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Starvation and Literature: Reading Contemporary Lithuanian and Latvian Novels

"Hamsun ought to have been sent to Siberia, so he could see what the real hunger looked like" (Māra Zālīte, *Five Fingers*, 2013, 136)

Abstract: The cataclysmic events in the Baltic states during and after the Second World War, such as the Holocaust, concentration camps, Siberian exile, etc. make hunger and famine a momentous topic in the Baltic works of literature: it has become so popular that it recently amounted to a rich body of Lithuanian and Latvian contemporary trauma narratives. Food researchers search the literature for phenomena related to satiety, i.e., gustatory experience. My debate will focus on food deprivation, low-calorie intake, malnutrition, and the corresponding physiological and psychological effects and reactions. How does the social, political, and psychological situation of a starving person deconstruct the accepted view of food? What is the relationship between starvation and femininity in the representations of trauma? Is it possible to adequately articulate starvation if neither the writer nor the reader has experienced it directly?

The paper is based on a few Lithuanian and Latvian modern literary accounts, namely *Five Fingers* (*Pieci pirksti*) by Māra Zālīte, *Between the Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys, *In the Shadow of Wolves* (*Mano vardas – Marytė*) by Alvydas Šlepikas, *Darkness and Company* (*Tamsa ir partneriai*) by Sigitas Parulskis, and *The Beautiful Ones* (*Skaistās*) by Inga Gaile. My interest in focusing on these texts is determined by the capacity of a literary text to capture ethical debates expressing the relationship between life and death, the individual body and power, and the edible and non-edible. By proposing a comparative trajectory and using structuralist research tools, I will trace the problematic depictions of starvation in Lithuanian and Latvian literary works and highlight the anti-cultural meanings that it acquires.

Keywords: famine; hunger; starvation; Lithuanian literature; Latvian literature; omnivore paradox; gusteme; culinary triangle

The spectrum of themes related to starvation in the literature ranges from religious to secular contexts, from fasting to the representation of eating disorders. Hunger is often portrayed in literature as a phenomenon linked to figurative meanings or a spiritual dimension (hunger for knowledge, love, personal expression, or recognition), but in this paper, I will approach it from a rational point of view, exclusively as a physiological necessity. I have chosen this angle of analysis because in Baltic literature, starvation usually functions as an embodiment or trace of historical violence and suffering. We can locate literary works depicting starvation in the same paradigm as narratives of trauma, as war brings suffering and food shortages, which may also be used as effective means of physical torture and social subordination.

My theoretical position is based not on the research of the history of gastronomy as a cultural act, but rather on the "history of survival", where food functions as a basic biological need for nourishment and personal nutritional instinct. Starvation studies fall within the field of food studies but offer a very different, even opposite, perspective. The representation of starvation is not about the choice, preparation, and serving of food, but about the search for it, its rationing, and its constant scarcity, circumstances that lead to different situations of human existence and affect our perception of eating and humanity. It is not about taste, cookery, and gastronomy in literature, but about the nutrients that the human body needs. In the literature on starvation, it is not about *what*, but *how much* and *how* the characters eat. In the face of crisis and catastrophe, people are forced to return from culture to the realm of nature, to the primal instincts and eating habits of a primitive community.

The traditional gastro-poetic tools of analysis are inadequate to deal with hunger and starvation in literature, and the existing methodological arguments have to be reformulated and supplemented, no longer for the study of taste, but the study of survival, with its ethical, emotional, and psychological implications. As a starting point I took the concept of "gustemes" formulated by structuralism, which Claude Lévi-Strauss explained through the analogy with lexemes in language as oppositional units of meaning:

> Like language, it seems to me, the cuisine of a society may be analyzed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call "gustemes", and which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation. (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 85).

