I ask my auntie what she remembers about their time in Uzbekistan. A scorpion on the white wall. A scorpion on the white wall of their tiny room at Station Malyutinskaya, Gal-Aralskiy District, Samarkand Region. The room is adjacent to the clinic my aunt’s aunt, Tamara, runs, while my aunt’s mother, Faina, takes care first of two, then of three, children. The scorpion is monstrous.

Also—a nice dress made dirty by the nuts she gathered. It is the shells that do the damage. Did Faina—quiet-spoken, kindhearted Faina—have some words to say about the stains? My auntie cannot recall. All she remembers is the dress—dirty and vivid.

Funny the stuff little girls remember—scary bugs and ruined dresses.

My auntie was three and a half when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The stutter she would have through her childhood arrived courtesy of her first bomb raid. Messerschmitts bombed a road they were taking out of Dubovyazovka, a village in Ukraine’s Sumskoy Region, where the war caught them in June 1941.

Who is there with my auntie under the bombs? Her mother of course, pregnant with her sister, plus her aunt, a young doctor recently graduated from the Kharkiv Medical Institute, plus her aunt’s daughter, the little cousin Vera. Women and children.

Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, the best historian I know, says that when women speak about the war, it is a different war they speak about. “Woman’s war,” she writes in her unbearable, luminous book *War’s Unwomanly Face*, “has its own colours, odours, its own lighting, its own sentient space. Its own words. No heroes, no extraordinary feats, only people busy with the inhuman human task. And it’s not only

Epilogue

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people who suffer in this war, but the earth itself, and all the birds, and all the trees. Everyone who lives with us in this world. They all suffer wordlessly.”

My aunt’s name is Lina. Actually, it is Lenina. She is called that after you-know-who. She is born into the family of Ukrainian Jews, of Ukrainian Jews who are true believers. Born at the end of 1937. The worst year of you-know-what.

They have just started evacuating, Tamara, Faina, Lenina, Vera; they do not know where they are going. Kiev, where they are from, is already cut off. It is just the beginning, but already Lina has typhus. Her fever is off the scale. Tamara does not think she will make it. When Faina speaks to her sister about getting an abortion—it is the war, how could anyone think of giving birth now, babies are the very last thing people should be having—Tamara says, with a nod to Lina, “This daughter of yours will probably die, look at her, so you better try to hang on to the one in your tummy.” Faina listens to her sister and does not abort my mother.

My mum’s first memory is from the time they are back in Kiev—the family returns there sometime in 1944, after the city is liberated at the end of 1943. My mum is two and a bit. She is in a room, lying on a raskladushka, a sort of a camp bed, made of canvas stretched on two poles between two crosses. She is near a pechka, a Russian oven. The pechka makes her feel really hot, and then, all of a sudden, she is freezing—it is another shaking fit—she remembers her body going up and down, jumping up and down on the bed, flying, levitating.

All five of them got sick with malaria in Uzbekistan. All five of them get these shaking chills.

The blanket falls on the floor. My two-year-old mum looks down to where it is lying. It looks impossibly far away. This is how tiny she is. She is desperate for the blanket, but there is no way she can reach it. She lifts her eyes and sees a rat scurrying across a hall.

Funny the things little girls remember—busy rodents and fallen blankets.

Malaria is why they left Uzbekistan. It is why Faina wrote “Save us. We won’t make it here” to her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law, who were evacuated to Chkalov, an industrial city near the river Ural. When
the war started, Faina’s husband, my grandfather Iosif, became a leader of a partisan group in Ukraine. In Uzbekistan, Faina received a notice that he was missing in action—a code for dead, but with no identifiable gravesite. The staple male death of that war.

By the time Faina writes “Save us”—Faina, the least self-dramatizing person who has ever walked this earth—she has long since given birth to her baby daughter. She has long since gotten used to being all alone with two kids and a baby. Tamara is working day and night; she is often away visiting kishlaks (rural settlements). From kishlaks she brings melons, different types of goat cheese, cured meats—this food keeps them alive. Faina is the home front. The baby refuses to be put down, and Faina has to do all her chores holding my mum in one arm. When one of Faina’s arms gets severely burned and hangs useless in a sling, she still has to hold the baby—with what, a phantom third arm, her teeth?—while cooking on bricks of kizyak (dry goat dung) used as fuel, while milking an obstinate, hot-tempered goat, while bringing water from an aryk (an aqueduct in a street) filled with dirty water. She does it, though. In that war, in all wars, people do things that cannot be humanly done.

And they get through typhus too, even through the time Tamara—the one with the balls in the family, the one who could whip milk into cream, who was going to make them all survive no matter—is lying unconscious on the floor, for days, weeks, devoured by lice.

They get through their first-ever month at Station M too. Nothing to eat, nothing to sell, no money. Not even a blanket.

