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Women Under Siege: Leningrad 1941-1942

Who can measure the trauma of differing wartime experiences? Suffering is relative and unquantifiable, and comparisons can seem tasteless, even disrespectful. Yet even if suffering cannot be quantified, human deprivation can be. Starvation is a matter of simple subtraction: Below a certain number of calories per day, the body begins to consume itself, and several universal, physiological consequences ensue. First come listlessness and apathy. As the body grows emaciated, the skin assumes an unhealthy pallor and stretches tight against the bones. Often the body becomes bloated, with fingers and toes so swollen that even buttoning a coat is difficult, and walking an ordeal. Gums bleed; the body is covered with open sores that refuse to heal. Certain psychological symptoms are also universal enough to be considered chemical. Starvation tends to reduce us to a primitive, "de-humanized" state in which our only concern is to find food.

The experience of the siege of Leningrad shows that even when facing starvation, people will fight to keep their humanity intact. And though their heroism was not always voluntary, women were the acknowledged saviors of Leningrad. Admittedly these women had a physical advantage over men: their better-insulated bodies enabled them to endure greater privation, at least initially. But something else was at play, which had more to do with nurture than with nature. Women's traditional familial and social roles made the crucial difference in their ability to negotiate through the seemingly endless days of the

siege. Their primary impulse to focus first on their families helped them to overcome the forces of inertia, both physical and psychological, during the nine hundred days of extreme deprivation when continuing to live seemed pointless and irredeemably bleak. While it would be erroneous to imply that all women behaved nobly during the siege—numerous cases document the selfish, even savage, behavior of some—women made sacrifices that often proved life-saving, both for themselves and for others. The very fact of their femaleness arguably helped the women of Leningrad to survive the terrible blockade of the city.

In the United States and Great Britain the preferred wartime attitude of women was an admirable pluckiness coupled with an enthusiastic embrace of innovation: If sugar and eggs are in short supply, we'll still bake our cake, we'll simply use substitutes! This positive ideal presupposes the availability of a certain basic amount of foodstuffs, with which people can afford to be creative. Leningrad women had to be creative beyond measure. Tested by want, they searched their apartments for edibles in the forms of tooth powder, Vaseline, glycerine, cologne, library paste, and wallpaper paste, which they scraped from the walls. They tore books apart and gave their children the glue off the bindings. Hardship demanded innovation, but it was hardly light-hearted. In wartime Britain, butter and eggs may have been scarce, and flour dark and heavy, but people did not starve. Such cookbooks as Ambrose Heath's Good Food in Wartime insist that many pre-war recipes "by some very slight adaptation to present needs, can still appear with success upon our war-time tables, not quite up to their pre-war form perhaps but certainly more than merely presentable."¹ The British Ministry of Food worked hard to educate housewives in wartime economy, providing information about unfamiliar products like dried egg powder and recipes for belt-tightening meals. Thus the Ministry's Food Facts No. 331 suggests a "Swiss Breakfast," a highly nutritious muesli touted as "a

delicious change from porridge."² One might argue that Britain's wartime exigencies actually broadened people's palates by introducing them to a wider range of foods once they had to forego their beloved bacon and eggs.

Though it is a commonplace that the nurturing of the family falls largely to women, the extent to which women will sacrifice their own well-being for their family's has not been fully examined. One wartime study in Britain showed that mothers regularly gave their husbands and children the best food from their own plates,³ and the women of Leningrad largely did the same. But amid widespread hunger, against the absolute limits of human endurance, such acts of maternal self-sacrifice become something other than noble. During the German siege of Leningrad, which lasted for nearly nine hundred days, over one million people died of starvation and related causes; nearly 200,00 died in February, 1942, alone.⁴ The resourceful women of Leningrad painstakingly retrieved old flour dust from the cracks in the floorboards and licked decades of spattered grease from the kitchen walls, savoring it slowly.

The question of how much food to share was problematic, and in ways we can't fully imagine. If a mother had children who were slowly wasting away, her inclination was to feed them first, above all. But it was also imperative that the woman keep up her own strength in order to take care of them, especially if they were young. If she didn't survive, how would they? Hunger weakened one's ability to think logically, to calculate in any meaningful way. The world seemed blurry; the small piece of bread on the table represented all that was tangible. Should the mother give her children extra food from her own meager ration, or should she try to conserve her strength to hold the family together?⁵ The women of Leningrad were forced to face these questions daily, and the simple answers were all deadly. Two-thirds of the city's civilian population during the siege was made up of female office workers, housewives, children, and the elderly⁶--groups

whose food allowances were considerably smaller than those of factory workers or front-line soldiers; consequently, a decision concerning 50 grams of bread could (and did) mean the difference between life and death.

Before examining the ways in which women fought to survive, we must understand the constraints under which they lived. The siege effectively began on September 8, 1941, when German forces cut off all land access to Russian-controlled territory; it ended only on January 27, 1944, with the breaking of the German blockade. Like other Russians, Leningraders had been on war rations ever since the German invasion began on June 22. As in England, these rations created hardship without much urgency. Factory workers were entitled to 800 grams of bread a day,⁷ while office workers received 600 grams, and dependents and children under twelve were allotted 400 grams--somewhat less than one pound. Still, most people were able to supplement the bread rations with meat, grains, fats, and sugar. On September 2, however, as the German forces closed in on the city, the bread ration for factory workers in Leningrad was reduced to 600 grams a day, with office workers receiving 400, and dependents and children only 300 grams of bread, or about three-quarters of a pound.

