My Stalingrad Childhood

A memoir
by Edward Ochagavia

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Edward Ochagavia was born in Stalingrad (now Volgograd) in 1937. His father, an American of Spanish/Basque origin, had in 1923 accepted an invitation to serve for one year in the Soviet Union as a specialist engineer, and afterwards stayed-on. The family remained in the city during the early stages of the 1942-43 Battle of Stalingrad, and later became refugees on the steppe. After the war, Edward moved with his parents to the small town of Liepaja in Latvia, where he completed his schooling. He then studied at the Leningrad medical school, subsequently working for 12 years as a doctor and research scientist before emigrating to the UK in 1974. He then worked in the BBC Russian Service as a broadcaster and as editor of the Your Health radio journal for almost 25 years.

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My Stalingrad Childhood

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The Battle of Stalingrad raged from 23rd August 1942 to 2nd February 1943. When the battle began, the five-year-old Edward Ochagavia was living in the city with his father (an American immigrant), mother, and grandmother. This is his story.

'Memories are the height of poetry, when they are the memories of the keenest happiness or excruciating pain, when they reopen old wounds...' Ivan Goncharov; 'Oblomov' (tr. Stephen Pearl)

Whereas World War II began for the British in September 1939, for us in the Soviet Union it started in June 1941. The German army reached Stalingrad, on the Volga River, a year later, in the summer of 1942.

The famous battle at Stalingrad was a huge psychological turning point in the Second World War. It would not be an exaggeration to say it changed the course of the war by destroying the myth of German invincibility.

Many books have been written about the battle and several films made. One of the most famous novels from my point of view is Life and Fate by Vassily Grossman. Grossman was based in Stalingrad as a war correspondent for a Soviet newspaper, Red Star. He describes in powerful ways the struggle, the life and sufferings of the people – civilians and troops – during the period of the Battle of Stalingrad.

Even more famous in Britain is the book Stalingrad by the historian Antony Beevor. His work is remarkable in its detailed military descriptions of the titanic struggle between two armies and the regimes behind them, Stalin's and Hitler's.

My family found itself in Stalingrad at that time. How did that come about? It's a long story, but I will try to make it short.

My father, Lawrence Ochagavia, was an American engineer of Spanish/Basque origin born in 1890. In 1923, at the invitation of the Russian government, he went to Soviet Russia along with quite a few other foreign specialists. They were offered a one year contract to help rebuild Soviet industry, destroyed by the Revolution and Civil War.

Needless to say, many of these men had pro-Soviet sympathies. My father's American trade-union and the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia paid for his travel to Russia and his stay for the first year.

His first assignment was in Kemerovo, a Siberian coal-mining city, where he was in charge of maintaining the mine-shaft lift equipment. As his Russian was non-existent (it remained broken for the rest of his life), he had a personal interpreter.

After that year, he was asked to stay in Russia for longer, because his experience was needed in other fields. He agreed and was sent to Dnepropetrovsk in the Ukrainian SSR, to work at the pipe-rolling factory, which produced large diameter pipes, probably for the oil and gas industry. There he stayed for another four years and it was during this period that he met a young lady, Nina Zelenskaya, whom he soon married.

In 1928 his first child, a daughter, my half-sister, was born. She was named Natalia in memory of my father's sister, who remained in America. My father called Natalia 'Tala' for short, and she became known as Tala to everyone in the family.

The following year, in 1929, my father was invited to work at the Stalingrad Tractor Works, a new tractor plant desperately needing technological specialists. The new family moved to Stalingrad.

At first my father was responsible for training new workers; he later became head of the tools department. According to his memoirs, he worked long hours and was very dedicated. Thanks to many innovative ideas that he put forward, he was instrumental in 1931 in creating the first Soviet wheeled tractor. This tractor was part of the May Day parade in Stalingrad the same year.

In recognition of his contribution, Lawrence Ochagavia received several awards, including the 'Stalin Prize', the first Soviet-produced car, a GAZ (Горьковский автомобильный завод – Gorky Automobile Plant).

