Mosaic of History and Memory in Alexander Motyl’s Novel Fall River

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1 Fiction by the Ukrainian American writer, painter, journalist, and historian Alexander Motyl is one the most striking developments in Ukrainian-American literature. All his books of fiction, including *Fall River* published in 2014 are classified as novels, however, they are more like fictionalized Ukrainian historical narratives of the 20th century. The characters of Motyl’s novels—*Sweet Snow* (2013), *The Jew Who Was Ukrainian or How One Man’s Rip-Roaring Romp through an Existential Wasteland Ended in a Bungled Attempt to Bump off the Exceptionally Great Leader of Mother Russia* (2011), *A Russian in Berlin* (2021), and *Lowest East Side* (2022)—interiorize historical dramas, which took place in the territory of Ukraine during and between the First and Second World Wars and shaped their existential expectations and illusions.

The novel *Fall River* entwines the past of twentieth-century East-Central Europe with the individual experience of its protagonists. Life of the three siblings—Mychasko/Mike, Manya, and Stefa, epitomizes the dramatic history of Eastern Galicia and the pre-and post-WWII Ukrainian immigration to the United States. A small Ukrainian-Polish-Jewish community in the provincial Galician town of Przemyślany (now Peremyshlany) where most of the action takes place, becomes a small-scale version of historical and political conflicts of the 1920s-1940s. The experience of immigration and adjustment in the new country is not the only focus of the novel. The pre-immigration life of the characters and the way it was determined and transformed by history is also an important thematic focus. *Fall River* is not only a family saga and a migrant story but, more importantly, a novel about history.

As a contemporary form of the historical fiction, the novel about history integrates three narrative components: historical narrative, mnemonic narrative, and personal experiential narrative. They are interconnected and together, create a subjective vision of important historical events. Alternatively, we can refer to such novels as subjunctive or existential histories. The novel about history does not create an alternative version of history but offers a subjective vision of important past events, which is inscribed into
a broader historical context whose authority is not challenged. History, experience, and memory create a triangle, in which the meaning of each of the three components is revealed only in conjunction with the other two (Koval 46-47). Therefore, the involuntary but inescapable engagement in history shapes the existence and identity of characters and determines their perspective.

Technically speaking, the three siblings who are the protagonists of *Fall River*, are second-generation Americans: their parents, Ivan/Jan and Anna came to the USA in 1913 and 1914 respectively, and their three children were born in Fall River, Mass. However, after Anna’s death, the widower decides to return to Galicia with his three little children. Their American passports allow them to survive the turmoil of the first half of the 20th century making it relatively easy for the siblings to return to the US.

*Fall River* consists of three chapters named after the protagonists of the novel—“Mike,” “Manya,” and “Stefa.” While “Mike’s” chapter the novel begin with focuses mostly on the young man’s American life, the action in his sisters’ parts evolves in Eastern Galicia (Western Ukraine now). The second chapter of the novel with a story told by Manya, the oldest of the three siblings, offers the most comprehensive perspective as if providing a historical framework both for Mike’s story, which precedes it, and Stefa’s story, which follows. The first-person narration in Manya’s chapter implies the subjectivity of her perspective but also reinforces its historical anchoring. Memory and experience are the three components, which Alexander Motyl makes the main existential pillars in the novel with history being the driving force and the background of the action in the novel:

The absence of memories and experience is notable, of course, but the beginnings, middles, and ends are in place and form something in the nature of a coherent narrative. All that remains is to ask one final, unanswerable question: Did thirty-two-year-old Jan-Ivan have any idea, as he boarded the ship to New York in 1913, that it would all end and begin and end in Fall River? (149)

Neither for Stefa nor the eight-year-younger Manya history is a phantom that crowds their experiential horizon. A historical slant is a distinctive feature of major novels Ukrainian-American fiction (Askold Melnychuk’s Ukrainian novels *What is Told, Ambassador of the Dead*, and *The House of Widows*, Irene Zabytko’s *When Luba Leaves Home*, Yuriy Tarnawsky’s *Warm Arctic Nights* and others) where the characters experience, either in the “old country” or in the new is firmly rooted in history, which determines the course of events but is presented from a very personalized and subjective perspective. Major historical transformations of East-Central Europe are also enacted in Motyl’s characters’ lives. Polish-Ukrainian national conflicts of the 1930s, the development of the underground Ukrainian nationalist movement and its brutal suppression by the Polish government, the Soviet annexation of Polish lands in September 1939 and subsequent political persecutions, mass murder of prisoners proceeding the Nazi occupation, and, finally, a difficult decision to leave their Ukrainian home and move to the West shape the sisters’ lives and determine their decisions.

