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INSTEAD OF A PREFACE

. . . ONE QUOTATION

In the course of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) millions of Soviet children died: Russians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars, Latvians, Gypsies, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Armenians, Tadjiks . . .

People's Friendship magazine, 1985, No. 5

. . . AND ONE QUESTION BY A RUSSIAN CLASSIC

Dostoevsky once posed a question: can we justify our world, our happiness, and even eternal harmony, if in its name, to strengthen its foundation, at least one little tear of an innocent child will be spilled? And he himself answered: this tear will not justify any progress, any revolution. Any war. It will always outweigh them.

Just one little tear . . .

L A S T W I T N E S S E S

“HE WAS AFRAID TO LOOK BACK . . .”

Zhenya Belkevich

SIX YEARS OLD. NOW A WORKER.

June 1941 . . .

I remember it. I was very little, but I remember everything . . .

The last thing I remember from the peaceful life was a fairy tale that mama read us at bedtime. My favorite one—about the Golden Fish. I also always asked something from the Golden Fish: “Golden Fish . . . Dear Golden Fish . . .” My sister asked, too. She asked differently: “By order of the pike, by my like . . .” We wanted to go to our grandmother for the summer and have papa come with us. He was so much fun.

In the morning I woke up from fear. From some unfamiliar sounds . . .

Mama and papa thought we were asleep, but I lay next to my sister pretending to sleep. I saw papa kiss mama for a long time, kiss her face and hands, and I kept wondering: he’s never kissed her like that before. They went outside, they were holding hands, I ran to the window—mama hung on my father’s neck and wouldn’t let him go. He tore free of her and ran, she caught up with him and again held him and shouted something. Then I also shouted: “Papa! Papa!”

My little sister and brother Vasya woke up, my sister saw me crying, and she, too, shouted: “Papa!” We all ran out to the porch: “Papa!” Father saw us and, I remember it like today, covered his head with his hands and walked off, even ran. He was afraid to look back.

The sun was shining in my face. So warm . . . And even now I can't believe that my father left that morning for the war. I was very little, but I think I realized that I was seeing him for the last time. That I would never meet him again. I was very . . . very little . . .

It became connected like that in my memory, that war is when there's no papa . . .

Then I remember: the black sky and the black plane. Our mama lies by the road with her arms spread. We ask her to get up, but she doesn't. She doesn't rise. The soldiers wrapped mama in a tarpaulin and buried her in the sand, right there. We shouted and begged: "Don't put our mama in the ground. She'll wake up and we'll go on." Some big beetles crawled over the sand . . . I couldn't imagine how mama was going to live with them under the ground. How would we find her afterward, how would we meet her? Who would write to our papa?

One of the soldiers asked me: "What's your name, little girl?" But I forgot. "And what's your last name, little girl? What's your mother's name?" I didn't remember . . . We sat by mama's little mound till night, till we were picked up and put on a cart. The cart was full of children. Some old man drove us, he gathered up everybody on the road. We came to a strange village and strangers took us all to different cottages.

I didn't speak for a long time. I only looked.

Then I remember—summer. Bright summer. A strange woman strokes my head. I begin to cry. I begin to speak . . . To tell about mama and papa. How papa ran away from us and didn't even look back . . . How mama lay . . . How the beetles crawled over the sand . . .

The woman strokes my head. In those moments I realized: she looks like my mama . . .

“MY FIRST AND LAST CIGARETTE . . .”

Gena Yushkevich

TWELVE YEARS OLD. NOW A JOURNALIST.

The morning of the first day of the war . . .

Sun. And unusual quiet. Incomprehensible silence.

Our neighbor, an officer's wife, came out to the yard all in tears. She whispered something to mama, but gestured that they had to be quiet. Everybody was afraid to say aloud what had happened, even when they already knew, since some had been informed. But they were afraid that they'd be called provocateurs. Panic-mongers. That was more frightening than the war. They were afraid . . . This is what I think now . . . And of course no one believed it. What?! Our army is at the border, our leaders are in the Kremlin! The country is securely protected, it's invulnerable to the enemy! That was what I thought then . . . I was a young Pioneer.*

We listened to the radio. Waited for Stalin's speech. We needed his voice. But Stalin was silent. Then Molotov[†] gave a speech. Everybody listened. Molotov said, "It's war." Still no one believed it yet. Where is Stalin?

* The All-Union Pioneer Organization, for Soviet children from ten to fifteen years old, was founded in 1922. It was similar to Scout organizations in the West.

