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THE LAST WITNESSES

(From the book "Unchildlike Stories")

FROM THE AUTHOR

On the morning of the twenty-second June, 1941, on one of the streets in Brest, lay a dead little girl with small unplaited pigtails and her doll.

Many people remembered this girl. They remembered her forever.

What is dearer to us than our children?

What is dearer to any nation?

To any mother?

To any father?

But who counts how many children are killed by war, which kills them twice? It kills those that been born. And it kills those that could, that ought to have come into this world. In "Requiem" by the Byelorussian poet Anatoli Vertinsky a children's choir is heard across the field where the dead soldiers lay -- the unborn children scream and cry over every common grave.

Is a child going through the horrors of war still a child? Who gives him back his childhood? Once Dostoevsky posed the problem of general happiness in relation to the suffering of a single child.

Yet there were thousands like this during the years 1941 to 1945...

What will they remember? What can they retell? They must retell! Because even today in some places bombs are exploding, bullets are whistling, missiles reduce houses to crumbs and dust and children's beds burn. Because even today someone wants widespread war, a universal Hiroshima, in whose atomic fire children would evaporate like drops of water, wither like terrible flowers.

We can ask what is heroic in five-ten-twelve-year olds going through war? What can children understand, see, remember?

A lot!

What do they remember about their mother? About their father? Only their death: "A button from mother's jacket remained on the pieces of coal. And in the stove there were two small loaves of warm bread". (Anya Tochitskaya -- 5 years old.) "As father was being torn to pieces by Alsations he shouted: "Take my son away... Take my son away so he doesn't see it." (Sasha Khvalei -- 7 years old.)

Moreover they can tell how they died of hunger and fear. How they ran away to the front, how other people adopted them. How, even now, it is difficult to ask them about mummy.

Today they are the last witnesses of those tragic days. After them there is no one else.

But they are forty years older than their memory. And when I asked them, to remember it was not easy for them. For them to go back to that state, to those concrete sensations of childhood would seem impossible. But an amazing thing happened. One could suddenly see in a woman with greying hair a small girl imploring a soldier, "Don't hide my mummy in a hole, she will wake up and then we will walk on." (Katya Shepelyevich -- 4 years old.)

Blessed is our lack of defence against our memory. What would we be without it? A man without a memory is only capable of doing evil, nothing else but evil.

In answer to the question "Who then is the hero of this book?" I would say: childhood which was burnt, shot, and killed by bombs, bullets, hunger, fear and by fatherlessness. For the record: in children's homes in Byelorussia in nineteen forty-five, twenty-six thousand nine hundred orphans were brought up. And one more figure -- about thirteen million children perished during the Second World War.

Who can now say how many of them were Russian children, how many Byelorussian, how many Polish or French. Children died -- citizens of the world.

The children of my Byelorussia were saved by the whole country and brought up by the whole country. In the big children's choir I hear their voices.

Tamara Tomashevich remembers to this day how in the children's home in Khvalynsk on the Volga, not one of the grown-ups raised their voice to the children until the time that their hair had grown after the journey. And Zhenya Korpachev, evacuated from Minsk to Tashkent, has not forgotten the old Uzbek woman who brought a blanket to the station for him and his mother. The first

Soviet soldier in liberated Minsk picked up four-year-old Galya Zabavchik in his arms and she called him "daddy". Nella Vershok recalls how our soldiers, walked about their village and the children looked at them and shouted, "Our daddies are coming. Our daddies."

Children are very best people on earth. How can we protect them in this troubled twentieth century? How can we preserve their souls and their lives? And both our past and our future with them?

How can we preserve our planet on which little girls are supposed to sleep in their beds, and not lie dead on the road with unplaited pigtailed? And so that childhood would never again be called war-time childhood.

In the name of such womanly faith as mine, this book is written!

"HE WAS AFRAID TO LOOK AROUND"

Zhenya Bilkevich.

5 years old. Now a worker.

Lives in Brest.

Mummy and daddy thought that we were sleeping, but I was lying next to my little sister and only pretended to sleep. I saw daddy kissing mummy for a long time, kissing her face, her hands, and I was surprised because he had never kissed her like this before. They went out into the yard, I ran up to the window: mummy was hanging around daddy's neck and would not let him go. He tore her away from him and started to run; she caught up with him and again would not let him go and she was shouting something. Then I started to shout: "Daddy!" My little sister and brother, Vasya, woke up; my little sister saw that I was crying and also started to shout: "Daddy!" We ran out, all of us, on to the porch: "Daddy!" Our father saw us and I still remember as he covered his head with his hands and left, he even ran. He was afraid to look around. . .