1 The anglicized form of the Ukrainian spelling of the city's name was Dnepropetrovsk. In 2016 the city was renamed simply Dnipro.
Edward Ochagavia’s Stalingrad Childhood

In 1934-1936 the Stalingrad Tractor Works changed to producing tractors on caterpillar tracks. By then my father was working almost exclusively on tractor engines, which would later be installed in tanks too. Tanks for the Soviet army, including the famous T-34, were later produced by this factory.

It was for this contribution that he was awarded the highest civilian award at that time, the Geroi Truda or Hero of Labour, and not a day passed without his name being mentioned in the local newspaper, Stalingradskaya Pravda.

With his innovative ideas, hard and dedicated work ethic, Lawrence Ochagavia became a very popular specialist at the Stalingrad Tractor Works (Stalingradskii Traktorny Zavod or STZ). Life was good, but in all this his personal life suffered considerably. Nina, his wife, was a very different person from him. They had different interests and she was, I gather, emotionally unstable. But he loved his daughter, Tala, and she him, and he often took her to the plant, where she would spend some hours in his and his colleagues’ company.

The relationship with Nina became increasingly strained and around this time Lawrence met Anna Lobanova, who worked in the book-keeping office of the tractor plant. Anna was a young, beautiful and intelligent woman of equable temperament, and Lawrence inevitably fell in love with her. Soon he divorced Nina and in 1936 married Anna Lobanova. I was the result of their union, being born in April 1937. Father called me Edward (anglicized Russian, Eduard), this time in memory of one of his brothers remaining in the USA.

What a year to be born in the Soviet Union! It was precisely at this time that Stalin initiated a campaign of mass purges under the guise of fighting ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and enemies of the people. The educated classes, the ‘intelligentsia’ and the ‘working intelligentsia’ were also the target of these purges and killings. As Vasily Grossman accurately described that period in *Life and Fate*, it was a ‘time of cruel violence against the individual and his human rights’.

My father, as a foreign specialist, must have come under particular suspicion during that terrifying period. By then, he had become head of research at the Construction and Experimental Department (R&D), working on new tractor engines. This department soon afterwards became high security, with limited personnel access. As a consequence, a strange episode happened to Lawrence.

One morning – as my mother told me in later years – father went as usual to the tractor factory. To his surprise, he found he was locked out, banned from entering the R&D department. His enquiries at the works administration came to nothing.

A month or so later he was summoned to the Stalingrad office of the NKVD, where he was questioned. The officer’s first question was: ‘What was the purpose of your coming to the Soviet Union?’

Amazed at such a question after nearly 15 years of working in the country, Lawrence replied that he couldn’t understand the question and said: ‘The Russian authorities invited me to help rebuild the country’s industry’.

A pause ensued… Unexpectedly the investigating officer put his hand-gun on the desk in front of Lawrence and left the room…

What was the motive behind this action? My father could only guess: ‘To scare me, perhaps?’

After about 20 minutes the officer returned and said to Lawrence: ‘Do you know that our specialists have produced an engine according to your design, but it doesn’t work!’

My father’s reply was that he had been denied access to his project for more than a month, that he would need to get back, see the engine and find out what was wrong with it.

Soon afterwards, Lawrence was allowed to return to the
tractor works to prove that his engine did work. It turned out that the engine had been incorrectly built. A week or so later, having corrected the faults, Lawrence invited all the relevant people along, including the NKVD representative, and successfully fired-up the engine in front of their eyes.

The same day he was re-admitted to his project and was allowed to go home and rejoin his family after a strange month of enforced absence from the tractor factory.

Up until the end of 1940, my father continued his work, coming up with a number of innovations. These included a proposal to build a gas turbine engine for tractors and tanks. This new project was supported by a group of different specialists at the Stalingrad tractor works and was presented to the Ministry of Defence, including the minister, K E Voroshilov, the People’s Commissar of Defence (Narkom Oborony) at that time.

At the end of 1940, Lawrence was invited to Moscow by the Ministry for the Engineering Industry to work at the newly-opened car factory in the Taganka district named ‘KIM’. In April 1941 he moved there with my half-sister Tala, who was by then 13 years old. The rest of our family (my mother, my maternal grandmother and me) were left behind in Stalingrad, waiting for Lawrence to be allocated an apartment for the family in Moscow, whereupon we would move there; but this never happened.

