

Kazimir Malevich — return to Belarus

The great master of suprematism is connected deeply with Belarus, although few realised until recent times. In December 2012, writer Igor Malevich released his book *Kazimir Malevich. Ascension to the Cross of Fate*, highlighting facts from the artist's life.

By Alla Narovskaya

The style of the book is unusual and original, perhaps due to Igor's background as a physicist and Harvard Professor. He even worked as a diplomat in China and Korea for several years. The book gives us his very personal view of Kazimir Malevich's ideas, to which he is more than entitled, being related to the legendary artist.

He leads us through the labyrinth of Malevich's life: twisted and controversial to an unparalleled degree. We cross time and space, following the artist on his journey to New York, Amsterdam, St. Petersburg, Moscow and Shanghai. In fact, Kazimir was a member of the ancient Litvin family of Malevichi — supporters of Kastus Kalinovsky. His father left Belarusian lands after the rebellion was suppressed, fleeing to Ukraine with his young wife in the repressive 1870s. Bearing new documents, he changed the birthplace of his son, Kazimir, to protect him. The babe's mother, Severina-Stepana, died, leading his father to marry again: to a Polish gentlewoman called Ludwika. This connection later linked Kazimir to Poland. However, when Ludwika wrote to the Russian Tsar requesting that her children's nobility be recognised, Kazimir's name was notably absent, as he was not of her blood.

Kazimir Malevich has long been considered to be a Russian artist, born in Ukraine, but is connected to Belarus through his family tree. The link was first mentioned in the late 1980s by a professor from Cologne, who spoke of 'Kopyl' and the 'Belarusian painter', in his biography of Kazimir Malevich. He noted that all the master's works were written in Belarusian, using the Latin alphabet: 'in his native language'.

Igor's book includes various family recollections, such as stories from his Kopyl grandmother, Uliana, who recalled her friendship with Kazimir and Igor's grandfather, Pavel Malevich. She called Kazimir a 'revolutionary' and a 'strange painter'.

Igor's grandfather called him Kazik, saying that he resembled Kazimir, but was worried that Igor might also emulate the artist's strange style, painting on fences and ovens! Kazimir Malevich wrote several biographies of his life: one was composed before the Revolution, the second was prepared for Soviet institutions while the third was written for the Berlin exhibition. An unfinished version mentions Kopyl and his native Litvin. Unfortunately, no original manuscripts remain in Belarus, nor any original pictures.

Igor used archives to research his relative, following in the footsteps of his father, who edited a pre-war newspaper called *Stalinskaya Molodezh*

(*Znamya Yunosti*). His father also worked with his brother, who edited *Selskaya Zhizn* newspaper, gathering Kazimir Malevich's archives. Sadly, after Igor's uncle's death, these archives mysteriously disappeared.

Igor's search took him to Germany but all archives connected with Kazimir's stay there are closed. Despite his university connections, Igor Malevich and his wife managed to find only one page from a 1927 newspaper mentioning Malevich's legacy. However, it took them to a collection of Kazimir's works in Bavarian Biberach.

It's known that, in 1927, Kazimir Malevich came to Germany, opening an exhibition of his works in Berlin: 73 oil canvases, watercolours and sketches. He brought all his diaries and scientific tables of suprematism — the famous Architects. However, several months after his arrival in Germany, he received an order to return to the USSR. Malevich left his pictures in Berlin, in the care of the Hering family.

philosophy and his works.

After the war, Hugo Hering donated Kazimir Malevich's collection to the University of Biberach, which constructed a gallery to house the works. For a long time, it has been the only place to exhibit Malevich's works. However, Mr. Hering had no legal foundation to transfer ownership of the works to the local municipality. Igor writes: 'No one had or has any documents on Malevich's legal will in Germany'.

Kazimir's works alongside diaries and scientific tables have now been donated by the University of Biberach to the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam. The latter holds annual exhibitions relating to Kazimir's legacy, displaying new letters, drawings and documents. According to Igor, such documents are also likely to come from the Biberach.

Besides the Berlin collection, there was another held in Vitebsk, as Kazimir worked alongside Marc Chagall from 1919-1922. Before setting off for Petrograd, he left a major

near Vitebsk's agricultural aerodrome. Soldiers entered in uniforms without denotation of their rank, carrying large trunks. Such was the chaos that they passed unnoticed. However, they went straight to the local history museum, taking everything of note. After the war, the Nazis secretly sold such spoils to European and American museums.