The sun shone so warmly on my face that even now I cannot believe that my father went to war on that morning. I was very small, but I believe I knew I was seeing him for the last time. So that was the link in my memory, that war is when your daddy's not there.

And then I remember how our mother lay near the highway with arms stretched out. The soldiers wrapped her up in a waterproof cape and buried her right there. 'We shouted and asked them not to bury her. . .

"...AND I WAS ASKING HER TO STAND UP..."

Tamara Frolova.

3 years old. Now an engineer.

Lives in Kuybyshev.

... They say that our soldiers found me near my dead mother. I was crying and asking her: to stand up. It was at one of the railway stations in the suburbs of Minsk. The soldiers put me on to the train that went to the east, taking me away farther from the war. So, along with the other people I ended up in the town of Khvalynsk. There, a husband and wife, the Cherkasovs, adopted me; they became my parents. As for my own parents -- mother and father -- I do not know them. I have no photos nor even memories: what kind of mummy, what kind of daddy. I don't remember. I was very small. . .

I live with the feeling that war gave birth to me. Because from childhood I remember only war. . .

"IF ONLY ONE OF OUR LITTLE BOYS SURVIVED"

Sasha Kavrus.

10 years old. Now a Candidate of Sciences (Philology).

Lives in Minsk.

I was studying at school. We went out at break time, and began to play as usual when fascist aeroplanes started dropping bombs on our village. We had already been told about the fighting in Spain, about the fate of the Spanish children. Now bombs were flying at us.

The SS detachment was the first to burst in on our village of Brucy in Myadel District. They opened fire, shot all cats and dogs, then began to ask everyone where the activists were living. There was a village soviet in our house, up until the war, but none of the villagers named my father.

I remember the episode when they chased our chickens. The soldiers caught them, twirled them and wrung their necks until they fell to the ground. I thought that our chickens were screaming with human voices. The cats and dogs too when they shot them. This seemed awful to me, I had not yet seen death.

They began to bum our village in 'forty-three; we were digging potatoes on this day. Our neighbour, Vasili, who fought in the First World War and who knew German, said, 'I'm going to ask the Germans not to burn our visage.' He went there and they burnt him too.

Where could we go? Father took us to the partisans in the Kozyan-sky woods. Going there, we came across people from other villages which had also been burnt. They said that the Germans were ahead and were coming towards us. We climbed in to some hole: I, my brother Volodya, mummy with little Lyuba and my father. Father took a grenade and we agreed that if the Germans saw us, then he would pull out the pin. We had already falcon leave of one another. My brother and I took our belts, made loops to hang ourselves and then put them around our necks. Mummy kissed us all. I heard her say to father: "If only one of our little sons survives." Then father said: "Let them run. . . They are young and might be saved." But I felt such pity for mummy that I did not go.

We heard dogs bark, we heard foreign words of command, we heard shooting. . . Our wood -- it is the kind with wind-fallen trees, turned over fir trees, nothing is visible beyond ten metres. This was all so near, but then we heard the voices further and further away. When it was calm, mummy was not able to stand up.

In the evening we met the partisans, they knew father. We had already walked for a bit, feeling hungry. We were walking when one partisan asked me: "What would you like to find under a pine: sweets, biscuits, or a little piece of bread?" I answered: "A handful of cartridges." The partisans remembered this for a long time afterwards.

I remember that after the war we had a single ABC reader in the village, and the first book that I found and read through was a collection of exercises in arithmetics. . .

"A WHITE SHIRT SHINES FAR IN DARKNESS..."

Yefim Fridland.

9 years old. Now the Deputy Director of an industrial complex for silicate production.

Lives in Minsk.

I do not remember myself being a child. The war started and the childish caprices finished. Everything that I remember about the war is not from childhood memories, I felt like a grown-up. I was afraid like a grown-up that they might kill me, I understood what death means, did grown-up's work, I thought like a grown-up. And nobody treated us like children in that situation.

That which happened before the war was forgotten. I remember that before the war I was afraid to be alone in our flat, but afterwards my fear disappeared. I no longer believed in mother's house-spirits which sat behind the stove, and she did not recall them. Leaving Khotimsk in a cart, mummy bought a basket of apples, placed it near my sister and me and we ate. The bombing started, my little sister had two lovely apples in her hands, we began to fight over them, she would not hand one over. Mummy shouted: "Go and hide somewhere," but we shared the apples. We fought until I said to my sister, "Give me just one apple, or they will kill us and I won't have tried it." She banded one over, the very best. At this time the bombing stopped. I decided not to eat the lucky apple.