On 22nd June 1941, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. For a whole year my family was separated from my father. We stayed in Stalingrad; he remained in Moscow.

During that year his car factory in Moscow was evacuated to the Urals, but my father didn’t go there because he wanted to get back to his family. Stalingrad was still in the rear zone of the war at that time. Father was responsible for the evacuation of his tool department, and that was the main reason he stayed in Moscow. In war-time you had to obtain a special permission from the NKVD to leave the city.

Only in June 1942 did he and Tala manage, with great difficulty, to return to Stalingrad. On his return from Moscow, Lawrence sold his car, which he didn’t use much anyway. After the sale, he put the money (more than 20,000 roubles) into the ‘Fund for the Defence of Stalingrad’.

In late June, German war planes began sporadically bombing Stalingrad. The authorities implemented a hurried evacuation to the Urals of the main industrial factories. Unfortunately, the evacuation of the civilian population, and in particular the families of the tractor plant workers, was delayed, probably because that was not at the time considered a priority. The evacuation of civilians only started – in a panic – when the German bombings increased.

At the end of July, a whole train-load of people was due to leave Stalingrad, but the Germans somehow found out and bombed the railway tracks leading out of the city and the train itself. My family was on board this train, which got hit just after it had started.

All the people rushed out of the carriages and ran for cover in the open steppe.

As a child of almost six, I remember well how my mother, father and granny desperately looked for somewhere to hide from the machine gun-fire of the German fighter planes. We found a gully, and my father, together with some other men, looked for branches, tumbleweed bushes, bits of wood, anything to cover the gully.

It was my first experience and is my first memory of real war. I remember a German plane flying very low over us, maybe diving, and firing its machine gun. It was so close I distinctly saw the pilot’s face with his goggles on.
My mother covered my face with her hand and said to me: ‘Edik, close your eyes!’ Being curious and mischievous, I still looked through the fingers of her hand.

The bullets missed us and after a while all went quiet. We climbed out of our makeshift shelter and walked back to our apartment in Stalingrad.

After our failed official evacuation and return home, we spent most of August in the apartment, or the bomb shelter in the basement of the house.

The Germans shelled the town almost daily. I remember the siren sounds and how before the bombings the loudspeaker on our street posts would echo: ‘Attention, attention! Air alert! Citizens get down to the bomb shelter. German air raid!’

I hated going to the bomb shelter because it was filled with wounded soldiers and civilians. Amongst the injured on the wooden berths in the shelter I often saw some of my classmates from our kindergarten with bandaged heads, hands and feet. The bandages were soaked in blood and the air in the basement was stifling, with a smell of rotting flesh. With every bombing our shelter walls shuddered and the basement air was full of building dust.

On rare calm days, I liked to sit at the window of our apartment on the third floor of the house and watch the dogfights in the sky between the Russian and German war planes. These air battles in the pure blue August sky were for me like watching a film.

I particularly remember one such dogfight over the tractor factory. At about noon, three of our fighter aircraft (they were bi-planes – we called them kukuruzniki) climbed from the Russian airfield and slowly approached the shining points in the sky – the German planes.

Soon afterwards, I heard some shots from anti-aircraft guns, located in the park near our house, and in the sky appeared small white ‘cotton wool balls’ – the result of the bursting anti-aircraft shells. To me, the explosions sounded similar to light applause.

Then I saw a fireball, which became a whirling spiral leaving a long tail of smoke, and finally dropped into a nearby grove. Soon afterwards, two ambulances – green-coloured GAZ vans with red crosses – with their bells ringing, moved into the grove, where billows of smoke rose from the fallen aircraft.

As the end of the month approached, the Germans were bombing and shelling the city and our area nearly every day.

I heard from my parents that in some cases very strange objects – heavy metal beams, rails and even pipes – fell from the sky. They broke through the roofs and balconies of houses, causing panic and fear with their terrible howling, piercing and whistling sounds. Perhaps the Germans were doing this to put psychological pressure on the population – to create panic and sap morale.

My sister remembers that from 23rd August, the acknowledged ‘beginning’ of the Battle of Stalingrad, the bombings and air raids intensified so much that she called it a ‘rain of fire’.

