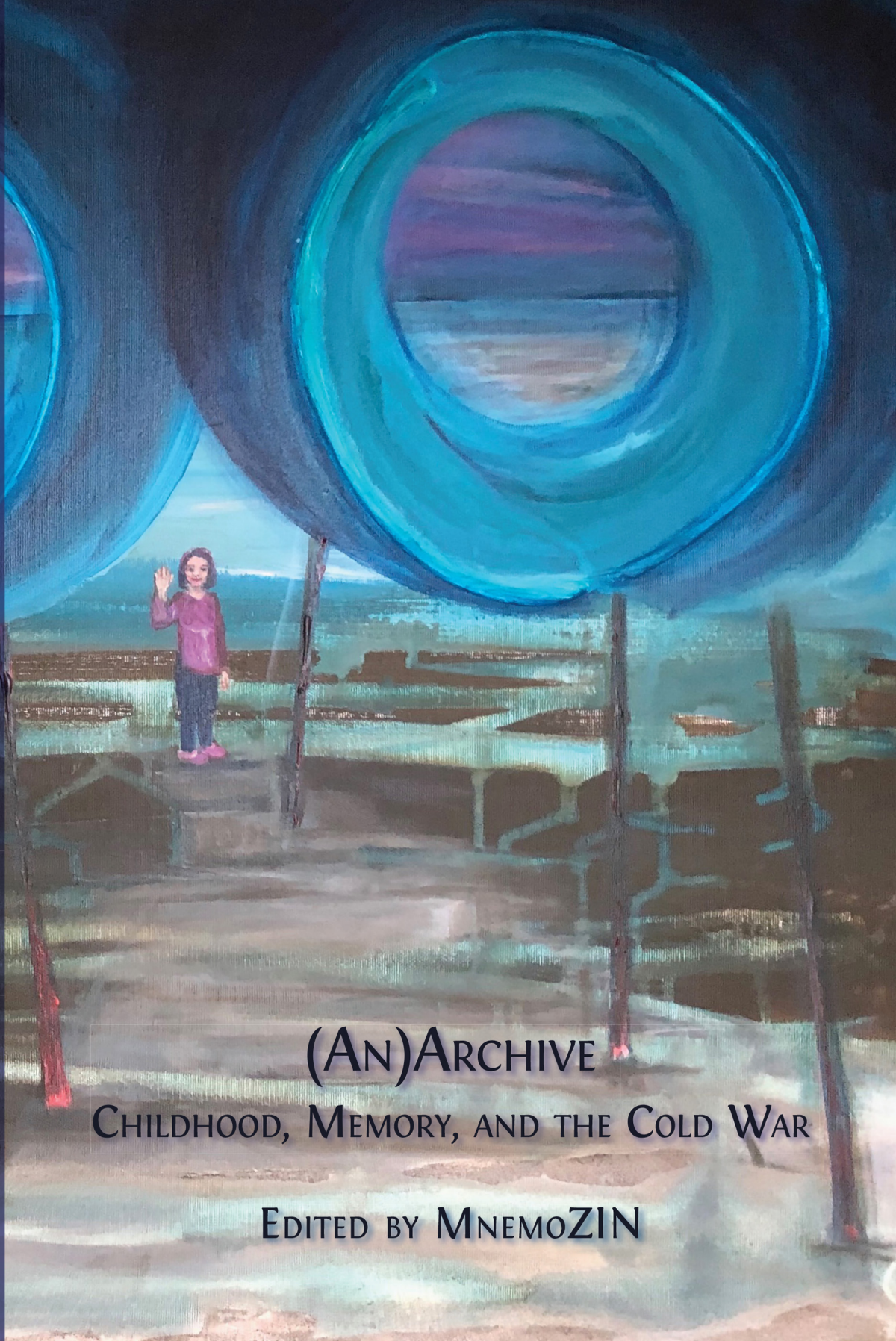

(An)Archive

Childhood, Memory, and the Cold War

Edited by MnemoZIN

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5. You Can't Go Home Again... Especially if You Have Never Had One

Madina Tlostanova

Starting from the premise that any childhood is existentially tragic, this fictionalised memory reflects on the last Soviet generation of children as a lost generation. This chapter is written as a memory stream based on free associations, and it dwells on the major leitmotifs and recurrent sensibilities that have shaped the author's experience as a member of this generation. Following her personal trajectory, the memory stream refers to the symbol of the vertical, to the sense of being lost both literally and symbolically, to specific ways and strategies of hiding in her own world and rejecting the outside reality. These personal paths combine with more general patterns of double consciousness and redoubling of the world that generated a cynical framework in its late-Soviet children's version: an urge to make their own escapist forms of alternative realities and internal emigration models in the decade just before *perestroika*. The chapter touches upon key late-Soviet oppositions that children of the 1970s learned to identify from early on in order to survive. It also considers the ethnic-racial and religious differences that affected the lost generation's internal erosive processes.

