

How I Failed My Motherland

“YOU’RE MAKING TROUBLE! What’s got into you?”

First barely audible, then more and more clearly, my mother’s voice reaches me. I look back to my childhood, trying in that faraway fogginess to detect and, if I’m lucky, to solve the riddle of my life. After several unsuccessful attempts, gradually, like the decals of my childhood, the events of that faraway time begin to become faintly visible. We used to paste these little decals on the covers of our notebooks, their patterns half hidden under a layer of paper until we moistened them with our saliva and carefully, with our finger tips, rolled off bits of paper, one after another, until, bright as fresh paint, squirrels, hares, steamships, and crocodiles appeared.

For a long time, I can’t figure out anything in these snatches of my childhood impressions. A few details flash in front of me. A round granite stand for public notices on the curbside at the corner of Gavan and Lanzheron streets is covered with scraps of old posters, left over from the Romanian and German occupation. Not too many events happen in a city that is trying to put its normal life on track. I catch glimpses of the central City Garden, its stone lions holding balls under their paws with goalkeepers’ confidence; the rotunda for small orchestra concerts, which were not yet revived; a thickness of tall honeysuckle in which I went to catch dragonflies. The streets give off the smell of cold ashes. The war is over, but there are many ruins. The Germans have demolished the front wing of our building. We—

my mama, my papa, and I—live in the back, in a small, two hundred-square-foot room. We are very fortunate: Mama managed to prove in court that this living space belonged to us before the war. The neighbors, those who occupied it under the Germans, had to give the room back to us. However, they secured the adjoining room, small and windowless, for themselves, the room in which Mama said I used to sleep before the war began.

We moved there from an empty grocery store, where we had slept on the floor after returning from evacuation. We moved back with our belongings—a suitcase, threadbare on one side, a bundle of old linens, a shoebox with three spoons and forks, a pocket knife, and an alarm clock—all piled on a wheelbarrow, pushed by an aging unshaved man my mama had hired. As we were walking along the street, we heard a loud cry behind our backs: “That’s what we’ve lived to see! The reptiles have returned!”

Mama scowled. I looked back, toward the source of the cry. We were passing the driveway of some building on Richelieu Street. By the wrought-iron gate, their arms crossed, their faces heavy and unsmiling, there stood two middle-aged women in kerchiefs. I couldn’t understand what their words meant then. Why were they addressed to us? During the war, “reptiles” were what the boys called fascists. How could fascists have managed to return if the war had ended with Germany’s unconditional and full capitulation? I had seen the victory parade on Red Square in the newsreels. The soldiers threw swastika banners on the steps of Lenin’s Mausoleum, and Comrade Stalin himself received the parade on the square’s grandstand.

Finally, in the amateurish, poorly spliced film of my memory, a sound track produces Mama’s voice: “You’re making trouble! What’s got into you?” Here it is. The first reproach. The first evidence of my withdrawal into myself, into my own inner life that is not given away to anyone. Gradually, frame by frame, it all comes to me—that hardest time of my life, the dread of days echoed in the nights’ dreams.

The early fall of 1945. Less than a month after Japan capitulated. I am on my way to the first-grade class on the first day of the first postwar September. I am walking there with my mama, walking along the streets of my native town washed in the pale autumn sun.

The school, number 43, is located across from the main post office, on Gogol Street, overgrown with acacias. From our home on Deribas Street, 18, it’s not far—four and a half blocks. Mama attempts to hold my hand. I pout and try to break away from her. Well, what’s next? To hold Mama’s

skirt! I'm already a big boy. Mama frowns. Along the roadway, raising dust, their motors loud, trucks rush about. They carry bricks to the construction sites. They are rebuilding the ruined city. Why bother with pedestrians? Finally, Mother and I compromise. I let her hold my hand only when we cross the street. On our way to school, there are three crossings—on Lanzheron Street, at Bania Alley, and at the Sabaneev Bridge. I extend my hand reluctantly.

Children and their parents fill the schoolyard. Everybody is excited, making a racket, like seagulls on a jetty. Many first graders hold out bouquets of luxuriant red peonies, the favorite flower of Odessa. The color of the South!