‘On the first day of massive bombings,’ Tala wrote, ‘German aircraft hit two large oil tanks not far from the house. The oil tanks burst into flame and huge clouds of smoke went into the sky. The burning oil from the bombed reservoirs ran down to the bank of the Volga river, burning everything on its way, and eventually the Volga itself was in flames.’

According to Antony Beevor’s *Stalingrad*, the blazing of the city was so strong that on the other bank of the Volga – the left bank – at night cars didn’t need to use their lights. The bombings, which went on day and night, concentrated on the river crossings, thereby preventing the Red Army from transporting artillery, shells and other military equipment to the right bank of the river. Many civilians who tried to use the crossings to escape from the besieged city on the right bank were killed or drowned as a result of the bombing.

One day that August, Lawrence somehow managed to visit Tala and her mother. Knowing the situation, my father – Tala remembers – told them to sit tight because every morning, after the air raids, the river was full of civilians’
corpses, suitcases and personal belongings.

By about 23rd August 1942, the German army had captured most of the city, and German tanks of the Panzer division had reached the Volga river just north of the town, in the area called Rynok. At the same time, the German infantry of General Paulus’ 6th Army had penetrated the southern part of the city at the site of a huge grain silo and established its headquarters there. At this time, the Germans thought they had won the war.

From this point until 1954 my family completely lost contact with Tala and her mother, who lived in the part of Stalingrad that fell into German hands, and we had no idea if they were dead or alive.

Only the territory of the Stalingrad tractor factory was still in Russian hands. In the rest of the city and in the area of two other plants – Barrikady and Red October – battles were going on street by street and house by house. Probably the only reason the Germans couldn’t capture the whole city was because of the strong resistance by Russian soldiers in street-by-street fighting and because Soviet forces had managed to lay dense minefields in front of the five main factories in the north, including the Stalingrad Tractor Works. The most brutal, pitiless and perhaps the most important battle in history had begun. The Battle of Stalingrad was to last until 2nd February 1943.

For the Russian civilian population the suffering was immense; The massive air raids preceding the battle resulted in the death of 40,000 civilians – nearly one-sixth of the population of the city. Stalingrad was ablaze.

In early September 1942, my mother, father, grandmother and I were still living in our apartment on the workers’ estate for the Tractor Works. Our situation had deteriorated considerably; food shortages, no water or electricity supply, and consequently no heating. Our modest supplies of food were prepared on a kerosene primus stove.

According to my grandmother, there was real hunger. Some meat products that appeared at the street markets were rumoured to be human flesh. For survival, the most important things were bread, salt, water and matches.

Our building started being hit by mortar shells. One hit our kitchen and exploded. Luckily, no one was hurt, but my father said it was time to leave. In his heavily accented, broken Russian he said: ‘Enough. Here the Germans will kill us. No evacuation. We have to leave ourselves.’

But where to? The city was surrounded. The only possibility, very risky, involved crossing the Volga. Beyond that was the Volga steppe.

So it was that at the end of September 1942, having packed a minimum of belongings, we left our half-destroyed apartment and moved towards the river. On the way, crossing a playground near the house, I remember seeing anti-aircraft gunners who were very young girls. The reason I know this is because I could see their pigtails protruding from under their helmets. There was shooting, explosions and smoke all around us. I still remember the smell of burning gunpowder.

For me as a six-year-old, the most painful thing was the separation from my beloved big toy bear, Mishka. He was my height and I even took him to bed with me on some nights when there were bombing attacks. We had to leave him behind in the apartment, along with many other things.

The scene at the Volga crossing was one of utter chaos. It was packed with thousands of civilians trying to flee. The crossing was primarily meant for transporting soldiers and military equipment; civilians were not a priority. My father somehow persuaded the driver of an army lorry to take us on to a barge which was returning to the left bank. He gave him some bread, a box of matches, a small tin of salt and a gold pocket watch (a valued souvenir of America).

The crossing was by no means safe, and we came under German fire, both from ground artillery and aircraft. After crossing the Volga there were some wounded people on our barge who had been hit by the German fire, but we survived.