In the first week of September, the Germans began to shell Leningrad. An emergency inventory of the city's food supplies revealed that there were only enough grain and flour reserves to last the civilian population for thirty-five days.⁸ The situation worsened on September 8 with the bombing of the Badaev warehouses, where stores of flour and sugar were kept. Although workers managed to salvage much of the molten sugar, the flour was a total loss. Authorities responded by cutting the bread ration further, to 500 grams for factory workers, 300 grams for office workers and children, and 250 grams for dependents, including housewives, whose tasks were arguably more strenuous than those of office workers.⁹ But it soon became clear that even this curtailment

was insufficient to feed the population with the flour remaining in the city's storehouses. And so the allowances were reduced even more drastically, culminating in the November 20 ration of 250 grams of bread a day for factory workers, and only 125 grams of bread--a mere two slices--for all others.¹⁰

Technically these bread rations should have been supplemented by other foods, but in that first fall and winter of the blockade nothing else was available, or available only sporadically. Thus the bread ration was the only guaranteed source of nourishment. If you were too weak to go to the designated store to receive your daily ration, and if you had no one to trust with your card, you got nothing to eat. In an effort to conserve food supplies, the authorities strictly controlled the issuing of ration cards. If your card was lost or stolen, it could not be replaced. The reality was as simple, and as harrowing, as that. A small piece of cardboard determined your fate.

Even when the bread ration was safely brought home and divided among the family, what sort of nourishment did it provide? Traditional Russian rye bread is famous for its rich, sour flavor, its dense texture, and its high nutritional value. But because ingredients were so scarce, the proportion of flour used in the siege loaf was continually revised. In mid-September, oats that had formerly been reserved for horse fodder were added to the commercial bread recipe, as was malt, which previously had been used in the production of beer (the breweries were now closed). By late October the percentage of malt used in commercial loaves was increased to 12 percent, and moldy grain that had been retrieved from a ship submerged in Lake Ladoga was dried out and added to the dough.¹¹ The taste of this loaf was extremely unpleasant. Yet even these fillers were not sufficient, and in late November, when minimum rations dropped to 125 grams of bread, the composition of the standard loaf was set at 73 percent rye flour, 10 percent "edible" cellulose, 10 percent cottonseed-oil cake (*zhmykh*), 2

percent chaff, 2 percent flour sweepings and dust shaken out of flour sacks, and 3 percent corn flour.¹² The seemingly high proportion of rye flour masks the fact that the dense fillers made this siege loaf 68 percent heavier than a normal loaf of bread. Thus from their 125 gram ration people effectively got only 74.4 grams of nourishing rye flour. And while the cottonseed-oil cake originally intended for cattle fodder did contain protein, the "edible" cellulose was not digestible. Dmitri Pavlov, who oversaw Leningrad's food supplies during the siege, writes that "[t]he bread was attractive to the eye, white with a reddish crust. Its taste was rather bitter and grassy."¹³ But others who survived on this bread are less gentle in their assessments. The bread was so damp and heavy that "when you took it in your hand water dripped from it, and it was like clay."¹⁴ It appeared "greenish-brown..., half wood shavings."¹⁵ "...nothing was issued but bread, if you could call it that. Those four ounces on which life depended were a wet, sticky, black mash of flour waste products that fell apart in your hands."¹⁶

In 1997, when visiting Saint Petersburg's new Museum of the History of Breadbaking, I had the experience of tasting siege bread. The museum director, Liubov Berezovskaia, accommodated my request to find out more about wartime bread by asking a survivor to bake me a loaf. Unlike the traditional round Russian loaf, siege bread was rectangular in shape: In order to incorporate as many additives as possible, the bread had to be baked in pans, since free-form loaves would not hold together.¹⁷ The bread was heavy and pale in color, its texture rather crumbly, yet gummy on the tongue. Most memorable were the sensation of chewing on sawdust and the splinter of wood that pierced my mouth. Swallowing even a small piece required considerable effort.

Picture a mother with two children, whose husband is away at the front. As is typical for most Russian families, her elderly mother lives with them. This woman is one of the lucky ones--she has a factory job that affords her the highest category of rations, while her children and mother receive only the third, or lowest, category. Yet she lives in fear that her strength will give out and she'll lose her good ration along with her job. It is late November, 1941. For a week now her family has had almost nothing to eat but two slices of coarse bread a day. They survive on the factory dinner she brings home. Each day she goes to the canteen at work and receives an ample portion of thin soup. She drinks the liquid from the top of the bowl, then carefully transfers the bits of grain and cabbage left in the bowl into a jar she's brought from home. This hot liquid doesn't relieve her hunger, and it makes her legs swell, but at least she has something left for her family.¹⁸ Her mother has grown too weak to move; in fact, she is like another child who needs tending.