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I must go back to my childhood to die there.

Sergei Paradzhanov

Although there are dozens of sociological taxonomies attempting to divide recent generations, my gut feeling tells me that the last truly Soviet generation was the children born in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is a lost generation in the sense that we were born too late to manage to root ourselves in the dying Soviet system. Because this system collapsed precisely when we were entering adulthood, we did not have a chance to find a place within it, to become one of those who belonged, or to take the role of the 'janitors and night watchman' mentioned in Boris Grebenschikov's well-known song.[1] Yet, we were also born too early to adapt to the impending age of wild capitalism with its completely different value system. Stuck between the two epochs, this generation, with its diverse and most-unusual life trajectories, still shares a cynical and all-encompassing doublethink and doublesense. I refer not to the Orwellian (1949) understanding but, rather, to a very mundane expectation set by the lying that was so ubiquitous in the late-Soviet era—a feeling so viscerally represented in Vladimir Sorokin's (1994) nauseating *The Norm*. This enormous bunch of sickening lies penetrated everywhere, turning children into hypocrites that accurately predicted or, perhaps, felt what was acceptable or unacceptable to say and where. Such survival skills festered the young souls, burnt them from inside; they made us look for and create different escapes and outlets.

At the end of the Soviet regime, everyday life had almost lost the sticky fear and the sense of walking on the edge that characterised life in the Stalinist era. But instead, we were left with viscous despair and doom to which children learnt to adjust early on. Somewhere in the entangled knots of this double consciousness, of this false-bottomed world, we nourished a sense of homelessness, unsettlement, uprootedness and non-belonging, an alienation from the world, from the social context and from ourselves and our lives. Therefore, many of us are no strangers to restlessness and disidentification. From our earliest years, we became

1 'Generation of Janitors' from the album *Equinox* by Aquarium and Boris Grebenschikov (1987). See, for example, 'Поколение дворников', uploaded by Akvarium—Topic, 18 November 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mM35HDtrNQw

aliens in different ways and to different degrees, we have lived unsettled lives. Perhaps that is why my own and my contemporaries' memories so often focus on efforts to reconstruct, rebuild, and remodel a home space where we might feel a sense of inner peace and balance with the world. So, our childhood memories frequently repeat stories of various games based on the creation of alternative spaces or other worlds. As in many other childhoods, these spaces were often associated with freedom, however transient and secret. The wish, however, was not just for a freedom from the grown-up world of responsibilities, parental control, and boring duties; this is clear from the experience of our parents who often felt the same conflict and aversion. A major part of our lives—adults' and children's, material and spiritual—was expropriated by the rotting Soviet regime, and it is from this that we wished to be free. This is perhaps why we loved so much to 'play house' and to design different models of houses that allowed us to dream of other lives. Some children fashioned them with the help of curtains thrown over the backs of the chairs to create a semblance of a tent, others made small copies of real houses using different blocks and building kits. I could never become the architect my father once dreamed I might because I had absolutely no drawing talents and would not be able to pass the entrance exams to any architectural institute. Yet, the urge to design imaginary living spaces attracted me from very early on. In my peony-wall-papered nursery, there was never a single doll but instead lots of houses that I assembled from components of several GDR kits, following my own designer's fantasy rather than the attached specification. The building kit was supposed to imitate standardised socialist panel constructions, but I came up with non-symmetrical houses of varied heights with multiple balconies and terraces and sloping roofs, which looked completely different from the miserable lined-up, five-storied apartment complexes crowding the main streets of our town.

A kind of internal or psychical emigration is my first and foremost memory and sensibility. Somewhere towards the early teenage years it had channeled into the more conscious choice of future-life strategies that would let me avoid almost entirely any contacts with Soviet ideology and let me 'leak through' it into my imagined home, my imagined self. Later, this refusal to take any part in political life—a stance that was so typical for the late-Soviet intelligentsia and took the form of passive,

Bartleby-like protest, and that I interiorised through my family and environment—prevented me, for a while, from collaborating with critical Western colleagues. They, because of their completely different experience, were not allergic to ideology and politics in general; they genuinely believed that they were capable of really changing something through their struggle and, therefore, that it was worth engaging in and writing about.

