the golden era of the past." Autobiographical narratives of pain "are designed not only to elicit response in the reader, but also to develop and refine the readers' own sentiments and sensibilities" (Dwyer 2).

II

Twentieth-century Latvian literature is rich in diverse depictions of childhood memories, testifying to the great interest in questions of the self, identity, and history through the decades. As guides "for interpreting life narratives" (Freadman), autobiographies focus on representations of real-life human experiences in specific geographical topoi (spaces) and at one particular historical time. Time, in the frame of autobiographical identity-building, has been viewed as both "a structure and object of construction" that reveals diverse "temporal orders of natural, cultural, and individual processes" (Brockmeier 51).

This paper focuses on depictions of World War II as seen from the perspective of a child in childhood memory narratives written by Latvian writers born at the end

of the 1920s and early 1930s. It investigates the role of celebrating festivals during turbulent times of war in the territory of Latvia and how such celebrations impact the dynamics of the child's sense of (in)security. The selection criteria were as follows:

- authors born in the late 1920s and early 1930s in various regions of independent Latvia;
- authors with personal experience of growing up in wartime under Soviet and German occupations;
- authors with personal experience of growing up and living under the second, post-war, Soviet occupation;
- where possible, personal experience of growing older in post-independence Latvia after the 1990s—this was the case with two of the three authors;
- autobiographic prose containing episodes on wartime holidays.

This approach was determined by the following factors:

1) The complexity of the notion of memory and the aspect of authenticity which is context-dependent—In the context of authenticity, memoirs have traditionally been viewed as works that fall "between two worlds, between truth and fiction, between primary and secondary source, between reality and imagination" (Dwyer 4). As there are no significant neurological differences between remembering and imagining, the fallibility of autobiographical accounts needs to be recognised: "Each time we revisit the past in our minds, we bring with us information from the present that can subtly, and even profoundly […] alter the content of our memories" (Ranganath 141).

2) Social, cultural and historical context—After years of independence (1918-1940), Latvia was subjected to Soviet occupation and incorporation into the USSR in 1940. During World War II, Latvia experienced both Soviet (1940-1941) and Nazi (1941-1944/45) occupations before the final Soviet advance in 1944 and a long period of colonialism that lasted until 1991 (Lumans). In the first years after Latvia regained its independence, Latvian literature still "remained defensive and disoriented positioned against the greater outside powers that had defined its fate" (Chakars and Peel 57). The legacy of persecution and dependence left strong marks on Latvian literature: "Narrative forms blur the actual and the fictional and, in so doing, transcend matters of forensic 'truth' and instead pursue a higher 'mystic' truth" (Jirgens 273). The autobiographic works written after Latvia regained its independence blend "memoir and history, fiction and non-fiction" (Chakars and Peel

57). This stream of memoir literature[1], much like Latvian literature-in-exile, developed exponentially as reflections on the collective past aimed at fulfilling the role of identity-building (Chakars and Peel).

The autobiographical prose of three Latvian authors—Harijs Gāliņš (1931-1983, born in Liepāja/ Kurzeme region), Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne (1932-2020, born in Rēzekne/ Latgale region) and Andrejs Dripe (1929-2013, born in Valmiera / Vidzeme region)—was selected for the current study. All three writers were born during the interwar period in Latvia; as children they experienced the occupations and the war and remained living in Latvia until they died. Due to the war, all of them lost at least one close family member (one parent or both, or a sibling[2]) and throughout their lives they lived with the consequences of physical or emotional trauma inflicted by the war. Their testimonies reveal individual and collective traumatic experiences and can be considered the life stories of a generation. Tragically, even in post-war Latvia, the so-called "fatherless generation" was never able to regain their lost childhood.

> Because there is a time when everything, absolutely everything turns upside down—ideas about life and people, people's fates, everyday life. This upside-down world is created by war. And then it also happens that naughty children turn unimaginably quickly into adults, into people quite torn by the storms of life, into 'young little old men'. (Sokolova "Iepazīsimies ar Hariju Gāliņu" 135)

Gāliņš's creative writing, which takes the form of both poetry and prose works published from the mid-1950s onwards, focuses on the true essence of meaning and the course of human life. His works gradually attain a more self-reflective, contemplative, and philosophical character (Dombrovska) which reveals his attempts to reach a deeper understanding of reality and the self. His autobiographical short story cycle, *Nāves ūtrupe* [The Auction of Death] with the subtitle *Priekšpilsētas stāsti un hronikas* [Suburban Stories and Chronicles], is written mostly as first-person nar-

1 For some writers, including Dripe, interest in memoirs was also driven by the influx of low-brow foreign literature and reaction against it ("10 jautājumi …").