Her children spend all day in the apartment, waiting listlessly for her return. She tries to focus on her work, but it's difficult. She has to get up at six in the morning because most of the trams have stopped running. She stands in a long line at the bakery for the family's bread ration and brings it home, then drags herself several miles to work on swollen legs through streets that have not been cleared of snow. Every day she sees heavily swaddled figures swaying along the narrow footpaths. She can recognize the goners from their shuffling gait, and every day she worries whether to follow them or pass them by. The moment that they fall is the worst. They crumple and drop. She wants to stop—it's the humane thing to do—but she has no strength to help them. So she tries to make her way past them, stepping around them, not over them, and never looking at the pile of cloth itself, lest an arm reach up or a pair of eyes implore. Bodies lying in the street no longer concern her; it is the ones still in motion that

cause her pain. The woman concentrates on each step, trying not to think about the people inside the other bundles of clothes, or even about her family at home. It is the darkest time of year, with only five hours of daylight, when even daytime seems like twilight because the sun hangs so low in the sky. The apartment is very dark. Ever since September the windows have been covered with plywood to protect against air raids; weak blue lights have replaced normal bulbs in an effort to conserve energy.

Then on December 9 the electricity is shut off throughout Leningrad; there isn't enough fuel for the power stations. Only a few commercial bakeries and factories are kept running. People pin phosphorescent patches onto their coats so that they won't bump into each other in the dark. The woman's factory has closed down; she has lost her worker's rations. Now her family of four must make do with only 500 grams--a little over a pound--of bread a day, with no supplemental soup from the factory canteen. Even though she no longer has to walk miles to work, continuing to live feels impossible. With no electricity, there is no heat. The pipes have frozen and burst. The plumbing no longer works. Panic flutters in her chest. The woman reminds herself that her family is luckier than most: they at least have a *burzhuika*, a primitive wood stove, and they still have a few books to burn, and a few more pieces of furniture. Some kerosene is left over from September, so they can eat their bread by lamplight. Now, instead of going to work, each morning she joins hundreds of other women who head to the Neva River, where holes have been cut in the ice. She fills two buckets with water and struggles back up the icy embankment, trying hard not to spill too much. She puts sticks in the water to keep it from sloshing and ties the buckets onto her child's sled. By the time she gets home the water has frozen. She's not surprised: the thermometer has not risen above -30° F for a week.¹⁹ In the dark she can barely manage to haul the buckets up the four flights of ice-glazed stairs

to her apartment. Finally, she is inside. She lights the stove and melts the ice, using some of the warm water to wash her children's faces, sooty from the kerosene. She tells herself that at least she doesn't have to try to wash diapers like her neighbor down the hall, who struggles to change her infant daughter under layers of blankets so that she won't freeze to death. She pours the rest of the hot water into mugs for her family. They drink it, relishing the warmth, trying not to focus on the sweet, musky taste of the water, the taste that comes from the hundreds of corpses that have been thrown into the Neva by people too weak to bury their dead in the frozen ground.²⁰ The walls of the apartment are covered with a thick layer of frost. The family huddles together, wrapped in winter coats and blankets.

It was the men who died first. Olga Grechina, a survivor, writes:

The men were the first to go. There was no sight more pitiful and terrible than a siege man! It was then that women understood how well nature had made [us] -- [we] had huge reserves of inner strength, which, it turned out, men did not have. The lack of meat, fats and tobacco severely sapped their strength, and they somehow immediately fell apart. At first they began to grow weak, to let themselves go -- they stopped washing and were covered with grey stubble. There were very few of them in the city in comparison to the number of women, but their inability to adapt to the tragic conditions of life was striking. They began to fall down in the street, they didn't get out of bed, they were dying and dying...²¹

It is true that the male metabolism requires more calories to survive; nevertheless, the claim by journalist Harrison Salisbury that men died because they "led more vigorous lives"²² is objectionable as well as incorrect. In fact, the burden of getting water, scavenging for firewood, and searching for food—all "women's work," even in these most extreme circumstances--required huge expenditures of energy. Retrieving water from the frozen rivers and canals was difficult enough, but getting firewood was far more strenuous. The river was filled with logs that had washed downstream and been trapped in the ice. Weak with hunger and fatigue, women used axes to chop the ice around the logs until they were released. Once free, the logs still had to be tied onto sleds and dragged back home, then sawed into pieces small enough for the stove. Paradoxically, despite the extra expenditure of calories, these grueling tasks helped to keep women alive. It was the elemental nature of their duties that gave women an advantage.²³

It was especially difficult for new mothers. Most babies born during the blockade were small and weak from lack of nourishment in the womb. (It wasn't until June, 1944, that the government finally issued a decree to increase the ration for pregnant women.²⁴) Infants officially received only 3 1/2 ounces of soy milk a day. Mothers like Elena Kochina drank a pot of water every night to try to keep their milk flowing, but it rarely helped. Kochina's baby daughter screamed and tore at her dry breasts.²⁵ Here is how Lidia Okhapkina nourished her baby:

My Ninochka cried all the time, long and drawn out, and she couldn't go to sleep. Her crying, like moaning, drove me out of my mind. So to help her fall asleep, I gave her my blood to suck. I hadn't had milk in

my breasts for a long time, in fact I didn't have any breasts left, everything had just disappeared. I pricked my arm with a needle

just above my elbow and placed my daughter on this spot. She sucked noiselessly and fell asleep. But I couldn't fall asleep for a long time...²⁶