But all that came later, after the incredibly long pre-*perestroika* childhood and the crisis years that left many of us in the situation of the 'minimal self' in its Soviet rather than the American version that Christopher Lasch (1985) would write about later in his controversial book *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. Nevertheless, in both cases, this self arose out of austerity and survival in crisis conditions wherein ordinary relations stopped working. It is a bare selfhood—one devoid of personal history, friends, a family, a sense of place. Our lost generation had lost this sort of settlement very early on, before we had managed to entirely shape our identifications and inclinations, and, hence, we looked for and created some substitutes instead.

Double existence had become so habitual and mundane by the 1970s that children were not even bothered by it, and it almost did not matter. Each of us quickly learnt to lie and pretend or, let us say, feed into the game everyone else was playing; we learnt to be actors and feel at home in this pervasive mimicry. Besides, the regime of the increasingly senile Brezhnev had, by then, largely replaced the previous massive bloody and deadly repressions with imprisonment, commitment to a psychiatric clinic, or exile. And yet, the double existence had its poisoning effect on every minute of our lives. Even the organisation of space in my own home displayed the same all-penetrating double logic, an array of confusing, contradictory messages that I never stopped to reflect upon but learnt to decipher intuitively. Take, for instance, our enormous home library that occupied the walls of all the rooms, including the hall, floor to ceiling, in our spacious and airy apartment. The library was strategically shelved by my mother with the same duality in mind. The upper, unreachable shelves carried pre-revolutionary and foreign-published books; sometimes soiled, home-bound typewritten texts borrowed for one night. At eye level, one could admire lavish art albums that had been printed abroad, the tastefully designed translations of so-called foreign

literature, and some selective Russian classics. My father's solid and corpulent Soviet editions of the complete works of Lenin, Hegel, and Marx were exiled to the bottom, invisible shelves. Was this arrangement a reflection of our ideological preferences? Perhaps.

Sometimes, one could spot on one of the middle shelves a brightly coloured propagandistic book denouncing a famous dissident in a catchy title, while, on the invisible top shelf, this very dissident's half-blind texts were carefully nested away from an accidental guest's notice. We treasured many Soviet books that denounced various 'bourgeois cultural phenomena' such as modernist and generally non-realistic styles in art, cinema, or literature, because it was from these books that we could get at least some information about and some usually bad-quality images of the artists and cultural phenomena that was otherwise inaccessible to us. Thus, second hand, via the cautious Soviet critics, we often acquired knowledge and awareness of a cultural world beyond what was usually possible to read or see. In my earliest childhood, I loved to sit under the large, glass-covered coffee table, slowly leafing through enormous colourful albums of impressionists, Bosch, Chagall—all brought from abroad. But not only that. Among my favourites were also the ridiculous but well-illustrated books by Soviet critic Kukarkin that were published with remarkable regularity and invariably denounced the bourgeois mass culture (Kukarkin 1985). Equipped with politically correct introductions by Yakovlev, the future ideological architect of *Perestroika*, the texts of these mediocre books did not give any food for thought. But I was enormously attracted by the reproductions of pop art and abstract-impressionist works they contained and, most of all, by the many stills from Western horror films and thrillers, which were out of reach of the ordinary Soviet people in that pre-video-player era. These stills were always accompanied by indignant authorial comments such as 'The characters of the horror films have different faces for every taste, or rather, for any type of psychopathology' (Kukarkin 1985, p. 417), but the author was clearly enjoying his taxonomy of Western cinema monsters. Already then, I noticed that Viy and the witch—characters from the technologically naïve and clumsy Soviet horror film based on a story by Nikolai Gogol—were really different from the aliens, vampires, and zombies depicted in Kukarkin's books. For one thing, Pannochka (the witch) and Viy were much scarier. I remembered this very well from

watching the film in the local, gloomy movie theatre 'Victory'. The place itself perhaps added to the horror affect. It left a strange impression of incongruence: the vaguely constructivist compact building dissonated with a set of oversized imperial columns attached to its façade and two disproportionately large, ominously realistic human figures adorning its roof (these, it turns out, were early works by a future famous Canadian sculptor Leo Mol [Leonid Molodozhanin]). Did all of this induce cognitive dissonances in my growing mind? Hardly so. Rather, it taught me to easily incorporate into my worldview quite different, eclectic, and at times contradictory things.