We were frightened when we saw the dead. This was real fear. It was terrible and incomprehensible, because before I used to think that only old people died, and that children did not die until they became old. Who instilled this in me, from where did I get such an idea? I remember that before the war, my friend's grandfather died in our neighbourhood, but I have no recollection of other pre-war deaths. When dead people were lying on the roads, I was afraid, hut

sometimes I peeped over mother's shoulder to see who was lying there. I was frightened when I saw the dead children, my fear was simultaneously that of a child and that of an adult. On the one hand, like an adult, I understood that they could kill me, but on the other hand, like a child, I was panic stricken: how is it that they can kill me? Where will I be then?

We travelled in a cart, and in front of us was the herd. From father -- up until the war he was the Director for cattle procurements in Khotimsk -- we knew that these were not ordinary cows, but pedigree cattle which was bought for a lot of money abroad. I remember that father was not able to explain to me how much this was -- "a lot of money", until he gave the example of every cow being worth a tank. "Worth a tank" meant an awful lot. People took care of every cow.

Since I grew up in the family of a livestock specialist, I loved animals. After the next bombing we were left without a cart, so I walked in front of the herd, tying myself to the bull, Vaska. He had a ring through his nose, through the ring a rope was tied, and I tied the ends of the rope to me. The cows could not get used to the bombing for a long time, they were sluggish, unused to the long frocks, their hoofs were twisting, they were terribly tired. After the firing it was difficult to gather them together. But if the bull moved on, then all the others followed on behind, and the bull obeyed only me.

At night my mother washed my white shirt somewhere or other, and at dawn Senior Lieutenant Turchin, who led the line of carts, shouted, "Get up," I put on the shirt, took hold of the bull and we went on. Yes, I remember that all the time I was wearing my white shirt. In the darkness it shone a long way, everyone could see me. I slept by the bull, under its front legs, it was warmer like that. Vaska never got up first, but waited until I got up. He felt that near him was a child and that he could cause pain to that child. I lay with him and never worried .

We went on foot to Tola. There were few people left, the cows had swollen udders. A cow, its udder hurting, stopped close by and looked at me. I had cramp in my hands: in a day we had milked up to fifteen -twenty cows. I still remember a cow that was lying on the road with a broken leg, and milk dripped from its bluish udder. It looked at people and it seemed to be crying. The soldiers saw this, took their submachine guns and prepared to shoot it. I asked them: "Wait a minute."

I went up and released its milk on to the ground. The cow gratefully licked my shoulder. "Well," I got up. "Now shoot." And I myself ran away so I won't see all this.

In Tutu we learnt that all the pedigree cattle that we were bringing in was for the meat processing factory; there was nowhere else for it to go. Germans were approaching the town. I put on my white shirt and went to say goodbye to Vaska. The bull breathed heavily on my face. . .

At the beginning of 1945 we were returning hoxne. We were approaching Orsha, and I was standing by the window at that time: I felt that mummy was standing behind me. I opened the window. Mummy said: "Do you recognise the smell of our marches?" I rarely cried, but then I started to howl. During the evacuation I even dreamed of the marsh grasses being cut, and how they gathered them into small stacks, and how the hay smelt when dried out a little. I thought that the smell of our marsh grasses can be found nowhere else. On Victory Day, our neighbour, Uncle Kolya, ran out into the street and began to shoot up into the air. Little boys surrounded him:

"Uncle Kolya, give it to me!"

"Uncle Kolya, give it to me!"

He gave his rifle to all of them. For the first time in my life I fired the rifle too. . .

"WE ATE... THE PARK..."

Anya Grubina.

12 years old. Now an artist.

Lives in Minsk.

I am a girl from Leningrad. Our daddy died during the blockade. Mummy saved us children. Up until the war she our our guiding light. In 1941 Slavik was born. How old was he when the blockade started? Six months, just six months. She saved

both this little mite and us three. But we lost daddy. In Leningrad everyone's daddy died sooner; but the mummies were left, They were probably not allowed to die. With whom would we be left? But the fathers left us with the mothers. From Leningrad they took us off to the Urals, to the town of Karpinsk. They took the whole of our school. In Karpinsk we rushed to the park right away, we did not walk in the park, but we ate it. . . We especially liked the larch with its feathery needles -- it's so delicious! We nibbled the shoots from the small pine trees and munched the grass. Since the blockade I knew all the edible grasses; in the Karpinsk park there were many sour ones, like the so-called "Hake's cabbage".