The city authorities intermittently provided the populace with foodstuffs salvaged from industry, and along with the new terminology for the different stages of dystrophy, their harsh-sounding names became part of the everyday language of the blockade. Especially distasteful and hard to digest were *shrotty* (also known as *zhmykh* and *duranda*), hard cakes of pressed seed hulls left over from the processing of oil from sunflower, cotton, hemp, or linseed (*duranda* most often referred to linseed cakes). These seed cakes, commonly used as cattle fodder, sustained many lives. Often they were too hard to break into pieces by hand; instead a knife or axe blade was used to plane them like wood, and the shavings were fried like pancakes.²⁷ Other industrial products included *olifa*, boiled linseed or hempseed oil. Used in classical oil paints, *olifa* could be metabolized like edible oil, with the same nutritional value, but the flavor was vile. Still, it was preferable to machine oil, which people stole from factories that had ceased production. Although machine oil generally went right through the system and had no nutritional value, there was always a chance that it was based on animal fats or vegetable oil rather than petroleum. Similarly, coarse, wet bread seemed more palatable when fried in paint thinner,²⁸ and *mezdra*, the inner side of pig- or calfskin, could be boiled for hours to make a kind of soup. If you could endure the nauseating smell, the liquid afforded some protein, and it was better than the old leather straps people otherwise boiled. One woman cut up her gopher fur coat, boiled it, and ate it.²⁹ Sometimes the grain ration provided a coarse, greyish-black macaroni made of rye flour and linseed cake,³⁰ and in the

late fall of 1941 a murky white yeast soup derived from cellulose began to replace grain. To make the soup, water and sawdust were allowed to ferment into a foul-smelling liquid, which contained some protein.³¹ Soup is an important component of Russian cuisine, an integral part of the daily meal, and therefore women often made soup out of the family's bread ration instead of just serving the bread plain. Although this soup consisted of nothing but breadcrumbs and water, the whole felt like something more than its parts.

As the siege continued, and hunger grew, the women of Leningrad had to find sources of food beyond the official rations.³² They brought home the tough, dark green, outer leaves of cabbage they had previously discarded. Slowly braised and softened, the leaves were turned into a dish known as *khriapa*.³³ Women scoured the city, braving artillery fire in their search for food. At night, dressed in dark clothes, crawling from row to row, they chopped at the frozen ground to dig the potatoes that lay rotting in the fields. With true hunger, squeamishness disappeared, and survivors tell of readily, even avidly, eating the wood shavings, peat, and pine branches they scavenged. Often, though, the metabolism proved more discriminating. Zoya Bernikovich nearly died after eating pancakes made of dry mustard, which she was told were delicious. Soaking was supposed to remove the mustard's volatile oils, so Bernikovich duly soaked two packets of dry mustard in water for seven days, then poured off the water and added enough fresh water to make a thick, pasty batter, which she formed into two pancakes and fried. Her doctor later remarked that she was lucky to have eaten only one pancake before feeling the first burning sensations; others who ate more pancakes didn't survive, their stomach lining eaten away by the mustard.³⁴

The more heartbreaking and horrifying issues surrounding food were moral ones, and different people recognized different limits. For many families,

sparrows, pigeons, crows, canaries, cats, and dogs became acceptable food, despite reluctance and shame. But consume them they obviously did, because virtually all animals, including pets and house mice, disappeared from Leningrad within the first four months of the siege (the mice, like the people, died of hunger).³⁵ The only creatures left were rats, the scourge of the city, who fed on the bodies of the dying and the dead. Except for the most depraved or those whom hunger had deprived of reason, the people of Leningrad refused to purchase the large chunks of meat sold by suspiciously well-fed vendors at the market. Described variously as bluish or pale white in color, this meat was undoubtedly human flesh. Memoirists frequently refer to the sight of corpses lying on the street, their fleshy buttocks carved out.³⁶ Bits of desiccated skin from the corpses were boiled into soup.

Perhaps the only salutary consequence of such conditions was the generous community of women that evolved. Leningrad had always maintained a conscious distinction between the intelligentsia and the uneducated peasants who had flocked to the city from the countryside following the 1917 Revolution. Now, standing for hours in a bread line, or helping someone cross a street under enemy fire or pull a heavy sled, women who ordinarily led separate lives began to converse with one another. And in many cases, the impractical *intelligentki* survived largely thanks to the wisdom of old peasant women who willingly shared what they knew. Women who had never given much thought to domestic exigencies learned how to dry tree bark and grind it into flour (the bark stripped from oak trees stopped the bleeding of gums), and how to extract vitamin C from pine needles for a scurvy preventative. Such folk knowledge far surpassed Tolstoy's celebration of the peasant arts. Beyond providing practical benefit, this advice reconnected intellectual city dwellers with a more elemental mode of life.

