Сестричка

Little Sister

Written by
Vera Tkachenko

Translated from Russian
by Nina Armstrong &
Christopher Walker
Georgetown University

Translator's Preface

This article was written by the Soviet journalist Vera Tkachenko. As a special correspondent for Pravda, Tkachenko visited many different cities and towns in the Soviet Union, authoring diverse human interest stories. Among many interesting articles, "Little Sister" stands out as a captivating documentation of what it was like to be a Soviet woman veteran of World War II. The article's focus is Yevdokia Andreyevna Kuznetsova, a veteran who must contend not just with her disability as a result of her military service but additionally with everyday sexism within Soviet society.

A precursor to Svetlana Alexievich's oral history of WWII, The Unwomanly Face of War, Tkachenko's piece articulates some of the same themes and critiques, albeit in a form that would pass the Soviet censorship of Pravda: both authors address narratives of women veterans of World War II, detail their personal thoughts and feelings in their own stories, and highlight their gendered experiences of war and life after it. While The Unwomanly Face of War presents separate chapters, some of extended direct quotes from interviews and others containing her down thoughts about her documentary process, "Little Sister" intermixes quotes from Kuznetsova with commentary about how her story connects to Soviet political and economic conditions at the time. However, each author commits themselves to a similar endeavor.

Tkachenko addresses the story of a woman whose life displays the contradiction between the Soviet ideal of gender equality - especially in the context of military service - and her own life experience. For her to bring this dynamic to the fore suggests that Tkachenko is not writing to merely serve state ideological interests and that her work has more to offer readers than the sort of propaganda Alexievich critiques in her work.

On a sunny May afternoon, in a lively metropolitan square, people no longer young and in plainclothes hugged and cried and smiled through their tears, clumsily hiding deep excitement and rough, male tenderness behind jokes:

"I wish you good health, Comrade Colonel!"

"Tolya, damn it, you're still just the same!"

"Commissar, my brother!"

Embraces, incoherent exclamations, the endless "And do you remember?..." The eyes of accidental bystanders warmed with emotion - understandable, given the circumstances: an understandable thing. Brother-Fellow soldiers from the same regiment met. As they had once dreamed, they met on Victory Day near the Bolshoi Theater in the very heart of their dear Moscow. Well, these people have something to remember; they have a reason to furtively wipe away a tear of joy and of the anxious grief of many, oh so many losses... Almost all of them saw each other on this day for the first time after many, many years and made a distant journey for the sake of this meeting, having found each other with considerable difficulty. They were drawn here, to the agreed-upon meeting place, by a mighty feeling of frontline brotherhood. That feeling that does not grow old with age, that does not fade through the events of everyday life, that cannot be forgotten and will not be forgotten, so long as those who survived the war live and breathe...

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But the first wave of excited feelings soon subsided; someone suddenly looked back, and with him, others started to look back anxiously. No one had said a word yet, but each knew why his comrade had gone silent in expectation. Suddenly a clear and ringing woman's voice hailed them. They threw themselves toward it:

"Little sister..."

"Dina!"

"Finch!"

She approached them, slightly dragging her unbending leg as she walked. Were it not for this tense gait and her glasses, before them would be the very same Dina-Finch, who seemed not to have changed a bit, who was their comrade in arms, military paramedic, and scout, Yevdokia Andreyevna Kuznetsova. The same prominent cheekbones, the face in smiling dimples and the moist currents of her slightly squinting eyes, the unruly curls of her hair, straying from her hairstyle. In the 145th rifle division, this face was known by one and all. She was the favorite of the regiment: this combat girl who ran away from an orphanage and audaciously got to the front at sixteen on her own, by ways known only to her. For her ringing voice, Dina was nicknamed Finch; for her short height - Pencil. But if in earnest, those older called her daughter, those younger - sis, sister. A sister not only by occupation but also by a fraternal affection, with which the stern soldiers, who walked next to

death, zealously protected Dina's vulnerable, fragile, and fearless youth...

Her military decorations testified to how she fought. Dina Kuznetsova began the war near Moscow. She liberated Velikiye Luki, Smolensk, the Baltics, and Belarus with her division. Just when the war was close to victory, she was badly wounded. Her arm and leg were shattered, and she became blind from shell shock. After coming to her senses in a field hospital, Dina vaguely caught the terrifying word "amputation" and burst into tears, not from the pain and the fear, but because - it's funny to remember - she won't have to be able to dance anymore...

Decades later, the war looks at us through orphaned mothers' old eyes, faded from tears.