It was the year of 1942, in the Urals there also was famine. In the children's home we were solely from Leningrad, and it was terribly difficult, they were not able to feed us for a long time.

I do not remember who was the first in the children's home to see the Germans. When I saw my first German I knew straight away that he was a prisoner, that they were working out of town in the coal mines.

To this very day I do not understand why they came to our children's home, why the Leningrad one?

When I saw him he did not say anything. We had just finished lunch, and I obviously still smelt of food. He stood near me, smelt the air and his jaw involuntarily moved, as if it were chewing something, so he tried to hold it with his hands. He tried to stop it. But it moved and moved. I really could not stand to see a hungry person. I was not able to look at him. To us, to all of us it was like an illness. I ran off and called the girls, someone had a piece of bread left, so we gave him this piece of bread.

He did not say anything, he just thanked us, "Danke schon.Danke schon." We knew when they had come, one or two of them. We ran out with whatever we had. When I was on kitchen duty, I left them all my piece of bread for that day, and in the evening I scraped out the saucepans. All the girls left them something, but I do not remember if the boys left them anything. Our little boys were constantly hungry, the food was never enough for them. The teachers told us off, because even the girls often fainted from hunger, but all the same we secretly left food for these prisoners.

In 1943 they did not come to us any more, in 1943 things were becoming easier. By this time there was not so much famine in the Urals. In the children's home they gave us good bread and plenty of porridge. But to this day I cannot stand to see a hungry person. A short while ago, on the TV programme "Time", they showed hungry Palestinian refugees. . . They queued up, hungry, with their small metal bowls. I ran off to another room, I became hysterical.

The first year in Karpinsk we did not appreciate nature. Everything that was natural evoked one desire -- to try it: was it edible? And it was only after a year that I noticed the beauty of the Ural landscape. There were tall grasses and woods full of bird cherries. What beautiful sunsets they have there! I began to draw. There were no paints, I drew with a pencil. I drew post-cards, we sent them to our parents in Leningrad. Most of all I liked to draw bird cherry trees. Karpinsk was filled with the smell of bird cherries. I think that even today it would smell the same. For some years I have had the completely absurd wish to go there. I really want to see if our children's home is still there -- it was a wooden building. Is it still intact? There are even trams there now. . .

"MUM-MY WASH-ED THE FR-AME..."

Fedya Trutko.

13 years old. Now Manager of the Department of Technical Control of the Novo-Berezovsky lime factory.

He lives in the Bereza district central of the Brest region. Mother became seriously ill before the war, and was in the Brest hospital. The Germans chased the sick out of the hospitals, those that were unable to walk were taken away somewhere in motor vehicles. Among the last, so people said, was also my mother. Her fate is not known. They shot her. But where? How? When? I could find no trace of her.

For my sister, myself and our father war began at home in Bereza. My brother, Volodya, studied at the Brest Technical College. My other brother, Alexander,

had finished the Navy College in Pinsk, which is now a maritime college, and was working there as a motor mechanic on a steamer.

Our father, Stepan Alexeyevich Trutko, was the Deputy Chairman of the Bereza District Executive Committee. He received an order-to evacuate to Smolensk with his documents. He ran home: "Fedya, get your sister and go to grandfather's in Ogorodniki. . ." We arrived at grandfather's farmstead in the morning, and during the night Volodya tapped on the window, he had travelled from Brest for two days and two nights. In October Alexander also turned up at the farmstead. He told us that the steamer going to Dnepropetrovsk had been bombed. Some of the survivors were captured. The Germans pushed them in front when they launched the offensive. Several people ran away, among them was Alexander.

We all three were happy when the partisans came to grandfather's.

"How many years have you done at school?" the commander asked me when they took us up to him.

"Five years. . ."

I heard his order: "Put them in the family camp."

Women and children lived in the family camp, but I was already a Young Pioneer*. This was my trump card, that I was already a Pioneer. I applied for the fighting corps. I assumed I was not in luck, when I heard the partisan say: "We are going to open a school for the likes of you."

War was all around us, but we studied. Our school was called "The Green School". There were no desks, classes, nor textbooks, there were only pupils and teachers. There was one ABC reader, one history textbook, one book of arithmetical problems, and one grammar textbook for everyone. We were without paper, chalk, ink and pencils. We cleared a glade, sprinkled it with sand and this was our school 'black-board'. The first grade pupils wrote on it with fine twigs. The partisans brought German leaflets, old wallpaper and newspapers. All of this was given to the older classes. Even a school bell was acquired from somewhere. We liked obis best of all. Could it be a real school if there were no bell? They made red ties for us, Pioneers.

