

Ukrainian literary fiction

Bat-Ami

Novel. Ukraine 2020. Approx. 400 pages

Ukrainian Jewish boxing champion Ilya Goldinov has just come second place in the Soviet All-Union championships when World War II breaks out. After the German invasion of Ukraine, he joins the partisan fighters in the forests behind the front line. Only by lucky coincidence does he survive and he joins the regular army as a soldier before being sent by the Ukrainian secret service on a life-threatening mission to occupied Kiev. There a former sports comrade recognizes him by chance on the street and denounces him to the Germans as a Jew. Meanwhile Ilya's wife Felixa is leaving with the evacuation. On the way she falls ill and is abandoned by her Jewish mother-in-law, together with her daughter Bat-Ami. The hope of seeing Ilya alive again keeps mother and daughter alive. They make it back to Kiev. There Felixa's friend Ira is the last to see Ilya alive. But Ira is in a concentration camp. It's only in the summer of 1945, after miraculously surviving the concentration camp that Ira can deliver the bitter truth.

This family saga, full of unforeseeable twists and turns, is told in such a thrilling, detailed and touching way that it casts its spell after only a few pages. Unique is the perspective – the attack of the Germans seen through the eyes of a boxer and assimilated Jew. Even the Ukrainian farmers, Nazis, secret service agents, partisans, and sports comrades rarely conform to the usual schemata of good and evil, friend and foe. They are interwoven in fine shades into the main plot of Ilya's family during the chaos of war. An emotional and a stylistic highlight of the novel is Ilya's march to Kiev carrying the small Kiev rabbi in his rucksack: for the elderly rabbi a rescuing march into life, for the young Ilya a walk to certain death.

BAT-AMI is not a documentary novel, but its story – inspired in part by the author's family history – is based on files relating to 1941-42 secret service operations from the archives of the Ukrainian Secret Service, not released until 2011, as well as from other Ukrainian archives, the museum of the Dynamo Kiev sports club and Yad Vashem. Most were not published until very recently. These sources enabled the author to tell the true story of the famous boxer Goldinov. Because the widespread theories about what happened to him – the rumours that were still circulating in Kiev after the war – have largely proven to be false, as has old Yad Vashem version of events. The descriptions of Ukraine's complex conflicts involving an overpowering Russian brother state, the Soviet secret service, German occupation, partisans and patriotic nationalist freedom fighters cast their shadows even onto the Ukraine of today.

All the NKVD officers who were involved in this operation and are mentioned in the novel are real people whose background in the pre- and post-war period has been researched and made known thanks to the work of the Russian Memorial Society and Ukrainian historians.

Nikitin was born in Kiev in 1967. After completing his course of physics at the university of Kiev and his period of conscription he established his own company in 1992 and worked on different projects for the Ukrainian oil, chemical and atomic industries. In 2000 he published his first volume of poetry, which was awarded the Korolenko prize by the Ukrainian writers association for the best poetry of the year. In 2002 Nikitin closed his business operations and worked for several years as an IT journalist. Afterwards he dedicated himself completely to his literary activities and has since published several novels. Nikitin lives in Kiev.



THE AUTHOR

translations
4 languages

awards
National Bestseller 2014
Russkaya Premia shortlist 2013

sample translation available
english

other works
Victory Park
Mayong
Istemi - Your Turn

Aleksei Nikitin

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SUMMARY

The main plot of the novel is set in Ukraine from 1938 to 1946 during and after the occupation by Hitler's troops. The life of Ilya Goldinov is told in flashbacks.

Goldinov was Ukrainian boxing champion even before the war and is known beyond Ukraine as the Soviet All-Union runner-up. He becomes a member of the Dynamo Kiev sports club. He earns his living as a fireman in the famous Arsenal Plant. Both sports clubs and fire brigades are under the control of the NKVD secret service, which is why Ilya is not drafted into the army in 1941, but is assigned to one of the partisan troops of the secret service.

Much too hastily assembled and badly prepared, these troops are either dispersed or destroyed by the autumn of 1941. Only a small remnant can be reintegrated into the army. When the Germans surround Kiev in September, Ilya is wounded and goes into captivity. As a wounded Jew he has little chance of surviving, but by chance the city mayor of Poltava gets him an official German pass as a worker, with which he is allowed to leave the camp on foot towards Poltava. On the way Ilya is able to escape, crosses the front line to the east and joins the Ukrainian army again. At the end of January 1942, the head of the 2nd dept. of the 1st administration of the Ukrainian NKVD, himself of Jewish descent, sends him on an espionage mission into occupied Kiev, against all reason, because a Jew as a spy is doubly endangered. Ilya's mission: he is to find a former NKVD superior who now runs a prosperous private practice in Kiev as a 'doctor' and maintains contacts with the German secret service. The 'Doctor' is either to be recruited as a double spy or liquidated.

Ilya sets off on foot. On the way he slips into the home of friends in Poltava, where Kiev's elderly rabbi is also hiding. Ilya is to take the rabbi with him to save him from the SS. He carries the small rabbi in a rucksack across the River Dnieper into the forests Ilya knows from his time as a partisan. There, survivors from his old regiment continue to hide in earth huts where he can leave the rabbi. Before Ilya crosses the front line towards Kiev at the end of February 1942, he sends a last letter to his wife Felixa. He suspects that he will probably not return alive. In Kiev, Ilya stays with a friend of Felixa, who secretly accompanies him on his mission, as a witness to his deed. On the way to the 'Doctor', Ilya accidentally meets a boxing buddy from the past. The buddy recognizes him and denounces him immediately as a Jew on a German patrol.

Felixa, also an athlete, and Ilya had married before the war. Ilya's Jewish mother Gittl was already disgruntled that her son did not want to study but became a boxer. His championship titles meant nothing to her. That he then also married a Ukrainian farmer's daughter was another thorn in her side. When Felixa gave birth to a daughter, Gittl demanded that her granddaughter at least gets a Jewish name: Bat-Ami, daughter of my people. Felixa's parents, simple Ukrainian farmers and abstinent vegetarians from the Schtunden religious community, embrace their Jewish son-in-law from the very beginning. And they continue to help him later.

Shortly before the occupation of Kiev by the Germans, Felixa and Bat-Ami are evacuated together with Ilya's family towards the Urals. When Felixa falls ill on the steamship on the River Volga, she and Bat-Ami are simply left behind by Gittl at the next landing stage. A doctor has Felixa brought to hospital. But Bat-Ami is taken to an orphanage. It is only because of her rare name that Felixa finds her daughter weeks later, infected with polio. At the end of 1943 Felixa and her daughter make their way back to liberated Kiev, where she continues to search for her husband, who was believed to be missing. She receives, with much delay, his last letter – the final sign of life. In Kiev, Felixa finds out that he had stayed with her friend Ira. But Ira was then taken to a concentration camp before Kiev was recaptured.

Ilya's mother, also back in Kiev, meets the old rabbi again, who survived thanks to Ilya. The rabbi writes her a letter of commendation to the city commander. The latter not only helps to find Ilya, but illegally provides Felixa with a war widow's pension, even though Ilya is still only thought to be missing.

In summer 1945, when Ira suddenly returns to Kiev as a concentration camp survivor, Felixa finally learns about Ilya's murder. She now not only knows who denounced Ilya, but also finds the necessary second eyewitness to bring the traitor to justice. But who sent Ilya as a Jew into occupied Kiev and why, Felixa will never know. Less than two years later there is a new Jewish pogrom in Kiev, and to calm the population, the Soviet administration is considering pardoning former traitors of the Jews.

Aleksei Nikitin