2 Varslavāne's parents tragically perished in front of the girl's very eyes during Russian air strike in 1944 (Salceviča) and she herself was injured and suffered from the hearing impairment for all her life. Dripe's brother died in the result of accidental gun death (Dripe). Gāliņš lost his father at the end of the war (Sokolova "Iepazīsimies ar Hariju Gāliņu").

ratives. It was published in 1968[1] when, despite being increasingly censored, Latvian writers attempted to expand their range of themes and artistic approaches. The work depicts the beginning and two final years of World War II from the perspective of the main character, Hažus—first as a small boy and later as a thirteen-year-old mobilised for trench construction work in the Courland Pocket[2]. The boy experiences hunger, poverty, the taste of raw alcohol, and love/ sex with a woman twice his age. By creating meaning through juxtapositions in the process of documenting the events, the author reveals the story and destiny of a whole generation trapped between two powers as if between two millstones. In Latvian literary criticism of that time, *The Auction* of *Death* was perceived as "a discovery," partly because the war was shown "without a frontline" (Sokolova "Karš bez frontes līnijas") and through the eyes of a child, but mainly due to the child's embodiment of curiosity, innocence and boundless imagination set against the harsh encounter with war that provokes his inevitable transformation.[3] The impetus to set down his memoirs was Gāliņš's work on the translation into Latvian of the Lithuanian writer Balys Sruoga's memoir *Dievų miškas* [Forest of the Gods] on the Stutthof concentration camp (Sokolova "Karš bez frontes līnijas"), published in Latvia in 1968 (Sroga)—the same year as Gāliņš' *The Auction of Death.* Two years after the short story collection was published in Riga, it was also introduced to Latvian readers in exile. Gāliņš's characteristic feature, as noted in the exile periodical *Jaunā Gaita*, was "his great desire to tell stories, to tell stories loudly, to tell stories boldly and with clear gestures and dialectics" (Silenieks).

Varslavāne engaged in writing early but her works were not published until the second half of the 1960s. They attracted wider attention after the publication of her autobiographical story "Cilvēks spēlējas ar lāčiem" [Human Plays with Bears] (Salceviča). The work, written continuously over a period of decades, was

1 By that time, a number of prose works (e.g. *Trīs šķūnīši* by Anna Sakse (1905-1981, published in sequels in 1944 in the newspaper *Cīņa*), *Edžiņš* (1942/48) by Vilis Lācis (1904-1966), etc. (Čākurs)) had focused on depictions of a child during World War II. However, many of these works were written during or soon after the war by authors born at the beginning of the twentieth century; in addition, such works represented Soviet children's literature and corresponded to the ideological demands of the Soviet power.

2 The Courland Pocket is an area in western Latvia where German forces and Latvians were cut off and trapped by the Soviet advances (1944-1945).

3 Among the iconic works published in the first years after regaining independence is Vizma Belševica's second book, *Bille un karš* [Bille and War] (1996), from her autobiographical trilogy *Bille*. Similarly to the authors selected for this study, Belševica reveals the transformation of a child under the impact of the war and occupation (Belševica).

published in 1972 in the literary magazine *Karogs* [The Flag] and in 1975 as a book. The story depicts the period of German occupation in Septiņkalne [Rēzekne] from 1942 to 1944 and the Soviet return, and contains flashbacks from the time of independent Latvia and the first year of the Soviet occupation. The structure of the story resembles a cinema montage: the narrative frame, which starts and ends with reflections on the funeral of the parents of the heroine Skaidrīte Varkalne, is permeated by interludes of the girl conversing with toy bears which represent her family and herself after having witnessed her parents' tragic death during a Russian airstrike in 1944). As the cinematic shots change, these interludes function as brief respites from the tragic plotline, offering moments for contemplation and recovery, and serve as narrative transitions that tie ideas together (Kacane and Kovzele).