Pinning onto my white starched apron a 'Little Octobrist' star—mine was a plastic, cherry-coloured one with a black-and-white photograph of an angelic Lenin instead of the more-common orange metal ones—I could not help imagining a different face, one of the senile Lenin with crazy, hollow eyes that I had seen in some book that belonged to my parents. Yet, it felt almost normal to stand in the militarised school line and observe all of the nonsense with which we were fed. This situation multiplied and repeated again and again. After lessons were over, I used to go to a music school, which was based in an old merchant's house that survived the years of massive Soviet construction. My choir class met in its former ceremonial hall—one frequented by the ghosts of the ex-owners who were probably executed in their own yard so that I could almost hear the rustle of their fluffy skirts. The choirmaster made us sing mostly hideous Soviet songs, such as 'Love, Komsomol, and the Spring'. However, as soon as she was called to quickly answer the phone in some far away teachers' room, I would immediately jump to the tall 'Red October' piano and start playing and singing Edit Piaf's 'Hymne à l'amour' to the utter delight of my choirmates.

My childhood, like so many others, was also full of dread. This phase of life is seldom discussed in such grim terms, perhaps because what follows on from it is so often a transition from bad to worse. So, we apply an illusion of happiness to at least the start of our lives. I believe, though, that childhood is the most hopelessly tragic time in any life. It opens up an existential abyss that is hard to overcome because, as Sergei Paradzhanov (2004) so graphically put it, 'from the balcony of one's childhood', everything is seen too seriously, too irrevocably. In my particular childhood, the external social world was extremely

and permanently hostile, and this hostility only acquired additional overtones, nuances, and depths as I grew older. Hence, it was necessary and, in fact, lifesaving to keep this world at a distance at all times. Yet, what I also remember as a leitmotif of my childhood sensibility was a discordance of feeling. My moods and dispositions would quickly change from absolute grief to joy and then boredom and back. This intense psychic fluidity was a contrast to the deadening slowness and stillness of time that was controlled by invisible machines of power disciplining human lives. It was the time of the dying empire, creaking with all its ungreased gears. But, then, I was not aware of it. My childhood world so easily switched from major to minor, from beautiful to ugly and scary, from the safety and nonchalant freedom of the cosy old flat to the treacherous threatening falsity of public spaces and institutions.

The outside world was non-homogenous and diverse and, in its turn, was divided into more and less hostile spaces. For instance, there was a clear difference between the provincial world and that of the cultural capital, between different spaces inside and outside, beyond the Soviet borders, at its borderlands, and even within them. And one learned quickly to differentiate all the nuances between Armenia and Estonia, between Moscow and Sofia, Leningrad and Dresden. The frequent trips to various places, including several socialist countries in Eastern Europe, were always tastes of freedom and temporary liberation from the drag of my habitual double existence. But they were short. And one had to return to the well-ordered and sluggish childhood life. My first sixteen years were spent in what was conventionally referred to as a provincial place, but this North Caucasus province was not very calm, boring, or culturally impoverished. In some elements, it even outstripped Moscow; it had its own musical, theatrical, and literary underground—one to which I had access from very early childhood thanks to my mother. This was not, however, the kind of province that Brodsky (2010) recommended when writing, 'If you were destined to be born in the Empire, it's best to find some province, by the ocean' (para. 4 of 9). No ocean was nearby, although pale vacationers flocked anyway to our town in the summer months from all over the Soviet Union. With their trade-union vouchers in hand and plans in mind to spend twenty-four days at a sanatorium or a spa hotel, they used to ask the local people in the street: 'Could you tell us, please, what is the way

to the sea?' Once, I answered very seriously that they should follow the famous hiking route through the mountains that would take them first to the 'blue lakes', then along Cherek River to the glacier Shtulu, and finally to the Gezevtsek Pass, which is the easiest way to get to Georgia. And then, I added, you just go down to the mountain resort Shovi to take a bus to Kutaisi or Poti. There you have your Black Sea. 'It would take you a week!' This I had to shout after the frightened holidaymakers as they retreated to their usual peaceful mineral water 'drinking paths'.[2]

Our late-Soviet province was not that backwards, it was still penetrable. Seeds of another life, other voices, came through; bits of entirely non-Soviet trajectories and unbelievable nodes of forgotten histories and erased memories suddenly emerged in the measured space of the congealing Soviet existence that was rapidly turning already then into a decoration, a theatrical set ready to gather dust in some warehouse or on a museum shelf. Meanwhile, life turned out to be much broader and more multifaceted than its allowed external manifestations. Perhaps the most crucial and disturbingly persistent sensibility of my childhood was the everyday inevitable struggle with the dichotomy of the same and the other, of belonging and exclusion. I had no universal key to solve this problem and sometimes it led to amusing mistakes.