"A-i-r!" shouted the teacher on duty. The glade was cleared. And then again the little ones tried to make out the words in the sand: "Mum-my wash-ed the fr-ame. . ."

Big upright abacuses were made from branches and blocks. Several sets of the alphabet were cut off from a tree. We even had a Physical Education lesson. The playground was equipped with a beam, a running track, a pole and circles for throwing grenades. I threw the grenades further than the others. Probably because of my resentment that they did not accept me into the partisan detachment.

I finished my sixth school year and firmly said that I would only go in to the seventh after the war. I was given a rifle. Then I myself got hold of a Belgian carbine -- small and light. . .

* Member of the Children's Organisation in the USSR -- Tr.

"WHEN I WENT TO THE CLASS
MUMMY CARRIED ME THERE IN HER ARMS"

Nina Starovoitova.
7 years old. Now an economist.
Lives in Mogilyov.

..Mummy kissed us and went out, the four of us stayed in the cabin: the younger ones -- my little brother, my cousins (a girl and a boy), and I. I was the biggest, I was seven. We were not being left alone for the first time, and had learnt not to cry, but to behave calmly. We knew that mummy was a scout and had been given an assignment, and we had to wait for her. Mummy had taken us away from our village not long before, and we now lived in a partisan camp for families.

We were sitting and listening: the trees were rustling, the women were doing their washing not far off, and chastising their children. Suddenly there were shouts: "Germans! Germans!" Everyone started to run out of their cabins, calling their children and running off further in to the wood. But where could we run, on our own, without mummy? But what if mummy knew the Germans were coming to the camp and was running towards us?

As I was the eldest I said, "Everyone be quiet. It's dark here and the Germans won't find us."

We hid. Someone looked in to the cabin and said in Russian: "'Whops there, come out!"

The voice was calm, and we came out of the cabin. I saw a tall man in a green uniform.

"Do you have a father?"

"Yes, I do."

"Where is he?"

"He's far away, at the front," I said.

I remember that the German even laughed.

"And where's your mother?" was his next question.

"Mummy's with the partisans and she is a scout."

Another German came up to us, this one was wearing black. They were discussing something and the one in black indicated with his hand where we were to go. Women and children, who had not managed to run away, were standing there. The German in black aimed a machine-gun at us, I was terrified, I understood what he was about to do. I did not even manage to call to the little ones and embrace them. . .

I was woken by the sound of my mother crying. I thought I was sleeping. I came to and saw mummy digging a hole and crying. She was standing with her back to me, but I did not have the strength to call her, I only had enough strength to look at her. Mother straightened up, paused for breath, turned her head towards me and cried: "Ninotchka!" She rushed towards me, took me in her arms. She held me in one arm, and with the other hand she touched the others: what if one of them were alive? No, they were cold.

When they had treated me, mummy and I counted nine bullet wounds on my body. I learnt to count: in one of my shoulders there were two bullets, and in the other there were also two. This made four. In one leg I had two bullets, and in the other there were also two. This made eight. And in my neck there was a wound. This made nine.

After the war, when I was in the first class mummy carried me there in her arms.

"DARLING, REMEMBER THIS ALL YOUR LIFE"

Anya Korzun.

2 years old. Now a livestock specialist.

Lives in Vitebsk.

...I remember 9th May 'forty-five. Women were running up to our kindergarten: "Children, Victory!"

They began to kiss us all, and they switched on the speaker. Everyone listened. We little ones did not understand one word, but we understood that happiness came from there, from above, from the black disc of the speaker. The adults lifted one of us in their arms. . . Someone else climbed up by himself. . . We climbed one on top of the other, only the third or fourth person reached the black disc and kissed it. Then we changed over. Everyone wanted to kiss the word "Victory". . .

In the suburbs the salute was raised in the evening. Mummy opened the window and cried: "Darling, you must remember this all your life. . ."

But I was afraid because the sky was red. When father returned from the front I was also afraid of him. He gave me a sweet and asked: "Say 'Daddy'..."

I took the sweet and hid under the table: "Uncle..."

"HOW GOOD IT IS WHEN PEOPLE LIVE TO BE OLD"

Valya Brinskaya.

12 years old. Now an engineer.

Lives in Gorky.

While daddy was alive, while mummy was alive, we never asked about the war, we never spoke about the war. Now that they are no longer around, I often think how good it is when people live to be old. When they are alive, we are still children. . .