Lévi-Strauss used this oppositional structure to highlight the contrasting qualities of French and English cuisines, while Rimvydas Laužikas, a researcher of Lithuanian historical cuisine, applied it to the flavour poetics of Kristijonas Donelaitis' epic poem *The Seasons*, where he identified the composition of the flavour of "tasty" and "disgusting" as a defining element in the composition of positive and negative taste (Laužikas, 2016, 446). Speaking of starvation, we need to reconsider the concept of gustemes, focusing on the binary nature that arises from nutrition and starvation being at the two opposite ends of the spectrum. The aspects of eating such as tasting, relishing, or savouring food give way to the functional elements of nutrition. Given the fact that the notion of food is explored not as a product of culture, but rather as a caloric intake necessary for one's survival, various concepts, such as time, space, political and social environments, and circumstances, become very important to our debates. The hunger experience is not gustative, but rather biological and moral, so the literature often explores such categories as life and death, humanity and cruelty, individual body and power, corporality and discourse, etc. Scientists wonder whether language is even capable of describing the extreme physical, emotional, and psychological suffering that is inflicted upon the victims when such tragedies occur (Pitrone, 2003). Hunger is usually seen as a non-discursive experience that is outside or beyond words and relies on a gap between signs and their referents (Simek, 2016). The topics of "famine memory" and "collective remembrance" have themselves become debated terms within famine studies (Kelleher, 2013). As to the portrayal of hunger and starvation in literature, I would like to pose a question of whether the experience of starvation can be effectively conveyed through literary works, or is there a line that the arts and literature should not cross to begin with?

My chronological frame for this topic is defined by the cataclysmic historical events of the 20th century, such as the Russian and German occupations, although all the works in question are written in the 21st century. In the Baltic region, the problem of famine has become a historically distant and more abstract, symbolic notion, although still very important and rooted, as seen in the selection of artworks for the international exhibition "Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States", which raises famine as a significant episode in the Baltic States[1].

1 The regional memory of famine was represented in the exhibition by the work "Hunger" by Aleksander Uurits (1888–1918), the sculpture "Famine", ca 1910, by Antanas Vivulskis (1877–1919), etc. These artworks reflect the history of the Baltic region: wars, plague epi-

A plethora of recent literary works of 21st century authors exploring this topic[2] shows that it is still alive in our collective remembrance as a traumatic post-memory syndrome[3]. These concepts of hunger, starvation, and famine in literature usually accompany the representation of other terrifying historical events and experiences, such as war and postwar periods, the Holocaust, deportations, and concentration camps. Writers reflect on this theme in an attempt to overcome and transcend the oblivion and stigma attached to it.

In this framework, I focus mainly on the following five works: Inga Gaile's *The Beautiful Ones* (Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1941, Latvians, Germans, Poles), Alvydas Šlepikas's *In the Shadow of Wolves* (Kaliningrad, winter of 1946, Germans, Russians, Lithuanians), Sigitas Parulskis's *Darkness and Company* (Vilnius ghetto, 1941, Jews, Germans, Lithuanians), Ruta Sepetys's *Between the Shades of Gray* (Siberia, 1941, Lithuanians, Russians), and Māra Zālīte's *Five Fingers* (Siberia, 1952, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Georgians), in which victims either engage in the struggle to overcome hunger or succumb to starvation. To my knowledge, there has been no attempt to date to provide a unified overview of 21st century works of disaster literature with the perspective of hunger and famine as the main object of study. I have chosen works by Baltic authors who depict different nations experiencing famine and starvation as consequences of the Second World War and who communicate hunger through characters of different ages – children (Zālīte, Šlepikas), adolescents (Sepetys), and adults (Gaile, Parulskis).

Of these writers, only Zālīte has personally suffered from starvation as a child in Siberia, so in her work, the catastrophe of starvation is highly personalized, linked not only to history but also to family memory. Other books portray starvation as an integral component of traumatic experiences and physical, moral, and psychological violence. They explore the topic as researchers and

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demics, and the natural disasters that led to famine, such as the famine of 1709–1711, when food shortages and plague reduced the Baltic population by almost a third, or the bad years of 1867–1868, which led to emigration to America.

2 Sandra Kalniete, *Ar balles kurpēm Sibīrijas sniegos* (2001), Laima Muktupāvela, *Mīla. Benjamiņa* (2005), Rugilė Audenienė, *Vojago* (2020), Aneta Anra, *Jehudit. Pasaulis galėtų būti toks gražus* (2021), Ina Pukelytė, *Panelės iš Laisvės alėjos* (2020) to name just a few.

