

Title: Sergei Dovlatov and Marek Hlasko: Life and Art in the Sotslager

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Marek Hlasko and Sergej Dovlatov lived during the same period in Poland and Russia, both countries of “victorious socialism,” in the context of repression of freedom. Both were shaped by the bohemian circles in which they moved, and both worked as journalists because they were unable in the reigning situation to find fulfillment as writers. Both were obliged to emigrate and exercise their creativity while struggling to survive in the new environment. In both cases their premature demise was attributable to the abuse of alcohol. Both writers were plagued by doubt and self-questioning regarding their vocations as writers. Both by their very nature tended to an ironic view of the world and, more importantly, of themselves.

As an analysis of Dovlatov’s and Hlasko’s works (e.g., *Chemodan* and *Piękni dwudziestoletni*) shows, the two writers invite comparison on a number of levels. First, for both the chosen form was autobiographic prose. Second, in each case the preferred genre was a sequence of short stories making up a sketchy narrative of an artist’s life in the *sotslager* and in emigration. Third, Dovlatov’s and Hlasko’s stories are laconic to the point of being anecdotes, being ironically coloured fragments of the lives of contemporaries, some well-known, others quite ordinary. The reader of the work of either of the two writers has a sense of *deja vu*. Dovlatov and Hlasko were not acquainted and most certainly could not have read each other’s works. Yet it seems as if they were quoting each other. One encounters the same themes, the same character types, the same plot elements, and the same linguistic registers.

A parallel reading of the two writers reveals significant textual similarities, as if we had to do with mutual translation, and it can be argued that we indeed have to do with a kind of translation of similar social, cultural and individual experience into literature in their respective languages. This phenomenon is relatively common in various periods and genres of twentieth-century Polish and Russian literatures, for example, Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky, Jerzy Pilch and Venedikt Erofeev, Dorota Maslowska and Irina Denezhkina. It suggests that national literatures tend to adopt common features when exposed to the like situations, and perhaps that Russian and Polish literatures are more kindred than is generally believed.

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