They have placed me in the first-grade class "A." Mama is satisfied. *A* is the first letter of the alphabet. It means that her son is among the first, in the vanguard.

With its windows wide open onto the street, the classroom on the first floor smells of fresh black paint. The covers of all thirty-two desks are coated with it. The paint hasn't quite dried. If I keep my elbows on the same spot for a while, it sticks to my skin, leaving little archipelagos of black speckles. In secret, I attempt to dig them up with my nails, but I spread the paint over my skin even more.

We are told we should bring ink in an inkpot, in a little bag tied up with a string. (Later, a favorite prank would be to slip carbide bits into an inkpot. To find carbide wasn't difficult: welding was going on everywhere to fix the water pipes broken during the war. Ink would bubble, pour out, become pale like bluish milk.) My briefcase is made from black oilcloth with the same design of raised diamonds that we had on our prewar portable record player.

High, above the blackboard, almost at the ceiling, portraits of our leaders hang. From my desk in the first row, I stick up my head to examine them. I already know some of them, the major ones, of course. Stalin, Molotov, Malenkov, Beria, and other members of the Politburo are slightly squinting, looking somewhere far above our heads. They live somewhere over there, far away, in the North, in Moscow, in the Kremlin, a thousand miles from my city. They are made of the same wonder-working material as the heroes of the Russian fairy tales I've begun reading. The leaders are Russian epic heroes. Our enormous country rests on their shoulders. In my belief that somewhere there, in the big world beyond the borders of my city, in the northern forests, Kashchey the Immortal lives, and Baba Yaga gallops, laughing wildly in her bronze mortar, and Vasilisa the Wise rides a

gray wolf that rushes her to her Ivan Tsarevich, I see an immense country, powerful but benevolent, remarkable in every respect.

I am prepared for school. I can read, and not just by syllables. Anxious before the start of the school year, I've read many pages not only of the textbook but also of the reader *Rodnaia rech'* (Native Speech). Mama got it on the black market. For a long time, I still don't understand what "the black market" is. I know only two other markets in Odessa—the Novyi (New) and Privoz (Fresh Delivery). I also don't know yet that "to get" means "to buy with great difficulty." But I already know from *Native Speech* that I am fortunate. I happen to be born in the best country in the world—the biggest, the most beautiful, and the most just. Everybody in this country is fortunate too. Over the radio, I often hear the famous song from the film *Tsirk* (*Circus*):

From Moscow to the very far border districts,
From the southern mountains to the northern seas,
A man walks as the proud owner
Of his boundless native land.

And more:

I don't know any other country,
Where a man can breathe so freely.

I don't know about metaphors yet. I imagine the person from the song as a colossus who marches over the woods and fields and noisily inhales and exhales air from his giant lungs.

Our teacher's name is Galina Ivanovna. She speaks loudly to us, the way a commander in the movies addresses his soldiers before attacking the enemy. She's wearing a dark-blue dress with an embroidered bodice. The dress seems too tight on her. She pulls at it constantly under her arm. First, she makes us repeat her name, both the first and patronymic, syllable by syllable. Then, she takes a brand new class record in a brown paper cover from her desk. "As soon as you hear your name," she says, "you have to stand up and say clearly, 'Here.'"

Alexandrov, Burkin, Velikhov, Goriun, Doroshenko . . . I'm next in turn. Reading my last name, the teacher stumbles. She trips in the middle, raises her eyebrows in puzzlement, and makes an unhappy face. Though she pronounces all names for the first time, she handles all the others easily. All

the other surnames are normal. Only mine is the devil only knows what kind:

“Drrr . . . Dey . . . Drei . . . Draï . . . Draï-tser?”

I jump up and utter, “Here.”

The class laughs. What kind of a last name is this? With a ferocious look, his eyes popping out, his bangs hanging down to the bridge of his nose, the boy next to me turns toward me and asks, “Your last name doesn’t sound Russian. Who are you? A kike? that’s who you are?”