We began moving in a north-easterly direction, away from the hell of Stalingrad, and became refugees in the Volga steppe. Even before our exodus from Stalingrad, my father had somehow heard of a collective farm (kolkhoz) in a village called Novaya Poltavka that urgently needed mechanics. That is where we headed, sometimes on foot, at other times on a makeshift two-wheel cart that my father
knocked together with bits of wood. Our journey took about two weeks.

On our way to Novaya Poltavka, we stopped to spend a night at an abandoned, half-destroyed izba (hut). My mother laid me down on the floor and covered me with a blanket. Suddenly I heard the roaring sound of an approaching aircraft. A few minutes later I heard a huge explosion near the hut. Chunks of plaster and planks of wood fell on top of me. My mother rushed in screaming: ‘Edik, are you alive?’ Thank God that I was not seriously hurt.

Another thing I remember vividly is the sight of swollen children sitting by the roadside. My mother explained to me later that they were orphans and that they were dying from hunger. It was horrible to see them; they couldn’t stand up, nor even lift their heads, and just sat motionlessly staring with vacant expressions and making soft groaning noises.

Towards the end of September, the weather in the steppe became noticeably colder, and there was even some snow. The people in the villages disliked hungry refugees, because there were cases of robbery and even murder. So we were not welcomed to stay indoors even on frosty nights. At the very most, the locals in some villages might allow just me to spend the night in the porch of their hut.

Immediately on our arrival at Novaya Poltavka, father started work at the collective farm. Our family was put into one room with another family – altogether eight people. We lived the whole winter in those squalid conditions; up to March 1943.

The winter that year was exceptionally cold, with a lot of snow. The temperature fell to minus 40°C. People suffered not only from the cold and lack of food, but also from lice. We spent a lot of time combating these bloody parasites, which lived in one’s underwear and hair. Lice are of course carriers of typhus, which was rampant during this period in the whole of the Stalingrad region.

Hunger that year affected the steppe wolves too. My mother was nearly killed one day when she came close to being attacked by a pack of wolves. It happened when she went to see someone at the far end of the village. A blizzard started when she was returning in the evening; she lost her way and a pack of wolves surrounded her. Luckily, a man was going past on a sledge. He heard my mother’s screams and gave her a lift, saving her life.

Somehow, we survived that winter, but by then my mother had TB, no doubt because of the dire conditions. So my father started thinking of moving to another place. Soon he found a village near the Volga called Nei Kolonia. It is close to the city of Kamysshin.

The state-run stables there and the collective farm required a qualified mechanic. My father went there, was accepted and returned to take the family to our new place. We moved from Novaya Poltavka to Nei Kolonia in March 1943 and spent the rest of the war there.

Before the war, Nei Kolonia had been a settlement of ethnic Volga Germans. When the war began and the German advance came close to Stalingrad, the NKVD deported the whole population of Volga Germans in the space of 24 hours. They were regarded as a possible fifth column. As far as I know, they were sent to Kazakhstan. The empty settlement was filled with refugees such as ourselves.

It was only many years later that I was able to learn what happened to my half-sister Tala and her mother in the part of Stalingrad that fell into German hands. This is what she wrote.

‘By the end of August/beginning of September our houses came under constant bombardment. We lost contact with my father and his new family. At that time the population sought shelter from the bombing in the basements of their houses. However, our house had no basement and the house was already half-ruined by shelling.

‘During one of the bombing attacks my mother and
I got together some of our belongings, including a tin pot full of small pancakes, and ran across the street to another building which we knew had a big basement. It was already half full of people. And for some reason there were also army beds.

‘It is at this point that an air raid began. The noise and din were deafening, even the walls were shaking. The oil lamps and candles went out and our mouths and noses became clogged by thick dust. Suddenly a miracle happened.

‘In the far corner of the basement an old lady sat with several icons, and everyone rushed to the icons and started praying. This was despite the fact that most of the people – including ourselves – were not religious at all! Maybe it was this that saved our lives during that raid?