Igor Malevich's book gives us a scientist's perspective on Kazimir Malevich's creativity, looking at the famous *Black Square* from the point of view of physicists. Hundreds of thesis papers try to explain why time is not lineal, being comprised of layers; Igor asserts that Kazimir Malevich was the first to intuitively realise this, as he explored through his art. Physics are now researching the world of elementary and nano-particles, nano-space and nano-time, building colliders for

choosing sites for building homes; Belarusians in the Vitebsk Province used the 'mandala' concept to guide them. Grain or honey was used to select the site, with a square drawn; this was then divided into four parts with a cross, and a prayer was addressed to the family ancestors and gods, while standing at the centre. Historians B. Rybakov and V. Toporov analysed the application of the square in this construction ritual and came to the conclusion that the Square, Circle and Cross are symbols of the Universe. Igor is convinced that these shapes are at the heart of our subconscious.

In Belarusian Sharkovshchina, Knyagino and Krivichi, where Kazimir Malevich served with the Vitebsk and Smolensk Intendant Unit in WWI, he drew his mystical suprematism paintings, adding the numbers of days of his service. The book gives us many interesting facts on Kazimir's life billeted in small Litvin towns. There, he drew his masterpieces on woven linen canvases (commandeered for the front) and wrote his thoughts on the tragedy and absurdity of war: *Soldier of the First World War and Flying Aeroplane*.

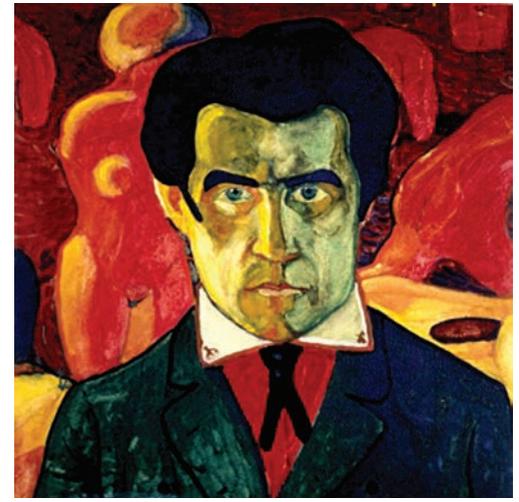
Kazimir Malevich felt intuitively the approach of the new era and revolution. His escape from the world's chaos of destruction took its form in his structuring of space and shape. *Black Square*, *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*, all created in 1915, look forward towards a new World of Happiness and Universal Harmony. The chaos of war brought forth his idea for new cities — his Architects. Explored in *New Day of Art*, he created his own philosophy.

Igor Malevich's book is an invaluable contribution to Belarusian culture and arts: the beginning of the great master of Suprematism's return to his historical Homeland.

Professor Igor Malevich is a Doctor of Physico-Mathematical Sciences and laureate of state awards, who worked for the diplomatic service in China and South Korea. He has taught at Harvard University, as well as at leading universities in Germany and Finland.

His career has included work on the Soviet system of Moon laser location, upon satellites and on lidar systems (used for space and undersea surveillance). He has also helped advance medical technology in the field of immune system laser stabilisation.

His books include the following titles: *Attention, China; While It's Still Yesterday in Europe It's Already Tomorrow in Korea; In Changing Itself, China Changes the Whole World — Negotiation Traditions and Contemporary Business Etiquette*; and a Chinese-Russian-Belarusian Phrase Book. He is also the author of the linguistic reference book *Chinese-Belarusian Business Dialogue*.



K. Malevich. Self-portrait



Kazimir Malevich. *Ascension to the Cross of Fate*

He was imprisoned as soon as he was picked up from Leningrad train station and died in 1935, in the Russian Museum's box room. He never returned to Germany and his Berlin exhibition remains in private hands.

Nobel Prize laureate physicist Albert Einstein publicly lauded Malevich as a genius, helping guide public opinion towards the artist in Germany. Even those who didn't understand suprematism couldn't but acknowledge the originality of the

archive with his pupil, beloved Alexandra, who then worked at Vitebsk's Local History Museum. Sadly, Igor believes the archive was taken by Luftwaffe landing forces during WWII, as reported in an old Soviet *Yunost* magazine. He recalls an article discussing the disappearance of artworks during the war. Of course, the Nazis took the cultural legacy of each country they invaded.

On the twelfth day of the invasion, landing troops took Tulovo,



From the artist's work

this purpose.

Kazimir Malevich's pictures announce that elementary forms — such as the square, circle and cross — are the foundation blocks for everything. Igor writes: 'We can't look beyond the barriers of our natural perceptions. Malevich's *Black Square* is the gateway beyond which only geniuses can pass. Only they can look beyond elementary forms'.

The concepts behind *Black Square* also echo 19th century thinking in