SOVIET WOMEN WRITING

15 SHORT STORIES

INTRODUCTION BY I. GREKOVA

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1987

The Siege of Leningrad: Notes of a Survivor

Lidia Ginzburg

During the war people avidly read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as a means of testing their reactions (not Tolstoy's, because no one doubted that he was equal to life's challenges). And the reader would say to himself, "Yes, now I know that my feelings are accurate. Now I know that this is the way it is." During the siege of Leningrad, anyone with the strength to read avidly read *War and Peace.*

No one can surpass Tolstoy's depiction of courage, of people engaged in the common cause of an all-out war. He also showed once and for all how those caught up in such a common cause actually advance it inadvertently when they seem occupied with solving their daily personal problems. The people of besieged Leningrad worked (as long as they were able) and saved themselves and their loved ones, if they could, from starving to death.

And in the final analysis, that too was a necessary part of the war effort, because in spite of the enemy, a city that the enemy wanted to destroy remained alive.

The following narrative describes a few aspects of that struggle.

I needed to describe not only life in general but also the everyday details of one person's existence during the siege. This person is called simply N. because he is composite and imaginary, an educated person confined to particular circumstances.

Perhaps this narrative will provide our descendants with an insider's view of the siege.

Lidia Ginzburg

A day in the life of Leningrad, spring 1942. The word *spring,* incidentally, sounded strange. The bread ration had been increased, and streetcars were moving tentatively through the thawed streets. The Germans had stopped the aerial bombing but were bombarding the city every day, several times a day, with artillery shells. The strongest and most vigorous Leningraders had either died by that time or survived. The weak continued to die a slow death. The word *spring* sounded strange.

N., a survivor of the siege whose poor eyesight prevents him from being drafted, wakes up. The previous summer he had woken up differently—he was always roused at 6:00 A.M. by the sound of the loudspeaker that had been installed in the hallway for common use. Later on he got into the habit of waking up ten or fifteen minutes ahead of time and lying in bed, listening. About three minutes before six, unable to restrain himself, he would go out into the hallway in his pajamas. His neighbors would already be standing there half dressed, their faces desperately tense. If the announcer identified the various radio stations in his customary unnatural voice, it would seem to mean that nothing special had happened that day. . . . N. knew that this was an aberration on his part, and that he could not escape it. Incidentally, the broadcast would begin not with the announcer's voice but with short rings and pauses that formed an audible pattern. We had never heard a sadder sound. Then came the station identifications with their fragile illusion of stability. And at last the frighteningly brief information (it seemed to get briefer all the time), which in those days consisted of instructing people where to go. And everyone stood by the loudspeakers with palpitating hearts, receiving the latest instructions. The announcer spoke in an unnaturally deliberate voice, and you could count the seconds separating one word from another, the name of one locality from the next. That's how it had been in the summer of 1941.

People were desperate for information. They would run to the loudspeaker five times a day, interrupting any activity whatsoever. They would pounce on anyone who had been even one step closer than they to the front or to the authorities or to other sources of information. And their incoherent questions would anger the person being interrogated, because the questioners actually wanted to know something entirely different from what they were asking. They wanted to know what it was like when there was a war, what it was going to be like. . . .

The first days were characterized by ignorance strangely mixed with painstaking preparations and with the idea, instilled for many years, that this event was inevitable and shatteringly total.

The Siege of Leningrad

Everyone who lived through it remembers what he was doing on the first day of the war. Sunday. A short line at the ticket window of the commuter train station. My hand picked up a rectangular cardboard ticket and some change. And at that very moment a seemingly surprised voice (or maybe it wasn't surprise?) said:

"That's Molotov speaking. He's saying something about . . ."

A crowd of people had already formed at the entrance to the station. Words were coming out of the loudspeaker and each of them, independent of its meaning, was a vessel containing the torment that lay ahead, the gigantic torment of the entire nation. The speech ended. I went back home clutching the ticket I'd bought at the station so tightly that my hand hurt. They would wait for me on the railway platform a long time that day and I wouldn't show up. Less than half an hour had elapsed, but we were already being inexorably drawn out of our prewar frame of emotions.

I went back home along seemingly prewar streets, amid objects that were still of prewar vintage but that had already changed their meaning. There was still neither suffering nor mortal anguish nor fear; on the contrary, there was excitement and a feeling, bordering on lightness, that life as we knew it had come to an end.

During the first moments after the event occurred, it seemed that you should rush off somewhere in a terrible hurry and that nothing could ever be the same again. Later it turned out that, for the time being, much remained the same. The streetcars still ran, honorariums were still paid, and stores still sold the usual things. That was amazing. The sense that your former life had ended was so unbearably strong at first that your consciousness, bypassing everything in between, focused entirely on the outcome. Under these unprecedented circumstances, consciousness did not want to flail around; it wanted to be steadfast and stern. Those who were least prepared could find no other way to achieve this than by starting at the end and contriving their own demise. They would say to each other in complete honesty, "What's the use? In all this confusion only one thing is clear—we're done for." For about two weeks they believed that this was the plainest fact of all and that they were dealing with it quite calmly. Then it became apparent that to perish is harder than it seems at first glance. And later on these same people made a great effort and tore their lives from the clutches of malnutrition bit by bit, and many of them, either consciously or unconsciously, contributed to the common cause.

some accidental position. The hand was losing its ability to grasp. It could now be used only like a paw, like an amputee's stump, or like a stick-shaped instrument. A person would grope around in the dark and scrape together the chips scattered about the stone landing, squeeze a pile of chips between his two stumps, and toss them into a basket.

Then he would still have to carry water up from the frozen basement. The steps leading to the communal laundry room were covered with a layer of ice, and people would descend this incline in a squatting position. And as they climbed back up they would look for indentations in the stairs, using both hands to set their full pails down in front of them. This was a form of mountain climbing.

One had to overcome the resistance of every object by using body and will without the intervention of any technological devices. Going downstairs with his empty pails, a person would look through the broken window and see the narrowing space of the courtyard he would have to get across when his pails were full. The sudden sensation of space, its physical reality, would cause him anguish. How strange that water, which hangs like a rock from his shoulders and arms, presses a person into the ground (and how altogether strange that this colorless, fast-flowing liquid is heavy, like stone). This same water normally has no trouble racing upward through pipes, passing one story after another. The water pipe is a human idea, a connecting link that has overcome chaos, a sacred means of organization and centralization. We normally see only the friendly face of a Janus-like world. But technology, the connecting link, is something we all have in common. The world that gives us technology wants a portion of our lives in exchange for water racing through pipes, for light that obeys the command of a little switch.

When he returned with his pails full, a person could take a rest at the bottom of the stairs. Tipping his head back, he would measure the height he had to climb. In the distant abyss was the ceiling, with some kind of disk-shaped alabaster ornament. The disk was located right in the center of the suspended rectangular zigzag of the stairwell. Staircases, it turns out, indeed hang in midair (peering at them is very frightening); they are held up by an invisible inner connection to the building itself. Tipping his head back, a person would gauge the height of the staircase as it reared on its hind legs, the distance through which his own will and his own body would have to carry water that weighed him down like stone.