I don’t know what he is talking about, but, judging by the others’ facial expressions, I understand that to be “a kike” is shameful. I freeze. I have never before heard this word. The roll call continues, but I am dumbfounded. I’ve waited for the beginning of my schooling—and here you are. I don’t even know what to think, but I see that my classmates look back at me from time to time, their eyes mean. I can hardly wait for the class to end. Luckily, the teacher lets us go early on the first day. We sit there only till noon.

In the schoolyard, Mama waits for me. She is in the same—elated—mood as in the morning. After all, it’s a milestone in her life. Her firstborn has spent his first day in school! She notices my head is low. She bends over me: “What’s happened?”

I’m silent, my eyes cast down.

“Why don’t you answer me?”

I’m silent.

She squats in front of me, straightens the collar of my shirt, tries to look in my eyes: “Well, what’s the matter?”

I mumble something under my breath. I shift my eyes; now my nose is almost down against my chest.

“Can’t you tell me what’s happened?”

“No- . . . thing,” with difficulty, I squeeze out of myself.

“Why are you upset?”

“I’m not.”

“Why do you say you’re not, when I see that you are?”

“I’m not. I’m not.”

“You’re making trouble!” Mama says. In punishment, she grabs my hand though we are still far from the street crossing. I groan and try to pull my palm out of her warm hand, but she restrains me. In my helplessness, no matter how hard I try to hold them back, tears roll out, stinging my eyes. Mama holds on to my hand. With all my strength, I try to break loose so that I can wipe off the tears with my fist. Mama reluctantly lets me go, again squats beside me. From her black purse with a little clicking clasp, she takes

a perfumed white lace handkerchief. I turn away. That's a good one! To use a female handkerchief.

"Wait!" she says impatiently. "Let me wipe it off. Well, what's happened?"

Her face expresses concern. Her brow furrowed, she considers something, turns her head back to the school entrance.

"OK, I'll ask the teacher why you're crying."

Next to us, little twin boys are standing; they both wear the same gray pants and white shirts. They hold hands, their fingers interlocked. Their eyes are also wet. They've spent a long time today among unfamiliar adults and children, far from their mama. Craning their thin necks, they look for her in the crowd. They are frightened and hungry, and cry just because they're small.

It seems that this changes Mama's mind. She assumes that her son is simply a crybaby, though he wasn't known for this before. She is annoyed with me. I spoil her big day—the beginning of my school life.

At home a freshly cooked dinner awaits me—wonderful, smelling through the whole apartment with all the spices of the world—borscht and sweet-and-sour meatballs with gravy. Mama knows my favorite dishes.

At first I refuse to eat. I am silent as before. I lie down on a windowsill and pretend to look down at our courtyard, where it is drizzling over the flagstones. A cat called Murka is running from one hallway entrance to another. In search of coins, lowering his head on his chest, Boska, our caretaker's son, makes his rounds over the yard, as always. I looked forward to the beginning of school so much! Now I feel bitter. Maybe I won't have to go back. I ask myself how I can manage not to go there anymore. Maybe I should get sick with something serious? But how to make it happen?

"Well, stop it! Come over and eat." Mama raps a spoon on the table. "Everything's getting cold. Stop your tricks!"

I'm somewhat afraid of Mama, especially when she talks that way. While I'm finally eating, she sits beside me.

"What a whiner I've got myself here. The only thing you want to do is to hang on to your mama's skirt. You're already a big boy! They go to the first grade at seven. And you're already eight and a half months older. You should show the little ones the way. And yet you're all the same like them." She's still disappointed with the look on my face. I haven't shared her first-day-of-school excitement.

I sleep poorly that night. I try to understand what has happened in school. Why was I laughed at for the first time in my life—almost eight years long now?

The next day it doesn't get better. I should get acquainted with my neighbors. I should let them know my name. I hear normal names from all sides—Kolya, Vanya, Petya, Seryozha. Now it's my turn.

I keep my mouth shut. My neighbor with the tousled hair nudges me. "What's your name?"

I'm silent.

"Hey, you! Are you deaf? What's your name?"

I'm silent.

"Why ask him?" A jolly voice comes from one of desks in the last row. "If he's a Jew, it means he's little Abram."