Conversations about food took on significant social meaning, transcending the sphere of women's relationships to encompass society at large. Unlike the great nineteenth-century Russian gastronomes who celebrated the art of dining well, the Soviet intellectual, nurtured on revolutionary idealism, disdained any talk of food as crass and bourgeois. For the intellectual, the higher life of the mind was all-important, and giving as little thought as possible to domestic concerns was a point of pride. But such lofty ideals inevitably clashed with the reality of siege existence. Even the most consummate intellectuals found themselves preoccupied with food, theorizing about it, rationalizing their actions surrounding it.³⁷ Suddenly they recognized the artistry involved in obtaining and preparing food. The lowly housewife was now ascendant, her daily occupations ascribed a greater value. The literary critic Lidia Ginzburg explains how siege conditions transformed the intellectuals' attitude toward food:

...this conversation [about food], which had previously drawn down the scorn of men and businesswomen (especially young ones) and which [the housewife] had been forbidden to inflict upon the thinking man -- this conversation had triumphed. It had taken on a universal social meaning and importance, paid for by the terrible experience of the winter. A conversation on how it's better not to salt millet when boiling, because then it gets to be just right, had become a conversation about life and death (the millet expands, you see). Reduced in range (siege cuisine), the conversation became enriched with tales of life's ups and down, difficulties overcome and problems resolved. And as the basic element of the given life situation, it subsumed every possible interest and passion.³⁸

At the same time that conversation became more elemental, so did the foods that people ate. Joiner's glue became standard fare for many. Like the wallpaper and library pastes used before the introduction of synthetic adhesives, joiner's glue was based on animal proteins such as casein from milk, blood, and fish residues. Thus it contained proteinaceous material that provided some nutritional value. From a chance acquaintance on the street, Olga Grechina learned how to prepare an aspic from joiner's glue. The glue was soaked for twenty-four hours, then boiled for quite a long time, during which it gave off a terrible odor of burnt horns and hooves. Then the glue was allowed to cool and thicken. A bit of vinegar or mustard, if available, made it palatable.³⁹ Nearly all of the siege survivors express nostalgia for the "sweet earth" they consumed--soil from the site of the Badaev warehouse fire in which 2,500 tons of sugar melted onto the ground. Eating dirt may seem to us degrading, but those who ate it were grateful. The government had salvaged most of the thick, crusty, black syrup from the surface of the warehouse soil, using it to make candy,⁴⁰ but seven hundred tons were lost.⁴¹ Starving Leningraders, however, did not consider the sugar a total loss. For months after the fire they used axes to chop away at the frozen earth and loosen the soil, still saturated with sugar. Retrieved down to a depth of three feet, the soil sold for one hundred rubles a glass; from more than three feet below the surface it cost only fifty rubles.⁴² This "sweet earth" could be heated until the sugar melted, then strained through several layers of muslin. Or it could be mixed with library paste to make a kind of gummy confection. "This was 'candy' or 'jelly' or 'custard,' whatever the imaginative housewife decided to call it."⁴³ Some people simply ate the earth raw. Valentina Moroz describes its flavor:

The taste of the earth has remained with me, that is, I still have the impression that I was eating rich curd cheese [full of fats]. It was black earth. Could it actually have had some oil in it?

[You couldn't perceive] sweetness, but something rich [fatty-tasting], maybe there really was oil there. You had the impression that this earth was very tasty, genuinely rich [full of fats]!

We didn't cook it at all. We would simply swallow a little piece and wash it down with hot water.⁴⁴

In the spring of 1942, when the ice and snow melted after the first long winter of the siege (which proved to be one of the harshest winters of the century), the women of Leningrad extended their search for food, eagerly foraging for grass and weeds. Anything green contained vitamins, and many people, though clinging to life, suffered from scurvy, pellagra, and rickets. Grass disappeared from the city and its environs; trees were picked clean of their pale, new leaves. Grass could be mixed with *duranda* into pancakes, or savored fresh by the handful. Nettles and dandelion leaves made excellent *shchi*, the classic Russian soup traditionally based on cabbage or sorrel. Juicy dandelion roots were ground and made into pancakes.⁴⁵ Angelica (from the Botanical Gardens), orach, and other grasses all served as welcome food, giving Leningraders hope that, against all odds, they might yet survive. One factory canteen made inventive use of wild greens in the spring and summer of 1942, listing the following menu choices: Plantain soup (*shchi*), pureed nettles and sorrel, beet green cutlets, orach rissoles, cabbage-leaf schnitzel, seed-cake (*zhmykh*) pastry, seed-cake (*duranda*) torte, sauce of fish-bone flour, casein pancakes, yeast soup, soy milk (in exchange for coupons). After a winter of starvation, this menu seemed like a feast.⁴⁶

Physical survival was one thing, and the daily quest for food certainly overshadowed all other concerns. But the diary entries of survivors afford glimpses into another difficult aspect of blockade life: the deterioration of relationships. Hunger caused tempers to be short, a physiological as much as a psychological condition. Husband and wife, mother and daughter--the siege unavoidably changed the way people treated one other. Love and hatred became mixed up: you wanted to share your food with your family, but at the same time you resented their needs.⁴⁷ Elena Skriabina describes the way hunger can affect personality:

People are growing brutal right in front of our eyes. Who could have thought that Irina Kliueva, recently such an elegant, quiet, beautiful woman, was capable of beating the husband she's always adored? And why? Because he wants to eat all the time, he's never satisfied. All he does is wait until she's found some food. She brings it home, and he throws himself on it. Of course, she herself is hungry. And it's hard for a hungry person to give up the last bit.⁴⁸

One's very style of eating could cause aversion in others. Merely watching someone else chew--even someone you loved--was agonizing if you had already finished your morsel. Those who ate quickly, swallowing everything in a few desperate gulps, felt anger towards those who lingered long over every bite. Elena Kochina writes of her struggles with her husband, who became so crazed from hunger that he even stole food from their infant daughter. He could not bear to watch his wife eat: "I happened to get a particularly hard

piece of crust, which I chewed with delight. I sensed how he was looking with hatred at my evenly moving jaws."⁴⁹ This response was instinctive; Kochina's husband had lost the ability consciously to choose good behavior over bad, sacrifice over self-interest. In this way, for some people questions of morality all too easily slipped away.