3 Laima Kota, in her novel *Mierielas vilkme,* highlights the lasting impact of the famine on the collective imagination of future generations, stating that "the memory of the genes of the starvation" still prevents Latvians from throwing away food (Kota, 2016, 110).

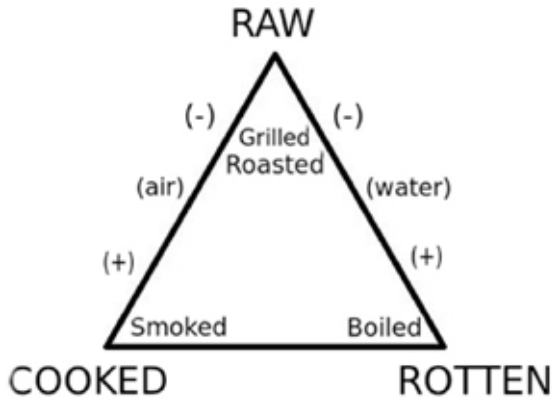
historians based on documented and archival materials, without firsthand knowledge or immediate experience. In the Baltic countries, the chrestomathic autobiographical and fictional works of literature depicting the experience of famine have so far been associated with the representation of exiles and the trauma of Siberia, and the novels by Zālīte and Sepetys are no exception to this trend. Šlepikas's work was chosen to diversify the corpus of sources for the article, where starvation is the narrative axis and the people experiencing the starvation are the Germans (known as the *wolf children*) who fled from the Kaliningrad region to Lithuania during the famine that broke out in the East Prussia in the winter of 1946–1947. Their path was essentially one of starvation[4], which led to salvation because there was more food in Lithuania. *Duona* (Lith. "bread") was the first Lithuanian word the German children learned, along with *darbas* (Lith. "work"). In Parulskis's novel *Darkness and Company*, one of the members of this "Company" is undoubtedly the starvation experienced by the Jews imprisoned in the Kaunas ghetto and later executed. Gaile's novel was necessary for the discussion on starvation as it reveals a different perspective, standing out in the overall array by its immortalization of a woman's experience of starvation in a German concentration camp.

Starvation Diet: Raw, Rotten

The starvation diet is limited, primitive, and linked more to the savage than to the cultural dimension and tradition. As in prehistoric times, nature is becoming practically the only source of food for humans, and there is a return from elaborate cultured dishes to the consumption of unprocessed plant products, as they have a higher nutritional capacity, more natural vitamins, and minerals, which are needed to sustain the life of an exhausted organism. The culinary triangle was designed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1964; 1965), in whose triangular semantic field he arranged the three states of food: the "raw", the "cooked", and the "rotten". The "raw" spike is

4 In 2016, the Museum of Genocide Victims at Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania arranged the exhibition "Wolf Children: Along the Path of Bread from East Prussia to Lithuania" ("Vilko vaikai: duonos keliu iš Rytų Prūsijos į Lietuvą 1945–1948").

unmarked and represents unprocessed food, the "cooked" spike localises food that has undergone a process of cultural processing, and "the rotten" spike in the researcher's system of meanings denotes the natural phase of food deterioration.



This triangle acquires new meanings in the context of starvation, especially the "raw" and the "rotten" semantic ends. Often, characters in literary works are forced to cross the cultural and social boundaries by eating unacceptable foods that are not used for food in peace. People would eat the decaying and stinking leftovers discarded by guards and ditched by soldiers, such as potato peels, food remains, and scraps (Šlepikas, 2012, 15). In most cases, there are no facilities and no means to prepare the food properly, while the fatal hunger means that no time can be wasted, so the food is eaten uncooked and untreated (baking is the most common method of preparation mentioned in the novels). One could even say that starvation is a gastronomic anti-cultural presupposition, since extreme hunger adjusts the boundaries between the edible and non-edible, breaking down traditionally existing food habits and the taboos of culture. Eating rotten food also complicates the traditional notion of identity, because, with the saying "you are what you eat" in mind, it is possible to imagine who the person becomes by eating waste and rotten peels.