Our daddy was a soldier. We lived on the outskirts of Belostok. The war started for us from the very first boor, or more accurately, from the first: minutes. In any sleep I heard some sort of rumble, as if there were thunder, hut it was something unusual, something continuous.

I woke up and ran to the window -- beyond the barracks, in a small town, Grayevo, where my sister and I went to school, the sky was on fire.

"Daddy, is it a thunderstorm?"

Father said: "Get away from the window, it's war."

Mother got his kit ready for him. At the alarm signal we would wake father up. I wanted to go back to sleep again. My sister and I went to bed late, we had been to the cinema. During that pre-war time "going to the cinema" was not at all that which it is today. Films were screened only before non-working days, and there were few of them: We Are from Kronstadt, Chapayev, If There Is War Tomorrow, Jolly Fellows. The viewing was organised in the Red Army mess. We children did not miss one single show, and knew the films off by heart. We even prompted the actors on the screen or tried to anticipate them.

There was no electricity in the village, nor in the military unit, the film was shown with the help of a portable dynamo set. Hearing its whirr, we left everything and ran to sit on the seats near the screen, sometimes we even took stools with us.

Films went on for a long time. It was not a continuous show. A part finished, everyone waited patiently while the projectionist wound on the next bobbin. It was good when the film was new, but if it was old, then it continually broke"-- it took time to stick it together, tixne to dry out. But if the reel caught fire -- it was worse still. It was a complete disaster if the dymano went out of order. Many a time we could not see the film to the end. We heard the command:

"First company out. Second company line up.

We knew that was it. If they were raised by the sound of alarm, it always turned out that the projectinist ran away too. When the breaks between parts became too long people lost their patience and became agitated, they whistled and shouted; my sister would climb up on to the table and announce: "We ate opening a concert." She herself really liked "recitation". She did not always know the text properly, but she climbed up onto the table without fear. She had been like this since her kindergarten days, when we lived in Leshchintsy, near Gomel. After reading poems, we sang; we were asked to do an "encore" of the song Our armour is strong and our tanks are fast. The glass in the mess shook when the soldiers took up the refrain:

Thundering with flame, sparkling with a gleam of steel, the machines will join the furious battle...

Thus, on twenty-first June forty-one we watched, probably for the tenth time, the film If There Is War Tomorrow. After the cinema we did not spilt up for a long time, and it was father who made us go home: "Are you going to sleep today? Tomorrow is a non-working day."

'...I finally woke up at the sound of an explosion nearby and the noise of shattered window glass in the kitchen. Mummy was wrapping my brother, who was half asleep, up in a blanket. My sister was already dressed, our father was not at home. He had been called out to the fortress.

"Girls," mummy urged, "be quicker. There is some provocation at the border. . ."

We ran to the wood. Mummy was gasping for breath, she had my brother in her arms, she would not hand him over to us, and all the time she repeated:

"Girls, don't fall behind. Girls, get down. . ."

For some reason I remember that the sun shone very brightly into my eyes. It was a very fine day. The birds were singing. And that penetrating hum of the aeroplanes. .

I was shaking, bet then became ashamed of this. Because I always wanted to imitate the heroes in the book by Arkadi Gaidar, Timur and His Team. And here I

was shaking. I took my little brother in my arms, started to rock him, and even began to sing I am a young girl. This song was in the film The Goal Keeper. Mummy often sang it, and it was very well suited to my mood and situation in the past. I was in love! I do not know about the science and psychology of a teenager, but I was always in love. There was a time when I liked several boys. But at this point I only liked one -- Vitya from the Grayev-sky garrison. He studied in the sixth grade. And this sixth grade was in the same room as our fifth grade. The first row of desks was the fifth grade, the second row the sixth grade. I cannot imagine how the teachers managed to conduct the lessons. But what did I care of the lessons! How could I not turn my head to look at Vitya?

I liked everything about him, that he was small (a good match for me), and that he had blue, blue eyes (like my daddy's), that he was well read (unlike Alka Poddubnyak, who gave painful "flicks" and who liked me). Vitya especially loved Jules Verne. This is what finally swayed me. How I loved Jules Verne! In the Anna library there was his complete works, and I had read them all while still in the third grade.

