

Seventeenth spring of Ivan Naumenko

To the 100th anniversary of the People's Writer of Belarus

'Singer of the seventeenth spring' — this is what Ivan Naumenko was called during his lifetime. It is the 17-year-olds who are the main and most frequent heroes of his books. Belonging to the younger generation of frontline soldier who stepped into the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 straight from their school desks, he devoted his entire life in his prose to the main theme of youth, trampled and destroyed by war, marked by irretrievable losses, bitter and unfair. Most of his peers remained on the battlefields, risked their necks in the partisan struggle and perished in the occupation. "I must write about what I know and what is in my soul. And this is exactly what is in my soul..." the People's Writer of Belarus used to say. Fascism took the lives of yesterday's boys and girls by the thousands, and those who survived walked along the path of fate, skirting the abyss of endless losses — they would never meet the friends of their carefree childhood again.

He started with poetry. However, it did not work out with poetry — some facet of perception was missing for the poems to come out truly 'alive'. Ivan Naumenko began to pour out his thoughts in prose, carefully preserving the melodiousness of speech that attracted him so much to poetry.

His prose is always melodic; it is not just filled with meaning, but has its own rhythm — even, rather, breath — which is why it goes straight to the heart, leaving a long aftertaste.

His prose is truthful and in many ways biographical — in large and small ways, in precise and succinct details, experienced or observed around him and then melted into artistic words by the author's will. "Such is my lot, I write easier when I have seen something — about my own experience, or even about someone else's but what I know well, when I have either participated myself, or heard about it," the writer would admit. "It so happened that the main thing I know is what happened to me and my comrades..." Everything was reflected in the books — both his childhood (he was born into a family of a railroad worker in the town of Vasilevichi) and the life of the bookworm boy who passed the 9th and 10th grade exams as an external student and was eager to get into science. His passion was literature, and Naumenko dreamed of dedicating his life to studying it. All plans and hopes were crossed out by the war. Sixteen boys from his class went to fight, and only four returned. He himself, a teenager who was not old enough to go to the front, became a member of an underground Komsomol cell, published a youth newspaper *Za Radzimu* (For the Motherland), and at the beginning of 1942 he was already fighting in the Panteleimon Ponomarenko partisan detachment in a reconnaissance and sabotage group. In 1943, he grew up to be finally drafted into the army. He was fighting on the Karelian Isthmus in desperate battles against the Finns, when the Soviet troops destroyed Mannerheim's army.

They were the majority there — 18-20-year-old boys, walking towards the enemy through the swamps on white nights, exhausted and hungry, when often for weeks they had only berries and mushrooms for food... Those places were called the Dead Valley even after the first Soviet-Finnish war. And yet, they broke through the front and forced Finland to leave the war.

There, in Karelia, Ivan Naumenko got a concussion, after which he forever lost the ability to smell. From the Leningrad Front they were transferred to Byelorussia, and Naumenko took part in the liberation of his native town of Vasilevichi, and then moved on — he fought in the Baltics, and ended the war in East Prussia and Silesia. More than once he, an intelligence officer who knew German very well thanks to school and then to his experience as a partisan during the occupation, eavesdropped on the conversations of enemy signalmen, connecting to their cables in a skilful manner. Once during a sortie into the neutral zone, he heard that the Germans were going to blow up a dam on a water reservoir to

delay the advance of Soviet troops. Thanks to Naumenko's urgent message, the dam was cleared of mines, for which he received the Red Star Order in September 1945, followed by the Order of the Great Patriotic War 2nd degree in 1985.

Only after the war did Ivan Naumenko take a step towards his dream, entering the philological faculty of the Belarusian State University, distance learning. It was impossible for a 20-year-old lad who had fought in the war to be without work and income. For five years, he worked as a correspondent for the Mozyr regional newspaper Balshavik Palessya; in 1951, he became a correspondent for the Zvyazda (Star) newspaper, while simultaneously studying in graduate school at the university. In 1953, Naumenko came to head the prose department at the Maladost (Youth) magazine, where his first stories were published two years later. It was from that time that he began counting his literary activity.

In 1957, his first story Seventeenth Spring, dedicated to the fates of his peers, was published. Boys of the Same Age, Heather on Burnt-Out Swamps, Poplars of Our Youth, Veranika — each time Naumenko plunged into those days when life was still wonderful, and summed up by which of his heroes remained to live only in memory.

"The war had not finished yet, but Viktar already did not remember anyone of the boys who were born in 1925, with whom he went to school and who went to the front, to be alive..." Naumenko wrote in his story Boys of the Greatest War.

For the book Poplars of Our Youth, Ivan Naumenko received the Lenin Komsomol Prize of Byelorussia in 1967. In the 1960s, he took on a major work — the novels Pine Tree by the Road (1962), Wind in Pine Trees (1967), Forty-Third (1974) — which together make up his partisan trilogy. Towards the end of his life he said that three books had been written about the occupation, and at least two should be written about the Victory. Along with that, he admitted, "The joy was great, yet it is harder to write about the Victory."

Another equally important facet of Ivan Naumenko's talent, which for the most part does not fall into the focus of the average reader, is his colossal activity as a literary scholar.

Doctor of Philology, Professor, he received the Honoured Scientist of the BSSR title in 1978, two years later — Academician of the National Academy of Sciences. Over 200 scientific works, a dozen monographs — it is to Naumenko that we owe breakthroughs in Yanka Kupala and Yakub Kolas studies. He focused on the creative work of Maksim Bogdanovich, Kuzma Chorny, Zmitrok Byadulya, Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkevich. The writer's scientific work brought him the State Prize of the BSSR named after Yakub Kolas in 1972. From the outside, Ivan Naumenko could seem detached and stern. Yet, on closer inspection, he revealed himself as a kind, caring, sincere and sensitive person with a cheerful, calm character. Although he carried a huge load of public duties and administrative work, he had enough energy for both science and literature. Naumenko never used his position for selfish purposes. In 1985, he found himself in the post of Chairman of the Supreme Council of the BSSR, where he replaced another living legend — his senior comrade, People's Writer Ivan Shamyakin. Naumenko headed the highest body of state power in the republic for five years, leaving his post in 1990.

On February 16th, 1995, President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko signed a decree awarding Ivan Naumenko the People's Writer of Belarus title for the enormous contribution he had made to the development of Belarusian literature. Partisan, frontline, distant memories did not leave Ivan Naumenko throughout his life, until the very end. In the 1990s, Naumenko again turned to reflections on the fate of his generation in the autobiographical trilogy Childhood. Adolescence. Youth, and then in the story Beloved City, reliving those old days again when his peers went to war and everyone was still alive.

IN MEMORY OF THE WRITER

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In 2023, the name of Ivan Naumenko was given to a street and a lane in Minsk in the Severny microdistrict. Moreover, a memorial plaque to the People's Writer of Belarus has been located on the house at 36 Karl Marx Street since 2011. Its author is People's Artist of Belarus Vladimir Slobodchikov.