

To Whom Does a Poet Belong?

The Reburial of Vasyl' Stus (1989) as a
Ritual of Cultural Appropriation¹

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On November 19, 1989, the body of the Ukrainian poet and dissident Vasyl' Stus (1938-1985) was brought back to Ukraine from the gulag, where he perished as a prisoner of conscience. Stus's final homecoming did not end with the reburial of his body, however. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, and later, throughout the subsequent years of independence, Ukraine has gradually been rediscovering one of its most talented and uncompromising poets, whose life and work were virtually unknown to the country's citizens before his homecoming. In this paper, I return to this "rediscovery" and look into the complex process by which this unique political and cultural figure has been culturally appropriated, first, by Ukraine's intellectual elite and, second, by her common people. I argue that while literary scholars and other cultural makers have been rightly concerned about the significant dose of reductionism in Stus's posthumous reception in Ukraine, this seeming reductionism was a necessary avenue to follow for the political movement of the day, which brought Ukraine independence in 1991. In this context, the seemingly reductionist interpretations of Stus's life and work helped to ensure that Stus would become known and dear to many in Ukraine, whether they could relate to his potent poetic voice or not. What I will focus on here is the way the process of Stus's cultural appropriation by a people relied on ritual, which legitimized it despite the arguments voiced by the Ukrainian elite against it.

"And who actually was that Stus?" well-read, Russian-speaking university friends of mine from Kyiv asked me after the news of the poet's reburial spread around the capital. Many of my friends who had grown up in Kyiv in the 1980s were predominately immersed in the Russian-speaking culture of the late Soviet Union, which firmly established itself in Ukraine's urban centers throughout the republic with the exception perhaps of Western Ukraine. Many Ukrainians had little familiarity with contemporary Ukrainian culture, for a variety of reasons, the main one being that the kind of Ukrainian culture which grew not exclusively out of Ukrainian folklore but rather dealt with universal human values and issues beyond those addressed by the literature and art of socialist realism had not been promoted very much in the Soviet public space and was therefore quite inaccessible to the ordinary citizen of Ukraine.

Stus's poetic voice broke through the conventional socialist realist Ukrainian literature in the 1960s, during the period known in the former Soviet Union as the thaw. His unbleached, deeply touching lyric and intense, often politically charged and yet subtle poetic imagery have not been matched in Ukrainian literature since then. Coupled with the zig-zags of an eventful life uncompromisingly devoted to the revival of Ukraine's national dignity and consciousness at a time when this was still inconceivable, Stus's poetic breakthrough attracted a great deal of attention among literary scholars and journalists in the post-USSR Ukraine. Many writers felt obliged to pay tribute to the great, yet hardly known, poet of their time. Some examined his poetry, some recollected personal encounters with him, while others discussing his life utilized the opportunity to voice their own patriotism. A few tried to bring analyses of his poetic world into this discussion to reveal the complexity and multilayeredness of his poetry (Mel'nyk 1990, Kotsiubyns'ka 1991, Hundorova 1992, Bedryk 1993). As far as the intellectuals' appropriation of Stus is concerned, it is safe to say that a new literary discourse was born in Ukraine in the 1990s: "the Stus discourse," in which Stus as a poet, a philosopher, and an intellectual has been granted membership and placed firmly in the circle of the Ukrainian cultural and political elite.

Stus's poetry, though often interpreted as an expression of the "national" Ukrainian spirit, was "thoroughly human and humane. We are face to face not with a canonized tribune, but with a human being – Human with a capital H" (Shevelov, 1987: xxii). Stus's search for inner truth through poetry and writing, a search so intensely intertwined with the vicissitudes of the day (with the cultural and political suppression of Ukrainianness in Ukraine) placed him among the great existential Western poets, such as Rilke. Yet, at the same time, Stus was born Ukrainian, into the Ukrainian language but also into the Soviet Ukraine of the 1960s and 1970s, where issues of truth were not necessarily voiced or addressed openly and where Ukrainianness was suppressed.