The daily standard per-person calorie intake proclaimed in the interwar period was three thousand per day[5] (Černiauskas, 2015, 144), while the same

5 In 1935–1938, Denmark and Sweden shared first place in Europe in terms of the recommended daily calorie intake per person, with a suggested daily intake of 3200 kcal, while in

standard intake could not have been further removed from reality during the Second World War. In Siberia, the ration of bread per day per person was three hundred grams, as documented by Sepetys, and that was only for laborers (Sepetys, 2011, 129). In the harsh Siberian climate, as well as in German concentration camps and Russian-ravaged Kaliningrad, oftentimes the daily calorie intake per person was zero. The situation of starvation requires not only physiological resilience but also psychological and social adaptation to the environment: "Lithuanians [in Siberia] were getting along in different ways. Some were able to exchange their quality items for food because the locals had never seen such clothes or things. Others picked berries and sold them to the lazy, others grew potatoes, ate what they found in the forests, or fished" (Andriukevičiūtė, 2015, 175). This quote provides social and characterological information: it speaks of the higher social level of Lithuanians, and emphasises their entrepreneurship, ingenuity, industriousness, and use of nature's bounty for food. We shall see that these motifs are universal and later recur in literary works, as starvation reveals itself as an equalizing experience.

The texts of the novels testify to a mechanism of gastronomic adaptation based on the "availability logics" (Sahlins, 1976). People in a situation of food scarcity experimented with wild ingredients, especially edible berries, and herbs, and ate other things that otherwise would not be considered food: birch sprouts, bird-cherry berries, various weeds (such as wild garlic, goose-foots, stinging nettles (Zālīte, 2013, 60–61)), frozen linden tree bark (Šlepikas, 2012, 89), young birch bark and pinecones (Gaile, 82). Laužikas, who has historically researched the region's eating preferences and traditional menus, testifies that Lithuanians have not been herbivores in the past centuries, and that for a long time in the Baltic States, the consumption of plant products, especially herbs, has been avoided, and that it was believed that humans were different from animals in the sense that people consumed not raw food, but rather processed food[6].

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the UK the daily dietary allowance was 3100 kcal. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia ranked 4–7 in the survey. The average daily food intake suggested by doctors was 3000 kcal (Černiauskas, 2015, 144).

6 Until the end of the 19th century, it was unusual to eat plants and vegetables in the Lithuanian gastronomic tradition, which "was based on the view that 'grass' (vegetables that had not been cooked) was eaten by cattle, while people ate only what was boiled, baked, fermented or stewed" (Laužikienė, Laužikas, 2018, 53).

Humans are beings whose bodies are anatomically and physiologically adapted to a mixed diet, but this versatility also means that the diet can be modified in many ways and even narrowed as much as possible. Food anthropologist Claude Fischler has called this contradictory nature of the diet the "omnivore paradox". According to him, this paradox manifests itself in the fact that "[i]n all cases the human omnivore can live on the available foods. He can survive the disappearance of the species on which he previously fed; he can move about, change his ecosystem" (Fischler, 1988, 278). Humans need a minimum variety of food, as long as they can meet the physiological needs of the body and obtain enough nutrients to sustain life. In the case of starvation, this biological parameter of an individual's diet is a great advantage, as it allows one to reorient oneself according to possibilities and change the perception of edibility.

Human as Carnivore and Hard-to-Swallow Products

The claim that *Homo sapiens* are omnivorous automatically implies that they are both herbivores (eaters of vegetables and plant material) and carnivores (eaters of meat). Eating meat while starving is also an important part of the starvation reflected in the literature, since the natural supply includes not only plant-based food but also animal-based food. Not all animals are considered edible in the Baltic tradition, but as mentioned above, a starving person consumes whatever is available and has a caloric value. As far back as the first Lithuanian work of fiction, the long poem *The Seasons* by Donelaitis mentions the phenomenon of starvation and related culinary creativity as follows:

> When out of misery, my heart to cheer,
> I kill some crows for roasting every year.
> It's you, sirs, bring poor folk to such a pass,
> We're ready to eat owls or even rats." (Donelaitis, 1985, 138)

Janīna Kursīte, who has written about the representation of the years of deprivation in Latvian literature, states that for ancient Latvians there were "hard-to-swallow" products; horse, cow, dog, and cat meat was avoided for food, and "the possibility of eating frogs, toads, rats, mice was particularly disgusting,

but during the years of famine, these were also eaten" (Kursīte, 2012, 25). During Second World War and in the postwar period, it was the meat of these domesticated or "filthy" animals, and the fresh meat of wild animals, that formed the basis of the meat ration. Since milk and its products do not feature at all in the starvation diet, meat from animals, insects, and birds is one of the few sources of protein available to wartime humans and is essential for the maintenance of omnivore life. In the Baltic literary writings on famine, any creature is regarded as a potential source of food and nutrition, big or small, dead or alive: "cats are also meat now" (Šlepikas, 2012, 64), "all birds are edible, why wouldn't they be? They all have got feathers" (66), a German woman in Kaliningrad hunting and cooking rats (68). An owl, mentioned by Donelaitis as a "starvation food" in the 18th century, helps ensure the survival of Siberian exiles in Sepetys's novel, ignoring the fact that the bird is found dead. As we can see, the supply and composition of the famine menu remain almost unchanged historically. Fishler writes about neophobia, the fear of eating new, unfamiliar foods, and pushing the boundaries of the usual diet (Fishler, 1988, 279), but the characters in the Lithuanian and Latvian novels are forced to take risks and experiment, or else they would starve to death.

The roles of eating and being eaten reverse in the food chain – dead or alive people become the food of parasites or wild animals, and, vice versa, blood-sucking insects turn into human food. For example, one Ukrainian man survives in Siberia by eating lice off of his own body, having been taught by his veterinarian parents that it is just protein (Zālīte, 2013, 19). Bones of dead bodies in Siberia are being chewed on by wolfs (102). Crows are being reflected on as man-eaters, devouring corpses of war victims: "fat post-war bird, full of human flesh, almost human itself" (Šlepikas, 2012, 66). A person sees only food everywhere and gravitates from the individual with an identity and a personality toward an organism whose only ambition is to fill its stomach. All human activities, thoughts, and fantasies are oriented towards this desire. The writers personalize hunger: the children think that out of their mother will crawl "some unseen, horrible beast, maybe Hunger itself, which she carries under her heart" (Šlepikas, 2012, 90), and the character in Sepetys's novel, 15-year-old girl, thinks that her stomach will eat itself (Sepetys, 2011, 76). When starving people see other people, they perceive their bodies as meat, i.e., even human flesh is seen by the eyes of the starving person as edible meat. Such extreme starvation

can even lead to cannibalism as a means of survival. However, in the Baltic writings about famine, we encounter only verbal hints of it: "Violeta could eat a doctor, having had not eaten for three days. [...] Let others eat the guards. Most of them are bony. They say human flesh tastes like chicken" (Gaile, 2019, 12). In Šlepikas's novel, a mother wishes she could cut off a piece of her body to feed her children (Šlepikas, 2012, 15), and a character in Sepetys's novel suggests that others being smart and eating him when he dies (Sepetys, 2011, 71).

Starvation forces one to rethink not only the relationship between life and death, between the edible and non-edible, between an object and a subject, but also that of value – the basic instinct of survival and food as the only object of desire take precedence over emotions and even culture: "[...] eventually the mind adjusts as well, and you start thinking like a bug, not bothered by feelings, sentiments or cultural needs, survival becomes the only important thing. Like a bug, all you care about is to snatch a piece of putrefied cheese or a rotten apple, and you are no longer ashamed of your squirmy bug body" (Parulskis, 2012, 192). This is just one of the typical examples; in Parulskis's book, the analogy of Aleksandras, a Jew in the ghetto, with the character in Franz Kafka's short story *The Metamorphosis*, who has turned into a huge insect, is constantly repeated. This transformation into a miserable creature expresses the inadequacy of the Jew's situation in the ghetto and the man's disgust with himself, degraded, having lost all cultural ambitions, the autonomy of action, and personal articulation. In his novel, Parulskis clearly defines the two conditions of human life and existence as speaking and eating (Parulskis, 2012, 110), which, when taken away, leave the human being without a personality. Ironically, in Kafka's short story, the character who turns into an insect eats little, and finally, after realizing the futility of his empty existence, starves to death before the sunset.