Malaria—now that they do not think they could get through. Not in Uzbekistan.

Akrikhin—the name of antimalaria medicine. It makes your skin mustard-colored. And the taste—nothing, mum tells me, has ever tasted so bitter in her life.

My mother’s name is Svetlana. Svet means “light” in Russian. She is not named after a mass murderer. She is her aunt’s first-ever real-life delivery.

When, after the war, Faina and Tamara speak of their time in Uzbekistan—just under two years for Faina and the kids, longer for Tamara, who did not go to Chkalov but stayed on until she could return
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to Kiev—they say, “Thank God, we were together.” They also say, “Thank God, Tamara is a doctor.”

In Uzbekistan, Samarkand was their first point of call. They arrived on a train, barely alive. Their first night was in a city square, camping alongside countless others. They must have slept deep and hard that night, even though they were starving and it would have been cold, and noisy, and smelly, and utterly, dizzyingly alien; they must have slept deep and hard, because in the morning they discovered that their bag—their only bag—which had all the money, documents, and belongings in it, was stolen.

At the Oblispolkom—the Regional Executive Committee—Tamara says, “I am a doctor, I have worked as a doctor, I am here ready to be a doctor, to help, to work. I am here with my family. My bag with documents got stolen.”

The men and women of the Oblispolkom say, “You know, there are hundreds like you here, maybe even thousands. The so-called doctors. The so-called engineers. All of you come to us, all of you ask for a job. Documents. We need documents. No documents—no work.”

Outside the Oblispolkom, Tamara thinks it is all over. She lifts her eyes but cannot see anything. Then, as if through a fog, she sees a familiar face. At first she cannot work out how she knows this man. Then she remembers—he is a professor at the Kharkiv Medical Institute, her teacher. In class he would always single her out, would make her feel as if he noticed her diligence and hard work.

Tamara says, “Do you remember me?”

The Professor says, “I didn’t recognize you at first. You’ve lost your good looks.”

Her face is red and wet and swollen with tears.

The Professor is the first of their Saviours. He verifies Tamara’s identity. Organizes for the Samarkand Regional Executive Committee to dispatch her to Station Malyutinskaya, where a medical punkt, the most rudimentary one-doctor medical station, is sorely needed. Trains with the wounded travel through the station, stop there. The Professor organizes for Tamara, Faina, and the kids to be driven to their destination.

An empty mud hut. Nothing in it. No medical equipment, no medication, no furniture. The only way to communicate is through a Teletype.
machine at the station. It takes more than a month for stuff to begin arriving.

Anna Akhmatova, who was evacuated to Tashkent from Leningrad, who, too, fell into deep typhus delirium, who screamed in her delirium, “Strangers everywhere,” wrote famously that in Uzbekistan she learned what human kindness was.

The truth, we know, is almost always more complicated. Human kindness lives in close quarters with prejudice, indifference, fear, hatred.

Tamara is assigned a nurse and a medical orderly from the local population. The orderly is the second of their Saviours. The nurse wishes Tamara dead.

The orderly has three kids of her own. Her husband is in the army. She has some goats at home, a fruit and vegetable garden. She speaks a bit of Russian. Admires Tamara. Feels for Faina. Pities the kids. Brings them food. Straw mats to sleep on. Asks Tamara where she studied to become a doctor, for how long. She wants to be a doctor too. A woman doctor.

The nurse loves it when Tamara gets sick. The sicker, the better. Here is her chance to be in charge, to show everyone that Tamara is expendable, not needed. She does not use her medical knowledge to help, to save.

These two women are the truth about Uzbekistan, the truth about what it was like to be a Soviet Jew or a Polish Jew there during the war. For every orderly, there is a nurse. For every nurse, there is an orderly.

In the poem “Requiem,” dedicated to the invisible, nameless, faceless millions who perished in Stalin’s purges, Akhmatova writes,

I’d like to name you all by name, but the list
Has been removed and there is nowhere else to look.
So,
I have woven you this wide shroud out of the humble words
I overheard you use. Everywhere, forever and always,
I will never forget one single thing. Even in new grief.²

Tamara’s real name is Sarah. Faina’s real name is Ferga. I remember as a child, in the early 1980s, coming across old letters addressed to Ferga
Berkovna and wondering who this Ferga was. I remember the ground shifting under my feet ever so slightly when I understood that this was my grandmother. I can trace the beginning of my education about my family, my people, to that moment.

They survived—Tamara-Sarah, Faina-Ferga, Lina-Lenina, my mum. My grandfather Iosif survived too. By miracle, he came to find his family in Chkalov. He literally walked down a street one day and bumped into his mother. As Tamara had bumped into her professor in Samarkand.

Each survival in my family was predicated on a miracle.

Each Jewish survival in World War II is predicated on a miracle of one kind or another.

We know that most who survived—did so in evacuation.

Notes