† Vyacheslav Molotov (1890–1986), an Old Bolshevik and close collaborator with Stalin, served in several high offices of the Soviet Union. From 1939 to 1949 he was Minister of Foreign Affairs. On August 23, 1939, he signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of nonaggression between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which was broken by Germany in June 1941.

Planes flew over the city . . . Dozens of unfamiliar planes. With crosses. They covered the sky, covered the sun. Terrible! Bombs rained down . . . There were sounds of ceaseless explosions. Rattling. Everything was happening as in a dream. Not in reality. I was no longer little—I remember my feelings. My fear, which spread all over my body. All over my words. My thoughts. We ran out of the house, ran somewhere down the streets . . . It seemed as if the city was no longer there, only ruins. Smoke. Fire. Somebody said we must run to the cemetery, because they wouldn't bomb a cemetery. Why bomb the dead? In our neighborhood there was a big Jewish cemetery with old trees. And everybody rushed there, thousands of people gathered there. They embraced the monuments, hid behind the tombstones.

Mama and I sat there till nightfall. Nobody around uttered the word *war*. I heard another word: *provocation*. Everybody repeated it. People said that our troops would start advancing any moment. On Stalin's orders. People believed it.

But the sirens on the chimneys in the outskirts of Minsk wailed all night . . .

The first dead . . .

The first dead I saw was a horse . . . Then a dead woman . . . That surprised me. My idea was that only men were killed in war.

I woke up in the morning . . . I wanted to leap out of bed, then I remembered—it's war, and I closed my eyes. I didn't want to believe it.

There was no more shooting in the streets. Suddenly it was quiet. For several days it was quiet. And then all of a sudden there was movement . . . There goes, for instance, a white man, white all over, from his shoes to his hair. Covered with flour. He carries a white sack. Another is running . . . Tin cans fall out of his pockets, he has tin cans in his hands. Candy . . . Packs of tobacco . . . Someone carries a hat filled with sugar . . . A pot of sugar . . . Indescribable! One carries a roll of fabric, another goes all wrapped in blue calico. Red calico . . . It's funny, but nobody laughs. Food warehouses had been bombed. A big store not far from our house . . . People rushed to take

whatever was left there. At a sugar factory several men drowned in vats of sugar syrup. Terrible! The whole city cracked sunflower seeds. They found a stock of sunflower seeds somewhere. Before my eyes a woman came running to a store . . . She had nothing with her: no sack or net bag—so she took off her slip. Her leggings. She stuffed them with buckwheat. Carried it off. All that silently for some reason. Nobody talked.

When I called my mother, there was only mustard left, yellow jars of mustard. “Don’t take anything,” mama begged. Later she told me she was ashamed, because all her life she had taught me differently. Even when we were starving and remembering these days, we still didn’t regret anything. That’s how my mother was.

In town . . . German soldiers calmly strolled in our streets. They filmed everything. Laughed. Before the war we had a favorite game—we made drawings of Germans. We drew them with big teeth. Fangs. And now they’re walking around . . . Young, handsome . . . With handsome grenades tucked into the tops of their sturdy boots. Play harmonicas. Even joke with our pretty girls.

An elderly German was dragging a box. The box was heavy. He beckoned to me and gestured: help me. The box had two handles, we took it by these handles. When we had brought it where we were told to, the German patted me on the shoulder and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Meaning here’s your pay.

I came home. I couldn’t wait, I sat in the kitchen and lit up a cigarette. I didn’t hear the door open and mama come in.

“Smoking, eh?”

“Mm-hmm . . .”

“What are these cigarettes?”

“German.”

“So you smoke, and you smoke the enemy’s cigarettes. That is treason against the Motherland.”

This was my first and last cigarette.

One evening mama sat down next to me.

“I find it unbearable that they’re here. Do you understand me?”

She wanted to fight. Since the first days. We decided to look for the underground fighters—we didn't doubt that they existed. We didn't doubt for a moment.

“I love you more than anybody in the world,” mama said. “But you understand me? Will you forgive me if anything happens to us?”

I fell in love with my mama, I now obeyed her unconditionally. And it remained so for my whole life.

“GRANDMA PRAYED . . . SHE ASKED
THAT MY SOUL COME BACK . . .”

Natasha Golik

FIVE YEARS OLD. NOW A PROOFREADER.

I learned to pray . . . I often remember how during the war I learned to pray . . .

They said: it's war. I—understandably—being five years old, didn't picture anything specific. Anything frightening. But I fell asleep from fear, precisely from fear. I slept for two days. For two days I lay like a doll. Everybody thought I was dead. Mama cried, and grandma prayed. She prayed for two days and two nights.