Dripe entered the Latvian literary scene at the end of the 1950s with stories for children and youth, who remained at the centre of his attention throughout his literary career; his other contributions were journalistic works and documentary novels that gave the impetus for documentaries and fiction movies[1] (Vite). The first volume of the writer's memory book *Bez skaistas maskas* [Without a Beautiful Mask], titled *Kara laika puikas* [Wartime Boys], as the author has noted, are "memory drawings" from his life. It consists of several layers—fragments of a diary and letters, notes left by the father, news of events captured outside the diary, and extensive commentary on them. It can be considered the oldest of the writer's works (Viese) as it was started in the author's teenage years in January 1943 (Valtere) but published fifty years later, in 1993, when the "moment of euphoria"[2] represented by the Singing Revolution and the Third Awakening of Latvia ("10 jautājumi…" 173) was over but the restoration of spatial and temporal normality, including Latvian traditions and values, was still ongoing (Stukuls Eglitis). The documentary evidence, compared by the author to "hot horseradish" (Mārtuža 1993), reveals dramatic scenes of the era with scrupulously accurate details and offered, for the first time since Latvian independence, a truly genuine account of a boy's perspective on war.

The selected works on wartime childhood represent only a part of the authors' memories through the course of their lives, and each of them published subsequent volumes (see Table 1). For example, the most famous contribution, Gāliņš's trilogy, depicts approximately 20 years of his life; the first short story cycle, *The Auction of Death* of his war experiences, was followed by the collection *Karūsām jāķer līdakas*

1 E.g. "Cela zīmes," "Cāļus skaita rudenī," "Tavs dēls," "Sieviete, kuru gaida?."

2 The Singing Revolution or the Third Revival (1986-1991)— social movement that led to the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 (Šmidchens).

Author's name, surname, years of life	**Autobiographical narratives depicting the time of World War II (*primary focus of the study*)**	**Subsequent volumes of autobiographical works depicting the post-war period**	
Harijs Gāliņš (1931-1983)	*Nāves ūtrupe* **(1968)** [The Auction of Death]	*Karūsām jāķer līdakas* **(1972)** [Crucian Carps Must Catch Pikes	*Jāsēj rudzi* **(1976)** [Time to Sow Rye]
Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne (1932-2020)	*Cilvēks spēlējas ar lāčiem* **(1972/5)** [Human Plays with Bears]	*Dzērvinīki* **(2001)** [Cold and Red Feet]	
Andrejs Dripe (1929-2013)	*Bez skaistas maskas. Kara lai ka puikas* **(1993)** [Without a Beautiful Mask. The Wartime Boys]	*Bez skaistas maskas. Pirmie pēckara gadi* **(1993)** [Without a Beautiful Mask. The First Post-war Years	*Bez skaistas maskas. Skolotāja darba gadi* **(1994)** [Without a Beautiful Mask. The Years of Work as a Teacher]

Table 1. Authors selected for the study

[Crucian Carps Must Catch Pikes] (1972) and a long story *Jāsēj rudzi* [Time to Sow Rye] (1976). The post-war years are also presented in Varslavāne's autobiographical long story, *Dzērvinīki* [Cold and Red Feet], written in 1977-1992 but published in 2001. On the other hand, Dripe's memoir, *Bez skaistas maskas* [Without a Beautiful Mask], consists of three books published in 1993-1994; it focuses on the war in Book 1 but the post-war years in Book 2 (*Pirmie pēckara gadi* [The First Post-war Years]) and Book 3 (*Skolotāja darba gadi* [The Years of Work as a Teacher]). Because the publication of works inconsistent with Soviet ideology was subject to censorship or bans under the Soviet occupation, some autobiographies on wartime or post-war childhood reached readers or were written decades later. This was the case with Varslavāne's autobiographical stories, which were written during various stages of her life under the Soviet occupation (e.g. *Dzērvinīki* [Cold and Red Feet], *Timseņa ausa... Veļtejums Latgolys pēckara bārnim* [Darkness Descended... Dedication to the Post-war Children of Latgale]) but were only published after Latvia regained its independence and at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Kacane and Kovzele).

The structure of autobiographical memory and the relation between memory and identity stems from one's knowledge of one's life and is "organized hierarchically across three levels of increasing specificity: lifetime periods […], general events […], and event-specific knowledge" (Harris et al. 256), which may

naturally include the celebration of holidays.

III

In Latvian literature, depictions of national, ethnic and religious holidays hold a deep-rooted significance and traditionally fall within a broader debate on identity construction and preservation. Representations of festivities and their traditional celebration provoke reflections on who we are and "contribute to self-identification processes" (Kovzele and Kacane 398).

