

Petrov's stories

Blockade and war

This is one of the most shameful stories in my life.

On the birthday of my father – this was in January 1942 when Leningrad was blockaded – my father was already very ill. At first it was described as a cold.

As dependents of civil servants each of us received 125 g of bread daily. Our family consisted of Father, Mother, myself and our household help who lived with us. Grandmother lived on her own.

Father was already in bed, and he didn't get up. And although he was considered sick, later I understood that it was all because of hunger. Mother and our household help went to get the bread and then divided that bread. They divided it in a way that the biggest portion was for Father, the next in quantity was for me, and the remainder was divided about equally between Mother and our household help. I did sometimes go to get the bread, but not often.

In the cupboard, I knew there was the bread. And if you lifted the bread, then there would be a crumb. And I could take that crumb and eat it, as it didn't belong to the bread. After a while you could lift it again. And that raw, heavy bread would lose another crumb. And once, somehow, I got carried away and ate the whole bread. And only after I had eaten the whole bread did I get terrified by what I had done. I had eaten the whole bread on the birthday of my father.

This was a shock.

Then Father died, and when Father died he died in my arms.

My father was Petrov Viktor Dmitriyevich. He was a reader at the Polytechnic Institute and after the war and the blockade had started he was offered to be taken out by plane, because he worked on new arms. He was working on a very strange new thing. Because everything was scarce during the war, they were working on a cannon that fired water. But he refused to leave without the family.

When the war started, on 4 July, I was twelve. And when Father died, in January, I had already passed thirteen. And then died our household help, and Mother was poorly. Then Grandmother came. Grandmother had asthma; she had always been a sick person. But it is known that during the blockade, many asthmatics were cured.

Grandmother went to the Polytechnic Institute and said: So, Professor Petrov is dead. You didn't take care of him, take care at least of his son.

Mother was no longer getting up. Grandmother went to get the bread, and I was taken to a kindergarten, in which there were children under twelve. Formally, I had no right to be there as I was thirteen. Nonetheless, I was accepted in that kindergarten, and food there was better than for dependents of civil servants.

I remember once coming home from that kindergarten, and my mother no longer spoke articulately. She was only saying "Yura, Yura, Yura" and crying all the time. By the morning she was dead.

And in that kindergarten I remember how we were sitting around the fireplace – the *burzhuyka*, the iron oven that burned books. It was glowing red, and your felt boots would steam in the front while your back was cold.

And then when I had been fed for a while, and I was going back home, I slipped, and as far as I remember it took me twenty minutes or so to get up. I knew if I didn't get up now I would never get up. In the end, I did get up and got home. We had a closet that we called the "mirror closet", which had a mirror. Grandmother said: "Listen here, you look wonderful!" I looked in the mirror and saw a skull lined with skin. This is how it was then.

I spent some three weeks in that kindergarten and was transferred to a children's home, because children's homes were being taken out of the city. The Road of Life had been laid on the ice of Lake Ladoga, along which cars brought food from the other side of the lake. The food was loaded onto trains, and these trains took back women and children and, generally, population that had to be evacuated from this side.

I left on 11 April. The crossing lasted a night. Those were the last cars that passed on the ice, because it had already begun to thaw. You couldn't see at all where the water was. There were barrels turned upside down, and there were women standing on them, directing the traffic with blue torchlights. In front of us there was a car with kindergarten children: it went down in a hole. And we were being shot at along the way.

On the other side there were heaps of food. I mean sacks with flour and other things. And on the way, generally, people from Leningrad were taken care of, and we had quite a fantastic ration – something like 600 kg of bread. At the railway stations there were cauldrons of gruel, and they fed us chocolate, and so on. Our wise teachers tried not to give us all of it, but do it little by little. But still... One buddy of mine was into stealing butter. He crawled under the bunks, which was easy in those wooden carriages. In general, when the train stopped it was a horrible sight: men and women jumped off, took out pieces of paper and squatted down in a row, because everyone had diarrhea. A girl and a boy from our car squatted down under the car, and suddenly the train started. The boy, as the defter one, jumped out on time, but the girl was cut into two.

As a result, after the people were out of the blockade, a huge number of them died. First, if they are not subjected to a special diet, people fall ill with starvation diarrhea. I had it. A man ill with starvation diarrhea dies of starvation. Everything he eats comes out of him within twenty minutes. The organism is unable to absorb and digest it.

