

Introductory speech , 7 December 2015,

by Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy

Ladies and gentlemen – I bid you a warm welcome to the Swedish Academy!

Two months ago, in early October, here in the Grand Hall, just before one o'clock in the afternoon, a multitude of journalists had gathered, eager to know the new laureate's name. I opened the door, mounted a podium and stood in silence a short while. I began speaking, and as soon as I uttered the word "Belarusian", there were cheers.

Everyone wanted to know all about the year's Nobel literature laureate, Svetlana Alexievich.¹ Where was she born? Where did she grow up? What had she written? Where should I begin? Was she a journalist? In which case, what kind of journalist? A new breed? Did her writing represent a new kind of non-fiction? I was shunted from one journalist to another, thirty seconds here, three minutes there. After about three hours, the show concluded.

In the meantime, I could not stop thinking about the larger issues looming behind the small, with no one asking about them. The major issues included the Red Individual and the rise and fall of the Soviet citizen. Behind that, an even larger question was emerging: Why should we even care about a narrative of the Red Individual's rise and fall? That empire was over. The great experiment, seven decades-long, was dead and buried. And the Red Individual was progressively being replaced by another person, whose name is yet unknown. Do we miss the Red Individual? More, why should we care?

Alexievich is determined to engage with people. She wants to hear their stories and before it is too late. And always from people who would have no part in the narrative had not Alexievich happened by, and had she not decided to write the history of the women of the Second World War, of all the women – a million of them – who volunteered to fight. What did we know about them? And if I tell you that two million Russian-speakers have bought that book, you can be

¹ With a Ukrainian father and a Belarusian mother, Svetlana Alexievich grew up speaking Russian.

certain that not even in those regions was much known about the women soldiers. In the war they were medical instructors, snipers, gunners, anti-aircraft officers, sappers, pilots ... Now they are accountants, laboratory assistants, guides and teachers. The official version of the Second World War has been about the aspirations of the Soviet individual. What Alexievich shows is how it really was. It is at times hard to take in.

What did we know about the children of all the adult men and women who went to war? Or about the troop multitudes who fought the ten-year war in Afghanistan? Or of all those who returned to Chernobyl ten years after the disaster, often facing mortal danger, to resume their lives? Or of the others, all the *homo sovieticus* washed ashore at the end of the Soviet era, some initially led astray, others fearful, even others sceptical. Some still believe in *homo sovieticus*, some stopped long ago.

It is a nutshell of the catastrophes that have characterised the life of the Red Individual from the October Revolution in 1917 to the collapse of Soviet communism.

Alexievich's work has a double perspective. On the one hand, she wants to talk about the Red Individual, and all the formative experiences. On the other hand, she waits until the true human experience begins to reveal itself, overriding clichés and spun versions. Here, somewhere, is the crux.

She needs the catastrophes, but needs also the emotions. If the catastrophes had been merely devices, one would have done the job, one book would have been enough. And if the emotions she sought out were mundane, one book would have sufficed as well. The catastrophes show a path, as do the feelings, just differently for each time.

This makes me think of *War's Unwomanly Face*. It has a great advantage: it treats an historical event we believe we thoroughly understand. But you don't get very far in the book before you begin to understand that here is something new. Firstly, that a million women volunteered for what was known as the Great Patriotic War. Secondly, that the women's participation changed the perception of the war. And thirdly, that after the war, the women

participants and their experiences were belittled: men were the soldier-heroes and the women given no honours. They were not taken seriously. Postwar, these women were seen as whores and treated as such.

When Alexievich came along – about thirty-five years after the war’s end – and wanted to probe the reality, she encountered both respect and suspicion. Many hours of conscientious work were needed. She listened, listened again, then a third time – often more – until the magic instant arrived when a person opened unlocked a secret door to a secret place and told how it was to kill for the first time, to see a friend cut down by an enemy bullet, to hobble around in shoes ten sizes too big dragging wounded bodies – and then to be primping your hair, putting it in rollers. And to be better with a gun than the men. These things, decades-old, Alexievich offers us in the form of a bare yet multi-voiced account.

Who could have accomplished this? Alexievich has given almost forty years to her writing. She acknowledges her models, among them the great Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich (1927-1994), who, with others, depicted the siege of Leningrad in the Second World War, a siege that ended for a hideous number of people in famine and death – a famine brought on by an enemy. Among models, too, was nurse/writer Sofia Fedorchenko, who, years earlier, in the First World War, was at the front, and heard Russians soldiers talking when they believed no one to be listening, unaware that the nurse behind them, anonymous and apparently busy at her tasks, was registering their words. So yes, there were models. Widening our horizons, we find historians such as Studs Terkel in the US, dead only a few years ago at the age of 96, and one of the great exponents of what is known as oral history.

Alexievich has deferred to Adamovich with utmost respect and frequently mentions his influence on her project. But, although I suspect she will not admit this, she has gone several steps further. She wants to converse with people, and I mean this in the deepest and most comprehensive sense. She craves the speech of living people, that which disappears when the people in question no longer exist. She doesn’t want photographs, diaries, letters, newspapers,

places. She wants the speech of living people, which is why she goes back. Not only that: she removes everything superfluous to the core. She adds nothing; she subtracts. We are told people's names, their ages and what they do, little apart from that. We are thus confronted with a choral work, of voices stitched one upon another. This is Alexievich's great achievement.

What remains is the big question of human historical experiences. Why should we care? Alexievich has studied catastrophe after catastrophe. She has investigated how men and their mothers experienced the Afghanistan war. She has written about the Chernobyl tragedy and how it affected those who returned after ten years. She has sought out the people who, one way or another, survived the fall of Soviet communism. These are historic calamities. No one escapes them unscathed, no one is ever the same again.

Why should we want them? Because Alexievich is telling us something about ourselves and the people we may be, or might have been, us people on the edge of history. She tells us about the history of an emotion compacted by one disaster after another, about the suffering individual's entire span of feelings, and especially about love, the desperate love for those we were once close to, the children we lost, the husband or wife, the relatives, the wounded love for all the people no longer with us.

She tells us too about another sort of love, the frenzied love for a motherland, a love that we would like to see as a gift from another age, but which probably isn't that at all, but a sentiment that speaks more about the motherland's demands on us: Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. It is there, in the maimed love for one's nation, that Alexievich finds familiar faces, all those people who lived for so long in the hope of another and better land.

Translated by Kim Loughran