Shared values, beliefs and rituals help to form society itself; "individuals' survival and well-being rest on cultural resources and social belonging that must be revived periodically in collective assemblies" (Rimé and Páez 1306). As "residues of the past" (Popelková 173) and manifestations of social norms and standards of behaviour that serve as action-guided rules, festivities are usually depicted within the binary opposition "mundane/ profane" (everyday life/ experience) *vs.* "the festive/ the sacred" (extraordinary life/ experience). This fundamental duality between the profane (ordinary casual activities) and the sacred (extraordinary or transcendental ceremonies and rituals, shaping the beliefs and values of communities) is typically employed for depictions of time. In this framework, the sacred is looked upon as an interruption, offering a break from the homogeneity of mundanity (Eliade 20). Although both the mundane and the festive constitute the cultural fabric of the society and are by nature predictive due to their repetitive cycles, the first evokes the feeling of the monotony of routine life, whereas the latter elicits feelings of serenity, solemnity, reverence, order, and peace to the soul, thus it is often characterised as spiritual or "untouchable, inviolable, inaccessible, and unalienable" (Cova et al. 1).

From a psychological perspective, autobiographical memories of wartime childhood reflect adult preoccupations with human evil and the author's experiences dealing with it. The new "disorder," the "unexpected" (loss or transformation of the family landscape) is often juxtaposed with the old or pre-war "order," for example, through nostalgic memories of and expectations for repeated routines (both mundane and festive), thereby revealing attempts to bring normality back into the abnormality of a twisted world. In this way, narratives of tragic experiences and physical and psychological consequences of, for example, bombings, demolished lives, pursuit, violence, escape, displacement, hunger, or the death of a loved one are complemented by depictions of episodic memories of wartime holidays.

In the selected autobiographical narratives, the duality between "the mundane" (the grim reality of the war, adapting to new circumstances, work and duties,

suffering, survival, pain and death) and "the festive" is blurred, as war not only destroys the sacred value of human life but also makes it hugely challenging to live a mundane life and, even more so, to celebrate festivals. In the selected authors' works, war is presented as the "iron present" (the time "now") in sharp contrast to the "golden past" (the time "then"). For the depicted children, life seems confusing; the city is no longer a fairy-tale but an enchanted space (Varslavāne 33).

Although rarely depicted, wartime holidays and celebrations of festivities play a crucial role in the analysed works and are presented within the frame of the wartime present, survival, and loss, as well as in the context of the past, nostalgia, and longing for bygone times.

The most vivid portrayal of celebration in Gāliņš's *The Auction of Death* is found in the introductory story "Kāzas" [The Wedding]. The story vividly reveals how, a day before the Midsummer Eve on 22 June 1941[1] in a rural farmstead in Kurzeme, joy is transformed into sorrow and the comic becomes the tragic. During a reunion of extended family and friends a day before the wedding scheduled, on the very eve of the summer solstice[2], a curious city boy sees a plane falling and associates it with an air festival, and therefore expects candy canes to be thrown from the air. Instead, having learned that the war has started, the boy delivers the news to the intoxicated wedding guests who are happily engaged in singing and celebrating. The third-person narration (which the author uses only in the introductory story) suddenly changes to a brief dialogic perspective, thus the focus from the depiction of a celebration is diverted to that of how the war is being perceived and how swiftly it changes the festive landscape and the celebrants. The war, from the perspective of a boy in Gāliņš's collection, is shown through dramatic contrasts—the main hero's healthy vitality and rather naive objectivity are juxtaposed with the adults' preoccupation with the futility of the war (Silenieks). Although the children initially see the war as a game, as something unknown, incomprehensible, and therefore captivating, a change in their perception of it is indicated by reintroducing the title phrase "the auction of death," which refers to one's own and others' lives and childhoods being bargained. Gunshots are compared

1 On 22 June 1941, Germany started its surprise attack of the Soviet Union, which since 1940 (after Soviet occupation and annexation) included Latvia. It bombed the territory of Latvia from early morning; "Blitzkrieg troops reached the Latvian border by the 26th June" (Pabriks and Purs 27; Lumans 2006). The German occupation of Latvia was completed by 8 July 1941 and lasted until 1944, when then country was re-occupied by the Soviet Army.