My crossing the lake presented a very colourful picture. To be honest, I was just very thirsty, but... Our teachers had handed out to us the food for three days. Children got white bread; it had been dried and handed out for three days in advance. We ate it all in the beginning, and then we were thirsty as hell. We drank the molten dirty snow directly from under the engine. And after that we, including myself, developed starvation diarrhea.

We travelled in the cars in this way. There was the first layer of people, then mattresses, then the second layer of people, then mattresses, then the third layer of people. I lay somewhere in the lower layer. As I was on the bottom and I had diarrhea, you can imagine what it was like. The whole way – and we were being taken to Maikop in the Caucasus; I lay there for 22 days – I had a bunch of clothes on. It was cold outside, and you only had the clothes that you were wearing. I cut the clothes off one by one and threw them out.

It was all not very pleasant and not very heroic. Then we reached Maikop and were put in a children's home. And all inhabitants of Maikop gathered to see us. I think they hadn't seen people in such condition. Already in Stalingrad, on the way, they had given us white loaves, and life was very different. And in Maikop it was peaceful and calm. And the citizens of Maikop gathered and looked at us the first day, and then they started picking people out, taking them home and feeding them. These were goodhearted Ukrainian aunties. They fed us very well and several times a day, and we all went around on visits and ate several times, and at night when people got up you could hear how they took out the food they had picked up and rustled with it and ate it.

A little detail: everyone fell ill with hernia, the falling out of the straight intestine, from the intensity of eating.

At this time the radio said that somewhere around Rostov there was fighting. Rostov was far away from Maikop. Some retreating detachments passed through Maikop, but those were some battered buggies with soldiers sitting on them with dirty gauze bandages.

As to me, at that time I fell very ill. I developed some boil on the neck with a high temperature and inflammation, and I was at the military hospital. And then it turned out that it was time to leave. Our children's home left but I stayed at the military hospital.

We had a teacher from this children's home who had a little girl. Her husband was a doctor who was fighting somewhere around Leningrad. And when the children's home was leaving, her mother – who lived in Pyatigorsk – wanted to take a boy who was old enough for her to take care of. And then it was decided, when I was at the military hospital and I was about to leave, that it was to be me. She would take me to her home in Pyatigorsk. There was time for that because the fighting was near Rostov.

One day -- I had already left the hospital – you could see that authority in the city had disappeared. People began to pillage shops. On the same day there was a raid of German war planes, but since I had lived through many such raids in Leningrad, it was nothing to me. Nonetheless we went to sleep in the garden of my teacher's house.

And when I – as the man in the house – went out in the morning, then I saw terrible noise and – here they come, the main forces of the army. I went to the fence and saw good-humoured boys on lorries with rolled-up sleeves, car after car. Sweaty, dusty, but many. Here it is finally, our main force. And then I suddenly saw a car with some very strange people on it, in a green uniform with some kind of white shoulder stripes and so on. And I understood they were Germans.

There had been some shooting during the night. So what, they had been shooting.

This was completely astounding, because according to all the radio broadcasts the fighting had been somewhere far away.

The Germans immediately took control of the city; they raced around in cars; they opened the hydrants, naked to the waist. They were laughing and sprinkling each other with water and so on. They went with the machine-guns into the house, took the red flag, as they should, hanged it up and, guffawing, set it on fire.

They cooked food that I had never seen in my life, before or after. A huge cauldron of macaroni with chocolate. This sort of food. And straight away, “komm, komm”, they called the children and fed them. These were good-humoured, wonderful people. So they looked, to my astonishment.

Then I started moving around a bit. I went out on the street and asked something. In German. And I talked with that German for a while, and then he looked at me and said: “Du bist Jude?” (Are you a Jew?) I didn't make it out; I thought he had said: “Are you Yura?” I was terribly surprised how he knew that I was I. He looked at me in a certain way and went on.

So to get to the substance of it, these were front detachments at a moment of success. They had broken through everywhere and taken everything as if our army had not existed. And it was natural that they all were high at that moment.

When they arrived there was a problem. We had to get something to eat. And as this woman who had taken me in was the wife of an officer, naturally she could not get a clearance. And then I, as I knew German, I went and translated this and that. In one place they would give me bread, in another something else. So, on the whole, I became a useful member of the family.