The poet's life-long journey to truth, and his truthful self, thus became a path of resistance to the system, to its stillness and cruelty towards culture and freedom of expression. His daring self-positioning against the system was naturally not welcomed by the Soviet state. In 1965, Ukrainian intellectuals were first arrested by the KGB for openly voicing through art, verse, and fiction their alliance with the ideals of Ukrainian nationalism. In 1966, the state began its hunt for Stus, first expelling him from the Academy of Sciences, then confiscating his written manuscripts on several occasions, and finally sentencing him to gulag labor camps twice for two terms for a total of eighteen years, which he did not survive. In the late 1980s, neither my friends nor many other Ukrainian citizens had access to such knowledge.

My friends' curiosity exposed me to another side of the Stus discourse in the late 1980s. I began to question how Stus had been perceived by ordinary

Ukrainians involved in the nation-building process of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Contemplating this question made me wonder whether the intellectuals' effort to prevent Stus from being regarded as a purely political figure and a national martyr could ever have succeeded. To address these concerns by looking at Vasyly Stus's posthumous life from an anthropological perspective, I deal here not with the question of his intellectual heritage as such, but that of how this heritage, and the figure of the poet himself, has been appropriated by ordinary Ukrainians, by his nation and by his country. I limit myself to a discussion of how this appropriation was destined to become public. Although Stus's poetry can hardly be called undemanding reading easily accessible to a general public, soon after his "return" to Ukraine he was treated precisely as a *narodnyi* poet or a "poet of the people." The events of 1989 seemed to have triggered this perception. Taking up a ritual approach to the poet's reburial, I argue that the emergence of this perception and the subsequent growth of a "Stus cult" in post-Soviet Ukraine has been the unavoidable consequence of the symbolic and ritual nature of his reburial. In doing so, I want to redeem Stus's public appropriation, criticized and denigrated by intellectuals, as a legitimate and justifiable (though far from unproblematic) aspect of nation-building processes in Ukraine of that time.

Literary critics in the West have been engaged with Stus for some time (Shevelov 1986, 1987, Carynnyk 1977, 1988, Pavlyshyn 1992). Marko Pavlyshyn was among the first to analyze the cultural background of the "East-West landscape against which the reception of Stus is taking place" (1992: 33). Pavlyshyn, and he was not alone in this, warned against the creation of a Stus cult and called upon his colleagues in literary criticism to unite their efforts to prevent "the *popular* devaluation" of Stus's poetry: "There is a necessity to create a qualified, as much as possible an intellectual discussion in order to reveal the potential meanings of Stus's legacies for the development of the Ukrainian culture where he belongs" (1992: 34). Pavlyshyn appears to be concerned and somewhat skeptical when he refers to ordinary people's fascination with Stus and cites statements like "Stus is our honour and national pride." His citations of those respondents who, in 1991, sent to the newspaper *Literaturna Ukraina* emotional letters along with money for a monument for Stus were meant to illustrate this "popular devaluation" of Stus's legacy. While agreeing in principle with Pavlyshyn's view on today's canonization of the poet, it seems to me that it is time to move beyond this approach to Stus, which primarily expresses a concern Pavlyshyn shares with others about the state of elite culture in Ukraine. Stus's legacy is simply too immense to remain the intellectual property of the elite alone. Both the intellectuals and the ordinary people have been inevitably engaged in the construction of the poet's imagery, contributing to his on-going mythologization. Even if there are often debates over the question of who

“owns” Stus, and who owns the rights to read him in a certain way, the point is that scholars, filmmakers (Chernilevs’ky 1992), common Ukrainians, contemporaries (Orach 1993), and family (D. Stus 1995)² all have been participating, each in their own way, in the Stus discourse.

The late 1980s, and especially 1989, were times of heated political debates over the future of a still-Soviet Ukraine, times when the Ukrainian culture and language were neither fully rehabilitated within the ruling structures nor legitimated in the minds of the population, particularly among the Russian-speaking portion. Against this background, the one-day event of Stas’s burial not only reflected the contemporary complexity of the political situation in Ukraine, but this ritual formulated and, more relevant to this discussion, provided the “masses” with a new symbol, which the national elite had been eagerly seeking in order to realize their political goal of an independent Ukraine.