One of them I remember quite well, although I was not yet four years old. In the early spring, when the sun shines so ruthlessly but the snow still lies around in sloppy, thick patches, I was standing in line with my mother in the bakery that was on the ground floor of our apartment complex. As always happens in small towns, we bumped into an acquaintance—a professor of pathology from the medical school of the local university. But I was soon distracted from her strange, fixed gaze. I had noticed some weird-looking, unfamiliar, high-and-narrow cakes and asked my mother to get me one. Strangely, my mother refused to buy it, and she whispered that it was an Easter bread and that we

2 'Drinking paths' were a local slang used to define the ways connecting sanatoriums and multiple mineral water springs located throughout the resort area. Holidaymakers were routinely prescribed to take mineral water from different springs several times per day depending on their ailments. These people could be immediately distinguished from the locals as they busily followed the drinking paths, often sloppily dressed between different sanatorium treatments.

did not need it at all. I peered closer at the strange bread that had immediately become much more interesting and mysterious and read aloud its tag: 'spring fruitcake'. Like many children, I used to read out every bit of text I saw. My mother whispered again, 'They only say that it is fruitcake but, in fact, it is an Easter bread. I will explain it to you later'. But I was already moving forward and continued reading out loud the inscriptions on all the cardboard boxes that were stacked in the corner of the shop. One of them, for some reason, did not make any sense; it refused to form any word no matter how hard I tried: 'Uedeta?' 'Rotgauipu?'[3]

The pathologist, with her typical soft sarcasm, asked me: 'So you have not mastered the Latin alphabet yet, have you?' I proudly replied: 'I read only in Soviet.' This comment was a product of the internal contradictions and the unstable divisions of same/other that, already then, excluded me and made me an alien in any cultural group, even in this, my presumably native, space. At barely four years of age, I already knew that we were not Russian but Soviet, that our country was the USSR and not Russia, and that I myself was not Russian even though Russian was my native language. Why is something I would figure out only later. Moreover, if the inscriptions were printed on cardboard boxes imported from abroad, then texts on those produced in the USSR should, indeed, have been called Soviet and not Russian. So formally, politically, what I had said was all correct. Except it was not. Theatrical Soviet multiculturalism stumbled in the face of this Easter bread: it had been renamed a fruitcake in a presumably secular bakery in a Muslim republic as the enforced use of the Russian language and alphabet suppressed any internal diversity and usurped its external representation. What I had yet to learn, then, was what to do when the language is Russian but the culture is Soviet and if, in all of these intersections, there was still a place for me.

The Caucasus itself was perhaps the most important element of the lighter side of my childhood. It smelled sweet and pungent, and it offered astounding colours and tastes. The small town of my childhood was surrounded on all sides but one by the unbelievable beauty of the high mountains. How I miss this Caucasian vertical from my present

3 Attempts at reading the words 'Vegeta' and 'Potraviny' as if they were written in Russian/Cyrillic.

place in Nordic Europe, with its flat and meagre landscape. Yet, this verticality had its own dark dimension—one strangely connected in my perception with an early realisation of the flow of time, not my own, but historical. I was no more than five. I remember a strange sensation of the trees and thick bushes of the mountain forest slowly going vertically upwards and disappearing from the frame of my vision while we gradually descended from the alpinist camp where my family liked to go from time to time. Our 'Volga'[4] with passengers on board, was slowly descending, laid up on the old vehicle elevator at the Doctor's Mountain Pass,[5] the elevator travelled very slowly, creating the impression in my impatient childish perception that we were crawling down endlessly. And then, the beautiful but monotonous landscape was interrupted by two human figures right next to the side window of our car. They were slowly struggling down the narrow staircase on the right side of the elevator. A man and a woman. Very old. Both were breathing hard, and it was somehow immediately clear that they were foreigners—anyone in the Soviet Union, including the small children, could immediately tell foreigners from locals.