I do not remember how long we sat in the forest. We didn't hear any explosions. There was silence. The women sighed with relief: "Ours have seen them off." Then the hum of flying aeroplanes was heard. We jumped out on to the road. The aeroplanes were flying towards the larder. "Hurrah!". But there was something that was "not ours" about these aeroplanes, the wings were not ours, and they did not hum like ours did. They were German bombers. They flew wing to wing, slowly and heavily. It seemed that because of them there was no light coming from the sky. We started to count them, but went wrong. Later on, in the news reels of the war years I saw these aeroplanes, but the impression was not the same. They took the film from the same level as the aeroplanes. But when you looked at them from below, through a thicket of trees, and also through the eyes of a teenager -- it was a terrible sight. After jards I often dreamed about these aeroplanes. But the dream had a "sequel" -- all that iron sky slowly fell on me and crushed me, crushed me, and crushed me. I used to wake up in a cold sweat, and again the shivering would start.

Someone said that they had bombed the bridge. We became frightened: and what about daddy? Daddy would not have swum across, he could not swim.

Now I cannot say for sure, but I remember father coming running towards us: "They are going to evacuate you by a lorry." He handed mother a thick album of photographs and a warm quilt: "Wrap the children up, they'll catch cold." We had no documents, no passports, no money. We only had a saucepan of cutlets with us that mummy had prepared for the day off, and my brother's little boots. It was like this that we evacuated.

We got to the station quickly, but there we waited for a long time. Everything vibrated and rattled. The light went out. We began to set light to papers, to newspapers. Then a lantern was found. From its light huge shadows of sitting people were cast on the walls, on the ceiling. Just then my imagination ran free: Germans in the fortress, our people in captivity. I decided to try something -- will I endure pain or not. I put my fingers between boxes and pressed down. I howled with pain. Mummy was frightened.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"I'm afraid I won't be able to endure the pain at the interrogation."

"What are you talking about, you silly thing, what interrogation?"

Our people won't let the Germans through."

She stroked my head, kissed me on : he crown.

The echelon ran the whole time during the bombings. As soon as the bombing started mummy layed down on top of us: "If they kill us, then it will be all of us. Or me alone. . ." The first dead person that I saw was a small boy. He was lying and looking upwards, but I tried to wake him. I could not understand that he was not alive. I had a small tump of sugar, I gave this lump to him, just so he would get up. But he did not get up. My sister and I cried over him. . .

Bombs were dropping and my sister whispered to me: "If they stop bombing I will obey mummy. I will always obey her." And indeed, after the war Tamara was very obedient. Mummy remembered that up until the war she called her a terror. And our little Tolik. . . Before the war he was already able to walk and speak

well. But then he stopped talking, he clasped his head the whole time. I saw that my sister was turning grey. She had long, long black hair, but it was turning white. In a few days. . . In one night. . .

The train moved. Where is Tamara? She's not in the carriage. We looked, and saw Tamara running behind the carriage with a bouquet of cornflowers. There was a big field there, with wheat taller than us, and among the wheat were cornflowers. To this day I can see her before me: running silently, her black eyes opened wide. She didn't even shout "mummy". She ran and kept silent.

Mummy was beside herself. She was straining to leap out while the train was moving. I held Tolik and we both screamed. A soldier turned up at this moment. He pushed mummy away from the door, jumped out, caught samara and flung her into the carriage with all his might. In the morning we saw that she was white. We did not say anything to her for several days, we hid our mirror until she accidentally saw herself in another and started to cry:

"Mummy, am I already a grandmother?"

Mummy reassured her:

"We'll cut it off, black hair will grow again."

After this incident mummy said: "That's it. Don't get out of the carriage. If they kill us they kill us. Staying alive, that's up to fate."

When they shouted, "Aeroplanes! Everyone out of the carriages!" she squeezed us under the mattresses, and said to whomever chased her out of the carriage: "The children have run off, but I can't go."

I have to say that mummy often used the enigmatic word "fate". I tried to find out everything from her.

"What is fate? Is it God?"

"No, it isn't God. I don't believe in God. Fate is a life line," mummy answered. "Children, I have always believed in your fate."

I was terrified when bombs were falling. Then, in Siberia, I hated myself for my cowardice. I happened to read my mother's letter to my father out of the corner of my eye. We also wrote letters for the first time in our lives, but I decided to look what mummy had written. But mummy just wrote that Tamara was silent during the bombings, Valya cried and was frightened. This was enough for me. When father came home in the spring forty-four, I could not raise my eyes to him -- I was ashamed. But I'll talk about the meeting with father later. There is still a long way to go to that. For a very long time it was just a dream.

