

Interview L.F. Obukhova

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Memories of war and post-war childhood

Lyudmila Filippovna, what are your immediate reminiscences about your childhood during wartime as a child?

I was in Moscow, as our family had never left the city, and I vaguely remember how we had to hide in the Bauman-skaya underground. The escalators were not working and my parents had to go up and down the escalator stairs to wait out the bombing. I remember the sound of the air raid alarm. I remember famine, feeling hungry. It's awful. I can't possibly forget it. In order to survive somehow, my parents had to travel to buy bread. My parents were very poor, they were illiterate, and they were already too old to be sent to the front. One day, my mum took me on a trip, at the very beginning of the war. I well remember the women peeling potatoes in some village. And then, one of those women gave me a raw potato. I remember the taste of it, and it is unforgettable. And here are my sister's memories about me: I had an apron with pockets, and I put small bread crusts into them. As you can see, those were really hard times.

I remember such an event which, I hope, will never be repeated. Bread was rationed, and I remember my mother and her relatives cutting bread into pieces and selling it in the market. On one side of my house, there was a factory that produced buttons, on the other side, there was another house, we had common courtyard, and there was a factory on the other side. Women were making bullets at that factory. We were watching how they worked: they were grinding out the bullets and putting them in boxes. After the process was over, metal shavings remained. Those shavings were so beautiful, glittering, gold-coloured and shimmering. We used to play with those shavings. Food was very simple, we never had a first course, main course, then dessert. However, cabbage soup and fried potatoes, for example, were always available, and I always invited my friends.

Lyudmila Filippovna, please tell me whom you lived with during war years?

I lived with my parents and my elder sister; she was a student, and she already worked. Nevertheless, for some

reason, she was not sent to the front. I was a very small girl back then. I do not remember many things, but that's what my sister used to tell me. When the war began, my grandmother was still alive. We kids were small, and we cried a lot because we were hungry. My grandmother, who was 78 years old, gave one breast to me, and another one — to my cousin, in order to calm us down somehow. In all fairness, however, I want to say, "Yes, life was difficult, but we had some joyous and happy moments even then".

Lyudmila Filippovna, who did you make friends with during those years? Who were your friends?

We played with our peers, boys and girls who lived in the neighbouring houses. They were from more affluent and less affluent families. I was the only one who managed to break out of this life, out of the slum I lived in.

And what games did you play during your childhood? How would you describe your "predominant activity" during your childhood in times of war?

We used to play games together, which we initiated ourselves. And it was really the most important thing for that age. We had neither toys nor books, of course. By the end of the war, at the age of seven, we learned to play cards. There were a lot of us and we enjoyed playing together. Most of the time, we played in the yard. Our parents were not too worried about us. Despite the fact that it was an awful period and the times of famine, we were really free children. We could go wherever we wanted. We usually played cricket, goal post, and chicken. I remember perfectly well how we used to go specially to the German market. There was such a market in Engels Street. The market was filled with poor people. I remember those miserable people. They were very poorly dressed and seriously ill. We went to the market to collect sweet wrappers. We did not have our own sweets, so we collected sweet wrappers, and then we played with them. Sweet wrappers were a kind of treasure for us.

I remember how much fun we had as we went skating. I did not have any skates, but my friends did, and we used to fasten just one skate using ropes and sticks to our felt boots. And we enjoyed skating. We used to go tobogganning too.

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We used to listen to the gramophone. At the end of the war, when we grew up, we loved to arrange various theatrical performances. There were a lot of us, and we performed as members of the Young Guard organization. I played the role of Oleg Koshevoi, and we thought if another war broke out we would also create an organization like the Young Guard.

In addition, we went to the cinema at the Markov club nearby. It was not expensive, and one could go and watch several sessions of the same film many times. The greatest joy for us all at the time was to take a sauna. In order to get into the sauna, we had to wait in a long queue. We used to go there with my mother, of course, but sometimes we went with other girls. That was a sort of entertainment for us.

How did children help each other to live through that difficult war situation?

I would not have used the words “live through”. That was real life. We lived. We didn’t know any other life. In that life, thank God, I had my mum and dad, and the fact that they were alive was real support and comfort. Despite the fact that it was a time of cold and hunger, and we had nothing to wear, we managed to find joyous moments in life: games, ice skating, tobogganing.

Lyudmila Filippovna, do you think the war had affected your development in any way? Did it leave you with any kind of psychological trauma?

I had my mum and dad and they loved me. It was the most important thing. By the time the war broke out, I

was under four years of age. We were sent to a kindergarten in the Moscow suburbs and I remember the hustle and bustle caused by blacking out the windows. The Adults would run around trying to shut something. We did not understand what was going on. My mother came to visit me there, and I remember us riding a horse. The weather was fine, we were surrounded by trees, and I heard the sound of water flowing somewhere... And I felt so good! This memory is filled with positive emotions, and this is really important. My memories, despite the fact that I went through such a difficult life, are positive. And it’s probably helped me in my life. Nevertheless, I have to admit that, naturally, I have felt the consequences of the war. You asked whether I had any psychological trauma? Of course, I did! And it has lived with me all my life.

My son and my daughter studied in a German school, and when their acquaintances from Germany visited our house, I had quite a strange feeling because of the fact that Germans were in my house. And when I first went to Germany, I was up all night, I was tracing that route from Moscow to Berlin. When we arrived in Berlin, it was very important for me to reach the Brandenburg Gate, it was still the GDR then. I walked along Unterden-Linden up to the end with Galya Burmenskaya, a friend of mine, although it was hard for her, but I needed to walk that way whatever it cost. The most important event in my life was when my grandchildren and I ate ice-cream with me in the Reichstag. It was absolutely incredible. For me, the feeling of my being there together with my son and my grandchildren, eating ice-cream, was the peak of emotional experience.