My mother mused, 'I wonder how they managed to climb up in the first place? It is way too steep!' My father asked for the elevator to be stopped and, opening the window, inquired in the only foreign language he could speak a little of, which was German, if they were fine and if they wanted to 'ride' in our car instead of walking. Surprisingly, the white-headed and blue-eyed old lady answered him in German: 'We came to visit our son's grave. He served in the 'Edelweiss'.[6] And then

4 'Volga' or GAZ-24 is a famous Soviet car that was manufactured by the Gorky Automobile Plant (GAZ) from 1970 to 1985.

5 Doctor's Mountain Pass is a jokey name for the high vertical rock at the beginning of the Adyr-Su gorge that is necessary to climb to get to the actual gorge where two alpinist camps have functioned for many decades. Visitors to these camps invented the name to convey the idea that anyone who can manage this pass should be given a doctor's approval to become a mountain climber. The place is famous by its unique vehicle elevator which was constructed in the 1960s to bring cars and vans to the plateau top. The vehicles are placed on the large platform which moves along the rails up and down based on the funicular principle. Passengers are asked to leave their cars and use the 360 steps staircase on the side of the elevator.

6 The name refers to 'operation Edelweiss', a plan by the German Wehrmacht during World War II to gain control over the entire Caucasus, thereby capturing the oil fields, cutting off the Soviet army from strategic resources, and preparing the foothold for the future attacks in the Middle East and Asia. Fierce battles took place at many mountain passes in 1942, and German regiments did not manage to

she froze as if waiting to be rebuked. According to the safety rules, the passengers had to leave the car while it was transported up and down on the elevator and use the narrow staircase on the side. But that time the vehicle elevator had to endure, along with the heavy 'Volga', an additional five adults and myself. My father beckoned them inside as I held the following conversation with my mother:

> Mom, and why is their son buried here?
>
> He fought and he was killed.
>
> When?
>
> In 1942, just as your grandfather.
>
> You mean they are fascists?
>
> No, they are Germans, and they are parents whose son was killed in the war.

I was silent and brooding while we continued moving down at a snail's pace. It occurred to me that the war, which had managed to bronze itself into monuments and Soviet apocrypha, took place so long ago. Yet that 'long ago' shattered into pieces when I looked at the old man and woman who were sitting in our car as if nothing had happened. Then I realised that only thirty-something years had passed since the war ended. 'They were enemies?'—I hesitated—'no, even worse, they were the enemy's parents'. But my mother repeated, 'They came to visit their son's grave. There are many such graves around. Heavy fighting took place here.'

I do not know how to combine this 'heavy fighting' with the festive Caucasus of my childhood. The setting was far from ideal, but it had sunny and hot summers when one had to take the shady side of the street not to get burnt. It had long, dry, and breath-taking autumns, the astounding beauty of which was interrupted only by the annoying necessity of going back to school. Our small town had a marvellous spa-and-resort suburb with a huge old park, cosy hills, and beautiful lakes; it was full of fruit trees gone wild or, perhaps, that had once been grafted

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get to Transcaucasia. Subsequent events in Stalingrad and elsewhere led to Hitler's decision to order the troops to retreat, and the North Caucasus was soon recaptured by the Soviet army.

according to the old Circassian technique.[7] Here and there, one could find wooden mansions in the eclectic, intricate, provincial art-nouveau style; these were later remade into summer houses for the communist-party elite, kindergartens, sanatoriums, and Soviet institutions. There were so many things there that, later, completely disappeared from my life: the huge and extremely sweet watermelons that were left to cool in the cold water of mountain rivers at every picnic, the endemic fear of mosquitoes (oh, that horrendous Caucasus malaria!), the appallingly deep sounds of some Eurasian water bird that was spending its winters in the swampy valleys of the Caucasus, the spread-out mulberry tree in the nearby street of adobe houses, the old tree that perennially blackened the pavement underneath it with abundant fragrant berries, the sense of utmost calmness and unity with the universe while swiftly slaloming down the gentle Elbrus slope under the just-starting snowfall all by myself, and the pungent taste of wild medlar. There was also a trembling and seemingly unsafe chairlift which made its way over the old park. This long-unused chairlift that remains in place for lack of resources to dismantle it, often visits me in my dreams. I think it is that state of being in between heaven and earth so literally embodied in a small, rusted chair that attracts me so much; it is my most organic condition, for I am a bird whose home is where it sings its song.[8] I sing my songs for the loved ones and since there are no left, I have no home anymore.