What happened at the reburial? In many respects the event followed the well-established norms of a traditional Ukrainian funeral. For this reason, I look at the reburial through the prism of ritual analysis. Further, I treat this event not only as a ritual of reburial (of the dead), but also as a ritual of initiation (of the living) in which, as in every other ritual of initiation, certain cultural values are transmitted to the people participating in the event. In this analysis, I rely on terminology and concepts developed in the anthropology of ritual. Thus, I refer to the organizers of the event as *ritual coordinators* – the group that in the context of traditional rituals represents community leaders. I discuss the issue of *transcendental vitality*, a notion I borrow from Maurice Bloch (1992), who defines it as the new irreducible cultural/spiritual value that is gained by and transmitted upon initiates at the “highest spiritual point” in the ritual, a value that emerges from the event and that allows initiates to re-enter reality as initiated into the group.

November 19, 1989: Kyiv witnessed an unusual procession that slowly passed from the ancient Sofia cathedral, symbol of the might and power of the Orthodox church and Kyivan Rus’ in the tenth-eleventh centuries, through the main streets of downtown to *Baikove*, the most prestigious of Kyiv’s cemeteries. The main cortege, headed by priests from both Ukrainian Churches, Orthodox and Greek Catholic, convoyed three zinc coffins, draped with blue and yellow flags, decorated with flowers. Some carried crosses. Approximately 30,000 people followed in deep mourning, some with national Ukrainian flags and some with various slogans written in Ukrainian such as, for example, “Shame on the murderers of the Ukrainian nation” and “Welcome home, Vasyliu!” The whole procession silently marched through the streets, provoking the interest of pedestrians and drawing the most curious of them into its ranks. “Passersby wondered what was going on. Those who were already following the procession re-

sponded: "Vasyl' Stus, Yuri Lytvyn, and Oleksa Tykhyi, Ukraine's best sons, are returning to the native land" (*Holos Vidrodzhennia*, November 20, 1989).

Those who had urged on and supported Stus's symbolic return to Ukraine were people of the new ideology. Among them were the pro-national political leaders of the late 1980s, especially of *Rukh* (People's Front) and *Memorial* (the Ukrainian organization for political rehabilitation), as well as Ukrainian intellectuals, and his colleagues-in-writing and colleagues-in-imprisonment (M. Kotsiubyns'ka, E. Sverstiuk, V. Ovsienko, and others). They became involved in organizing the reburial and, along with the church officials, constituted the group of ritual coordinators solely responsible for the order and presentation of all aspects of the ritual.

Ironically, Stus's own family, his wife and his son, had little impact on the decisions political leaders made regarding the poet's funeral. Vasyl's son Dmytro Stus and his wife Oksana told me in May 1997 that, as a family, they felt they had lost their voices in the discussion of how to organize the reburial, due to the pressure that *Rukh* and *Memorial* leaders had put on them.³ According to Dmytro, the Stus family had originally wanted to have a private funeral, but they succumbed to the symbolic demand of the nation (at least to the demands of the nation's representatives) to allow everybody to share in their pain.

An interesting turn in the ceremony was a symbolic encounter between the three returning dissidents and Taras Shevchenko. Though it was not planned that the procession would detour and go towards the Shevchenko monument across from Kyiv University, all three coffins were brought to this monument, where a huge mass of people was awaiting their arrival. The staged encounter of the two poets resulted in many parallels being drawn between the lives of Stus and Shevchenko. Burianyk summarizes the general outline of such comparisons in the introduction to her doctoral study, the first thesis on Stus in English: "Both poets wrote under conditions of national and political oppression; both opposed the policy of Russification, spent significant part of their lives in prison or exile, died when they were 47 years of age" and were reburied in Ukraine after the original funerals (25).

Such an analogy between the two poets easily found its way into popular mythology. The myth of Shevchenko as the "father of the Ukrainian nation" has been part of public consciousness for almost a century and a half. His reburial in 1861 also turned into a mass political procession and significantly contributed to the awakening of Ukrainians' national consciousness at that time. Shevchenko has been such a huge presence in Ukrainian cultural space that it is difficult to encounter someone who has experienced otherwise. The Stus myth under construction in the late 1980s and early 1990s was therefore understandably verified against Shevchenko's. As a cultural phenomenon that survived the

rise and fall of different ideologies and had a lasting impact on Ukrainians' mentality (in Braudel's sense of the term), the myth of Taras-the-son-of-Ukraine has fundamentally affected the reception of Stus by the ordinary people, many of whom have become acquainted with his writing only through the mass media. Once Stus was labeled the spiritual son of Taras (*Literaturna Ukraina*, May 16, 1991), he could not be rid of it despite many critics' attempts to argue against such an over-simplistic reading of the poet's legacy.