‘When the raid finished, people in the basement started going back to their places. On the bed we were occupying, we saw something huge and dark brown: the middle of the bed was completely flattened, with the legs [of the bedstead] sticking up in the air. All around us was debris: broken bricks, dust coming down from the ceiling and metal beams hanging down. An old man came up to us and said: ‘This could be an unexploded bomb, be careful’. We spent that night on the floor near our bed, in the company of the shell.

‘Early the next morning, around five o’clock, the metal doors of the basement entrance screeched open and a group of German soldiers broke in carrying automatic rifles. They were screaming “Aus, Aus!” (“Out, Out!”) and pointing their guns at us. People understood the order and quickly ran out.

‘My mother and I didn’t, because our belongings were under the bed which had been squashed by the bomb. The soldiers pointed their guns directly at us, but – thank God – did not shoot. So, at gun-point, we carefully pulled out our belongings from under the collapsed bed and rushed to the exit. Upstairs there were no longer any Russians, just German soldiers.

‘Around us was complete pandemonium: explosions, flames, smoke, wounded people moaning... We were in a state of panic. What to do, where to go?

‘Someone in the basement had suggested that the best way to escape was to go in the direction of the Stalingrad Tractor Works, which was not yet in German hands. But in that direction we could now see half-destroyed tanks and upturned military vehicles. A German soldier grabbed me by the sleeve and gestured to me not to go there, saying: “Pouf, Pouf, you kaput!”

‘A funny episode happened among all this mayhem: the same soldier saw our pancakes in the tin pot and very calmly began to eat them, one by one, until he had eaten them all!

‘Finally, we decided to run to the house opposite. But there were many Germans there; one of them approached us, pointed his revolver at us and ordered us to open our hold-all and bundle of belongings. He went through it, opened a box with my mother’s wedding ring, weighed it in his hand and put it back. Then, with his pistol, he showed us which way to go. Which we did. All the while he kept his gun pointed at us and I was afraid he would shoot us at any moment.

‘I think we were moving in the general direction of the tractor works. The scene around us was horrific: there were wounded and dead Russian and German soldiers covered in blood, you could hear groaning all around. I remember seeing one dead soldier with his feet in puttees.
‘Soon, among the people running away from Stalingrad we met a family we knew – this was Elena Shemberg and her daughter Nina.’

Elena’s husband, an ethnic German from the Volga region, had disappeared during Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s. Elena had been a friend of Edward’s mother, Anna Lobanova, before the war.

‘Together we managed to reach the western outskirts of the city, and arrived at a house where lecturers from the local university lived. It was known as “the professors’ house”. This building had a large basement, where – by a strange coincidence – the Shembers met their grandmother.

‘Alas, soon after this, the Germans chased us out of the basement. More than that: they lined us all up in a column, which included a number of captured Russian soldiers, and marched us under guard towards Kalach, a town on the Don river that was already in German hands. Our column was very long. En route, Soviet aeroplanes at one point opened machine-gun fire on us. We guessed they had received orders to prevent captured Russian soldiers and civilians being used by the Germans. A number of people in our column were killed or injured as a result of these Soviet air attacks.

‘We walked on for about ten to 15km and at a certain point stopped for a short rest. My mother and I, together with the three Shembers, sat under a big tree, apart from the others. It is possible that we briefly fell asleep, owing to exhaustion. At any rate, we suddenly became aware that we were alone on the steppe, and didn’t know what to do. By this time, it was getting dark, and around us lay the bare steppe. Not far away, we could hear shell explosions, and Germans shouting and swearing – apparently because their lorries were having trouble in the mud.

‘As Nina had previously suggested, we pretended not to understand what he was saying and stayed in the same place. Soon after this, a Russian prisoner-of-war came out of the dug-out and advised us to take shelter there. (He was apparently looking after the Germans’ horses and doing other jobs). We finally agreed to go into the dug-out.

‘We were given a canvas on the ground and lay in a row on top of it. During the night it began raining heavily. That’s how we spent our first night in the Don steppe.

The following morning, the German soldier we had met offered Nina sandwiches, which she shared with us all. Later we found among our belongings some makhorka – a roughly cut, cheap Russian tobacco – and decided to offer it to an older German soldier in the same dug-out. This was our way of saying thank you. The following day, he in turn put us on a horse-drawn cart and drove us somewhere. Towards the evening it started raining again, and the cart began to get stuck in the clay of the steppe. Finally he abandoned us, saying he had to go in another direction. Once again we found ourselves alone in the open steppe.