As a strange, human version of a cat who likes to crawl into narrow enclosed spaces with a controlled entrance, such as a box or a bag, the child me loved my own room as a space where I could hide from the double reality, at least for a while. Mine was the only room in our apartment that had a solid white door with no glass panels, through which it could have been possible to look inside. My privacy was strongly protected by this heavy oak door and by my own fantasies. Falling asleep and slowly waking up, I liked to trace the designs on the

7 In pre-colonial times, Circassians developed a culture of forest gardens in which they not only cultivated certain edible plants in the wild forest but also grafted the wild plants found in the woods with domesticated ones. Their idea was to create a paradise on Earth where everyone would always find fruit to satiate their hunger. After colonisation, most of the forest gardens were destroyed, abandoned, or cut down.

8 This is from an Uzbek proverb about a quail. There is a tradition of quail-song competitions organised by the bird-owners.

peach-coloured wallpaper painted with impressionistic peonies that looked pale and withered. I have never slept better than on my parents' huge, old, 1960s ottoman that was put in my nursery when I turned three. I could not live without my old and simple record player and my vinyl records. These included 'Radio Nanny',[9] little flexible blue disks that came in the popular magazine *Krugozor* [The Outlook] and played 'melodies and rhythms of the foreign variety music',[10] and my favourite green disk 'The Bremen Musicians' with Muslim Magomayev[11] astonishingly singing all parts except the princess.

The best thing ever was to get sick and stay home alone. It was such a wonderful, feverish excuse to avoid the public spaces of the Soviet country—kindergartens, schools, and, a few times, even the pioneer camps where my parents tried to send me, hoping in vain to teach me some collectivism so that I could survive later. My rejection of school had nothing to do with studies or learning as such but with the school itself, its atmosphere of control and discipline, all-penetrating falseness and cynical demagogy, humiliation, and restriction of freedoms. The very time that moves so slowly when you are a child was being devoured in large chunks by the meaningless abyss of school that I hated honestly and wholeheartedly from the beginning to the end. Therefore, my enormous ottoman with a dozen pillows, a small mountain of books, and a vase of fruit was such a desirable alternative. Oh, the books! They were always around, and they could change everything. Yet, it was not clear at all how to leave this book world for the real one with its unknown laws and enigmatic characters called people. To complicate things even more, most of the books I used to read as a child were not Russian or Soviet. They were translations of world literature, some but not all of which was written specifically for children. When my illness would take over me and my eyes closed, I would start inventing endless stories about myself in the future, playing out different life scenarios. None of these came true. When, during *perestroika*, my parents finally changed the

9 Radio Nanny was a Soviet educational program for elementary school children produced by the all-union radio station. The broadcasts, which continued for almost twenty years, were released on vinyl disks.

10 *Krugozor* was a Soviet literary and musical magazine with flexi-discs which was published from 1964 to 1993. The Soviet audiences eagerly awaited each new issue because they hoped to get some new recordings of popular music from elsewhere in the world that was otherwise hard to find in the USSR.

11 Muslim Magomayev was one of the most famous and beloved Soviet pop and opera singers in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

old furniture in my room to a new set, it became a different space, and I felt that my home had been taken away from me. I could not imagine that it was only my first, small rehearsal of losing a home, of parting with, in fact, saying goodbye to a notion of belonging somewhere, anywhere at all.

In the endlessly multiplying and complicating opposition of sameness and otherness, a very specific child's stumbling point is the everlasting fear of getting lost. My experience varied depending on the situation of the internal or external alien space and on the degree of existential alienation it evoked. When I was seven, for example, I lost my way in a new neighbourhood in Varna. We were visiting our Bulgarian friends, and I begged my mom to let me sneak out to get an exotic—or so it seemed to a Soviet child—raspberry ice-cream. Although I did not know where to go, at first, I was not even scared. I was peeking into the windows of indistinguishable block houses until I spotted what seemed to be an exactly identical living room to the one I had left half an hour ago. It was, indeed, the same room with the same furniture and a set of the same adult heads and one curly child's—could it be mine? Did it mean I was there and, at the same time, looking at myself from the outside? Or, was I not me?