Sexuality was also affected. Sexual relations mainly ceased. This had to do less with a lack of energy than with an increased alienation from one's diminishing body. The physical characteristics that mark gender largely disappeared. Shrouded in layers of heavy clothing, people all looked alike. It was impossible to tell who was male, who female. Hunger eroded the differences between old and young. Women traded their few good dresses for food and wore the clothes of their husbands, fathers, or sons.⁵⁰ Holding the baggy pants and quilted jackets together with belts and long scarves to keep out the cold, they wrapped their feet in cotton rags and made makeshift galoshes from old automobile tires to keep their feet dry. Women stopped menstruating; their breasts atrophied until only nipples were left. Like most people during the winter of 1941-42, Olga Grechina did not even see her body for several months (it was too cold to undress for bed). Finally resolving to rid herself of the lice that plagued her, she got a coupon for one of the few working public baths. When she undressed she was horrified to find that she had neither a belly nor breasts. All of her bones stuck out; her legs were like sticks. Grechina felt a "disconnection" from her own body.⁵¹ Lidia Ginzburg describes the sensation more fully: "In the winter, while people were discovering bone after bone, the alienation of the body proceeded, the splitting of the conscious will from the body, as from a manifestation of the hostile world outside. The body was emitting novel sensations, not its own."⁵²

Under such conditions so far beyond our everyday understanding of “alienation,” when one's very sense of self was undone, it was difficult to care about anyone other than oneself. The usual niceties of social interaction had long since disappeared. As bodies diminished, normal social structures also shrank and disappeared. Food, once the pretext for friendly gatherings or their impromptu outcome, now ceased to be an element of social sustenance or succor. Although Russian culture holds that food has meaning only when it is shared, in blockaded Leningrad this practice was of necessity ignored. People simply ate what they had, when they had it, regardless. This unnatural role into which food was cast represented a particularly debasing aspect of siege life, and one which went to the core of what Russians hold most sacred; the loss of hospitality contributed to a sense of barbarism, of not belonging to a larger world than the one the body inhabited, and yet the body itself had become alien and strange.

Even so, when there was strength enough, some people engaged in small celebrations. Kira, a young hospital worker, sprinkled tiny squares of bread with a bit of hoarded sugar to treat her colleagues to “blockade pastries.”⁵³ A simple crust of bread could become something special, if you only allowed it to: “Thickly sliced crusts, toasted on the outside and left moist on the inside went especially well with tea. If you left the bread in the frying pan and ate it with a knife and fork--then you had a *meal*.”⁵⁴ On her birthday the critic Olga Freidenberg helped her mother set a special table, creating beauty in the midst of austerity:

It is a parade of a home and a spirit that has been preserved; it was my own personal triumph...To get my daily bread, I had sold the better part of [our china] for next to nothing. And yet there was still enough to adorn the table, and these old family members appeared on the

white tablecloth in their former luster and coziness. Only Mama and I could understand the importance of this holiday table...like us, it lived and existed after terrors, deaths, siege, and hunger; and like it, we were still living and could still revive our hopes for our future arrival in real, living life.⁵⁵

No matter that Freidenberg's stomach, unaccustomed to real food, vomited the meal; the emotional sustenance it provided outweighed any loss of physical nourishment.

Those who survived the siege were rewarded by the Soviet government. The presentation of the medal "For the Defense of Leningrad" was accompanied by much high-flown rhetoric about the courage and resilience of the women, who accounted for most of the survivors. Even Dmitri Pavlov's generally sober account of the siege underlines the heroism of Leningrad's women: "Their will to live, their moral strength, resolution, efficiency, and discipline will always be the example and inspiration for millions of people."⁵⁶ But at what price did such fortitude come? As Dmitri Likhachev has noted, their heroism is more accurately seen as martyrdom. Yet it is important to stress that unlike religious martyrdom, that of the women of Leningrad was not elected, at least not by them. In fact, the residents of Leningrad suffered largely because Stalin did not care enough about them to surrender the city. Stalin had always despised Leningrad with its large population of intellectuals, and perhaps now he chose to take his revenge. He did not attempt to save the citizenry; quite the opposite. Local collective farms that could have helped feed the population were quickly evacuated, their cattle and goods dispersed elsewhere.⁵⁷ And just days before the Germans encircled the city, large quantities of foodstuffs were ordered sent *out of* Leningrad.⁵⁸ This efflux ended only when the city was sealed off by the

blockade. Though there have been other sieges in history, the blockade of Leningrad stands out for the government's refusal to spare its people.

Survivors of the Leningrad blockade report truly tasting bread for the first time, and savoring the essence of even the most rudimentary foods. And they gained a new awareness of texture: sunflower oil lush on the tongue, each grain of porridge a revelation as it burst in the mouth. Once-odorless foods like sugar or dried peas suddenly acquired an aroma that the pre-siege senses were unable to detect.⁵⁹ Along with the newly sensitive palate came a deeper appreciation of cuisine: "Siege cookery resembled art--it conferred tangibility on things. Above all, every product had to cease being itself. People made porridge out of bread and bread out of porridge...Elementary materials were transformed into dishes."⁶⁰ The aesthetics of eating became newly attenuated. Such was the human cost of art.