But people have always been exceedingly kind towards her. In her half-childish naïvete, she repeatedly asked herself: "Lord, why did this happen to me? Why couldn't I have been extraordinary, a heroine, or some stellar beauty. Or been born happy." This time, happiness came in the face of an angry, mortally exhausted professor-surgeon named Nikolaev (Dina did not see him through the bandage even once). After listening to his colleagues' conclusions, Nikolaev grunted in irritation: "So, an amputation... And have you thought about what it would be like for the girl to remain a complete cripple?" Domineeringly brushing aside uncertainty and doubt, he ordered: "Onto the table! Anesthesia! I will take care of this case myself..."

Months of agonizing struggle flowed like years. The first, the second, the third operation - and so on ten times. With the thoroughness of jewelers, with the care of kind magicians, the surgeons glued, spliced, piece-by-piece, her shattered knee. Finally: "Well, young lady, let's begin learning to walk..." Her arm and leg were saved, then her eyesight. They had selflessly tried to save her for life, just as she had once done on the frontline, forgetting fear and mortal danger, crawling under intense fire to a fallen soldier, to help, to save a life.

...There are lives that war never leaves after entering them once. Thus war does not leave the homes where, framed on the walls, hang photographs of a father, a husband, a brother, killed by it. Decades later, the war looks at us through orphaned mothers' old eyes, faded from tears. Through the icon-like and bitterly wrinkled faces of widows. It peers through the early manhood of soldiers' sons who grew up without a father. And the living, on whom the war left its cruel mark, worry us intensely and painfully, perhaps in the same way a silent obelisk on the side of the road disturbs a passerby... Is this why the soldiers did not forget, could not possibly forget their Dina, whose strength of spirit often served as an example for men?

They knew everything about her. They knew Dina's post-war life did not work out in many ways. That she had to leave medical school (in a dream, she saw herself as a doctor, like Nikolaev) because of her fading vision. That her marriage was clouded

by the doctors' diagnosis: "as a result of the shell-shock, you cannot be a mother." But where the weak obediently bow their heads, the strong fight, go against the current. Dina took into her home a two-week-old orphan girl - a bundle carelessly "forgotten" by someone on the snowy veranda of another house. For months Dina spent sleepless nights in the hospital by the bedside of the foundling, exhausted with dyspepsia; she nursed her back to health, tore her from the jowls of death and saved her. Dina's husband told her fervidly: "a stranger's baby is dearer to you than your own husband. You know what, choose between us."

They separated. Dina named her rescued child "Victoria," in honor of the Victory at war. And so they began living together as mother and daughter.

"We are proud of you," her fellow soldiers wrote. "You're a hero not only in battle. It takes courage to sacrifice a long marriage for the sake of an adopted child."

"My dear ones," Dina laughed and cried as she read the letters. "What would I be without you, my good friends..."

Good friends - for her, are not empty words. After she was mutilated by the war, these good friends fought for her and got her back on her feet, giving her the happiness to live a meaningful, active life. Later, when Dina returned from the hospital to an unrecognizably destroyed Dnipropetrovsk, comrades from the party city committee, having found out about her story, did everything so that she was among the first that received an apartment - this was during that unthinkable housing shortage. Her frontline friends, soldiers from the same regiment, did not lose her from their sight, supporting her sometimes with advice, sometimes with deeds, sometimes with a kind word. Even her women neighbors, after moaning and groaning ("You're off your rocker, woman! After all, you're an invalid. Give up the child, take it to where you're supposed to before it's too late..."), with womanly tenderness kept an eye on the little girl. And all this taken together - the quiet, human engagement and warmth - shielded the humble nurse with a reliable wall from the piercing, everyday drafts and comprised her wealth and happiness.

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But this precious chain of kindness suddenly cracked. About that, how it happened, her fellow soldiers wrote in Pravda - the very same ones who, on Victory Day, with tears of joy, embraced each other by the Bolshoi Theater. "The joy of our meeting is overshadowed by the story of military paramedic Dina Andreyevna Kuznetsova. We, veterans of the war, tried ourselves, without the interference of the editorial office, to help our comrade-in-arms, but were not successful." And a row of signatures: from the former deputy commander of the 145th rifle division, A. I. Zubritsky, to the intelligence platoon commander M. I. Kiselev.

...I was already going to visit

Kuznetsova in Feodosia, but - what a coincidence! And was it really a coincidence? A letter from the Feodosia military commissar I. A. Skichko arrived at the editorial office. And although he did not mention Kuznetsova, the content of the letter, in essence, was the logical continuation of the story of Dina's fellow soldiers...