But in just two weeks a different kind of Germans came. There is an excellent book by our actress Voychenko, who was in Kiev during the war, which describes the occupation and in which she uses the precise terms “the first Germans” and “the second Germans”. It is very truthful, as few others are.

And so a completely different kind of Germans came, and then it was announced around the whole city that the kikes (*zhidy*) of the City of Maikop must appear at the assembly point on such and such day with no more than 20 kilograms of their most valuable things. They could take one or two suitcases.

Those who do not comply would be shot.

I decided that I would not comply.

If they shoot me they shoot me.

And then I saw how those people went.

And the population stood and watched.

One big shock for me was this. Apart from the teacher who took me in, other teachers too had remained in the city. And when our soldiers left they cried and said “Brothers, who are you leaving us to?” And when the Germans came, the very same people – teachers of Soviet schools; this astounded me particularly – said: “We have suffered for twenty-five years under the yoke of the Communists; now we have been liberated”. When they were kicking the Jews out, I have to tell you, the population stood and was silent. And from their faces you could see that they didn’t like it.

Not that they liked the Jews. No.

But what was happening now was too much. And so their faces were grim and disapproving.

The Jews were all shot. In a ditch. They were not taken anywhere.

And then in the evening of the next day I got a visitor. I was thirteen then, and this girl was around seventeen. Children had been getting together, from a few courtyards around, that’s where I knew her from. She came in the evening and said: “Listen, what’s your nationality?”

I said: “Negro. Why?”

And I recalled that before the Germans had come, we had been sitting together one evening, and I couldn’t remember why, in what connection, during this sitting I had said that my mother had been Jewish.

And now she said: “Listen. Quit playing the fool. Over there there is that Auntie Gabka, and she says that you are a Jew, and that she is going to go to the Kommandantur, the German headquarters, and tell on you.”

(At this point Yura’s wife Tamara, who is Jewish, interferes. She says: enough of this talk. Your hands are shaking. Enough. But we move to another room and he continues.)

Then I understood that I had to leave. But I also understood that if I leave the city alone and tramp along the roads, then I would be caught. And at that time, frankly, I didn’t know whether the Germans had a way, using various race instruments and craniometres that they used to measure skulls, whether they really had a means to tell that my mother had been Jewish. And as all Jews had already been shot, they were not going to stand on ceremony with me.

I decided that I had to leave the city. But how?

And at this point in my episodic translation work I found out that the German engineering and construction organisation, the Organisation Todt, was moving its base from Maikop to Pyatigorsk. And as my translations had been more or less acceptable, they asked me whether I wanted to go with them. I said that I did. In this way I joined them as a civil employee and moved to Pyatigorsk.

The uninhabited island

In the forties, when I was staying at the student dorm with twenty others in the room, I said to myself that one day I must go to an uninhabited island where I can just sit alone and listen to the tide.

In the early eighties I decided that I would work a lot and make a lot of money and pay the captain of a fishing trawler in the Far East in Russia to drop me off on an uninhabited island and then pick me up. But people told me that there are people on the ships who are paid just to make sure that no such things happen.

And then when I got the Humboldtpreis I went to a travel agent and said: take me to an uninhabited island. They said: sure, we have lots of exotic islands you can choose from. I said: no, I want to go to an island where I am alone. They said: okay, we can bring you to an island where there are only twenty

bungalows. I said: you didn't understand me. I want to be alone on the island. They said: okay, then you can buy an island. Robert Murdoch (or someone) just bought one.

But that was more money than I could pay. So I decided to go to Tahiti and find an island by myself. I bought a ticket to Rangiroa. When I was boarding the plane to Paris the canned meat I was carrying attracted lots of attention from the customs agents. They said: do you think there is no meat in Paris? I said: but I am transferring to Tahiti. They said: do you think there is no meat in Papeete? I said: but I am transferring to Rangiroa.

In Rangiroa I found a fishing boat that took me to an island where the locals collected copra, for half of the money I had been told. I spent ten days there in the hut of the copra collectors. It was wonderful. In this picture (*Petrov shows the foto of himself on the island*) I am sitting on the porch of the hut in a white shirt – I bought a white shirt especially for the trip – and listening to the tide.