2 For more on summer solstice and transformations in Midsummer's Eve celebrations after 1940, see Kovzele and Kačāne (2023).

to the auctioneer's hammer to symbolize a change of times, a change of destinies, and a change of behaviours. The sudden presence of war in the festive yard of a Latvian farmstead is symbolically revealed through the outwardly incompatible key concepts "child—war—celebration"[1] and enhanced by the use of the Russian and German languages within the mainly Latvian text to depict the state of being caught between two powers. The boy's first traumatic experience is depicted as a moment of awareness of the threat to life or physical security. The dramatic and swift shift from a state of joy to one of sorrow is exemplified by the employment of two important rites of transition—wedding (celebration) and funeral (death), as the planned wedding ceremony is eventually replaced by a funeral sermon. Such dynamics are exemplified by the following examples:

> Kāzas bija noliktas **pašā Līgo vakarā** [...] (Gāliņš 8)
> [The wedding was planned **on the very eve of Midsummer**]
> Maļčik…**voina** [a phrase in Russian] (ibid. 16)
> [Little boy…**war**]
> […] mēs te svinam **kāzas**… **Hochzeit**… [the last word is in German] (ibid. 22)
> [we are celebrating a **wedding** here…**Wedding**…]
> Kāzinieki ātrāk nešķīrās, kamēr sadabūja divus zārkus un **pašā Līgo vakarā** rīkoja divējas bēres. (ibid. 23)
> [The wedding guests didn't part until they got two coffins and **on the very evening of *Līgo*** held two funerals.] (Bold is mine—I. K.)

Disruption of the formerly known order and sudden chaos are introduced by combining the notions of beginning and ending: the story is set at the time when the sun is at its highest position in the sky and when traditionally life is celebrated—but when everyone expects the light, the darkness descends. The story prompts the loss

1 Child, war, and Midsummer's Eve are also brought together in Antons Stankevičs' autobiographical story cycle *Puikas neraud* [*Boys Don't Cry*] (1982), where *Līgo* (Midsummer's Eve) of 1941, or "vasara, kurā salūza likteņi" [summer when destinies were broken], is mentioned in the context of the binary opposition of "holidays" associated with movement and freedom (joyful travelling across the country for Midsummer Eve's celebration) *vs.* "war" (the news of the beginning of the war a day after reaching the destination), associated with feelings of lost security and being caught in a trap (Stankevičs). *Vasara, kurā salūza likteņi* [Summer When Destinies Were Broken] (1998) is also the title of an autobiographical prose work by Gunārs Birkmanis' (1931-2011) on the observations and experiences of a thirteen-year-old boy in the fateful summer of 1944.

of childhood innocence and the character's maturation.[1] In other stories by Gāliņš that end with the death and funeral of a child or mother or both, the author tends to exclude festivities from the narration but preserves the leitmotif of a wedding transforming into a funeral and repeats it in multiple stories (e.g. "Tēvs un dēls" [The Father and the Son] or "Tikšanās" [Meeting]), referencing the first story of the collection, "Wedding." This is also the case in volume 2, *Crucian Carps Must Catch Pikes* (1972), where the triad of Midsummer—wedding—death (the leitmotif "Uz Jāņiem bija paredzētas kāzas" [A wedding was set on the Midsummer Eve]) is also found in the introductory story, "Bez mugurkaula" [Without a Backbone]. This is the first of three stories in the collection that still depict the war (in particular the Holocaust), while the rest of the stories focus on the representation of the post-war years.

Joy and sorrow in the context of the summer solstice celebration are also combined by Dripe, whose intoxicated sixteen-year-old protagonist Andrejs, on 25 June after the *Līgo* celebration and the Midsummer's Eve green ball, learns of his little brother's accidental death by gunshot. Repetitions of the phrase "I remember…" act as flashbacks, reliving an aspect of a traumatic memory. For Andrejs Dripe as a child, war offers a fabulous life, a time of grenades and pistols when everything around seems extremely interesting and tempting. Instead, the mature Dripe sees the war as "one of the craziest times in human history" (Dripe 120) and "the greatest curse of mankind" (ibid. 38). The transition from childhood innocence to adulthood as a result of external and internal factors reveals itself gradually. A shifting perspective is also included in the depiction of the perception of the end of the war, as in May 1945 only "one disaster is over," but "insanity" under Soviet occupation continues for the next decades (Dripe 144).