As the oldest of the three siblings, Manya remembers and knows more than her younger sister and brother. She is the only one who remembers the American period of the family history. A small and poor house on Division street in Fall River, Mass., is recalled as the coziest place on the earth. Manya’s memories or, to be more accurate,
her stories of childhood represent a romanticized image of their happy and peaceful American life in a multiethnic community:

It was only on our block that the houses were small and had large green yards where the stout Portuguese women planted wines and tomatoes and, together with their wiry cigarette-smoking husbands, sat in the summer drinking wine and roasting fish, while their children played on the grass. Long, undulating lines of colorful laundry... crisscrossed the cavernous spaces, flapping in the breeze that came from the bay.... We lived well. There was always food on the table, sometimes even bananas and chocolate, and I had a few dresses, blouses, skirts, and a nice coat with large shiny buttons. (57)

A short and happy childhood in Fall River is also remembered for soft warm buns from a Portuguese bakery, a big green park, smelly yellow soap as well as sandwiches and cocoa. Most of all, Manya misses the time she spent with Mama, whose unexpected death puts an end to their nonchalant life. The pain and sense of loss never leave her and she mourns her Mum even as an adult.

In fact, Manya’s parents were a lower middle-class family who did not own the house, the neighborhood was rather poor and after Anna’s death, the father had to bury her in the worst part of the cemetery reserved for citizens with modest income. Manya was too little to remember many details of their life, particularly since many events took place before her birth. She appropriates the stories she heard as a child, adjusts them to her understanding of “good old days” and transforms them into what she believes to be her memories. Therefore, Manya’s memories are mediated narrative constructs, to which she assigns meaning and thus makes them accessible. Scholars of memory believe that the family narrative environment proves crucial for shaping general cultural beliefs about personal remembering (Wang 300). Additionally, “European American children often recall more elaborate, more specific, more self-focused, and less socially-oriented memories” (Wang 300). Later Manya and also for her sister Stefa come to realize that Fall River is an emblem of a lost home that they can only return to in their memories or dreams.

In his novel, Motyl employs an experiential mode of remembering, which according to Astrid Erll, represents the past “as a lived-through experience” (158). Experiential modes “evolve the ‘living memory’ of contemporary history, generational or family memories” (Erll 158). This mode of mnemonic representation uses the “personal voice” generated by first-person narration (like Manya’s part) and/or refers to memories of witnesses (Erll 158). The witness story, either authentic or fictional, focalize the embodied experience of the past. Motyl calls Manya’s memories “imagined” (103) and tells a real story of the family and their American life. However, even if the siblings knew the truth about their American life, it wouldn’t change much. Memories as stories about the past perform a therapeutic function and help Manya survive the first difficult years in Przemyślany. Together with Mike’s American history they also allow us to view Fall River as a migrant narrative with a motif of home return to a place that can hardly be called home.

Manya does not have a double identity, although she lives with a sense of double home—the old one in Fall River where her dear Mama is buried, and the new one in Przemyślany, Galicia. The former is idyllic and unreachable, full of warm memories and a bitter sense of loss. The young woman’s identity in the novel is less important than the context of the young girl’s life. The character’s adolescence and youth are typical for a provincial Ukrainian woman of modest means in the 1930s-1940s.
elaborates meticulously on the political and social environment, in which Manya is growing up: she goes to a coeducational gymnasium where she befriends Mańka who was Polish and whose father is assistant director of a local post office, and Fanka who was Jewish and whose father was a prosperous merchant. The girls’ friendship survives a test of time and history and they perform the roles history assigned to the representatives of their social and ethnic groups in the region. Manya’s life and that of Przemyśłany are illustrative of major political changes in Eastern Europe: consequences of the German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, a unification of Western Ukraine with Soviet Ukraine, a brief period of Ukrainian’s enthusiasm and hope that finally, after many years of mistreatment by Polish authorities they can breathe freely and subsequent Bolshevik repressions and persecutions. Historical events and decisions are seen through the prism of the mundane existence of a small town and its community:

And so we lived. The red flags kept flying. Stalin kept smiling cynically at us from every wall, and arrests and disappearances kept taking place with terrible ferocity, while we continued sleeping, waking, bathing, working, cooking, eating, laughing, flirting, and crying…. I still lived at Ciocia Kaśka’s and I still met with Mańka… and we still walked along Mickiewicz Street and the boys still invited us for coffee or ice cream at the cukiernia and the entire family still met on name days and holidays and sang songs and went on picnics and exchanged gifts. Life may be harder to live during wars and occupations, but it still had to be lived—and is lived. (71)

The writer describes in ample detail the attitude of the Bolshevik authorities towards the local community and presents the characters’ lives as participants of a bigger process with a very limited sense of agency. History in its human embodiment dominates the characters’ everyday existence. Manya is aware of that even though she cannot express her understanding in sophisticated terms. She speaks with disgust and surprise about Russian women wearing slips and nightgowns in the street, officers reeking of alcohol and garlic, burping loudly, scratching their private parts in public, and terrorizing local people. The contrast with the former Polish authorities was huge because even in their persecution of Ukrainians and brutality, they “retained some measure of civility” the Bolsheviks did not have: “But we learned to live with that, too. We had learned to live with every indignity and atrocity and would continue to live with every indignity and atrocity, turning away our eyes and keeping silent in the vain hope that we would remain untouched” (74).

Manya’s mental reserve does not express fear and passivity. If you live in a border territory where the governments change before people get used to them and the world disintegrates regularly, you develop a protective mechanism of helplessness and readiness to accept whatever changes come. Therefore, the entry of the German army into the town means just another crisis to deal with, a little joy and vain hope followed by despair and another round of violence—this time performed by the Nazis:

My life stood on its head: the past vanished, as did the people I associated with it, the present asserted itself with an unimaginably ugly brutality, and, all at once, the future seemed as uncertain as the horizon was distant on a ship crossing the Atlantic. I had lost Mama and America. I had lost Mike and Stefan. I had lost Poland. And I lost—what? I felt no loyalty to the oppressive entity the Russians called Soviet Union, but for two years it was where my home had been located. That entity wasn’t home, but my hope and my life were there and now that there had disappeared…. This time, even more so than in the past, the end of one life was implicated in the end of lives, with death, but with the kind of death I could never, in my worst nightmares, have envisioned. (Motyl 75)
Przemyślany once again becomes a scene of a historical drama: persecution of Ukrainian activists, the extermination of Jews, a ghetto and concentration camp, and the murder of innocent people. For Manya, Nazi governance is associated solely with death. However, the character's comments are neither judgmental nor angry but marked with an acceptance and bitter awareness of one’s helplessness: “We were together again as a result of enormous forces that shaped the world and our little lives. We were the playthings of fate and we knew full well that, just as fate had brought us together again, so, too, it could tear us apart at a moment’s notice, on an impetuous whim” (81). Manya is a keen observer and Motyl makes her notice many details. The accurate descriptions of the Soviet and German soldiers, their clothes, appearance, and manners seen through the eyes of a young woman become a subjective historical chronicle, in which life of a small provincial town in Galicia mirrors the drama of the entire East-Central Europe:

The empty Jewish houses on our street turned into soundless tombs. They exuded so many tears and so much heart-rendering suffering that I purposely avoided walking in the dreadful no-man’s land between them and the barbed-wire fence. On one side were the former lives of our neighbors. Somewhere on the other side were those very same neighbors, but without their former lives. Their confinement served as a constant reminder to those of us who remained outside in what passed for freedom of the unspeakable brutality that human beings... are capable of committing.... The entire town had become worse than a ghetto. It had become a graveyard. (Motyl 85-86)

The historical background of the family's mnemonic experience clearly outlines their horizon of expectations. Therefore, in mid-1944, with the Soviet troops approaching Western Ukraine, Manya and her sister decide to return to the US.