But back to the story, in order. At the insistence of doctors (little Vika's lungs turned out to be weak), Dina Andreyevna had to quickly move to a residence by the sea. When the health of her only child is under threat, a mother does not think too much. That is why Dina, a woman not entirely practical, exchanged her housing for the first that turned up in Feodosia. The child's health strengthened in two years, but for the mother, life was hard: a small room on the second floor, without running water, with an oven for heating. You try carrying water and fuel up the stairs when your crippled leg stumbles even on the level floor! And there is running water on the floor below, all one needs is just two meters of pipe to make the woman's life - an invalid of the war - a bit easier.

"We do not have the appropriate allocations for this," the Deputy Chairman of the City Executive Committee replied to Dina Andreyevna at the time.

Kuznetsova's fellow soldiers wrote to the Feodosia city party committee. Communist Y. A. Kuznetsova has had a difficult fate, has military merits, injuries, and so on. The answer was insultingly dismissive: No one had invited Kuznetsova to Feodosia, and she could have lived peacefully in Dnipropetrovsk...

On the way to Feodosia, I imagined bureaucrats, dry like parchment, frozen motionlessly in their old-fashioned offices behind an unapproachable fence of the secretaries. They were nothing of the sort. The city leaders - the secretary of the city party committee and the chairman of the city council executive committee are young, sociable, energetic people. They listened with sympathy. With noticeable effort, they recalled: "True, there was some letter. Well, yes, yes..." And then they told in detail how acutely felt the question of housing was in their resort city, how many retirees are "settling" here, how an insufficient number of houses are getting built, although, of course, to complain a lot is also a sin, - they are still under construction...

Certainly, the housing problem is not resolving itself in a year or two. Nevertheless, there is a circumstance that one cannot get past because its name is the law.

If I may say so, is it possible not to reckon with the order established by the law?

By the resolution of September 21st, 1945, the Soviet government obligated people's commissariats and agencies to transfer to the disposal of the executive committees of local councils ten percent of all living space in new and restored homes for securing living space for demobilized veterans, invalids of the war, and families of fallen warriors. Further, marking the twentieth anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, the USSR Council of

Ministers, by the resolution of March 6th, 1965, No. 140, obligated the Councils of Ministers of union republics, ministries, agencies, and executive committees of local councils to provide all-around assistance to invalids of the war and families of the fallen in preferential security of their living space. Finally, the law guarantees benefits in housing security to officers discharged in reserve or retirement.

Thus the ten percent of newly-built housing for the people within those categories is the alpha and omega of the issue over which spears were crossed in Feodosia. But, if I may say so, is it possible not to reckon with the order established by the law? And yet there were clear violations here.

For Victory Day in the village of Primorsky, which is within city limits, a new building composed of sixty-five apartments was leased. Five apartments were allocated within it for the ten percent. The happy candidates for the new apartments were invited to the City Executive Committee, were told about the upcoming event, and the next day found out that... the apartments were already inhabited - without them. Someone overlooked this issue, control was weakened somewhere, and thus a most unpleasant emergency happened. What can I say, `a baxd gift on Victory Day to veterans and their families! However, no serious conclusions were drawn from this incident, and the military commissar of the city, Comrade Skichko, who mentioned it to party activists, was invited to the Bureau of the Party City Committee for "an explanation..."

Meanwhile, in the city, from year to year, the norms of the housing stock provided for by law and allocated to disabled war veterans, families of the dead, and retired officers or those transferred to the reserve were not fulfilled. There is one motive: housing is difficult. Yes, it is difficult; but this is not about pie in the sky but about real possibilities within reach. And besides, there is a moral aspect to the problem - sensitivity and attention to the person. For example, was it really that difficult to invite the five failed apartment-dwellers, explain themselves, apologize to them, and reassure them? Did the simple human participation in the fate of Dina Kuznetsova, in her simple request, cost so much? Is it possible to promise for so many years and not repair the hazardous room where the sick, lonely old man, an invalid of the first category, the retired colonel Grigory Ivanovich Perverzev lives?

We sacredly honor the memory of the soldiers who laid down their lives for the Motherland. There are beautiful, inspiringly executed monuments at mass graves, the Eternal Flame reverently lit at the Kremlin wall on the Tomb of the Unknown soldier - this is a tribute to our grateful, sacred memory of the fallen. But we must also pay a high measure of respect to those who survived, having made their contribution to the victory. "No one and nothing is forgotten" - this is also said about those soldiers who today work or rest in deserved quietude, who raise children and grandchildren, and who continue to participate, to the extent of their aging abilities, in the building of communism.