The Role of Food in Gaining Power and Food Nostalgia

Food, the dispensation or denial of it, is a tool of power allotment and a manipulation of human nature. Through the portrayal of food, we can see the power gap between the perpetrator and the victimized subjects, such as deportees or prisoners. Inflicting hunger on individuals works as a means of punishment and a source of physical torture. In the concentration camp's punitive

block, the female prisoners are not provided food or even water for three days (Gaile, 2019, 53); Jews can barely walk, "probably because of having had not eaten for several days" (Parulskis, 2012, 172); Lithuanians being deported to Siberia are not receiving food for the third day in a row (Sepetys, 2011, 80). The borderline conditions of a human body exhausted by starvation cause spiritual and mental hardship. Starvation changes people's behavior, moral criteria, and even physiologic reactions. A child is sold for a half-sack of potatoes (Šlepikas, 2012, 78), death becomes desirable, stealing becomes a quotidian norm (128), and one's hearing sharpens (93). A sort of "microeconomics of food" emerged in the concentration camps, Siberia, and even postwar Kaliningrad, where food was exchanged for luxury goods, family heirlooms, and treasures: silver-plated goblets, utensils, and jewellery (77). Those on the other side – Germans – have their own special grocery stores, where they buy wheat rolls, butter, vodka, and vegetables (Parulskis, 2012, 105), they feast, participate in orgies, and use drugs. Members of the NKVD security forces have bread and tea, and they cook dinner on the campfire (Sepetys, 2011, 93). The hungry characters observe them from the outside, but for them, this asymmetrical situation does not cause humiliation or jealousy so much as reflections on their own former satiated lives. Food becomes the main object of a starving person's contemplations and a personification of the good life in the past. When the body suffers from poor or insufficient nutrition, the subconscious starts generating memories and dreams of high-calorie, fat and rich foods. We should note, however, that the visions do not feature sumptuous dishes and ingredients, but rather simple everyday products associated with times of peace and "home-cooked", "one's own" food, as opposed to the "wild" and "someone else's". A character may remember a big slice of bread with honey (Šlepikas, 2012, 25), milk, bread-and-butter: "The sisters would play a game where they imagined what they would eat if the food was plentiful. She would always imagine white bread with butter. A whole loaf of it. A whole loaf just for herself. And butter..." (Gaile, 2019, 37). Bread-and-butter is a common denominator speaking of literary food nostalgia: "Oh, just to have some bread and butter now. Say, a big slice. Or even small. Or even a half of a tiny slice. Good Lord, will there never be any more bread and butter" (Šlepikas, 2012, 45).

Food being scarce, the definitions of even the smallest amounts of it are being actualised, dividing the paradigm from a loaf of bread to a "sliver", "morsel", or even a "crumb". The act of eating is completely disassociated from

tasting in a sense; as we have mentioned above, its availability and nutritional composition are much more important, which is why novels deconstruct food down to its nutritional elements. Accordingly, a woman in Siberia needs *protein* after having given birth (Zālīte, 2013, 22), and a child suffering from scurvy lacks *vitamins* (Sepetys, 2011, 187). Deficiencies in specific nutrients cause disease or slow down the body's healing and recovery processes, so food is seen as the elixir of life.

