

Friends, colleagues, countrymen, lend me your ears!

(After William Shakespeare)

I am beginning my appeal to you in this very solemn, majestic way because my subject is very special: I am going to speak about a very great, crucial, fateful event in the history of Russia: the victory over the German Nazi invaders in the Second World War, 1941-1945.

I realize that I happen to be the only one in our academic company who is sort of a witness of the event. The humble 'sort of' implies that I was just a toddler when the war started. So this is a story of the Greatest World War through a child's eyes. It is not so typical because I stayed almost all the 4 war years in Moscow, the capital of the USSR that was never occupied but very heavily bombed. My late husband, MSU Professor Emeritus Valentine Fatyushchenko's story of the war, spent in a Smolensk region village was full of unimaginably cruel horrors he witnessed at the age from 6 to 9.

Mine is different. Here it is.

So, my wartime childhood. It was happy. At least, that was how it seemed to me. Maybe this was because children have the knack of accepting life without judging or making comparisons, or perhaps because of my own personal characteristics – optimism and the ability, the desire, to see the good in everything (and everyone!), and most probably because of both one and the other.



Sveta Ter-Minasova. Before war

The main sensation I remember is the feeling of freedom. Everything suddenly changed, I was no longer the baby of the family who had to be constantly looked after, fed, put to bed, read to, taught about life and the alphabet ...my parents faded into the background, they almost vanished from my childhood.

Papa was always 'at work', day and night, sometimes he completely disappeared, went to the front line to do something secret, something I didn't know about and didn't understand. I only saw him rarely, but I clearly remember the feeling of happiness when we did meet. He always brought some little treat for me; a piece of bread, an apple, or some of the small, grey, square-shaped sweets called 'little pillows'.

Mama was very frightened by the war and lived in a constant state of terror. My sister did fire watching at night in the courtyard of the big building where we lived on Krasnoprudnaya Street. Then she fell ill with typhus and Mama had to look after her and forgot all about me. That's how I came to be free and left to my own devices. This was a happy time. I spent whole days in the courtyard with my friends Vova and Tolya, also stuck in Moscow because their fathers worked on the railways.



Tolya, Vova and I played outside until evening, sometimes until very late, but no-one called, "Bed-time! Time to come home!" Nobody scolded us, we just took ourselves home when we were tired, and when we parted we would say to each other, hopefully, "See you later if the siren goes off!" We often did see each other later. In the cellar of our building, which was now called an air-raid shelter, we three year-olds were just as happy as when we played

outside. We chattered away in our top bunks and romped about; sometimes we

fought but we always had this same pleasurable feeling of being free and grown up. It was night but we stayed up, just like the grown ups.

Our mothers, pale and frightened, still weren't thinking about us, they were



afraid of being bombed, worried about their elder children putting out the 'lighters'. I didn't realise at first that these 'lighters' were incendiary bombs and not the sort of lighter Papa kept in his pocket. But I wasn't frightened.

New words simply appeared in everyday family conversation: alarm, siren, gas mask, barrage balloons, air-raid shelter, "lighters".

I remember my cousin Lev coming home on leave from the front, very thin and sad. Of all his stories I remember only one, which really shook me up. He drank water from a puddle. "What do you mean, from a puddle?!" He smiled sadly. "Svetochka, that wasn't by any means the worst thing that happened".

My uncle, my father's brother, who had taken part in all the wars, starting in 1914, also came to Moscow for a day as he travelled from one front to another and he must have told us many a heroic and bloodcurdling tale. And again all I remember is just one thing. That 'at the war' a spoon was a treasured object. Without a spoon you would go hungry. When Uncle Vanya was leaving I ran after him and slipped him my baby spoon. He evidently found this very touching for when he thanked me his voice was trembling. After the war he said that he had kept my little spoon as an amulet, he believed that he wouldn't get killed as long as he had it with him. Later, in 1943 he was seriously injured, but not killed. He reached Berlin.

The last “horrific” war memory is of the never-ending grey crocodiles of German prisoners-of-war, winding their way through the streets of Moscow; I watched them from the window, peeping out from behind the curtains.



It really was horrific, without any quotation marks, although in 1945 I was already 7 years old and the Germans were prisoners. They passed by in an endless procession, leaving some sort of trail of filth behind them; they were followed by street cleaning vehicles which washed away the filth. Now I understand that this was also a symbolic act, but then it just seemed to be a practical hygienic precaution to clean the city.



On 1st September, 1945, I started school. On my way there I used to walk along a street, where German prisoners-of-war were constructing huge new buildings. They no longer seemed scary, in fact they were very nice to us children, and we set up as trading partners in a very friendly manner. We gave them the breakfasts that our mothers had so lovingly made (mine was even carried in an embroidered canvas bag, Mama was very handy with a needle) and they gave us handicrafts they'd made: toys, whistles and so on.

That is how my wartime childhood ended.



**Sveta Ter-Minasova with her sister.
End of 1944**