

THE ORDEAL OF LENINGRAD

BY VERA INBER

RADIOED FROM MOSCOW



"We see German prisoners convoyed through the streets. Under the cross fire of our eyes, these Germans tremble with fear. If looks could kill . . . !"

For thirty long, terror-filled months, Leningrad lay under the muzzles of the Nazi guns. What those months were like, and what freedom from siege is like is told here by a distinguished Soviet poet, who, according to the Russians, has "immortalized Leningrad"

ONLY a short while ago the Germans were so near Leningrad that two streetcars of Route 23, which were heading for a suburban resort called Strelna, found themselves stranded among the Germans, and there they stood throughout the thirty months of the siege of Leningrad. Naturally, all that is left of these two streetcars are gaunt skeletons. But bullet-riddled, half burned and wrecked as they are, they still stand like old war horses on the rails, and I saw them the other day, after Strelna was liberated. I am sure they will find a worthy place in a museum of Russia's war relics.

It is a pity that the Leningrad typewriter factory can't be placed in a museum, too. The Nazis had turned this into one of their gun emplacements from which they shelled the city. On retreating, they blew up the factory. Our own guns had opened fire on this factory.

One gun commander said, "I had to open fire on it. It couldn't be helped. But don't think it was easy for me. You see, I happen to be among those who built this factory."

On January 15th, at dawn of a late winter day, Leningraders were awakened by the incessant boom of gunfire which merged into an unending din. This was so unusual, so unlike the customary enemy barrages, or even the enemy bombings, that most citizens failed to guess what it all meant. But they soon understood. One 7-year-old boy listened.

His mother said, "Oh, please! No panic!"

The boy said, "It is our soldiers firing all their guns at once."

He was right. Our artillery had opened a solid barrage of fire which lasted over

The Ordeal of Leningrad



"Drive slowly! Unexploded bomb! Danger!" says the notice behind the playing children of Leningrad

two hours. The whole horizon was belted with the flashes of guns. Later, the German prisoners testified that they could never have even imagined such an intensity of fire. Rifles of all classes and calibers, from the smallest to the gigantic, joined this fearsome artillery symphony, each one using its fullest powers. Naval rifles were used, too.

With hearts stormily beating, we listened to this thunder of guns—for it heralded the hour of our complete liberation. Natalia Maiorova, conductor of Streetcar No. 1987, Route 12, said on that January day: "As we approached the chief of staff building, we suddenly heard an announcer's voice from the street loud-speakers. 'Shhh!' I warned my passengers. 'Stalin's order is being read.' And, to tell the truth, I kept from ringing the start-off bell. Some of the passengers jumped off the streetcar, others hung on the outside platform, all with ears strained. Then we heard the news: Krasnoye Selo has been retaken! And Ropsha, too! The whole streetcar burst into cheers, and my passengers said: 'We will never forget this streetcar ride.'"

The tranquil small town of Ropsha—known before the war for its paper mill and its fish hatcheries for breeding silver carp—was the vital strong point of the German defense. Strategic roads branched out from here. Among many other things, our units which burst into Ropsha found a plate of macaroni in a room of one of the houses—and the macaroni was still warm. Whoever was eating this macaroni won't ever be eating it again.

In another Leningrad suburb, Gatchina, on a ruined palace wall, the Germans had scrawled in indelible crayon: "We have been here, but must clear out now, otherwise Ivan will come, and then we will stand little chance of getting away with a whole skin." And beneath this, the signature—"Eric Wurf, Stettin Uhlandstrasse, telefon dee 28-10-43."

"Ivan," which means the Russian soldier, actually did show up at Gatchina, and very few Germans succeeded in escaping alive.

Facing the lovely entrance to Gatchina Park, which has been half demolished by the Nazis, stands a granite obelisk. The Germans removed the globe which capped it and replaced it with a huge Swastika. But when we arrived at Gatchina, we found the Swastika already destroyed and blackening snow at the front of the obelisk. And preparations were under way for re-erecting the granite globe on its former place. The Swastika couldn't keep its grip on Leningrad, either by air or on land or on the sea.

The Ordeal of Leningrad

Long-range and self-propelled guns recently captured from the Germans were brought to Dvortsovy Square in Leningrad. For us, these guns weren't merely trophies. They were the source of the destruction of our lovely city. They were the killers of our children. For thirty months, the German and Finnish guns shelled us. By sounds, we learned to guess exactly what particular district was being bombarded, what class guns were firing and what shells were being used—shrapnel or high explosives.

Fifty times did the Germans change their tactics of shelling Leningrad during the siege. There were brief lulls between the hurricanes of cannon fire—this, too, is a variation of their tactics. Sometimes it was methodical blows at ten-, seven- or five-minute intervals.