Returning now to the reburial ceremony, the procession moved slowly through the streets of Kyiv for several hours before reaching the cemetery. Representatives of both Ukrainian churches conducted the memorial service, and the leaders of *Rukh* and *Memorial*, Stus's colleagues and friends each, one by one, delivered a moving and very powerful eulogy. After the speeches, as prescribed in a traditional Slavic funeral, the ritual coordinators and many who followed them each threw a handful of dirt into the grave "according to the old Cossack tradition," as *Holos Vidrozhennia* put it in its November 1989 issue.

Ritual works by lending its participants the feeling of being placed outside the domain of the real world, where time, space, and words are experienced differently than in the context of the everyday. Likewise, Stus's reburial constructed its own atmosphere of non-reality, in which mundane everyday experiences were temporarily suspended and lofty feelings of unity with the abstract and yet not finalized idea of the Ukrainian nation eventually dominated. Cold weather and rain only added to the effect. A powerful sense of unity pervaded, involving everybody in the same experience of being initiated into the nation. And it did not fade away with the end of the reburial but re-entered the real world once the ritual was over.

This sense of being initiated into the nation was the main political achievement of the Stus reburial. A closer look at the symbolic roles assigned to the various groups which participated in the ceremony offers a more intricate view of how the ritual nature of the reburial ensured the achievement of its political goal. The ritual would not have taken place if the three deceased heroes had not been believed to have played significant roles in the struggle for the liberation of Ukraine. In the eulogies, all three heroes were praised for their "civilian courage" and patriotism. It was they, who had suffered in prisons and Soviet labor camps for the freedom of their Motherland; it was they, who had died in their struggle in the no-land of the gulag, far away from their homeland.

What placed them in the centre of the ritual scheme were the following characteristics: first, that they were dead and not alive; second, that they had been active in the political opposition; and, third, that they had been absent from the political discourse and from Ukraine itself for a long time. The ritual completely reversed their status of being dead/absent/non-real. They were greeted as if they were alive. Their souls arrived in Kyiv along with their bodies. In the

eulogies, the ritual coordinators addressed them in the present tense as if they were themselves in attendance at their reburial. Further, their return to Ukraine was greeted as a homecoming after a long period of absence. In the speeches of such political leaders of the time as Ivan Drach and Mykhailyna Kotsiubyn'ska, they were welcomed home and addressed in the singular, a grammatical sign of familiarity reserved in the Ukrainian language for intimate relations, including the one with God. All this ensured that their presence in the ritual space was most likely experienced by the ritual participants as physical presence. This inversion of "mortal heroes – living compatriots" enacted a transfer of the *vitality* of their spirit, with subsequent effects upon all the participants/initiates in the ritual (Bloch 1989). Translated out of the heroes' patriotism, this vitality was endowed upon the initiates in symbolic and privileged communication with the heroes – forming a feeling of solidarity, a sense of belonging to a nation-to-be-born, a sense that would remain long after the ceremony was over.

Another important ritual transformation that took place during the ritual was that the figure of the "Motherland" was also brought "to life" in the time/space of the ritual and into contact with all the participants, real and symbolic, in the event. For centuries the idea of the Motherland has been continually cultivated in the Slavic and Ukrainian traditional and political cultures. In Ukrainian the words for Motherland, *Vitchyzna* and even *Bat'kivshchyna*, do not dwell on the spatial term "land." Rather Ukrainian culture, like other Slavic cultures with similarly non-geographic terms for motherland/homeland, allows for more semantic flexibility in how to interpret and visualize the idea of motherland. In many contexts, the notion goes beyond the spatiality of the term "motherland" and implies people and culture, as well as the land. In Kyivan Rus, its image was shaped into Mother Rus, an anthropomorphic figure, and it has preserved a similar signification ever since. Under different political conjunctures the figure of Motherland has changed its image; yet, in principle, the Motherland has been always depicted as a female figure, a mother. In Soviet times it was understood as a Mother of all Soviet lands, while in the transitional period of the 1980s, Ukrainians found themselves re-coding its meaning again into "mother-Ukraine." The symbolic significance of the motherland as a figure of almost goddess-like proportions made it a sacred figure in the public consciousness, and its importance can be measured by its surprisingly constant presence in speeches at many political meetings and gatherings. In the case of the reburial of Stus, Lytvyn and Tykhyi, all the people gathered at the cemetery shared a "civilian debt," which they discharged by taking an oath to the dead heroes as well as to their Motherland, to struggle for her liberation from "Moscow's tyranny that lasted centuries, from Russian imperialism, from the KGB web" (*Holos Vidrozhennia*, November 20, 1989). The heroes, who had suffered and died for their Motherland, were the greatest examples of "civilian