Christmas—one of the most remembered religious and family festivities of celebration, hopes, and dreams—is included in all the selected authors' writing. In Varslavāne's and Dripe's works, Christmas, is presented within the binary opposition "the iron present" *vs.* "the "golden past." The present is the time of pungent stenches, it stinks like chlorine and carbol (Varslavāne 71, 72, 74), whereas the past was a time when "aspens were small" and "the trees rustled nicely" (ibid. 95); the past smelled like bread. If "then" is the time when "birds were chirping" (ibid.) and mother was singing, then "now," even during holidays, "mama smiles

1 It is also reflected on in Gāliņš's poem "Bērnība" [Childhood] from the collection of poems "Akmens dzirkstis" [Stone Sparks] (1967): "Basām kājām pēc zemenēm saldām,/ Rokās tverdama pīlādža zaru./ Tanī mežā, kur ragana valda./ Kuru cilvēki dēvē par karu,/ Mana bērnība nobrāza kāju./ Viņas piemiņu glabādams tīru,/ Jākļūst bija pirms laika par vīru."

differently" and "there is no real music" as "[t]he untuned guitar is crying silently, the mandolin is squealing, the gramophone is croaking. Some bass buttons of the garmon [accordion] do not work"[1] (ibid. 152).

However, in the story, Christmas is the happiest of times for the small heroine. The author devotes three chapters to a detailed description of the last family Christmas choosing the titles of Christmas carols ("O Come, Little Children..." and "O Christmas Tree...") for two of them. Memories of Christmas as manifestations of family warmth and safety come flooding back to Varslavāne's main character, Skaidrīte, after her parents' tragic death. The focus on Christmas is the demonstration of the author's Christian faith and religious identity, therefore among its central aspects is participation in the Holy Mass, and the feeling of Christmas is exemplified by emphasizing a sense of inclusion (for example, by decorating a fir tree and lighting sparklers out in the forest, or decorating the Christmas tree at home). In this way, Christmas is associated with colourfulness, lightness, and serenity. Early childhood memories from the period of independent Latvia emerge like flash photographs in the darkness of fear, confusion, and separation. From these bursts of light, Christmas is presented as a nostalgic moment in the slow flow of the present time.

> THEN
> […] before war, mother too came to the forest, father decorated a fir tree with sparklers and lighted them. The sparkling needles and snowflakes were falling. We tried to catch them, and clapped our hands. Mammy's eyes glittered like stars. Alas! Then she laughed differently! (Varslavāne 136)
>
> NOW
> A festive table. We all have put on the best clothes [...]. The father looks at the mother with unusually bright eyes, takes out a bottle of cognac, pours a glass for himself and her […]. (ibid. 147)

According to Harris et al., recollections of specific past episodes are selective. Christmas under Nazi occupation and shortly before the Soviet re-occupation is depicted as a unique and happy family time, but takes place in the atmosphere of the inevitable change and approaching tragedy. A symbolic farewell to her childhood is revealed through the image of a piece of Christmas decor—a small copper

1 In Latvian: "Paklusu raud izskaņojusies ģitāra, strinkšķ mandolīna, ķērc patafons and […]. Ermoņikām daži basu kauliņi nedarbojas […]" (Varslavāne 152).

bell. Both "the symbol of a bell and the semantics of ringing it are related to the accentuation of transformation and to the relationship and distinction between the polarities, i.e. between the spiritual and the secular, the past and the present" (Kacane and Kovzele 11-12). When Christmas carols have been sung, presents exchanged, and a traditional Christmas meal held, the family takes a journey through personal memories via the family photo album, only to realise that the photo of the family's last Christmas will be missing; however, the sense of emotional communication and socio-cultural traditions will forever be kept in their memories, creative reflections, and imaginations.

For Dripe, too, Christmas of bygone times is associated with calm (parents singing Christmas carols, such as "Silent Night"), ritual (decoration of the Christmas tree), and both excitement and fear of the Christmas Man, along with parental reassurance and protection (Dripe 44). The image of the mother, who radiates the feeling of safety and contributes to the festivities being associated with stability and security[1], is an integral part of Christmas. However, the home space is secondary in Dripe's story, as during wartime the young hero is attracted by the dangerous outside world (collecting shrapnel and other war souvenirs, using abandoned bombsites as places to play).