I opened my eyes, and the first thing I remember was light. Very bright light, extraordinarily bright. So bright it was painful. I heard someone's voice, I recognized it: it was my grandma's voice. Grandma stands before an icon and prays. “Grandma . . . Grandma . . .” I called her. She didn't turn. She didn't believe it was me calling her . . . I was already awake . . . I opened my eyes . . .

“Grandma,” I asked later, “what did you pray for when I was dying?”

“I asked that your soul come back.”

A year later our grandma died. I already knew what to pray for. I prayed and asked that her soul come back.

But it didn't come back.

“THEY LAY PINK ON THE CINDERS . . .”

Katya Korotaeva

THIRTEEN YEARS OLD. NOW AN ENGINEER
IN HYDROTECHNOLOGY.

I'll tell about the smell . . . How war smells . . .

Before the war I finished sixth grade. At school the rule was that beginning from the fourth grade there were final exams. And so we passed the last exam. It was June, and the months of May and June in 1941 were cold. Usually lilacs blossom some time in May, but that year they blossomed in mid-June. The beginning of the war for me is always associated with the smell of lilacs. And of bird cherry. For me these trees always smell of war . . .

We lived in Minsk, and I was born in Minsk. My father was a military choirmaster. I used to go to the military parades with him. Besides me, there were two older brothers in the family. Of course, everybody loved me and pampered me as the youngest, and also as the little sister.

Ahead was summer, vacations. This was a great joy. I did sports, went to the swimming pool in the House of the Red Army. The children in my class envied me very much. And I was proud that I could swim well. On Sunday, June 22, there was to be a celebration marking the opening of the Komsomol Lake.* They spent a long time dig-

* An artificial lake built on the Svisloch River in the Minsk district of Belorussia. “Komsomol” was the acronym of the Communist Youth League, founded by Lenin in 1918.

ging it, building it, even our school went to the *subbotniks*.^{*} I planned to be one of the first to go and swim in it. For sure!

In the morning we had a custom of going to buy fresh rolls. This was considered my duty. On the way I met a friend, she told me that war had begun. There were many gardens on our street, houses drowned in flowers. I thought, "What kind of war? What's she inventing?"

At home my father was setting up the samovar . . . I had no time to say anything before neighbors came running, and they all had one word on their lips: *War! War!* The next morning at seven o'clock my older brother received a notice from the recruiting office. In the afternoon he ran over to his work, got paid off. He came home with this money and said to mama, "I'm leaving for the front, I don't need anything. Take this money. Buy Katya a new coat." I had just finished sixth grade and was supposed to start secondary school, and I dreamed that they'd have a dark-blue woolen coat with a gray Astrakhan collar made for me. He knew about it.

To this day I remember that, on leaving for the front, my brother gave money for my coat. Yet we lived modestly, there were enough holes in the family budget. But mama would have bought me the coat, since my brother asked. She just didn't have time.

The bombing of Minsk began. Mama and I moved to our neighbors' stone cellar. I had a favorite cat, she was very wild and never went anywhere beyond our yard, but when the bombing started, and I ran from the yard to our neighbors, the cat followed me. I tried to chase her away: "Go home!" But she followed me. She, too, was afraid to stay alone. The German bombs made some ringing, howling noise. I had a musical ear, it affected me strongly . . . Those sounds . . . I was so scared that my palms were wet. The neighbors' four-year-old boy sat with us in the cellar. He didn't cry, his eyes just grew bigger.

First separate houses burned, then the whole city. We like looking

^{*} *Subbotniks*, from the Russian word for Saturday (*subbota*), were Saturdays devoted to volunteer work for the community.

at a fire, at a bonfire, but it's frightening when a house burns, and here fire came from all sides, the sky and the streets were filled with smoke. In some places it was very bright . . . From the fire . . . I remember three open windows in a wooden house, with magnificent Christmas cactuses on the windowsill. There were no people in this house anymore, only the blossoming cactuses . . . The feeling was that they weren't red flowers, but flames. Burning flowers.

We fled . . .

In villages on the way people fed us with bread and milk—that was all they had. We had no money. I left the house with nothing but a kerchief, and mama for some reason ran out in a winter coat and high-heeled shoes. We were fed for free, no one made a peep about money. Refugees came pouring in crowds.