Starvation and Femininity

All the novels by women authors, especially Gaile's work *The Beautiful Ones*, touch upon the relationship between starvation and femininity, and the loss of female nature. Starving women lose weight, especially in the hip and breast areas, the parts of the body usually associated with femininity. Many reproductive-age starvation victims in Siberia and the concentration camps suffer from amenorrhea, the absence of menstruation, caused by malnutrition. That would cause women to start to question their identity. Older women would experience the loss of menstruation in the first two to three months of imprisonment. In her book, Gaile cites a recorded conversation between an imprisoned woman and a doctor, where we find out that only three women in her barracks still have menstrual periods, two of them teenagers. Women's experiences of starvation are closely linked not only to changing perceptions of their bodies and femininity but also to sexual violence and abuse. Physically starved women are forced to engage in sexual acts for food (Sepetys, 2011, 119). In Gaile's novel, women are sent to the "Dolls' House" – an experimental brothel designated for prisoners. The girls are supposed to be fed before they are taken on (Gaile, 2019, 58), to give them the attractive figure they need for their work in this "pleasure" institution, and as a bonus for their work they are given better rations of food, drinks, and cigarettes, but "none of the women who come back from the brothel want to go there again" (63).

The recurring motif of the mother as a (non-)provider, directly related to the representation of starvation, deserves special attention. Literary works record that women who gave birth on the trains on the way to Siberia and in exile, due to lack of food, stress, and sheer exhaustion, do not have milk

in their breasts. This develops the theme of the mother, who biologically and culturally is the giver of life, but without anything to offer as sustenance, is a bringer of death to her newborn (Zālīte, 2013, 20; Sepetys, 2011, 39). In cases where there was not enough food for both the mother and the child, the mother would be rescued, but mothers would still secretly hand out rations to their children and die of exhaustion themselves. Extreme physical, emotional, and psychological suffering is revealed through the relationship between a child and their mother in the face of starvation. Hannah Arendt argued that in emergencies, people are socially confronted, but it is the lack of food that creates communicative meanings. In the literary narratives under discussion, character qualities, such as self-denial and self-sacrifice, emerge where hungry people share food not only with family members and loved ones but also with strangers who are starving to death. At critical moments, not only a personal but also national solidarity emerges: when a Latvian woman gives birth, Ukrainian man Oleksandr remembers that he has buried some bear meat, while a Georgian woman Maja nurses a Latvian newborn Laura herself, saying that her own baby Levan will be the "milk brother" for Laura (Zālīte, 2013, 24). In this way, the ethnic and national arguments of belonging to a nation wither away before universal humanity and ethical implications. By sharing food, passive victims gain effective agency and successfully destabilise the authoritative power. On the other hand, they justify their suffering and sense of inferiority and assert their significance by helping others. The originally destructive nature of hunger could be reconsidered bearing in mind the creative and uniting potential it triggers in those involved.

Mothers created alternative hunger-ameliorating means, designed to trick their children's stomach as well as their minds – they would "feed" children hot boiled water (Šlepikas, 2012, 23), and tell tales about bread, meat, and turnips (22) or about Hansel and Gretel, where Hansel scatters breadcrumbs on the road to avoid getting lost (25). People attempt to alleviate physical hunger verbally by using folkloric narratives. However, the triggering of food memory does not satiate, but rather exacerbates the feeling of lack and inadequacy between a satiated past and a hungry present.

Discovering Starvation as Literary Material

Starvation is often associated with other bodily sufferings, such as cold, slavish work conditions, rape, and beatings, and is probably the phenomenon that highlights physicality the most. So, the question arises whether it is adequately described, and conveyed through words and literary means. A writer or literary scholar who has never experienced starvation is privileged. Also privileged are the witnesses on the other side – those that won the war, and concentration camp guards. Starvation victims question the morality of the narrative, saying that the texts distort the politics of memory, turning their authentic experiences and memories of hunger into kitsch. On the other hand, many victims close themselves off, so fiction is a medium that preserves and perpetuates their experience in an captivating and accessible form. In this case, literature acquires additional functions, as a moral philosophy or a tool for historical education.

The key question is not whether it is necessary to talk about starvation in literature at all, but how to talk about it. No literary work can adequately convey the reality of starvation in the context of such marginal experiences, but writers try to find the right rhetoric to communicate the experience of hunger to arouse the reader's reaction and emotion. On the one hand, such a text is subjective; on the other hand, it reveals collective tragedies – the tragedies of the exiles, the enslaved, and those who ended up in the ghetto or concentration camps.