courage.” Since they had died while struggling for her, they were her pride and her most respected sons, those who could inspire others for the struggle. Thus, it is through symbolic communication with them during the ritual that other sons and daughters of the Motherland were to be inspired to become better members of their nation-under-construction.

In the ritual of reburial, the interaction between three groups of ritual participants (“ritual coordinators,” “heroes,” and “initiates”) revealed their different statuses and roles with respect to the Motherland. A sacred, immortal image of the Motherland was present in the ritual space/time and was displayed through speeches and actions in such a fashion as to emphasize the imperative task for everyone to serve it. Since the heroes had shown the greatest loyalty to their Motherland, in the ritual they were symbolically brought back to life, to act as an example to others of how one should serve the Motherland. The ritual coordinators, who even in non-ritual time found themselves responsible for the construction of the imagined community of the new Ukrainian nation, facilitated a powerful spiritual reconnection of the Motherland with its people by coordinating symbolic, ritually transformative involvement of the ceremony’s attendees with the heroes, alive and vigilant in ritual space/time. The attendees/initiates were to undergo an important ritual transformation: from being loyal sons of the former Soviet Motherland to being the loyal sons of the new Mother of their land, Ukraine. It is on the basis of this connection, which was established in the ritual between the heroes and the initiates, that the symbolic initiation into a Ukrainian nation was to take place.

This symbolic initiation concerned in the first instance the more than thirty thousand people who joined the procession, but it did not stop there. After the event the city of two and a half million found itself involved in a truly public debate, a kind of a mass question-and-answer session over the reburial, which took place in public spaces such as the city’s transit system, a cultural urban space regularly serving Kyivites as a debate site. Still, those who participated in the ceremony were subject to the workings of the ritual more assertively than those who shared the post-reburial city talk. Since they encountered the poet personally, through the symbolic interaction with him during the reburial, they as initiates earned their right to claim a stronger emotional affiliation with Stus, having shared the enriching experience of a *communitas* that emerged during the ceremony.

Before the reburial stirred first the capital, and then the country, not all Ukrainians had made a choice with respect to the future of their altered Soviet identities. It took many public demonstrations and political meetings to create a new public space in which ordinary Ukrainians, who usually stayed away from politics, could develop new perspectives on their future identity choices. Stus’ reburial facilitated those processes, for the heroes glorified in this ritual

– “[t]hose three Ukrainians [who] demonstrated extraordinary courage in their personal lives in their struggle against the cultural and political oppression” (Ovsienko 1996) – became role-models.

As so many ordinary Ukrainians did not know of the poet prior to his final homecoming, the reburial of Vasyl Stus could also be called a ritual of discovery. For many it was not only the discovery of a great poet and powerful political figure, but also a deep personal discovery of the possible sacrifice one could make for “mother Ukraine.” Since his symbolic return took place in such a turbulent period, in a time of major identity shifts in Ukraine, Stus entered many lives in a profound way, becoming for very many a part of their *lived* experiences:

- “I read only what was published in LU [*Literaturna Ukraina*], but it was already enough to realize how much we are in debt to his courage. His image awakens our souls and calls for the struggle for a better fate for Ukraine.”⁴
- “It is painful and yet it is wonderful that we have such Vasyls, Yuris and Oleksas, they help us to keep our strength and to believe in ourselves (zchypity zuby is viryty).”⁵
- “I am happy to learn there are still people like him in (our) Ukraine... Let his monument stand above his grave for us to remember him, for our enemies to fear him.”⁶