Then someone in front sent word that the road ahead had been cut by German motorcyclists. We ran back past the same villages, past the same women with jugs of milk. We came to our street . . . Several days ago it was still green, there were flowers, and now everything was burned down. Nothing was left even of the centennial lindens. Everything was burned down to the yellow sand. The black earth on which everything grew disappeared somewhere; there was only yellow sand. Nothing but sand. As if you were standing by a freshly dug grave . . .

Factory furnaces were left. They were white, baked by the strong flame. Nothing else was recognizable . . . The whole street had burned. Grandmothers and grandfathers and many small children had burned. Because they didn't run away with the others, they thought they wouldn't be touched. The fire didn't spare anybody. We walked and if you saw a black corpse, it meant a burned old man. If you saw something small and pink from a distance—it meant a child. They lay pink on the cinders . . .

Mama took off her kerchief and covered my eyes with it . . . So we reached our house, the place where our house had stood several days ago. The house wasn't there. We were met by our miraculously spared cat. She pressed herself to me—that was all. No one could speak . . .

even the cat didn't meow. She was silent for several days. Everybody became mute.

I saw the first fascists, not even saw but heard—they all had iron-shod boots, they stomped loudly. Stomped over our pavement. I had the feeling that it even hurt the earth when they walked.

But how the lilacs bloomed that year . . . How the bird cherry bloomed . . .

“I STILL WANT MY MAMA . . .”

Zina Kosiak

EIGHT YEARS OLD. NOW A HAIRDRESSER.

First grade . . .

I finished first grade in May of '41, and my parents took me for the summer to the Pioneer camp of Gorodishche, near Minsk. I came there, went for a swim once, and two days later the war began. We were put on a train and taken somewhere. German planes flew over, and we shouted “Hurray!” We didn’t understand that they could be enemy planes. Until they began to bomb us . . . Then all colors disappeared. All shades. For the first time the word *death* appeared; everybody began to repeat this incomprehensible word. And mama and papa weren’t there.

When we were leaving the camp, we each had something poured into a pillowcase—some of us grain, some of us sugar. Even the smallest children weren’t passed over, everybody got something. They wanted us to take as much food as possible for the road, and this food was used very sparingly. But on the train we saw wounded soldiers. They moaned, they were in pain. We wanted to give everything to these soldiers. We called it “feeding the papas.” We called all military men papas.

We were told that Minsk had burned down, burned down completely, that the Germans were already there, but that we were going to the rear. Where there was no war.

We rode for over a month. They’d direct us to some town, we’d

come there, but they couldn't keep us there, because the Germans were already close. And so we arrived in Mordovia.

The place was very beautiful, there were churches standing around. The houses were low, and the churches high. There was nothing to sleep on, we slept on straw. Winter came, and we had one pair of shoes for the four of us. Then we began to starve. Not only the orphanage was starving, but also the people around us, because we gave everything to the front. There were 250 children living in our orphanage, and once we were called to dinner and there was nothing to eat at all. The teachers and the director sat in the dining room, looked at us, and their eyes were full of tears. We had a horse, Maika . . . She was very old and gentle, and we used her to carry water. The next day this Maika was killed. We were given water with a small piece of Maika in it . . . But they concealed it from us for a long time. We wouldn't have been able to eat her . . . Not for anything! She was the only horse in our orphanage. We also had two hungry cats. Skeletons! Good, we thought later, it's lucky they were so skinny, we didn't have to eat them. There was nothing there to eat.

We went around with swollen stomachs. I, for instance, could eat a bucket of soup, because there was nothing in this soup. I'd eat as much as they gave me. We were saved by nature, we were like ruminant animals. In spring not a single tree for several miles around the orphanage would sprout . . . We ate all the buds, we even peeled off the young bark. We ate grass, we ate everything. They gave us pea jackets; we made pockets in them and carried grass around and chewed it. Summer saved us, but in winter it was very hard. Small children—there were some forty of us—were placed separately. During the night there was howling. We called mama and papa. Our house parents and teachers tried not to say the word *mama* before us. They told us fairy tales and found books without this word in them. If anyone suddenly said "mama," howling began. Inconsolable howling.

I repeated first grade in school. It happened like this: I had graduated from first grade with a certificate of honor, but when we came to

the orphanage they asked us who had been reexamined, I said I had, because I decided that reexamination meant the certificate of honor.

In the third grade I ran away from the orphanage. I went looking for mama. Grandpa Bolshakov found me in the forest, hungry and exhausted. He learned that I was from an orphanage and took me into his family. He and grandma lived together. I grew stronger and began to help them with the chores: gathered grass, weeded potatoes—did everything. We ate bread, but there was little bread in it. It was very bitter. The flour was mixed with everything that could be ground: goosefoot, filbert blossoms, potatoes. To this day I cannot look calmly at healthy grass, and I eat a lot of bread. I can't have enough of it . . . After dozens of years . . .