During the course of the day, he would have to cross many more spaces of various sorts, the main one being the distance that separated him from dinner. For it was best to have dinner in some institutional cafeteria where

the gruel bore some resemblance to real porridge. He would race off to dinner in subfreezing temperatures through a mockingly beautiful city encrusted with frost. Others raced (or crawled—there was nothing in between) alongside him or in the opposite direction with briefcases, string shopping bags, and covered metal containers dangling from the ends of their sticklike arms. People would race through the freezing cold, trying to overcome a space that had taken on substance. The most highly educated thought of Dante, the circle of Dante's inferno ruled by cold. And it would be so cold in the cafeteria that after you came in from the street your fingers would not unbend and you would have to grip your spoon between your thumb (the only digit that worked) and a frozen stump.

Dinner itself was also a matter of conquering spaces, small spaces torturously cramped by lines of people. There would be a line outside the door, a line to the person checking coupon books, a line for a place at a table. Dinner—something momentary and ephemeral (a bowl of soup, so many grams of gruel)—loomed abnormally large and contained many obstacles, all following the classic rules of plot development. People would be asked, "What are you doing these days?" And they would reply, "We have dinner."

There came a period of multiple and consecutive air-raid warnings. On the way to dinner you had to sit them out in basements or plow through a barrage of antiaircraft fire and policemen's whistles. And people would hate the policeman who was trying to save them from a bomb attack; they perceived the bombing as an obstacle in the path to dinner. Some people would leave for dinner around eleven in the morning (this was still usually a quiet time) and sometimes not return from the cafeteria until six or seven in the evening.

Some people would bring food home for their families (if they still had families). The apartment would be pitch-dark. They would build a fire in the stove and by its smoky light pour the cafeteria soup from the jar into a pot and slice about forty grams of bread. Then the person who had come from the outside world where he had eaten dinner would move close to the door of the smoking, flaming stove and warm his hands. And nothing could tear him away from this pleasure until the day's supply of wood chips was used up. Cold would be raging in the dark room behind him. Right by the stove door, and only there, lay a small circle of warmth and light. A circle of life. All you could really warm up was the palms of your hands as you held them out in front of you. Your palms would absorb the firelight racing across them. This provided infinite pleasure, spoiled, however, by the fact that the supply of wood chips was bound to run out.

. . . Under siege conditions the closest and most crucial layer of social safeguards was the family, a cluster of blood ties and daily concerns that invariably required sacrifice. Some say that the bonds of love and kinship eased the burden of sacrifice. No, the situation was much more complicated. People found it so painful, so awful to touch each other that, living all cooped up in close proximity, they had a hard time distinguishing love from hatred—hatred of those from whom there was no escape. You could not escape, but you could offend and hurt. And still the bonds did not disintegrate. All possible relationships—formed at work and school, out of friendship and love—fell away like leaves, but families remained intact. Sometimes racked with pity, sometimes cursing, people shared their bread. They shared while cursing and died while sharing. Those who were evacuated from the city left these domestic sacrifices behind for those who stayed. There were too few sacrifices (if you survived, it meant you hadn't sacrificed enough), and along with insufficient sacrifice there was repentance.

. . . During periods of maximum exhaustion it became perfectly clear that the mind was consciously carrying the burden of the body. Involuntary actions and reflexes, their primordial correlation with psychic impulses—all these no longer existed. It turned out, for example, that a vertical position was by no means normal for the human body; the conscious will had to take it firmly in hand or else it would slip and plunge as though from a precipice. The will had to make it stand or sit or lead it from one object to another. On the very worst days it was not only hard to climb stairs, but it was also very hard to walk on a level surface. And the will now interfered in matters that never used to be any of its business. "Here I am walking," it said. "That is, my body is actually doing the walking, and I have to keep a sharp eye on it. Let's say I'm trying to move my right leg forward. My left leg moves back, presses down on the ball of my foot, and bends at the knee (and how badly it bends at the knee!). Then it breaks away from the ground, moves forward through the air, and descends, but during that time my right leg has already managed to move back. What the devil! Now I have to track it as it moves backward or else I might still fall down." This was an extremely repulsive dancing lesson.

It was even more humiliating when you suddenly lost your balance. This wasn't weakness, staggering from weakness, but something else entirely. A person wants to put his foot on the edge of a chair to tie his shoe; at that moment he loses his balance, his temples pound, and his heart stops. This means his body has slipped out of control and wants to collapse like an empty sack into an incomprehensible abyss.

A series of vile processes takes place in an alienated body—degeneration, desiccation, swelling—all quite unlike the good old ailments because they seem to be happening to dead matter. The afflicted person would not even notice some of them. "Just look how he's swelling up," others would say about him while he was still unaware of it. People would not know for a long time whether they were swelling up or gaining weight. Suddenly a person would begin to realize that his gums were swelling. He'd touch them with his tongue and probe them with his finger in horror. It would take him a long time, especially at night, to tear his thoughts away from them. He would lie there and concentrate intently on this numb and slimy feeling, which was particularly frightening because it didn't hurt: There was a layer of dead matter in his mouth.

For months on end most people—the majority of the city's inhabitants—would sleep with all their clothes on. They lost sight of their bodies entirely. Their bodies would disappear into an abyss, entombed in clothing, and would change and degenerate down there in the abyss. A person knew that his body was becoming frightful. He wanted to forget that somewhere far away—underneath the quilted jacket, the sweater, the knitted vest, the felt boots, and the leggings—he had an unclean body. But the pain and the itching let him know he had one. The most vigorous people occasionally washed themselves and changed their underwear. Then they could no longer avoid encountering their bodies. A person would stare at himself with a malicious curiosity that overcame his desire not to know. His body would be unfamiliar, spotted and rough, displaying new corners and depressions every time he saw it. His skin was a spotted sack too big for its contents.

. . . A typical [winter] day during the siege began with going out to the kitchen or the dark staircase to split the day's supply of wood chips or small pieces of firewood for the little stove. The night would just be starting to dissipate, and the walls of the apartment houses across the way, seen through the broken glass of the window in the stairwell, would still be dark rather than yellow. A person had to chop by feel, aiming the ax at an angle, carefully sinking it into the wood, and then pounding to split it. People's hands were in very bad shape. Fingers would bend and then stiffen into

It was this same anticipation of the end—the realization that the vital forces granted us would inevitably run out—that tainted every joy and the very feeling of being alive. Siege conditions made this formula graphically clear. And they reduced the eternally renewable attainment of eternally destroyed goals to a clearly visible race around a closed circle.