¹Ambrose Heath, Good Food in Wartime. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1942, p. 5.

²Reprinted in Marguerite Patten, Maruguerite Patten's Post-War Kitchen: Nostalgic Food and Facts from 1945-1954. London: Hamlyn, 1998, p. 14.

³An unnamed study of the British worker's diet found that "mothers give to fathers and children the lion's share of rationed foods. Other studies of family diets have revealed these deep-rooted habits, common to mothers everywhere, of which there is plenty of evidence at first hand. When there isn't enough chicken to go around, mother prefers the neck." In The New York Times Magazine, September 27, 1942, p. 32, cited in Amy Bentley, Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998, p. 91.

⁴Leningrad's (now Saint Petersburg's) Piskarev Cemetery houses a memorial to those who died during World War II. Their statistics state that 650,000 people died of hunger; but statistics from the Museum of the History of Leningrad place the number who died of starvation at one million. Russia's esteemed cultural historian Dmitri Likhachev estimates the total at closer to one million two hundred thousand -- and these were only the officially registered deaths, not those of

displaced persons or other people living illegally in the city. See Dmitri Likhachev, "Kak my ostalis' zhivy" ("How We Remained Alive"), *Neva*, 1991, no. 1, p. 31.

⁵Likachev writes: "There were very many women who fed their children by taking the last necessary piece from their own mouths. These mothers would die first, and the child would be left alone." In "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," p. 15.

⁶See Dmitri V. Pavlov, *Leningrad v blokade*, 5th edition, Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1983. Pavlov was in charge of the Leningrad food supply during the siege. All citations are taken from the English translation of his book, *Leningrad 1941: The Blockade*, trans. John Clinton Adams, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 77.

⁷There are approximately 28 grams in one ounce. Thus 800 grams of bread is equivalent to roughly 1 3/4 pounds.

⁸Pavlov, *Leningrad 1941*, p. 49. It is estimated that the population of Leningrad at that time numbered around three million.

⁹⁹ This hierarchical Soviet system of rationing dates back to the Civil War period of 1919-21, when Petrograd endured widespread hunger: "There were three categories of ration cards. Manual workers received the first; intellectuals, artists, teachers, office workers, etc., received the second; and the parasites of society—housewives and old people, especially of bourgeois origin—received the third." Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Hunger as a Factor in Human Affairs*, trans. Elena P. Sorokin, Gainesville: The University Presses of Florida, 1975, p. xxxii. Sorokin's book offers a compelling analysis of the social and psychological effects of prolonged hunger.

¹⁰With the opening of a transport road across the frozen Lake Ladoga, limited supplies could finally be brought into the city, and on December 25 the bread ration was increased to 350 grams for factory workers, and 200 grams for all others. By February 11, 1942, the bread ration was restored to 500 grams for factory workers, 400 for office workers, and 300 for dependents and children. See Pavlov, *Leningrad 1941*, p. 79, for a chart detailing the fluctuating rations.

¹¹Pavlov, *Leningrad 1941*, p. 60.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 63. I have taken Pavlov's figures as the most authoritative, but according to other sources the composition of the bread was even worse. Harrison Salisbury writes that as of November 13 it contained "25 percent 'edible' cellulose." See Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege*

of Leningrad, New York: Avon Books, 1969, p. 449. In her memoirs, the writer Vera Inber describes the bread exhibit at the Museum of the Defense of Leningrad. The descriptive label under the bread listed the following ingredients: "Defective rye flour—50%, Salt—10%, Seed cake (*zhmykh*)—10%, Cellulose—15%, and 5% each of soy flour, flour dust, and bran." See Inber, "Pochti tri goda (Leningradskii dnevnik)" ("Almost Three Years [Leningrad Diary]"), Izbrannye proizvedeniia, vol. 3, Moscow: Gos. izd. Khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1958, p. 457.

¹³Inber, "Pochti tri goda," p. 457.

¹⁴Veronika Aleksandrovna Opakhova, in Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin, Blokadnaia kniga (A Book of the Blockade), Sankt-Peterburg: Pechatyni dvor, 1994, p. 11.

¹⁵V.S. Kostrovitskaia, in Primary Chroniclers: Women on the Siege of Leningrad. I am deeply grateful to Nina Perlina of Indiana University and Cynthia Simmons of Boston College for making available to me this important manuscript, an unpublished collection of women's memoirs about the siege, which they have meticulously translated and edited.

¹⁶Galina Vishnevskaya, Galina: A Russian Story, trans. Guy Daniels, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1984, p. 27.

¹⁷Nikolai Antonovich Loboda describes these loaves, stating that "you can pour water or whatever else you want into pans, but a round loaf will fall apart." In Blokadnaia kniga, p. 81.

¹⁸Ol'ga Grechina thus describes how she fed her dying mother. See Grechina, "Spasaius' spasaia" ("Saving Others, I Save Myself"), Neva 1994, no. 1, p. 236.