‘We walked at random in the driving rain, God knows where. In the surrounding darkness, not far away, we could hear shell explosions, and Germans shouting and swearing – apparently because their lorries were having trouble in the mud. Nina decided to go towards the Germans to ask for help, as otherwise we knew we wouldn’t survive.

‘After a while she returned with a tall, handsome German, who was probably an officer. She translated the offer he had made, which was to take us to another dug-out out of the rain, but that there wasn’t enough room there for all of us, so that someone would have to stand. He signalled to us to follow him.

‘We followed him in the heavy rain and darkness to another German dug-out. I remember that the entrance to the shelter was covered by a big sack with a swastika, and that near the entrance there were two benches and a home-made wood-burning stove. The dug-out was long and narrow. At the end of it were some Russian prisoners-of-war guarded by three German soldiers. One of the guards slept on a plank bed. We were permitted to stay in a small space near the bed.

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Soon the two Germans near the stove started flirting with Nina Shemberg – they suggested that she take off her wet shoes and dry them. Then they made some cheese sandwiches
and gave them to us.

That night a curious episode happened. The soldier who was lying on one of the beds suddenly invited the young Nina Shemberg to lie down on the bed near him, because, he suggested, it was difficult for her to stand all night... However, my mother's legs were badly swollen and Nina immediately said: "Nina Vasilievna, you have such swollen feet, you take up his offer. It's so dark in here he won't notice who's on the bed."

My mother lay down on the edge of the bed.

'Soon after this we laughed for the first time in a long while. The reason was that my mother told Nina Shemberg that after she went to lie on the bed, the German had started stroking her back and hand. But, when he felt the wedding-ring on mother's finger, he had raised himself, taken a torch, and with the light of the torch seen that it was not young Nina, but an old lady. He had then turned his back on her and gone to sleep.

One morning in late October, all the Germans and their Russian prisoners-of-war went off somewhere and we were left alone in the dug-out. We went out of the shelter to try to find out where we were in the steppe. We were about two kilometres from the railway station at Gumrak. There was an airfield not far away, and the whole area had been mined by the Russians. The Germans, using mine-detectors and other equipment, had been trying to clear the area and were often blown up by the mines. Later we heard from Nina Shemberg that the handsome German officer who brought us to the dug-out had been killed by one of the mines.

'Our group didn't stay together for long; the Shembers were soon taken to another, more comfortable shelter by a Croatian soldier (who was probably serving in a Croatian battalion in the German army). So we were left alone in this long narrow dug-out.

'In this exceptionally cold winter, the outside temperature sometimes reached minus 40°C. Our shelter had no doors or windows and conditions were unbearable. The only place we could warm ourselves was around the stove. There was no firewood in the steppe, so I collected planks and sticks from nearby trenches. The "kitchen utensils" in our shelter included a tin bucket, a broken trough and a shovel. For our drinking water, I melted snow in the bucket on the stove.

'Soon we were joined in our dug-out by some retreating German soldiers, who ordered us: to clear the shelter of refuse and mud, to darn (stopfen) their socks, and wash their louse-ridden clothes. But with what? This question didn't worry them. They threatened us if we failed to obey. One German soldier threatened me with a dagger.

'With great difficulty, I managed to steam their linen in the bucket on the stove. As a reward they gave us some bread. The German who had threatened me with a dagger came back later to collect his washing and, to my surprise, used the same dagger to open a tin box of food and politely offered it to us. He thanked me for the job I had done and went out.

'One day that winter, a passing German car stopped near our shelter. The driver signalled to me and began speaking in broken Russian: "I Boris, and how you called?" I told him my name. He started laughing and then asked where I was living. I showed him our dug-out. He was surprised, because the shelter was level with the ground, with no door or window. He came down into the shelter but soon went out again. He took the blanket which was lying on top of the car bonnet and gave it to us. A few minutes later he said to my mother that he would like to drive me in his car to Nizhniy Chir, a town on the Don river. But my mother replied: "It is too soon to go for a drive, she is still a child." He smiled and drove away.