. . . All his life N., too, had dreamed of establishing a daily work routine and even believed that the only reason such a routine never worked was his habit of getting up late (a habit of Leningraders if they aren't bound by jobs that start early). Everything always began with the fact that the morning was already gone, that he had already irreparably ruined the splendid experience of the fullness, the entirety, of the coming day. Everything was already ruined anyway and for that reason N. found relief in letting himself go, and things would happen haphazardly after that. But now the cause-and-effect connection between impulses and actions was crudely exposed and tightened. He would wake up at 6:00 A.M. because, like everyone else in the city (who wasn't on night duty), he went to bed early, and he would get up immediately because he was hungry or because he was afraid of becoming hungry. In the morning he would do the household chores—because not to do them, to put them off, was tantamount to death. He would go to the editorial offices where he worked—extreme nearsightedness prevented him from being taken into the militia or the army. At the prescribed time he would go to the cafeteria at work because there was no way he could allow himself to skip dinner there; they might even serve him without tearing out a coupon (which sometimes happened at that cafeteria). After dinner he'd go back to the office, where there would still be a lot to do. Then he'd go home because he was still supposed to have an evening meal, and besides, there was nowhere else to go. Tanya had left, saying all the right things about how she was going away and leaving him (he had persuaded her to leave, of course), not at all because . . . but, on the contrary, because . . . His friends and colleagues had gone to the front or elsewhere, too. He would have supper and go right to bed, since he had gotten up at 6:00 A.M. and by 10:00 P.M. he was sleepy.

. . . Perhaps it will be possible to think things over in the morning while doing the household chores, carrying out the dirty water or cleaning the stove. Or while walking somewhere, to the bakery or to the cafeteria for

dinner. You can't think while standing in line, and you can't think or write after dinner. That's the time when your will falters. Toward evening it gets easier again. But there's generally no point in trying to think during the hours of sharp depression after dinner. It's better to sit in the office and work (those who don't work, who only eat and starve, have a rough time) and listen absentmindedly to the voices of your fellow workers (it's good to have voices around you!).

But then, does a person need to write? Does anyone need to write anything more? Or is being at the front the only thing that matters? Fighting the Germans . . . Everything else springs from the Devil.

Those who saw the things that writers wanted to record will probably never have any need for them to be written down, no matter what they may be. But memory is not willing to retreat; it stands its ground, just as forgetting also stands its ground. Forgetting preserves life by endlessly renewing its powers, desires, and delusions. It will give back to life its essential vanity of vanities after physical and mental torments so excessive that their return seems utterly impossible.

The elastic fabric of life was pulled and stretched to the breaking point; but once the pressure slackened, once the elastic was released, it instantly snapped back to its primordial boundaries and forms. Choices that were open to a person in crisis situations closed up again. Otherwise the people of our generation, for example, would long since have been unfit for life after the siege.

We are continuously amazed both at humanity's unchanging nature (we haven't forgotten anything and haven't learned anything) and at its ability to change. Both principles interact with each other all the while. The system we have set up constantly adapts to changing situations and constantly strives for its original state.

Tolstoy understood how crisis situations can be reversed. He knew that the sky over Austerlitz was clear for only a moment, that in the interval between the French gun barrel and the tsar's casemate, Pierre would revert to being a liberal aristocrat.

But at the time it seemed to us . . . You believed, of course, that after this was over it would never again be possible to babble on about the lyrical hero in literature,* for example. . . . Yes, that's how it seemed . . . but why? Who has ever established that malnutrition is reality while ordinary life

*One of Ginzburg's books is *O literaturnom geroe* (The Hero in Literature) (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1979). —TRANS.

is an illusion? Is it that once you've taken a peek at reality you don't want any illusions?

And so we obey the law of forgetting, one of the cornerstones of society along with the law of memory—the law of history and art, of guilt and repentance. Alexander Herzen said, "Whoever was able to survive must have had the strength to remember."

. . . At the beginning of the war the city began to acquire unusual details. First of all cross-shaped strips of paper began to appear on windows (to keep the glass from flying out). The authorities had suggested this measure to the citizenry during the very first days of the war. Amid the fluctuating anguish of those first days, when the new mode of life had not yet taken shape, this mechanical activity had a calming effect and distracted people from the emptiness of anticipation. But there was also something agonizing and strange about it, as, for example, in the sparkle of a surgery ward where there were as yet no wounded but undoubtedly would be.

Some people pasted these strips in quite intricate patterns. Somehow or other the rows of glass covered with paper strips created an ornamental design. Seen from a distance on a sunny day, it looked cheerful. Like the gingerbread trim that adorns the cottages of well-to-do peasants. But everything changed if you peered at the strips on the lower windows during bad weather. The yellowness of the damp newspaper, the paste stains, the print showing through like dirt, and the jagged edges formed a symbolism of death and destruction that simply had not yet had time to take hold, to attach itself to the cross-shaped strips.

Later on, people began to board up the windows of homes and stores. Some covered their windows because the glass had already shattered and others so that it wouldn't shatter. Sometimes they used fresh, practically white sheets of plywood for this purpose and sometimes rough, very somber-looking boards. A boarded-up window symbolizes an abandoned building. But in the fall the apartment houses were not yet empty; the population of three million, encircled by the blockade, still filled them to the brim. During those autumn days the symbol of a boarded-up window acquired a horrible reverse meaning—it became the symbol of people cooped up together, buried alive and perishing in darkness. It contained the funereal symbolism of boards, the tomblike feeling of basements, and the weight of a multistory building falling on someone.

The city was filled with a monotonous diversity of details that were

expressive and individually different but that blended into one. Dank walls displayed windows covered with fresh plywood, boarded up with rough planks, sealed with paper—blue wrapping paper, colored paper, newsprint—and blocked up with bricks. Sometimes one window combined sections of plywood, bricks, glass, and glued-on paper. Symbols varied and became muddled; onerous associations ran together without managing to take shape. Then it no longer made any difference. The windows became covered with ice. People on the street didn't look at buildings anymore. They looked down at their feet because the sidewalks were iced over and they were afraid that the slipperiness and their own weakness would make them fall. They were especially afraid of falling with containers full of soup.

. . . We saw everything in Leningrad during the siege, but we saw fear least of all. People scarcely listened to artillery shells whistling overhead. To wait deliberately until a shell exploded was much more difficult, of course; but everyone knew that you could hear a shell explode only if you weren't hit that time.

The quantitative scale of danger, or, more precisely, the probability of perishing (the degree of probability) holds key psychological significance. The distance between certain death and almost certain death is immense. The danger in Leningrad was constant and relentless, and its relentlessness was designed to wear on people's nerves, but statistically it was not especially great. The danger from bombing and shelling, verified by daily experience, was overshadowed by the enormous number of deaths from malnutrition. This slow kind of death required a completely different sort of inner preparedness. People in Leningrad naturally had a different attitude toward shells and bombs than did front-line soldiers or, later on, the inhabitants of cities that were burned to ashes by aerial attacks.

Few people in Leningrad were afraid of bombings—only those with a special physiological predisposition toward fear. Calmness became the universal and typical standard of behavior, and not to conform to it was more difficult and more frightening than the real dangers. You must be practically a hero to retain your composure in the midst of universal panic. But just try to scream and tear around when everyone else is going about his business—that takes a lot of audacity.