¹⁹The relentless cold drove some to desperation: "I [remember] walk[ing] along Zhukovskii Street. A building is burning. A woman with long, wild, red hair is passing by. She sees the fire and says, "Oh, warmth, fire!" She goes into the building and burns to death." Valentina Mikhailovna Golod, on "Tikhii dom" (The Quiet House"), a broadcast on the Russian television network ORT, February 10, 1999, 12:25 a.m.

²⁰Vera Inber states that even after filtering the water from the Karpovka River through eight layers of cheesecloth, it remained "terrible." Inber, "Pochti tri goda," pp. 298-99.

²¹Grechina, "Spasaius' spasaia," p. 238. See also Vishnevskaya, who writes: "We all went hungry together, but the men succumbed sooner than the women." Galina, p. 28.

²²The 900 Days, p. 436.

²³Lidia Ginzburg considers this instinct to endure atavistic. Writing of the long lines women waited in for food before setting off for work, she states: "Working women have inherited from their grandmothers and mothers time which is not taken into account. Their everyday lives do not allow that atavism to lapse. A man considers that after work he is entitled to rest or amuse himself; when a working woman comes home, she works at home. The siege queues were inscribed into an age-old background of things being issued or available, into the normal female irritation and the normal female patience." Lidia Ginzburg, "Blokadnyi dnevnik," Neva, 1984. All citations are from the English translation, Lidiya Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, trans. Alan Myers, London: The Harvill Press, 1995, p. 39.

²⁴Yulia Mendeleva, Director of the Leningrad Pediatric Institute during the siege, provides chilling statistics on infant health. Many babies born in 1942 were stillborn; the birth weight of those who lived was on the average over 600 grams (about 1 1/2 pounds) less than that of prewar infants, and their overall length decreased by 2 centimeters. Less than 1 per cent of the children admitted to the Institute during the siege were of normal weight; often they weighed three times less than they should have. Iuliia Aronovna Mendeleva in Primary Chroniclers.

²⁵E.I. Kochina, "Blokadnyi dnevnik," in Pamiat': Istoricheskii sbornik, vyp. 4, Moscow, 1979 and Paris, 1981, pp. 153-208. All citations are taken from the English translation, Elena Kochina, Blockade Diary, trans. Samuel C. Ramer, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990, p. 44.

²⁶Blokadnaia kniga, p. 290.

²⁷Elena Skriabina reports that *duranda* always caused heartburn. See Skriabina, V blokade (Dnevnik materi) (In the Blockade [A Mother's Diary]), Iowa City, 1964, p. 43.

²⁸Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, p. 63.

²⁹Blokadnaia kniga, p. 36.

³⁰Pavlov, Leningrad 1941, p. 64.

³¹See the description in Likhachev, "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," p. 17.

³²Pavlov provides daily caloric estimates for December, 1941, which are predicated on the availability of some meat, fats, grains, and sugar in the diet. He readily admits, however, that more often than not only bread was available. Even with the optimal, full norm of rations, the

daily caloric count for dependents (category 3, which included housewives) was only 466 calories. See Leningrad 1941, p. 122.

³³Information from Marianna Tsezarovna Shabat, Moscow, February 4, 1999.

³⁴In Blokadnaia kniga, p. 35.

³⁵Apparently, against all odds, a female zookeeper managed to keep the Leningrad zoo's beloved hippopotamus alive. See Blokadnaia kniga, p. 179.

³⁶See, for instance, Grechina, p. 239; Likhachev, p. 15; Salisbury, p. 550; Vishnevskaya, p. 28; Skriabina, p. 46; and Golod.

³⁷Sorokin writes: "Under the influence of hunger the whole field of consciousness comes to be filled with notions and ideas, and their complexes, which are directly or indirectly associated with food. They intrude into the field of consciousness, unexpected and uncalled for, and displace other notions and ideas, crowding them out of the mind, regardless of our will and even contrary to it." Hunger as a Factor in Human Affairs, p. 73.

³⁸Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, p. 43.

³⁹Grechina, "Spasaius' spasaia," p. 239.

⁴⁰The clumps of sweet black earth were processed into hard candies. "In taste the candy was reminiscent of the famous pre-Revolutionary candy Landrin [named after a French confectioner], a popular candy with a slightly bitter taste." See Blokadnaia kniga, p. 30.

⁴¹Leningrad 1941, p. 56.

⁴²The 900 Days, p. 546.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Blokadnaia kniga, p. 35.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 179.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁷Lidiia Ginzburg writes perceptively about this. See Blockade Diary, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁸Skriabina, V blokade, pp. 38-9.

⁴⁹Kochina, Blockade Diary, p. 55.

⁵⁰Likhachev's wife, Zina, was able to trade a dress for 1200 grams of *duranda* to help keep the family alive. "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," p. 13.

⁵¹Grechina, "Spasaius' spasaia," pp. 269-70.

⁵²Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, p. 9.

⁵³Lidiia Samsonovna Razumovskaia in Primary Chroniclers.

⁵⁴Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, p. 66.

⁵⁵Ol'ga Mikhailovna Freidenberg in Primary Chroniclers.

⁵⁶Leningrad 1941, p. 134.

⁵⁷Grechina, "Spasaius' spasaia," p. 256.

⁵⁸Likhachev, "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," p. 9.

⁵⁹Kochina, Blockade Diary, p. 57.

⁶⁰Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, p. 65.