Immigration, particularly a forced one, is a traumatic event, which disrupts a natural process of experience acquisition and, similar to other traumatic situations and conditions, such as war, Holocaust, and refugeehood impairs the schemas of memory transmission (Hirsch 33). Being a double immigrant first leaving the USA for Ukraine and later leaving Ukraine for the United States Manya experiences a double loss. Neither the world of her nonchalant childhood in Fall River nor the world of adolescence and youth in Przemyślany exist any longer or can be revived: Both worlds collapsed, therefore immigration for her is paradoxically both a hard and an easy decision:

The children I had known in Fall River were all as old as I was and, if I saw them, I was sure we wouldn't recognize one another. The friends, relatives, and acquaintances I had in Przemyślany were dead, had fled, or been deported to Siberia. I had left a world that disappeared for a world that had also disappeared. And now I was leaving that non-existent world for a country that existed only in my imagination. (Motyl 90)

For Manya, this new life started from scratch and is memory-free. Paul Connerton argues that forgetting is constitutive in the formation of a new identity (62). However, the young woman neither aspires to forget nor selects it voluntarily. Her past is deleted as a result of a changed political situation and Manya can only feel dead deprived of memories:

The war had destroyed everything.... What was there to remember? There had been good times and good memories, but the bad times and bad memories so outweighed them that it became far easier to forget and refuse to remember that to remember. But a person without memories is not a human being.... When you have no one to
Singer and Conway argue that memory is “after all the content of the self and, of course, nobody wants to be jumbled and empty” (82). The young woman tries to find meaning in a world deprived of humanity and conventional rituals. Manya begins to realize the violence and brutalities she witnessed only when she is on her way to the USA. She deplores her own and the others’ helplessness and no longer condemns the passivity of their Jewish neighbors. A silent subordination to the crushing force of the invaders is paralyzing and deprives an individual of the will and ability to resist. Manya calls herself and her siblings hostages to history: “[T]he past seized us by our necks and reminded us that there was no such thing as a new beginning” (97). Even though her reflections are not sophisticated and contain more questions than answers, they outline a historical and social frame of reference for the characters of the novel. They help the reader re-create and feel the atmosphere of those days and serve as a background to both Mike’s and Stefa’s stories.

Stefa’s life is embedded in and determined by major historical changes in Galicia in the 1930s-1940s. While Manya reflects on the personal dimension of the historical transformations, Stefa interiorizes them. History weighs heavily on her life and determines its course leaving her little if any choice and freedom of action. Her life synopsis is typical for a young Ukrainian woman. Stefa goes to Lviv to enroll in a trade school and apprentices with a Polish seamstress. She returns to Przemyślany before the outburst of WWII in 1939 and meets and soon marries Bohdan—a member of the Ukrainian underground nationalist organization with a long history of anti-Polish and anti-Soviet resistance, political persecutions, and several sentences in jail and a concentration camp, who together with other prisoners is brutally murdered by the Soviets in 1941 before they flee Western Ukraine from the Nazis.

Bohdan’s active engagement in the Ukrainian nationalist resistance movement allows the writer to introduce a theme of controversial Polish-Ukrainian relations and show their different dimensions. Many, Stefa, and Mykhalko grow up in a multiethnic Ukrainian-Polish-Jewish community, where irrespective of political and everyday controversies the neighbors still coexisted in a more or less peaceful way. As was mentioned earlier, Many’s closest friends are Mańka who is Polish and Fanka who is Jewish and whose family was saved by Ukrainian friends during the Nazi occupation. On the other hand, the character of Bohdan introduces a political and historical dimension of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict. His active involvement in the Ukrainian resistance reveals the violent nature of the Ukrainian-Polish conflict and shows how the persecution of Ukrainians by Polish authorities affected local communities and their fragile peaceful life. Bohdan’s story also discloses fears and uncertainties of Ukrainians living in Galicia whose status changed many times before WWII:

It was hard to believe that the hated Polish state was no more. The Soviet military men, their chests thrust forward and their arms swinging rhythmically, paraded along the streets of Lviv. Policemen and tram operators all wore Soviet insignia. Fervent communist marching songs were piped in over the loudspeakers at the strain station and posters of muscular Russian workers embracing emaciated Ukrainian peasants and kissing them squarely on the mouth adorned buildings and fences. The Poles walked with their heads down, the Jews had smiles on their faces, and the Ukrainians seemed confused, uncertain about the Soviet Ukrainian reality that had descended on them like a fog. Was it Soviet? Was it Ukrainian? Or was it both? And, if it were, how could it be both? (117)
Similar questions accompany each change of government in this region. Even such a politically active young man like Bohdan, with a strong sense of identity and agency becomes only a recipient of dramatic historical changes which he encounters in his short life.