When beauty parlors were still operating normally, I once happened to be stranded at the hairdresser's during an air raid and I observed how ordinary young women continued to give six-month perms amid the noise of anti-

aircraft fire, exchanging remarks all the while about how terribly frightening it was.

Death can be successfully put out of mind for the simple reason that it is beyond human experience. Death is either the abstract concept of nonexistence or the emotion of fear. In the first instance it belongs to the category of the unimaginable (like eternity and infinity). In order to think concretely about the instantaneous transition from a person in a room to the chaos of brick, metal, meat, and, most importantly, nonexistence, the imagination must work harder than many people's imaginations are capable of working.

. . . From the days of old to the present the word *coward* has had a magical ring. It is all right to be afraid of the common cold, but to fear death is considered shameful. How did such a notion become instilled and ingrained in humankind when the instinct of self-preservation is so strong? Probably because society, the nation-state, could not possibly exist without it and threw all its weight into instilling it.

. . . People from the outside world who ended up in Leningrad would become distressed. "Why aren't any of you afraid?" they would ask. "What do you do to keep from being afraid?" The answer would be: "When you've lived here for a year and a half, starving and freezing . . . well, there's no way to explain it."

Habit alone was not enough. Habit merely weakened the impulses of fear and self-preservation; it helped you suppress them and replace them with others. To avoid being afraid you had to acquire other impulses that were so powerfully primordial as to suppress and consume all the rest.

The siege survivor of the fall of 1941 gave way to the survivor of the winter of 1941–42. He is the person who walks down the street during an artillery barrage. He knows that this is very dangerous and frightening. But he's going to the cafeteria for dinner. And instead of being afraid, he is irritated (they won't even let him have dinner in peace); instead of being afraid of dying, he's afraid of being stopped along the way, of being detained and driven into a shelter so that he won't endanger his life. This person is conscious of the possibility that he might perish, but his immediate sensations are of starvation, more particularly the fear of starvation, and of a hunger-induced haste rushing blindly toward its goal. You can be aware of various

things simultaneously, but you can't desire them to the same extent at the same time.

A person wakes up in the night at the sound of an air alert. His hopes for a *quiet* alert are short-lived. The antiaircraft guns are firing closer and closer. What a shrill strike! Or is that actually a bomb? By this time, he no longer thinks about getting up, finding his overshoes, and going to the freezing basement. He's thinking that he shouldn't fall asleep. He doesn't want *that* to happen while he's sleeping. He doesn't want to wake up with the world caving in on him just to witness his own death in one very brief flash that instantly goes out. It's better to be prepared. It's better to lie there listening to the explosions as they come closer and closer. It's better when there's a lead-in to disaster. He is thinking that he shouldn't fall asleep, but in a few minutes he does fall asleep, because he's tired.

What's happening is very frightening. Right now, at any moment—before he can pull up the blanket, before he exhales the air that is expanding his chest—right now reality as he knows it might give way to some other incredible reality that is wailing, ringing, falling from utmost suffering into extinction.

All this could happen, but he doesn't have the strength to be afraid. He wants to sleep. He is amazed at what he was like at the beginning of the siege. Then he would wake up at 1:00 or 2:00 A.M. at the sound of an air-raid warning. That sound was enough to make him instantly forsake his warm bed in favor of the frozen basement. It was a naive wholeness and a fresh instinct of self-preservation not yet eaten away by fatigue and by a constant struggle with suffering. As a result of this struggle, the bed warmed by his body, his body lying peacefully in bed, became a blessing, an object of desire that not even the intellectual stuff of terrible thoughts could overpower.

I know that this is frightening. I want to live. If the worst happens, I will spend my last instant of consciousness cursing myself for being so reckless. I know that I should be afraid and take precautions. But I'm not afraid and can't be afraid, because I want to sleep.

Subtle changes occurred in the reactions of the siege survivor during the summer of 1942. By then he responded only out of habitual nervous tension, which would disappear along with the irritant that had caused it. The moment he heard the all-clear signal, he felt a sort of physical satisfaction, a sense of relief like the sudden cessation of a toothache. This explains people's strange mood swings, strange because of their swiftness. One minute they would be listening for death, while the next they would be chat-

tering away, repeating office gossip; women who were still coming back to life made plans to get hold of stockings or redo a dress.

Stable feelings and imagination no longer played any part in determining nervous reactions, and conscious will did not stand in the way. The powerful impulses of the capacity to resist had managed to reshape everything. People in whom these impulses were not working found themselves in the same position as the sick.

Why was starvation the most powerful enemy of the ability to resist? (The Germans realized this.) Because starvation is continuous and can't be turned off. It persisted and constantly took its toll (though not necessarily through the desire to eat); its most excruciating and depressing effect was felt at mealtime as the food came to an end with frightening speed, bringing no satiety.

The object of the morning excursion outside is the daily trip to the store. A grocery store has now replaced the bakery.* An announcement even hangs on the door: "This store sells bread." Can it possibly be trying to attract customers? At this moment the store is empty and quiet. The clerks are wearing white jackets, sample displays sparkle on the shelves, irritating the customers, that is, those registered to shop here, while the groceries that have not yet been distributed and can't be purchased are laid out on the counter.

. . . During the winter, when bread was apt to run out (this situation was later rectified), lines made sense. But there were also other lines—the result of famine madness. On the day they announced the distribution of fat and "confections," a crowd would already be waiting at the store by 5:00 A.M. People would endure all the agonies of standing in line for hours, knowing that by 10:00 or 11:00 A.M. the store would be empty. It was psychologically impossible to sleep, to become occupied with anything else, or simply to exist without entering the process of drawing near the fat and sweets as soon as they became a possibility.

A line is a collection of people doomed to a communality of enforced idleness and intrinsic divisiveness. Idleness, if not construed as recreation or entertainment, is suffering and punishment (prison, lines, waiting in reception rooms). A line is a combination of complete idleness and a heavy expenditure of physical strength. Men are especially poor at enduring lines because they are accustomed to having people appreciate and value their time. It's not even a matter of the objective state of things but, rather, of inherited experience. Working women have inherited from their mothers and grandmothers the notion that their time is worthless. And daily life does not allow this atavism to die out. A man thinks that after work he should amuse himself or relax; when a woman gets home from work, she works at home. During the siege of Leningrad, lines joined the long-standing tradition of distribution and acquistion, the habitual irritability and the habitual patience of women.

*In Russia, bread is normally sold in separate shops. —TRANS.