Stus thus became both the subject and object of the nation-building processes. His symbolic return to his country, his resurrection through and in the ritual, and his subsequent appropriation by the masses allowed him to re-enter the stage of the nation building process as a subject, a “metaphysical being” actively engaged in the construction of the new Ukrainian nation. Coming from beyond the everyday world, his voice altered people’s misperceptions of what Ukrainian culture was about, alerted their minds, and challenged their perceptions of their relationship to their nation/land. His poetic voice helped to overcome skepticism – such as that of my educated Russian friends – about the cultural and political potential of their country. On the other hand, in becoming the object of the nation-building discourse of the time, Stus-the-subject got lost in the writings of his interpreters, and the reader has been put in the position of relying on their appropriation of the poet. Stus as a public figure was quickly canonized by critics and the mass media in and outside Ukraine. Yet Stus as a person, as an individual, disappeared in their words, in speeches and articles, in letters to the editor and in high school poetry readings.

The argument has not yet abated about who Stus belongs to: to the legion of Ukrainian patriots who helped to resurrect Ukrainian spirit among formerly Soviet Ukrainians? To those world-class poets of the European existential tradition in a search of “authentic being”? To his people and country? Or to his family? While scholars like Shevelov, Mel’nyk, Pavlyshyn, Kotsiubyns’ka, Berdyk, Zhulyns’kyi and others insist on a non-reductionist reading of Stus as a poet, arguing that Stus is more than just a patriot, another, more popular way of read-

ing Stus seems to have dominated the on-going mythologization of the poet. This new myth-under-construction, the myth in which Stus is seen exclusively as a loyal son of his Motherland, “another Shevchenko,” a martyr, is vitally essential for the young nation.

It would not do justice to the nation-building process in Ukraine to understand this aspect of the Stus phenomenon as a simplistic misreading of his legacy. There cannot be proper or improper readings of the poet’s legacy, for he has already become cultural property and been appropriated differently by scholars, by the nation, and by its ordinary people. Despite the apprehension and criticism of the so-called misperception of Stus in today’s Ukraine, such readings of the poet as a “national hero,” a “martyr,” and the “people’s poet” persist for substantive reasons that need to be tackled directly. As Anthony Smith has astutely observed, nations and ethnic communities survive if successive generations continue to identify with some persisting memories, symbols, myths and traditions. Newly resurrected nations also require cultural symbols. For a nation-under-(re)construction such as Ukraine, there is a strong need to formulate new cultural myths that appeal to all of the people in the nation. Ukraine as a new state is actively involved in both re-designing its past and forging new cultural values to facilitate the processes of nation-building. The Stus phenomenon suggests that his figure was destined to become desirable, potent cultural property that Ukrainian culture acquired in the first decade of its post-Soviet state.

Whether we like it or not, from the very first moments of his return to Ukraine and to Ukrainians, Vasyl Stus came to belong to many. Stus may belong to his family and to a pantheon of the most celebrated poets, but we should not forget that he has also become the property of ordinary Ukrainian people. Stus was not only elevated by Ukraine’s cultural elite, but he was also translated by many others into their ordinary lives as well. His reburial was especially indicative in this sense, in that it triggered the further public appropriation of the poet. It was during the ritual ceremony of his reburial that the rights of such symbolic ownership were first offered to, and re-distributed among, all those who were present at and participated in the reburial as well as those who experienced it through the mass media afterwards.

It is not a question of stopping the on-going mythologization and canonization of Vasyl’ Stus; indeed, that is probably not even possible, for the reasons just listed. What is important is not to promote a further dichotomization of Stus’s image into “poet versus patriot” but to guarantee the multifacetedness of this new cultural myth so that everyone, not just intellectuals but ever other member of Ukrainian society (including my Russian-speaking friends in Kyiv) can continue to find something intriguing and inspiring in Stus’s life and poetry.

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ENDNOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies Annual Meeting in Seattle, November 1998.

² As discussed in my interview with Dmytro and Oksana Stus in May 1997 in Kyiv.

³ May 27, 1997. Personal interview, Kyiv.

⁴ From a letter to *Literaturna Ukraina* (LU) by Parneta Mykhajlo, a surgeon from Kremenchuk, East Ukraine, 16 May 1991.

⁵ From a letter to LU by Yurchyshyn Ia. M., Kaliningrads'ka oblast, 16 May 1991.

⁶ From a letter to LU by Stepania Baran, from Zhydachiv, West Ukraine, 16 May 1991.

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