I remember a night raid. Usually there were no raids in the night, and the train was fast. But there was a raid then. Bullets drummed on the roof of the carriage. There was a roar of aeroplanes. Luminous stripes from flying bullets. One killed the woman next to me. She did not fall. She could not fall anywhere: the carriage was packed with people. The woman was wheezing and her blood poured over my face, warm and sticky. So my T-shirt and trousers were wet from blood. When mummy shouted, touching me with her hand:

"Valya, are you dead?" I could not say anything.

After this some kind of sudden change happened to me. I stopped shaking. It was all the same to me -- I didn't feel any fear or pain, and I pitied no one. It was a sort of stupefaction, an indifference. How I was afraid, and of what I was afraid later on slipped from my memory.

I remember :hat we did not go to the Urals right away. At some time or other we stopped in a village of Balanda in Saratov Region. When we came to that place in the evening, we fell asleep. In the morning at six o'clock, a shepherd cracked his whip, and all the women leapt up, grabbed their children, and ran out in to the street crying "Bombs. . ." They screamed until the chairman came and said that it was the shepherd driving his cows. And then they all came to their senses.

There was silence, but all the time we were afraid. When the elevator began to drone our Tolik began to shake. He would not let anyone go away from him for a second, only when her fell asleep was it possible to go outside without him. We went with mother to the military registration office to find out about father, and to get some money. The military commissar asked mother: "Show me documents that your husband is the commander of the Red Army."

We did not have any documents with us, there was only father's photo with him in war uniform. The commissar teak it and questioned:

"But perhaps it is not your husband. How can you prove it?"

Tolik saw that he was holding the photo and was not giving it back.

"Give back my daddy," he shouted.

The military commissar burst out laughing:

"Well, I cannot disbelieve this evidence."

They gave us some money and a pair of felt boots.

Tamara went around "motley-headed". Mummy cut her hair. Every morning we all checked it: what would the new hair be like -- black or grey? My brother reassured her, "Don't cry, Toma. Don't cry, Toma. "Contrary to our hopes, the new hair was white. The little boys teased her, she never took her headscarf off, even during lessons.

One day when we returned from school, Tolik was not at home.

"Where's Tolik?" we ran to find mummy at work.

"Tolik's in hospital."

... My sister and I carried a pale blue wreath down the street, and my brother's sailor's suit. Mother came with us, she said that Tolik had died. Near the mortuary mummy stood still, and could not go in there. I went in on my own, and recognized Tolik straight away -- he was lying naked. I did not shed a single tear, I was like a stone.

Father's letter reached us in Siberia. Mother cried all night about how to write to father that their only son had died. In the morning we all three took a telegram to the post-office. "The girls are alive. Tamara has turned grey." And father guessed that Tolik was no more. We began to write letters to father. I had a friend, her father had died, and I always added at the end, as she requested, "Daddy, greetings from me and from my friend Lera." Everyone wanted to have a father.

Soon a letter arrived from father. He wrote that he had been on a special assignment in the enemy rear, and had fallen ill. At the hospital they told him that he could only be cured by his family, he would see his relations and he would get better.

We waited for father for several weeks.

I heard father's voice in the yard and was unable to understand anything: Is it really daddy? It was unbelievable that I could see father, we were not used to seeing him, we were used to waiting for him. We skipped lessons at school that day -- everyone came to look at our father. It was the first father who had returned from the war. My sister and I) did not study for another two days, people came endlessly to our house, questioned us, wrote notes: "What's you daddy like?"

Our father, Anton Petrovich Brinsky, is special -- he has been awarded the Lenin Order and the title of Hero of the Soviet Union.

Father, like our Tolik, did not want to be alone, he took me everywhere with him. One day I heard... He was telling someone how the partisans approached a village... They were standing and looking at the fresh ground under foot... Suddenly they saw that this ground was moving. A boy from the village nearby ran to them shooting that everyone had been shot and buried there.

Father looked round and saw that I was falling. He never recalled events about the war in front of us again.

We spoke about the war very little. There was only one thing in which the war affected my sister and I for a long time afterwards -- we bought dolls. In wartime we did not have dolls, we grew up without dolls. I was studying at the institute, but my sister knew that the best present for me was a doll. Sister gave birth to a daughter, I went to visit them.

"What shall I give you?"

"A doll."

"I asked, what shall I give you, not your little girl."

"I've already answered -- give me a doll."

While our children were growing up we gave them dolls. We gave dolls to all our acquaintances.

Some time later our wonderful mother was the first to pass away, then our father. And we sensed, felt straight away, realised that we were the last of our kind... We were the very last standing by the fateful brink. Today we have to speak... We are the very last witnesses.