Anyhow, I remember a lot. There's much more that I remember . . .

I remember a mad little girl who would get into someone's kitchen garden, find a hole, and start waiting for a mouse. The girl was hungry. I remember her face, even the sundress she wore. Once I came up to her and she . . . told me . . . about the mouse . . . We sat together and looked out for that mouse . . .

All through the war I waited so that, when the war ended, grandpa and I could harness a horse and go in search of mama. Evacuated people stopped at our house, and I asked them all whether they had met my mama. There were many evacuated people, so many that in every house there stood a cauldron of warm nettles. In case people came, there should be something warm for them to eat. We had nothing else to give them. But there was a cauldron of nettles in every house . . . I remember it well. I gathered those nettles.

The war ended . . . I waited for a day, for two days. No one came to get me. Mama didn't come for me, and papa, I knew, was in the army. I waited for two weeks like that, and couldn't wait any longer. I got under a seat on a train and rode . . . Where? I didn't know. I thought (this was still my child's mind) that all trains went to Minsk. And in Minsk mama was waiting! Then papa would come . . . A hero! With orders, with medals.

They had perished somewhere under the bombs. The neighbors told me later—they had both gone looking for me. They had rushed to the train station.

I'm already fifty-one years old. I have children of my own. But I still want my mama.

“SUCH PRETTY GERMAN TOYS . . .”

Taisa Nasvetnikova

SEVEN YEARS OLD. NOW A TEACHER.

Before the war . . .

How I remember myself . . . Everything was good: kindergarten, children's theater, our courtyard. Girls and boys. I read a lot, was afraid of worms and loved dogs. We lived in Vitebsk. Papa worked in construction management. Of my childhood I remember most of all how papa taught me to swim in the Dvina.

Then there was school. The impression I have kept from school is: very wide stairs, a transparent glass wall, and lots of sun, and lots of joy. The feeling was that life is a feast.

In the first days of the war papa left for the front. I remember saying goodbye to him at the train station . . . Papa kept telling mama that they'd drive the Germans away, but he wanted us to evacuate. Mama couldn't understand why. If we stayed at home, he would find us sooner. At once. And I kept repeating, "Papa dear! Only come back soon. Papa dear . . ."

Papa left, and a few days later we also left. On the way we were bombed all the time. Bombing us was easy, because the trains to the rear ran just five hundred yards apart. We traveled light: mama was wearing a sateen dress with white polka dots, and I a red cotton jumper with little flowers. All the adults said that red was very visible from above, and as soon as there was an air raid and we rushed for the

bushes, they covered me with whatever they could find so that my red jumper wouldn't be seen. Otherwise I was like a signal light.

We drank water from swamps and ditches. Intestinal illnesses set in. I also fell ill. For three days I didn't regain consciousness . . . Afterward mama told me how I was saved. When we stopped in Briansk, a troop train arrived on the next track. My mama was twenty-six, she was very beautiful. Our train stood there for a long time. She got out of the car and an officer from that train complimented her. Mama said, "Leave me alone, I cannot look at your smile. My daughter is dying." The officer turned out to be a field paramedic. He jumped into our car, examined me, and called his comrade: "Quickly bring tea, rusks, and belladonna." Those soldiers' rusks . . . a quart bottle of strong tea, and a few belladonna pills saved my life.

Before we reached Aktyubinsk the whole train had been sick. We children were not allowed where the dead and killed lay; we were protected from that sight. We only heard the conversations: so many buried here, and so many there . . . Mama would come with a very pale face, her hands trembled. And I kept asking, "Where did these people go?"

I don't remember any landscapes. That's very surprising, because I loved nature. I only remember the bushes we hid under. The ravines. For some reason it seemed to me that there was no forest anywhere, that we traveled only through fields, through some sort of desert. Once I experienced fear, after which I wasn't afraid of any bombing. We hadn't been warned that it would be a short stop of ten or fifteen minutes. The train started and I was left behind. Alone . . . I don't remember who picked me up . . . I was literally thrown into the car . . . Not our car, but the one before the end. For the first time I had a scare that I would be left alone and mama would go off. While mama was near me, I wasn't afraid. But here I went mute with fright. And until mama came running to me and threw both arms around me, I was mute, and no one could get a word out of me. Mama was my world. My planet. When I had pain somewhere, I would take