In contrast, almost every man who shows up at a store tries to bully his way to the counter without waiting. Men can't explain where they get this feeling that inwardly they are right when outwardly their conduct is clearly wrong. But they know for certain that waiting in line is a woman's job. Perhaps they have some vague notion that their claims are justified because there are so few men in line. But they don't give any reasons; they either behave boorishly or utter the classic phrase: "I'm late for work." "And aren't we late for work?" (Women invariably say *we*. A man standing in line thinks of himself as an isolated individual whereas a woman regards herself as the representative of a group.) "Nowadays everybody's late for work," a woman with a briefcase replies angrily. The man furtively hides the bread he has gotten by this time. There is nothing he can say, but deep down inside he's convinced that even if a woman actually works as much or more than he does, her attitude toward time, toward the value, use, and allocation of time, is different from his. And his attitude gives him the right to receive bread without standing in line. The clerk, a woman with no stake in the outcome, understands this and usually encourages these male claims of privilege.

Extremely few people read books or even newspapers while waiting in line. This comes as a surprise only to those who have never stood in line for hours at a time, day in and day out. The basis of line psychology is a nervous, wearisome yearning for the end, for some inner means of pushing empty time forward; weariness drives out everything that might dissipate it. The psychological state of someone standing in a long line is not usually conducive to other activites. An educated person has naively brought along a book, but he prefers to follow what's happening around him. Pushing up to the counter sideways, he watches the clerk hand out rations to those standing in front of him. If her gestures slow down, he responds by pushing for-

ward with an inner shudder (if the clerk leaves the counter for a moment, the torment is akin to that of a train stopping suddenly). Or he finds satisfaction in closely watching the precise rhythm of her work or rejoices when some time is gained unexpectedly (as, for example, when someone's ration cards are given back to him because he's not assigned to this store).

A person becomes genuinely hysterical when some claimant wedges in ahead of him and then, after receiving his dole, immediately strikes up a conversation with an acquaintance for half an hour, now conversing like a free person, as though he were here on his own initiative. As long as he's in line, he, along with the whole line, is seized by a physical craving for movement, even if it's illusory. The ones behind yell at the ones ahead of them, "Get a move on! What's holding you up?" And then some philosophizer who doesn't understand the mechanics of everyone's mental state will invariably respond, "Where can they possibly go? We won't get there any faster this way."

In the winter the lines of people suffering from malnutrition were morbidly silent. In the spring the habits of those waiting in line gradually changed as the bread ration increased, the weather grew warmer, and greens appeared (people bought beet leaves and boiled them). The lines started to converse.

Humans abhor a vacuum. The immediate filling of a vacuum is one of the basic functions of speech. Meaningless conversations are no less important in our lives than meaningful ones.

The course of every conversation is, in its own way, predetermined, but the springs that propel it are hidden from the participants. Subjectively they are committing an act that is almost independent of any resistance from the objective world that hangs over every *deed*. Conversation is an unrestrained substitute for action, which must always conform to rules. It is a distant prototype of art, which is also a special kind of reality, and people themselves create and destroy the objects that populate it.

Conversation is a replica of passions and emotions; love and vanity, hope and animosity find in it an illusory realization. Conversation is the fulfillment of desires. In conversation over a cup of tea or a glass of wine, insurmountable barriers are broken down and goals are achieved that in the world of actions would cost a great amount of time, failure, and effort.

Conversation is a form of release, and it is also the objectivization of desires, values, ideals, abilities, and possibilities, whether cognitive, aesthetic, or volitional. Above all, conversations with fellow mortals are the most powerful means of self-assertion, a declaration of one's own worth.

Something stated becomes real and acquires a social existence—this is one of the fundamental laws of behavior.

While engaged in dialogue with his neighbor, a person asserts himself both directly and indirectly, by head-on and circuitous routes—from out-and-out bragging and naive talk about himself and his concerns to secret admiration for his own views on science, art, and politics, for his own wittiness and eloquence, for his power over the listener's attention. Self-assertion hides itself in something that is objectively interesting; it buries itself in information or in something aesthetically significant. Sometimes information is only a pretext, and sometimes self-assertion merely accompanies information. One way or another, self-assertion is the imperishable heart and soul of conversation.

There are situations—the existentialists call them borderline situations—when it would seem that everything must change. In reality the eternal motive forces continue their monumental labor (as Tolstoy established once and for all). What was hidden, however, becomes obvious, what was approximate becomes literal, and everything becomes condensed and revealed. This is what happened to conversation during the siege of Leningrad—in editorial offices, in cafeterias, in bomb shelters, and in lines.

A line is an involuntary combination of people who are simultaneously irritated with one another and focused on a single, common circle of interests and goals. This leads to a mixture of rivalry, hostility, and collective sentiment, a constant readiness to close ranks against a common enemy—anyone who breaks the rules. Conversations among people waiting in line unravel because of the enforced idleness and at the same time hang together because of the fixed nature of their content, for they are tied to whatever the line is all about.

Understandably, the business of obtaining food requires statements that have a communicative function ("Who is last? What kind of coupon do we need? How many? Do they have 'Southern' candy today? Is it true that 'Iran' candy comes in wrappers? Then it's not worth it!") and statements devoted to the battle against rule breakers. Formally speaking, the latter are also communicative (they aim for a practical result). But in actual fact the practical element in such statements is just as insignificant as the value of the housewife's time that is expended on the interloper who has wormed his way into line. The sense of justice she appeals to in her usual emotional manner is also insignificant. The practical bent of heckling comments masks a release of irritation, impatience, and all sorts of accumulated passions. Their

emotional essence is borne out by the unprovoked rudeness and animosity in replies to perfectly innocent questions like "Do you happen to know how many coupons they take for a worker's ration?" or "How do you cook that?" The answers might be: "What's the matter? Is this the first time you've ever gotten food here?" or "What's your problem? Haven't you ever cooked before?" (Here you begin to suspect that you're dealing with an aristocrat who considers herself above all this.) In the winter you couldn't ask anybody anything: Any question was a longed-for excuse to give a savage reply that would relieve hostility and torment. In better times, along with rude answers one would encounter wordy, substantial replies when the speaker enjoyed playing the role of advisor and guide.

But the soul of a line lies in another kind of conversation, the kind that fills the vacuum of inactivity and is thoroughly predetermined and only ostensibly free. Conversations about food (about life and death) come in the plain brown wrapper of housewives' professional interests.

For intellectuals, for young people, even for men in general this is a fresh topic of conversation from which the ban has just been lifted, and they invent new clumsy and expressive turns of phrase. They are powerless to resist this topic but are ashamed of it as a sign of degradation. For housewives this is simply the continuation of their age-old conversations. For housewives of the immediate prewar period there is nothing new about standing in lines, carrying ration cards, or asking, "What are they handing out?" And so they didn't have to update their terminology in any radical way.

Still, some things did change. First, conversations about food crowded out all other housewifely topics of discussion (school, shopping, domestic help). Second, conversations that were once despised by men and working women (especially young ones), that housewives were forbidden to thrust upon such know-it-alls—these conversations triumphed. They acquired a universal social significance and meaning, the price of which was the terrible experience of winter. A discussion of the best way to cook millet—without salt, because then it *stretches* farther—became a conversation about life and death (for people learned how to increase their millet). Conversations narrowed in scope (to siege cuisine), but they were enriched by the peripeteia of difficulties to be overcome and problems to be solved. And being the most important discussions in the given life-and-death situation, they encompassed all imaginable interests and passions.