Being lost could also have a strange biopolitical aftertaste. When I was ten or eleven, my mother took me to Moscow during the winter break. While she was doing her medical examinations at the oncological centre, she managed to get tickets for me and the daughter of her old friend to attend the so-called Kremlin New-Year matinee called, simply, 'Yolka'.[12] Tickets for this performance, as with so many other things in the Soviet Union, were extremely hard to get. My memory has not retained any traces of the miserable New Year show or the taste of candy from the 'gift' that was packed in a weird, red-plastic Russian cottage.[13] What I will always remember, though, is the frozen Kremlin yard to which several thousand children were taken immediately after the performance at the Kremlin State Palace. It was very dark and cold. Only several spotlights were illuminating the yard. In its centre, the militia men cordoned off a large circle, putting up some barricades to prevent thousands of parents from entering. Then, they let the children walk

12 Yolka, the Russian word for 'spruce', is a colloquial, metonymic compression used to name a matinee organised usually for children around the New Year holidays.

13 Gift, here, refers to a standard, nicely packed set of candy and fruit that children traditionally receive at the 'Yolka'. Most were packed in plastic bags, but rarer sets came in hard plastic containers in the form of houses, rockets, and Kremlin towers.

around the circle, periodically chasing us with loud orders. Parents were calling their children's names when they thought they spotted their child among hundreds of others. We walked faster and faster, hoping that, any second, we would be found, we would be definitely found. Then, it would be possible to leave this children's flock as it marched obediently to an unknown but sinister fate. Many youngsters were crying. A couple of smaller ones slipped on the ice and fell into the snow. Yet, the militia men were standing around the outside of the circle, as if guarding children from their parents. At first, we were focused and serious; our eyes feverishly searched for moms, dads, grannies. Well into our third lap, we started to panic. Grown-ups, looking out from behind the militia men's backs, hollered discordantly in hoarse, almost hysterical voices: 'Misha! Katya! Natasha! Vasya! Dima!' Yet, no one seemed to be found. I even wondered for a moment if they paired us with the wrong set of parents. Tall and strong men forced their way to the first row, pushing the weaker mothers and grandmothers away. Shorter adults could not squeeze in at all. When we went into the fourth lap, I thought that we would never be picked up. Perhaps our parents just failed to come and collect us, but why? My imagination was drawing a terrible picture: the militia men would take us to an orphanage where we, those unclaimed by our parents, would solemnly check in and never leave. I could almost sense the smell of trouble, the horror of communal existence, the bedside tables shared by ten people, the open shower cabins and toilet stalls, the indescribably rancid taste of larvae-infested soup, and the rough surface of faded bedding that had known too many tenants. At this point, I lingered a bit and the close-by militia man immediately yelled: 'Get a move on! Don't stop!' The Kremlin yard made one feel decidedly uncomfortable. One could clearly feel here the clanking of the power's gears—one wrong step, and you are under its treads. And then, we were found! My mother's friend, who came to pick us up but could not see from behind the taller people in front, started calling to us in a very loud voice. She did not shout her own daughter's name, which was a common one in Moscow in the early 1980s. Instead, she shouted my strange and obviously not-Russian appellation, correctly sensing that I was probably the only one there who was called so.

Like many years ago, I am sitting in a small, red, wooden chair with a white number—38—on its back. The chair is slowly moving almost

vertically up through the air, slightly vibrating as it passes the towers of the chairlift system and periodically freezing up between heaven and earth. It is a different chairlift in a different country, and it is perhaps the best realisation of the state of unsettlement that has become my real authentic 'home' ever since I can remember. In my old mobile phone, there is still a contact 'Dom' [Home]. But now, there is no one there, and there cannot be if I am not there myself. I cannot call myself, or can I? And it is not a home anymore. It is time to change this incongruous name for something else, for instance, 'my old number' or, perhaps, give it some nickname or literary pseudonym. Against all odds, however, one humid and cold April night, my telephone rang. On its screen, the caller-ID read 'Dom'. I froze, but when my finger finally swiped with some delay on the green receiver, I could make out only some strange, almost-inaudible rustling and static silence on the other end of the line. I felt the stillness and emptiness of the dusty, abandoned not-a-home-anymore, where I cannot go back to just as I cannot return to my vanished childhood. This time, my vertical movement is upwards, as in the imagined scene of Sergei Paradzhanov's unfinished last film *A Confession*. In it, his dead ancestors, whose graves were destroyed to build a city park, become unsettled and run to the famous Tbilisi funicular to head to its upper station as a symbol of their ultimate ascension. And I am thinking once again of the exile from childhood as our first home and of the ways we can or cannot return there in order to die and be buried by our restless spirits—ancestral or not.

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