Old Anna Smirnova (a retired pensioner who knitted camouflage nets) and her ten-year-old granddaughter, Marusia, set out one morning to visit Marusiá's mother, who was in a hospital with a shell-splinter wound. Hardly had the grandmother and granddaughter left home when a shell smashed their room and reduced it to complete wreckage. Their neighbors were overjoyed at the fact that Anna and Marusia were away from home and that the room was empty at the time. But it was soon learned that at that very same moment, the old lady and the little girl were both killed outright by a direct hit on the street-car in which they traveled.

But, as comedy often goes hand in hand with tragedy in real life, I would like to tell how I had my tooth extracted during one of the enemy barrages. I was given a narcotic injection. I was seated in an armchair facing a huge window and told to wait until the drug took effect. Suddenly a terrific explosion shook the whole building and made the instruments dance.

My dentist—a woman—told me: "We must go into the passage, where there are no windows. That's an ARP rule here." We stayed a while in the corridor until the gunfire subsided. Scarcely had we returned—as soon as I opened my mouth—the whole thing started over again. Out into the corridor again, then back into the chair.

When I sat down in the chair for the third time, a sudden explosion blast shattered the windowpane, and glass splinters were strewn all over the floor.

"Quick, out into the passage!" cried the dentist.

"No," I yelled. "Draw that confounded tooth here and now, otherwise the injection will lose its effect."

To the accompaniment of explosions, splintering glass and clouds of brick dust, my tooth came out.

Serafima Osipova, collaborator of the Institute of Applied Chemistry, was wounded in the leg by shrapnel and was brought to a hospital where my husband is the chief doctor. I happened to be in the receiving ward when the volunteer nurse aides carried her in on a stretcher. Every nerve in her body quivered and she was terribly pale. To her body, Serafima pressed a blood-soaked shoe that had been removed from her injured foot. When she was carried into the X-ray room, she begged, "Please don't mislay my shoe! I will clean it. This is my best pair. I will put them on on the day of victory."

The Ordeal of Leningrad

The Salute to Victory

And indeed, I met Serafima on Kirov Bridge, so familiar to all Leningraders, on that memorable evening when Leningrad fired a salute of 24 volleys from 324 guns, shaking the very air. Guns on warships anchored on the Neva joined with guns placed especially along the embankment, firing this salute to victory. We had naturally grown somewhat accustomed to gunfire, but this was rather an unusual noise at that—324 guns making 24 bangs in concert.

In a blacked-out city, when the tiniest chink of light in the windows was considered a grave crime, a veritable sea of light suddenly flashed up. Our dark sky, so accustomed to sinister flames, conflagrations and spurts of enemy gun flashes, was suddenly lighted up with the red, green and yellow splashes of rockets.

These were combat rockets by nature, usually designated to signal the beginning of an attack, to mark landing fields for airplanes, to signal artillerymen, to warn tanks, to direct infantry. But those were solitary rockets. And now, thousands of attack signals, hundreds of skirmish and battle signals went rocketing into the sky, irradiating our streets with the illumination of victory.

Powerful naval searchlights sent their beams flashing upward, sweeping the skies. One beam came to rest on the spire of Petropavlov Fortress, illuminating the figure of the angel which crowns its summit. On streetcars, automobiles and bicycles, the Leningraders flocked to Marsovo Field and the city bridges, especially Kirov Bridge, which offered a fine view of the gunfire salute. Intermingled with this flow of cars and trucks, here and there was a tank or tankette—a reminder of the fact that the front wasn't so very far away. I was surrounded by the cries of jubilation of the huge crowd all around me.

"Thank you, General Govorov, for having driven off the Germans!" one little girl cried out.

Resting my elbows on the parapet of the bridge, I watched the searchlight beams. Now lighting up one or another building, or this or that part of the city, they awakened to me stirring recollections. We had been under siege for 30 months. Do you know how long thirty months can be? It is a longer time than you have been at war. It is the time it takes for a newly born infant to grow, to walk and talk and recite jinglets and learn to love a doll. It is too long for a child now attending school to remember back to when there were lights on at night, and laughter and freedom to play where he pleases.

Describing a sweeping arc in the skies, the searchlight gave faint radiance to that district of the city which but recently was the most forward line of our defense. The Germans there had approached almost to the very walls of a large war factory which we had turned into a fortress. Tanks, still hot from battle, used to be brought here for repairs. And ten minutes after the repairs were finished, they would be back in action.

Over there in that part of the city is situated the Botanical Gardens. In its famous hothouse had grown the tallest palm tree in Europe. In the winter of 1941, a Nazi bomb shattered all the glass in this hothouse, and this wonderful palm tree,

The Ordeal of Leningrad

this tender child of the South, froze dead overnight. And it had grown for 270 years.