While history is the normative frame of reference in the novel in general, in Mike’s chapter its significance is least obvious. It is the “American” part, which relates in detail to Mike’s trip to the US in 1938 and the process of his naturalization. This chapter can be read as a separate migrant story. It is a story of a quasi-American Dream undermined by the Second World War and Mike’s post-war personal dramas. While Manya and Stefa are rather flat characters who function mainly as fictionalized historical actors, Mike is a full-fledged figure whose American experience is not only a reflection of a typical travail of a nameless East-European immigrant but also presents a tragic lot of a war veteran.

Even though historical turmoil seems to have little impact on Mike’s life, the character’s attitude to the past and the relations of memory and experience are crucial in the chapter. The second-person narrator converses with Mike, seems to understand his doubts, and sympathizes with his bigger and smaller losses:

> How do we reconstruct the past? The question presupposes the existence of something called the past, but its reality is hardly as obvious as human beings desperate for meaning would like it to be. The past is no thing to be grasped, no place to be visited, no scroll to be opened, read, analyzed, and comprehended. Where are the memories of the past? On hangers? On clotheslines? In safes? In cardboard suitcases? In photo albums? In pant pockets? In cupboards? Who knows?.... What can we remember if we remember nothing? What can we claim to have experienced if we experienced nothing? (8)

Thus, at the very beginning of the novel the writer focalizes the past, memory, and experience as the crucial elements, which shape the narration and the action, even though the narrator is sometimes unaware of it.

Scholars of memory argue that autobiographical and personal memories are being “continually constructed in time and space conditioned by culture, over a multitude of timescales from seconds to a lifetime” (Wang 298-299). For some time, a sense of lost home, the small town of Przemyślany, dominates Mykhasko’s perception of America, while New York where he arrives is a “mad congregation of bodies, faces, hats, coats, shouts, groans, whistles, handkerchiefs, suitcases, trollies, dollies, workers, passengers, fingers, arms, legs, shoes, handbags, feathers, mustaches, beards” (20). With a transformation of Mykhasko into Mike memories of home, the father and sisters become blurred and fragmented. If Mike thinks about the “old country,” his home town and Ukrainians (Ukraine as a state does not exist in his mind), it is always in comparison with America, Americans, and American habits and stereotypes. Observing a humiliating treatment of African-Americans by his army buddies or hearing Myrtle’s offensive and contemptuous comments about “niggers” as “savages with no culture, upbringing, and refinement” Mike compares them to Ukrainians despised and oppressed by the Poles, Russians, and even Jews, and realizes that there is the difference between them and us. The nigger gets to his feet and, amazingly, excuses himself and, smiling so weakly that even his white teeth don’t show, runs off.... The Ukrainian would have waved his fist and gone for his friends. There would have been a brawl and some Polish heads would’ve been cracked.... Why don’t they fight? Why do they always smile? And then it strikes you: they’re like terrified dogs that...
have been systematically beaten. They slink along the walls with lowered heads and tails. The Poles, Russians, and Jews want us to be that way, too, you think, and we have a backbone and a will. We will not submit. (40)

Mike’s internal monologue containing the amateur political analysis reveals the doubleness of his American self and a clear recognition of being “us” as opposed to many “others”—Americans, African Americans, Poles, Russians, etc. The young man’s almost childish pride in his people indicative of his emotional connection with the “old country” is also an important element of cultural memory. It describes the values and attitudes appreciated by Ukrainians back home and transferred together with them to the New World.