Reading novels creates a different perception of starvation as a traumatic experience. It is unethical to ask whose hunger was stronger against the backdrop of the raging terror, because it was suffered by people of different nationalities and affected by different war events. Literary language is important as a testimony that allows us to get in touch with the reality of the time, understand and sympathise with the victims of the famine, and even identify with them.

There is undoubtedly a huge discursive gap between the direct experience and its verbal expression. Writers can use a variety of rhetorical strategies, but the rhetoric of starvation is usually laconic, without metaphors, emphasizing an existential horror that is difficult to express in words. The works analysed suggest that an effective language for describing hunger is open, unsophisticated, and reportage-like. The often fragmented, choppy, and jerky nature of writing conveys the desperation, frustration, and psychological and physical strain of the hungry characters. This is particularly characteristic of Šlepikas's novel, which is written in

a fragmented dialogue form, and of Gaile's novel, whose recitative and mosaic-like style cinematically reveals the tragedy of starved and abused characters. Parulskis writes in short sentences and episodes, alternating the perspectives of different characters, and using language to convey flashes of consciousness and breaking points. When concentrated naturalism becomes excessive, the writers use the techniques of ellipsis and unfinished sentences, leaving room for the reader's imagination, interpretation, and emotions – empathy, horror, or indignation. It should be noted that the stylistics of all the novels under discussion are emphatically simple, without the usual literary metaphors, epithets, intertextual references (the most frequent biblical allusions and interjections found in Parulskis's and Sepetys's novels, with occasional allusions to other texts, such as Kafka's aforementioned short story *Metamorphosis*). In a situation of existential survival, an overly graphic and overloaded literary language would seem unnatural. Zālīte refuses to use direct language at intervals, thus condensing and slowing down the natural flow of the novel. Her technique of conveying hunger through a child's point of view, with language being an effective tool for this, as in the episode when Zālīte's five-year-old character Laura, seeing her mother weeding, unconsciously exclaims, "But what will we eat when hunger strikes?" (Zālīte, 2013, 60). The child's naivety is also an eloquent means of expression for presenting difficult topics, such as starvation, in a frank and non-banal way.

Another discursive strategy of rhetoric, which has fallen out of the framework of this study but is important in the representation of hunger and its victims, is extreme humour and its various forms, such as irony, sarcasm, the grotesque, and farce. Latvian poet Knuts Skujenieks was once asked why he does not write about the time he was imprisoned in a concentration camp in Mordovia. His answer went as follows: "Such events were taking place in that camp that no one could sanely understand, this tragedy could be described as a farce. Only farce!" A similar method of expression was also employed by Lithuanian writer Balys Sruoga in his renowned memoir book *Dievų miškas* (*Forest of Gods,* 1957, published in English in 1996), where the author describes his imprisonment at the Stutthof concentration camp. Using humour to narrate their hunger experiences, writers display symbolic agency and control over their situation. Latvian and Lithuanian authors even employ the comics genre[7] to transform painful experiences and make them more accessible to the reader.

7 *The Cattle Express: A Tale of Wall Street and Siberia* (2016) by Tom Crosshill, *Siberian Haiku* by Jurga Vilė, and Lina Itagaki (2018).

Conclusions

As we see from these literary works, various regional ethnic groups have experienced starvation: Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Jews. But starvation is an experience that rises above any ethnic arguments. Starvation levels off all nationalities and leads to a transformation of values – all that remains is the simple need for survival, without any religious, national, or cultural differences. However, we can see that starvation is linked to the loss of feminine identity, as it negatively affects the perception of femininity by depriving women of their self-generating body shapes and physiological reproductive powers. All these books show that food in the times of starvation was the sole most powerful concern and the most popular form of currency.

Using the rhetoric of food, we can call these novels "consumption products", which help us not experience, but rather understand starvation. The portrayal of starvation often fulfils a pragmatic function – through the description of suffering, we see the critique of power and oppression. These hunger and starvation narratives could well serve as a critique of our contemporary over-consuming, food-wasting, vegetarian- and vegan-fad following society.

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