I will never forget the winter of 1941-42, when the bread ration was 4.4 ounces daily—and nothing else except bread was issued. In those days, we would bury our dead in long ditches—common graves. To bury your dead in separate graves, you needed fourteen ounces of bread for the gravedigger and your own shovel. Otherwise, you would have to wait your turn for days and days. Children's sleighs served as hearses to the cemetery.

As long as I live I will never forget one particularly dreadful scene I witnessed: Two women, themselves not more than half alive, yoked to a rope harness and wearily dragging a small sleigh on which sat a third woman holding her dead infant in her arms. And the thermometer that day recorded 42 degrees of frost centigrade.

A Tiny Funeral Cortege

Another time my attention was drawn to an emaciated-looking man hauling a small mahogany bedside table on a sleigh.

"Where are you taking it?" I couldn't refrain from asking him.

He looked at me with dull and immobile eyes and replied, "I am taking my baby to the cemetery. And this is serving as a coffin—better than no coffin at all."

The streetcars weren't running. We drew water from holes dug into the frozen river. We had to lie flat on the ice in order to haul out an ice-coated bucket of water which seemed heavier than solid rock. Instead of tiled heating stoves, we used tiny toy tin stoves. Mail service was practically nonexistent. Only two roads remained open for letters—through the air and along icy Lake Ladoga by way of the so-called "Road of Life." But both these routes were needed above all for delivering provisions and ammunition.

We had practically no news of our children who had been evacuated. What joy it was when a friend of mine received a letter from her little daughter, evacuated beyond the Volga! In this letter, her daughter wrote the following postscript: "Dearest Mummy, I am sending you herewith a lovely butterfly which lived on the steppes. There are no such butterflies in Leningrad." And then followed a postscript: "Please, Military Censor, don't crush this butterfly."

Our communication with the "mainland" (as we referred to our country) was just as fragile as this butterfly. And yet it was also stronger than the toughest steel. While the city suffered unspeakable hardships (of which I have described here only an infinitesimal fraction), while the city was defending itself, carrying on the work and battle inside the blockade "ring," our army units were gnawing away at this ring, hastening the break-through to those outside it.

The blockade was broken January 18, 1944, and here is what Lieutenant Zelenkov says: "The Germans had sluiced the tall Neva bank with water, turning it into a solid barrier of ice—huge sheer walls. Not content with this, they had frozen into it several rows of barbed wire and had booby-trapped all approaches. We built high scaling ladders, armed ourselves with

The Ordeal of Leningrad

hooks, rope, shovels and axes. We erected a similar ice barrier on which we trained day and night. We stormed this. At the zero hour, clearing our path through the barbed wire by means of grenades, we stormed the real enemy ice barrier and negotiated it."

Day by day the front is receding from us. Leningrad is free. But we are still fighting on Soviet territory. And we shall not pause until we are entirely rid of the Hitlerites.

On the house walls still hang those all too familiar warnings, white lettering on a blue background: "Notice! During artillery fire this side of the street is the most dangerous!" And in the newspapers we already read the official notification: "In view of the fact that the danger of enemy artillery bombardment of the city is now eliminated, all restrictions regarding pedestrian, streetcar and motor-vehicle traffic in the city are hereby canceled."

Building-material enterprises are already busy turning out bricks, cement, white-wash, window frames, doors, nails, chimney pipes, roof tiles, everything needed for bomb- and shell-smashed buildings. Repairs are already in full swing on the opera and ballet theater, which was badly damaged by bombs and shells.

The opera and ballet company, evacuated by government orders at the beginning of the blockade, is returning home. Along the October railway, which the Red army liberated, the "Red Arrow" Express leaves Leningrad for Moscow again.

A Rebirth in Safety

We can now be out on the streets till twelve midnight. We can now send our children to school again without fearing for their lives. We all have a sort of feeling as though the days have grown much, much longer, suddenly so. We don't have to stay indoors now because of enemy bombardments. We don't have to dart for shelter into strange entrance halls as Nazi shells scream down on us. We don't have to spend time now guessing what kind of bombardment there will be today—hurricane or methodic. Every hour, every minute of the day is now our own, and they are all equally safe.

On January 27th, in a maternity home, a midwife congratulated a new mother with the words: "Your son has been born in liberated Leningrad. There, nurse him in peace."

Our city, our time, our lives, all belong to us again. We seem to have been reborn. We see German prisoners conveyed through the streets of our city. Scowling like wolves, with furtive gaze, they plod under convoy of our submachine gunners. And when they find themselves under the cross fire of our eyes, these Germans tremble with fear. And if looks could kill, every German would be dead a hundred times. Those Nazis were certain they would enter Leningrad. Well, they have—as our prisoners.