Cultural memory in the novel is closely linked with the notion of time and expressed by the urban landscape and atmosphere. As Motyl notes, in the Ukrainian neighborhood in New York one could feel back home in Przemyślany. There is a Ruthenian Church and a Polish Church, small stores, clubs, bars, and a credit union, and many people speak Ukrainian and Polish. The Jewish neighborhood with its synagogues and cheap clothing shops is nearby. For Mike, the Ukrainian neighborhood in 1947 resembles his hometown so closely that he wonders whether he actually left home almost ten years earlier: “Time appears to have stopped and, when you walk along the streets, you are a round-faced boy again. Did you ever leave home? Was there a war? Did you serve in the military? It’s all a blur” (43). But for the episodes describing Polish persecution of Ukrainians and Soviet atrocities, Fall River might have been described as a nostalgic novel if we follow Svetlana Boym’s understanding of nostalgia as a “yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams” (xv). Boym believes the nostalgic rebels against the modern idea of time and the irreversibility of time and wishes to visit time like space (xv). The Ukrainian neighborhood gives Mike and later his sisters a sense of belonging, which however does not partake in any way in their new identity formation but allows for a short emotional retreat.

Capturing an image or an impression is something Mike enjoys. While in the Civilian Conservation Camp in Oregon, he becomes fascinated with photography. Mike takes many pictures and arranges them meticulously in his albums. They create a collective image of American Mike and supposedly, should become an imprint of his experience and memory acquisition as well as evidence of his new, transformed Americanized self:

Did you want to remember everything you experienced in this strange new land? Did you want to leave a record of your existence for posterity?... Life in Przemyślany could not have possibly engendered in you that delightful American fetish, optimism.... You never smile in your photographs as a boy; you smile and laugh only in your photographs in Oregon. The long train ride to Hamburg, the even longer ocean crossing on the President Roosevelt, and the trek to the Rockies must have erased so many torn memories that, soon after returning to New York, you were determined not to let the present dissolve irretrievably into the past. (34)

The reader may assume that Mike’s fascination with photography is a tool for preserving the precious moments of life and transforming them into materialized memories. However, when Mike returns to New York after the war his hobby acquires a weird form: he “takes” photographs when there is no film in the camera. He admires the process of “freezing time” if only for a millisecond and only in his imagination. Mike claims that he sees things and people differently through the lens: “[I]t helps you recapture some sense of will, of power, of potential. Film is unnecessary, after all. The
celluloid is just an accessory. You know that what matters most to the true photographer is the experience of looking through the viewfinder, framing some bit of reality, and hearing the awe-inspiring, incredible click” (44). The camera not only captures glimpses of reality but also changes its owner: Manya notes that holding it in his hands Mike turns into the old Mykhasko she has known and loved for many years before his departure to the United States: “His irascibility disappeared, his impatience vanished. He appeared happy, adjusting the focus, looking through the lens, stepping back, stepping forward, and constantly mumbling under his breath. Whom or what was he photographing I didn’t know” (95-96). It seems that through the camera lens Mike created a world of his own, which strangers could neither enter nor understand and in which he was desperately seeking mental and emotional shelter.

With time, an imitation of the process of taking photographs becomes a disturbing and later dangerous activity when Mike starts seeing people and places from his American past. It signals the beginning of his mental problems. Looking into the lens turns into an uncontrolled looking into a parallel, sometimes scary reality and evokes ghosts of the past. Tetiana Ostapchuk sees Mike as a character with border mentality (89) who he is, indeed, but not only because of his inevitably double ethnic identity. Mike’s mind also functions at the border of physical reality and imagined reality accessible only to him, between the past and the present crowded by images from the past. Constructing this other reality is an escape tactic, which helps avoid a gloomy everyday reality, in which Mike felt out of place: “The click-click-click brings your past back to life; indeed, the camera is a window on all that you have seen and experienced and all the women you loved and who have loved you.... [T]he camera lets you see past the drab, limited, and distorted reality around you and catch a glimpse of the real world of possibility” (Motyl 45). In Mike’s situation, his border mentality is not a productive or inspiring condition. If the state of madness creates insight into the recent past, it also undermines his personality, almost leading to suicide. “There is no memory and no experience of anything” is a phrase repeated many times in Mike’s chapter. The camera for Mike is a tool to preserve his experience and cling to his memory. Memory and experience are the two anchors that let the character feel at least some stability. When the camera is taken away by the doctors, Mike loses his connection to the past, present, and future and passes away like a ghost he often felt in his American life.