When people in line carry on conversations about food, their discussions contain everything: emotional release in reproaches and complaints, cognitive generalization in debates about the best way to obtain, prepare, and

divide up food, the recounting of "interesting stories," and all means of self-assertion.

. . . "Oh, dear, I've started eating my bread. Now I'm afraid there won't be any left when I get home."

"You should never start eating here."

A third woman (standing in line for sweets):

"The calmest time is when you've finished it. As long as it's there, it draws you like a magnet. Like a magnet."

"You can't calm down until you've eaten it all. And you can't forget about it."

"It draws you like a magnet."

"Why, I used to clean out the candy bins. I'd buy it a hundred grams at a time."

"And half a kilo of bread and butter is gone in a flash. It's just awful to have to carry it home."

The satisfaction of talking about yourself is duplicated by the satisfaction obtained from intellectual processes. Self-observation turns into generalization based on experience. "You should never start eating it here" is actually a maxim; "It draws you like a magnet" is an artistic image.

"Well, then, my kid and I will eat this right up."

"In one day?"

"What do you mean in one day? In an instant. Before the war we used to go through two hundred grams of butter a day."

"Yes, that was perfect for three people."

"You can't imagine what my kids used to be like. Suddenly they wouldn't want to eat buckwheat porridge. They wanted me to make them oatmeal. Both oatmeal soup and oatmeal porridge. I'd say, 'Pick one or the other, either soup or porridge. . . .' 'No, make both of them.' 'All right, I'll make porridge—'"

"And my boy—he's only seven, but these days kids know everything there is to know about food. Whenever they announce the children's allocation on the radio, he's all ears. 'Children under twelve can get sugar. . . .' He says, 'Mama, that's my sugar. I'm not going to give you any.' And I say to him, 'Then I won't give you any candy.'"

A story about yourself, about your family, specifically about how your family ate in the past, has objective, universal appeal. This is confirmed when a listener responds with a question ("In one day?"). The story about how people used to eat contains a subtext of self-assertion: See how high

my family and I could and still can rise above the forces that rule us. The reaction this elicits shows understanding; it indicates that the listener is also above it all and belongs to the same circle, that very circle of people in which a family of three used to go through two hundred grams of butter a day.

The story about buckwheat porridge and oatmeal has an underlying theme: The family lived so well that the children demanded not something better but something a little worse just to be different (out of satiety, the way the gentry used to eat rye bread).

After that would come the eternal female topic of children, now based on new and frightening material. The story of the boy who already knows everything there is to know "about food" has a certain amount of artistic, thematic appeal; but the main point, to be sure, is that this boy is mature for his tender age, that he'll manage to survive, and that he already acts like an adult while still retaining a sweet, childish naivete. But this child who is so well adjusted to life immmediately suffers defeat. For a listener suddenly begins talking about another boy who also behaved like an adult.

"No, my boy, who's dead now, always shared everything. It was amazing. His father and I couldn't take it. But he would hide candy in his pocket. He'd pat his pocket and say, 'That's enough for now.' And he was so unselfish. He would give away his own food. He'd say, 'Mama, you're still hungry. Take some of my bread.'"

. . . Food mania and maniacal conversations about food would intensify greatly whenever there was a breather. People were very quiet during the days of severe starvation. All resources were completely cut off, leaving no room for psychological enrichment with facts, for the use of facts by the eternal human will to affirm one's system of values.

A great amount of suffering leads to a different order of sensations. Thus the critically wounded experience no pain at first and people who are freezing to death fall into a pleasant state at the end. Real starvation, it is well known, does not resemble the desire to eat. It has various guises. It could turn into anguish, indifference, mad haste, and cruelty. It was more like a chronic disease. And, as with any disease, the psyche played a very important role. Those who were doomed were not the darkest, most emaciated and swollen people but the ones whose faces had an alien expression, a wildly concentrated look, who would begin to tremble before a bowl of soup.

A. would come to the cafeteria with swollen, dark red lips, and that wasn't the worst of it. One time the salt disappeared from the tables and

the gruel they handed out was undersalted. A. then fell into despair. He rushed from table to table mumbling, "I can't eat unsalted gruel. . . . I can't eat it. . . . Oh, my God, and I didn't bring any along. . . ."

That was definitely a bad sign.

B. came to the cafeteria one day wearing an overcoat with a big patch of cloth torn out of the front. He gave no explanation for this. He just sat at a little table in this overcoat and talked with his neighbors. But then one of the women suddenly dropped a teaspoonful of vegetable oil from her gruel into someone's empty, dirty bowl. "You're extremely wasteful," said B. in a genteel tone of voice and, scooping it out with his own spoon, he ate the oil. He died in the hospital about two weeks later.

During the Russian Civil War* people starved in a different manner, more spontaneously and chaotically (especially in outlying areas). They ate unbelievable things like peelings and rats, varying the ingredients and combining them with something else at the same time. Then suddenly they would get a sack of potatoes. The famine during the siege was not badly organized. People knew that an invisible person would give them a minimum ration on which some would live while others would die—that was up to the body.

Filled with inhibitions, people would monotonously go to the bakery and the cafeteria knowing what to expect. Each of them was given an unvarying daily ration of one hundred twenty-five grams of bread, a bowl of soup, and a helping of gruel that fit on a saucer. Moreover, there was nothing whatsoever to beg, borrow, steal, or buy. Your friend or brother would sit next to you clutching his one hundred twenty-five grams of bread. No matter what torments you suffered, you couldn't ask your best friend for his ration, and if he offered it to you himself, you couldn't take it (if you were in your right mind).

Knut Hamsun† described a completely different kind of starvation, the starvation of poverty, which is surrounded by temptations and hope. A person might suddenly find work or be given a loan, he might suddenly steal some food or receive a handout or come up with a decent excuse for dining with friends. . . . The hunger-induced desires of the poor are clouded by miscalculations, envy, and humiliation, but they are not crushed by the invariability of a daily ration.

Private markets opened in the spring and little by little speculators

*1918–21. —TRANS.

†Knut Hamsun (1859–1952): Norwegian novelist, author of *Hunger*. —TRANS.

crawled out of the woodwork. Beet leaves or even a cup of millet or peas became available—they were unbelievably expensive and hard to find, but available. The rebirth of the money factor caused an emotional upheaval. New possibilities emerged, and with these possibilities passions and vested interests came into play. From precisely that point on, food became the focus of everyone's mental energies (if people had talked at all during the winter, they didn't talk about how so-and-so was eating but about how so-and-so was dying). Food entered the realm of salable goods and quickly acquired various psychological components.

. . . Toward the end of winter the rules of ration-governed existence loosened up. Certain supplemental allocations and purchases like soy milk leaked through, and markets selling beet leaves and nettles appeared later on. The people who withstood winter best were the ones whose sense of self-preservation helped them force the destructive subject of food out of their consciousness. With the appearance of new possibilities, protective taboos fell away, and one's consciousness became open to the beckoning, instinctive desire for food.