While representing Christmas, Gāliņš mainly focuses on the harsh reality of the time "now" from the perspective of a mobilised teenager. Christmas of 1944 is associated with food shortages; instead of candles of peace and hope on the Christmas tree there are only rocket shots—"little candles in the sky" (Gāliņš "Konservu budža," 176-181)[2] and a strong will to stay alive. The same as a deadly explosion and fire provoke a birch tree flowering in winter, also the war turns a child into a "little old man" without the possibility to gradually transition from childhood to adulthood. A comparison of Christmas within the juxtaposition "then—now" is also sketched in Gāliņš's story "Tēvs no Dancigas" [Father from Dancig], where the holiday of the past is associated with the presence of the boy's father and chocolates, whereas the time "now" reflects the absence of both.

IV. Conclusion

Contrary to classic childhood memoirs (written at the beginning of the twentieth

1 A reference to the significance of festivities in the Interbellum period in Dripe's book is also exemplified by the inclusion of a Mother's Day photograph from 1936 (Dripe 134).

2 V. Belševica's heroine also thinks the explosions lighting up the night sky are Christmas lights and is impressed by the miracle—"Christmas trees" hanging in the sky and falling down, slowly illuminating all the details of the outside world (Belševica 292).

century and in the 1920s-1930s)[1], which are linear narratives containing both impressionistic glimpses and panoramic overviews of Latvian history, ethnography, and culture representing harmonious world order (Kačāne 66), the more recent stream of autobiographical prose relies on episodic memory and photographic or cinematic style to depict the brutality of real life. However, alongside portrayals of death, emphasis is laid on not only transformation and destruction of human life but also cultural heritage, rituals, and traditions, thus emphasising the transformative nature of the war.

Although the three writers first entered the Latvian literary scene at roughly the same time (the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s) and their testimonies of wartime childhood reveal individual and collective traumatic experiences that can be treated as the life stories of a generation, the specificity of their autobiographical works was impacted by the times in which they were written and published, as well as by the identities of the individual authors. Gāliņš focuses on the meaning and the course of human life, gradually attaining a more self-reflective, contemplative and philosophical character (Dombrovska) and a deeper understanding of reality and the self. While revisiting the past, Varslavāne reflects on violations of individual, national, and religious dignity, as well as socio-cultural deprivation and resilience. As a textual and visual narrative, Dripe's work highlights the writer's journalistic style and provides documentary evidence; at the same time, it falls within a tradition of autobiographical writing in Latvia just after it regained its independence that focuses on the reconstruction of the past. All analysed prose works are stories of self-transformation and although they make readers question the relationship between memoir and fiction, they also dwell upon the question of why specific events are remembered.

"Autobiographical memories are relatively good at retaining explicitly negative emotional events, and this refers to both the event itself and its details" (Kaprāns, Zelče 24), thus, the subject of trauma in literary narratives can be simultaneously "personalized and contextualized, fictionalized and historicized, as well as psychologized and metaphorized" (Schönfelder 29). The depictions of remembered wartime holidays largely depend on the emotional content of the experience and received stimuli. While the wartime Midsummer's Eve is mainly associated with

1 E.g. Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš's (1877-1962) *Baltā grāmata* [The White Book] (1914; 1921). Ernests Birznieks-Upītis's (1971-1960) trilogy *Pastariņa dienasgrāmata* [Pastariņš' Diary]: *Pastariņš mājās* [Pastariņš ar Home] (1922), Pastariņš skolā [Pastariņš at School] (1924), Pastariņš dzīvē [Pastariņš in Life] (1924); Aspazija's *Zila debess* [Blue Sky] (1924) and *Zelta* mākoņi [Golden Clouds] (1928). Anna Brigadere's (1861-1933) trilogy, etc.

the beginning of the war and death, and mainly depicted in the context of Kurzeme region, Christmas is presented by these authors in various circumstances and under changing powers.

Revisiting the past, rethinking family history and re-constructing wartime childhood memories have become central to the literary re-creation of collective traumas. On the one hand, the stories of childhood in the shadow of war "assist the critical cultural work of truth telling, remembrance, and healing" (Goodenough and Immel 11). On the other hand, "[m]emory is more than just who we were, it's who we are and what we have the potential to become, as individuals and as a society" (Ranganath 7). To get a holistic picture of the traumatic events, experiences, and resilience of the so-called "fatherless generation," childhood memory narratives must be studied in conjunction with life-story interviews.

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