Manya and Stefa often visit a cemetery in Przemyślany and a nearby Borshiv where their relatives on the father’s side are buried. Even though neither of the sisters has known their ancestors, the place of their burial is the place of meaningful family memory, which gives them a sense of belonging and rootedness. Even though the Fall River past is idealized and romanticized while Przemyślany becomes a synonym for grief, death, and bitterness, grief, it is the memory of the Galician Heimat and the cemetery with the graves of the Ukrainian relatives that the young women take with them on a long trip into the unknown. Galicia becomes a land of death and when a more rational Manya decides they should leave for America and join their younger brother she wants them to escape more deaths and disasters and another “round” of historical entanglements:

By the late forties, Przemyślany would have lost almost all the people who inhabited it before the war and become populated by peasants, refugees, and settlers from other parts of Ukraine, Poland, and the Soviet Union: frightened families and Soviet acolytes with no memories and no experience rooted in the
Neither of the characters uses the word “Ukraine.” Instead, they speak about Przemyślany, home, our land, and sometimes the old country. The only character in the novel endowed with political consciousness is Bohdan but he has been brutally murdered by the Soviets. For other characters, the idea of home determines their perception of the surrounding world. For obvious reasons, Mike neither shares his elder sister’s admiration of the Fall River of their childhood nor misses his Galician home. America is his existential frame of reference and he wants his sisters to see it as a country of opportunities and a place where one can be free: “Look at me. I’ve been out west, I’ve handled jackhammers, exploded mountains, built roads, learned to march, learned to shoot.... Can you believe your little Mykhasko is a soldier, a veteran, that I actually served in the army and have medals to prove it?.... It’s a great country, Stefa. You can be a human being here” (147). Neither Mike’s nor their sisters’ lives prove in any way the idea of American greatness Instead, they share the sense of a traumatic loss—of home, of the roots, or of dear ones, which also means loss of memories and a rupture of the experiential continuum.

Fall River with its historical, migrant, and generational foci lends itself to different readings. As a novel about history, it entwines the experience and memory of the characters with major historical events in Galicia in the first half of the 20th century. Historical dramas as well as political and social conflicts not only have an immediate impact on the three siblings’ life and their community and determine their decisions but are interiorized and add a new meaning to the characters’ decisions in the past and the present. This subjective narrative of the past unveils what is hidden behind the well-known dates and official facts or denied for reasons of political correctness. Immigration in Fall River is a supplementary theme, which adds another dimension to the family history. It is (and was for the siblings’ parents) an escape from the social and historical hell, therefore double identity and challenges of assimilation are not among the motifs of the novel. The novel is also an important element of cultural memory and introduces dramatic and violent episodes of East-Central European history to the anglophone reader.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. For a more detailed explanation of the typical features of the novel about history see *We Search the Past... for Our Own Lost Selves: Representations of Historical Experience in Recent American Fiction* by Marta Koval.

ABSTRACTS

The paper discusses *Fall River* by Alexander Motyl as a novel about history and family saga. The novel entwines the past of 20th-century East-Central Europe with the individual experiences of its protagonists—Mike/Mychasko, Manya, and Stefa. They continue the American history of the family, which started in 1913 when their parents-to-be arrived from Galicia to Fall River, Mass., to leave it for Europe ten years later. The life of the three siblings epitomizes the dramatic history of Eastern Galicia and the pre-and post-WWII Ukrainian immigration to the United States. A small Ukrainian-Polish-Jewish community in the provincial Galician town of Przemyślany, where most of the action takes place, becomes a small-scale version of historical and political conflicts of the 1920s-1940s. The paper draws on Astrid Erll’s theory of cultural memory and Paul Connerton’s concept of forgetfulness to analyze *Fall River* as part of the Ukrainian cultural memory and explore the role of forgetting in the characters’ identity construction, particularly their new American selves. The historical background that shapes Mike’s, Manya’s, and Stefa’s lives reveals the entanglements of East-Central European history of the first half of the 20th century, of which the American reader knows little if anything, and addresses complex ethnic relations and political dilemmas that were part of the characters’ everyday life. While history is the normative frame of reference in the novel, a sense of home and the awareness of its traumatic loss are some of the centrifugal forces of the story, which determine the characters’ attitudes. They evoke the idea of uprootedness (Weil) and nostalgic memory (Boym), which will be analyzed as an essential part of immigrant narratives.

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**Keywords**: novel about history, memory, experience, forgetting, migrant narrative, experiential rupture, Ukrainian American literature, Polish-Ukrainian community
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