Food—in its diverse social forms—has been an object of sublimation from time immemorial. We can recall ceremonial meals timed to coincide with various holidays and events, the ritual of receptions and banquets, the importance of family dinners in the daily lives of the gentry and the middle class, and the undying significance of suppers just for two.

During the siege people did not invite each other over for meals. Food ceased to be a means of social intercourse.

"I'm sorry I've come at such a bad time," X. once said to Y. when he dropped in on business just as Y. was frying oatcakes on his little stove. "I'm disturbing you. Food is such an intimate matter now."

At this, a strange, inhuman expression appeared on X.'s face. Yes, food had become an intimate and cruel matter.

But human affairs never lack psychology. When food lost its psychological properties, it very quickly acquired different ones. Having once been part of the daily routine, it was now transformed into the routine itself; having previously accompanied events, it became an event in itself as well as a realm of social realization and of taste sensations laid bare.

People accustomed to steak and hors d'oeuvres now discovered the taste of gruel, vegetable oil, and oatcakes, not to mention bread. Their fantasies took various directions depending on their cast of mind. Some lapsed into

the surrealistic experience of eating roast goose or puff pastry and sardines. Others dreamed of eating huge quantities of whatever they were currently eating. They wanted an endless protraction of those same taste sensations.

A restaurant serving hazel grouse was an abstraction, while this was reality. But such dreams wanted to make this reality enormous. Dreaming of vast quantities of food was not only a hyperbole of satiety but also a struggle against the depression and fear stemming from the momentary, inexorably transient existence of a single helping, even if it were double or triple in size.

People discovered a multitude of new taste sensations, but more revelations were connected with bread than with anything else. This was practically virgin territory because before the war many people in intellectual circles weren't even quite sure how much a kilo of black bread cost.

Some people were seized by a pure passion for bread. They wanted nothing but bread, our daily bread. . . . Others would develop elaborate dreams about bread. For example, they would want to sit before a dark loaf, cut off one thick slice after another, and dip them all into vegetable oil. A. F. said that he wanted only one thing—to drink sweetened tea and eat white bread smeared with butter forever. Still others would vary the bread theme. They would think about hot cereal delightfully stopping up their mouths, about oatmeal with its caressing sliminess, about the heaviness of noodles.

In the spring, people would even toast their bread or let it get slightly dry. Thickly sliced crusts that had dried a little on the outside while retaining their inner freshness were especially good with tea. If you didn't grab the bread out of the frying pan with your hands but ate it with a knife and fork, then it became an actual dish.

Z. told me about an incident that occurred during the siege when he happened to be at a certain house on business. While pouring his tea, the hostess said:

"Now don't be shy about helping yourself to some bread. We have more than enough."

Z. looked at the breadbasket and saw the impossible: the kind of ordinary bread they used to have before the blockade. Uncherished and unshared. Irregular slices of black and white bread lay jumbled among little pieces and crumbs. The white bread, moreover, had been lying there long enough to get hard.

Z. ate without hesitation and without experiencing any desire for that bread; his disappointment depressed him. That unlimited bread would have been appropriate in a dream, but in reality it evidently required a different, prewar apperception.

By springtime the malnourished had gotten back on their feet to such an extent that they felt like asserting themselves and feeling proud again. Some people had a knack for obtaining, preparing, and dividing up food—and they took pride in this as a sign of strength. Others had no such skills whatsoever, for which they, too, felt proud, considering it a sign of superior mental organization. When the markets were revived, some people began to take pride in buying nettles or beet leaves at a particularly low price; others were proud of spending lots of money.

An academic ration,* a dinner without having to surrender a coupon, a package from the outside world became tantamount to a promotion in rank or a medal or an honorable mention in the newspaper. Moreover, an exceptionally clear and crude hierarchy evolved. The Leningrad chapter of the Writers Union would now occasionally receive packages from Moscow. The packages were amazing—chocolate, butter, crackers, canned food, and concentrates. The union's governing body set the distribution quotas. According to their list—kept by the storeroom manager, who weighed out the butter—some of the writers who belonged to the Party cell got 1.8 kilos of butter and others got one kilo (those who were not active in the party generally got nothing whatsoever). Those who received 1.8 kilos were ashamed to brag about it, but they couldn't restrain themselves and bragged anyway. For those who got one kilo, the butter was tainted. Many would have been happier with half a kilo if only this had been proof of their literary and civic merits.

A siege survivor would go back home with his booty. He would carry it in his briefcase, in a covered container, in a string bag—the bread he'd gotten with a first-class ration card, the free soup, two or three turnips that he'd bought, for he could pay whatever price the speculators set. A scholar carried half a loaf of bread that he'd been given for lecturing at a bread factory; an actor cautiously carried a little suitcase in which, after a performance, someone had put a few lumps of sugar that were just as intoxicating as playing to a full house. People carried their social callings with them.

In this scheme of things there was a vital difference between those who lived alone—and there were more and more of them because in every family some members died and others were evacuated to the outside world—and

*Food allocations were based on occupation. Soldiers and defense workers received the most, unemployed dependents the least. People in academic and creative professions fell somewhere in between. —TRANS.

those who had dependents, with special ration cards that didn't even go as far as a daily bowl of soup.

Having dependents was a mixed blessing for the breadwinner of a family during the siege. It was a crucial, often fatal, factor because the breadwinner shared his food and, while sharing, lived in a constant fog of rudeness, repentance, cruelty, and pity. At the same time, the members of his household were the last ethical proof, a tangible symbol, of his place in society. One person carries away his booty so that he can swallow it in the silence of his lonely dwelling, while another goes home and spreads his booty out on the table, and someone will respond to it with rapture.

Among the stories of the siege that I collected is the story of O., one of those who received 1.8 kilos of butter now and then, along with crackers and concentrates.

His sister had been stranded in Leningrad (she was many years older than he). For a variety of reasons everyone in her immediate family had perished, and he was obliged to take her in—when her state of malnutrition had become irreversible.

O. is good at streamlining and systematizing. But under siege conditions, with which he was trying to cope by exerting his will in a rational way, his sister was the beginning of a stubborn, countervailing disorder. He became irritated by her ever-increasing uselessness and by the sacrifices he had made and continued to make for her. And he spoke to her about this with a rudeness that surprised even him. But at the same time, on another level of consciousness, it was obvious that without his sister the silence would have been incredible and complete. And it would have been impossible for him to enjoy those dismal forms of relaxation and amusement that he had left behind. The processes of preparing and consuming food were no longer the secret machinations of a maniac; the presence of a second person gave them a semblance of humanness. He looked at the woman stumbling around the stove, with her small, black, tenacious hands so unlike the way they used to be—and he spoke rudely only because rudeness had become a habit by then:

"We're going to eat now. Set out the plates. Wipe off the table so we can sit down to supper like human beings. Clear away this garbage. . . ."