'That winter our situation got worse by the day. We slept on the ground in our dug-out and it was terribly cold. We were overwhelmed by lice. They were everywhere – in our outer clothes and in our underwear. Bombs and mortar mines exploded around our shelter constantly.

'There was no food; even frozen potatoes were in great shortage. On days when it was reasonably quiet we would range out of our shelter and would sometimes find dead...
horses that had become frozen. We would cut off their skin and use it to make soup. One day a Czech soldier brought us some fresh horse-liver. My mother used it to make a lovely bouillon.

‘As we understood the situation, the Germans had become encircled by Soviet forces. The Germans suffered from lack of food too, because their aerial food supplies had become very sparse; German aircraft couldn’t reach our area. One day a Russian prisoner-of-war gave us about two kilograms of oats. We hid them from the Germans.

The “ring of encirclement” was tightened in January 1942. All dug-outs in our area were full of German soldiers. There were no spare places in our shelter and we were afraid that the Germans would drive us out. With cold of minus 40°C and constant bombing, it was certain that we would die in the open steppe. One of the Germans in our shelter was very bad-tempered and nasty to me. He noticed that I was wearing a pair of large felt boots given to me by a Russian prisoner-of-war. He demanded that I exchange them for his leather boots, but I refused. Eventually, he took off my felt boots and left his smaller-sized boots near the entrance to our shelter.

By the end of January 1943, life in our dug-out had become very dangerous. One day a German soldier started threatening us with his revolver. He put it to my head (probably because I often snapped at them) and started shouting that tomorrow the Russians will come and all of you (pointing at all of us) will be killed: “Pouf, pouf, kaput!”

Soon after this, all the Germans – as if they were obeying an order – all at once jumped out from the dug-out, leaving behind even their haversacks. An unusual silence fell: shell and bomb explosions stopped, and the Russian Katyushas (multiple rocket launchers) fell silent. In this silence we heard a very distinct and strange sound. It resembled the distant cry of a baby: “U-u-a – U-u-a – U-u-a.” This sound came in waves, ever closer and closer. At first we couldn’t understand what they were. But soon we were able clearly to hear long, drawn-out cries: “Hurrah – Hurrah – Hurrah!” These loud, rolling sounds reminded us of waves breaking on the sea-shore. Then we realised that the Red Army must be approaching.

‘We kept quiet, hidden in our shelter. Suddenly a German soldier with a machine-gun jumped down into our hole and immediately directed his gun back towards the entrance. Then he turned round and saw us. He exclaimed, “Mädchen” (girls), placed his machine-gun near the entrance and lay on the ground. He was in a state of emotional turmoil.

‘A few minutes later we heard a loud Russian voice outside the dug-out: ‘Who’s in there?’ My mother replied: “There are some Russians here and some non-Russians”.

‘Next, a Red Army soldier with a machine-gun and a white camouflage cloak burst into the shelter. He saw the German soldier and ordered him to stand. The German replied: “Nicht verstehe”. The Russian soldier said: “Never mind, now you will understand”, forced him to climb out of the shelter and killed him on the spot. Not long afterwards, the Russian soldier came back to the dug-out, gave us a loaf of bread, and then ran to rejoin a group of his comrades in the attack on the retreating German army.

‘The corpses of two German soldiers lay near our shelter for some time. We saw many photos and different papers and documents lying around the shelter. All these papers were later to disappear. It is possible they were picked up by German prisoners-of-war. At that time there were a lot of German prisoners-of-war in our part of the steppe. They were wandering everywhere, with no-one guarding them. Sometimes I saw how these prisoners went about burying their dead. They usually put a loop of rope on the neck of the dead German and dragged the corpse to a nearby pit or gully.

‘During that winter of 1942-43, everybody was starving: the Germans, the Russian prisoners-of-war, and us, the refugees. Everything was either in limited supply or non-existent, even drinking-water. We heard rumours that there were many cases of cannibalism among the Romanian soldiers in the German army.

‘The explosions and fighting in our area calmed down around 3rd or 4th February 1943. From time to time, we still heard the distant rumbling of the far-away battles, and we continued to live in our dug-out shelter until April’