His malnourished sister was an objectifying medium, an audience that appreciated his success in obtaining crackers and concentrates because of his fairly high position in the hierarchy.

Such was O.'s story of the siege, a tale of pity and cruelty.

. . . A person who has eaten his fill cannot comprehend someone who is starving, even if that someone is himself. As he puts on weight, a person gradually loses comprehension of himself, of the way he used to be during the months of severe starvation. The people who survived the siege steadily forgot sensations, but they remembered facts. The facts slowly crawled out of their murky memories into the light of rules of behavior that were already becoming the norm.

"She wanted candy so badly. Why did I eat that piece of candy? I could have chosen not to eat it. And everything would have been just a little better. . . ."

This is a siege survivor thinking about his wife or mother whose death has made the eaten candy irreversible. As the fog of malnutrition disperses, the person who was alienated from himself comes face-to-face with the objects of his shame and repentance. For those who lived through the siege, repentance was just as inevitable as the physical changes caused by malnutrition. Moreover, this variety of repentance—*uncomprehending* repentance—is painful. A person remembers a fact and can't reconstruct the experience, the particular experience involving a piece of bread or candy that incited him to cruel, dishonorable, and degrading acts.

"And that scream because of those millet patties . . . that burned up . . . that scream and then despair, to the point of tears . . ."

Perhaps he will be sitting in a restaurant after dinner one day and become morose from the overabundance of food, which brings on despondency and takes away all desire to work. Perhaps he will be waiting for the check and accidentally fix his gaze on the breadbasket filled with slices of black and white bread. And that practically untouched bread will suddenly convulse his drowsy consciousness with a shudder of recollections.

Pity is the most destructive passion, and, unlike love and hostility, it does not abate.

. . . The circle is the siege's symbol of a consciousness locked within itself. How does one break out of it? People run around the circle and cannot reach reality. They think they are fighting the war, but that's not true—the war is being fought by those at the front. They think that instead of fighting the war, they are merely subsisting, but that's not true either, because they are doing what must be done in a city at war so that the city will not die.

This is what happens to people if their actions are merely responses to

events rather than deeds that they initiate. How can an active deed break this circle? A deed is always an acknowledgment of the common bonds (without which one is simply inarticulate) that are obligatory for each person in spite of himself, although egocentric people keep talking and will continue to keep talking in the future (on a worldwide scale) about self-delusion and lack of contact and about absurdity.

Those who write, whether they like it or not, enter into conversation with the world outside themselves. This is because writers die but their writings, without consulting them, remain. Perhaps it would be simpler for the self-contained consciousness to do without any posthumous social existence, with all its compulsory blessings. Perhaps it would secretly prefer to be annihilated completely, along with all its contents. But writers die, and their writings remain.

To write about the circle is to break out of the circle. This is, after all, an active deed, something found in the abyss of lost time.

1942–1962–1983

Translated from the Russian by Gerald Mikkelson and Margaret Winchell

Anna Akhmatova, who died in 1966, was among this century's greatest Russian poets. Andrei Sinyavsky writes of her: 'From the barest whisper to fiery vehemence, from downcast eyes to lightning and thunderbolts – such is the range of Akhmatova's inspiration and voice.' Richard McKane's moving English translations do justice to a poet whose famous cycle, 'Requiem', was recognized as a lasting memorial to the sufferings of millions of Russians under Stalin.

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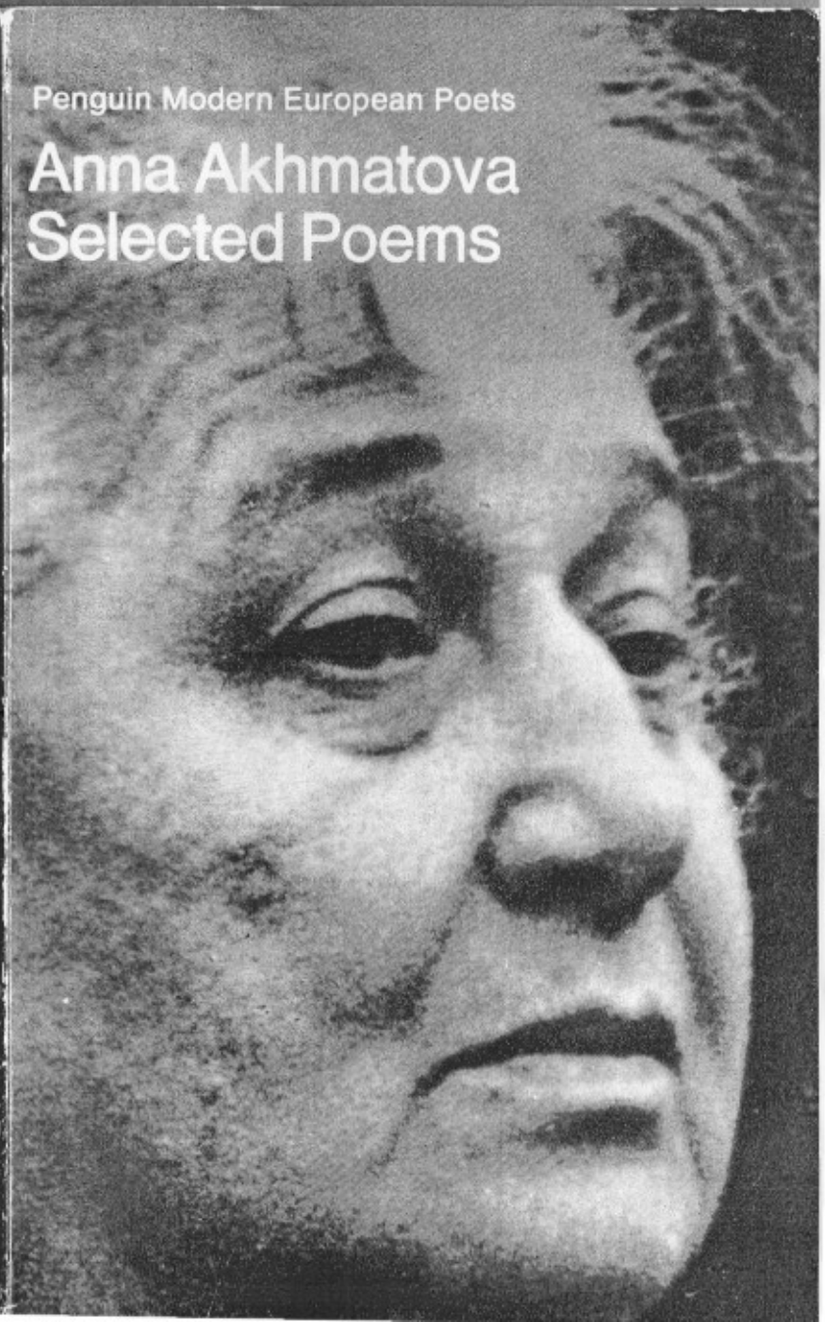

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