I don't have time to understand why yesterday they called me "a kike" and today "a Jew"—another insult, I guess, somehow tied to the first. Before I can figure this out, the whole class begins to jump up and down, bang the desks with their fists, clap their hands in time to the song I've heard on the streets. I haven't understood it and, therefore, didn't pay attention to it before. (They sing all kinds of stuff on the streets!) The class hoots, mockingly dragging out vowels, distorting the *r* sounds in every line:

A little old hag with no hurry
Crossed the little street;
A cop's stopped her:
"Well, granny, you've broken the law,
You've broken the law,
You'd better pay your fine or else!"
"Oy, my God,
Please let me go home,
Today's my little Abram's day off.
I have a little bun for him,
A little piece of chicken,
A little piece of chicken,
And a little pie!"

So the old granny's funny, the very name Abram is funny. It can't be said without laughter. It's clear that you should utter this name only this way, with mockery and contempt. My last name, Draitser, has already made me a laughing stock. And now I've just learned that my patronymic, Abramovich, is no better. That is, my papa's name is Abram, nicknamed Abrasha, "little Abram." Both my uncles, my mama's brother and her sister's husband, are called Abram and Abrashe as well. From all sides I have solid

Abrams. And that nasty little song, which gives everybody so much joy, therefore, is about all of them. I'm dumbfounded by these discoveries.

"Well, so, what do they call you?" the neighbor persists.

I am wondering what to say. At home, as long as I remember, everybody has called me Milya. I don't quite like this nickname, because it sounds like the Russian *milyi*, "cute"; it's too delicate for a boy. Although I don't quite see what could be bad about it, I'm afraid the class won't like it as well. I keep my mouth shut.

The teacher notices my unwillingness to give the neighbor my name. She leans over the class register.

Here I suddenly recall that, in my birth certificate, when I visited the school with Mama to file my documents, I saw that my first name was somewhat unusual and terribly unattractive. Better to give him my nickname: Milya.

The neighbor wonders what kind of name this is.

For the umpteenth time, Galina Ivanovna adjusts the bodice of her dress and says, with a smirk on her face, "It's not good to deceive your classmates. Milya. What? Do they call you that at home?"

I'm silent.

She looks into the class register again.

"What? Do you want to say that the register's wrong?"

I feel myself blushing.

"Well, why don't you answer me?"

I'm silent. I feel the tears beginning.

"Andrei," Galina Ivanovna says loudly so that all the class hears, "this boy's name is Sa-mooh-eel."

"Mo-o-lya," my neighbor sustains his voice in a jolly amazement. "Mo-o-lya, stop bugging me!"

Everybody laughs.

I remember—Moolya—that's what they called the funny character Samuil in the movie *Podkidysh (The Foundling)*. And the whole expression comes from that movie. But I'm not a foundling. I have a mother and a father.

"Mo-o-lya, Mo-o-lya!"

The neighbor even launches into a dance around me and begins to pinch me.

Why am I silent? Why don't I dare hit him in the face?

"Sa-mooh-eel," the neighbor says joyfully and at the same time with a scorn, "What kind of a name is it? Ah, that means you are a kike after all?"

He stares at me. It's evident that, though he knows the word, he's never

seen a living “kike,” or maybe he has seen one, but that one was an adult, and he wouldn’t have teased him. For all he knew, he could have got it in the neck.

“It’s not good to talk that way,” the teacher says. “You should say ‘a Jew,’ not ‘a kike.’ Children, in our country, according to our Stalin’s Constitution, all nationalities are equal. The Russians, and the Ukrainians, and the Byelorussians, and the Georgians, and the Jews.”

She is saying it, and I feel in my bones that she herself doesn’t believe what she’s saying. There is a stir in the class. The children at the back desks whisper to one another; the front ones are deliberating.

“Yes, yes,” Galina Ivanovna goes on. “Even a member of our government, Lazar Moiseevich Kaganovich, our comrade Stalin’s comrade-in-arms, is also a Jew.”

“It can’t be!” somebody from the last row blurts out. “All them Jews are cowards. During the war they all hid their asses in Tashkent.”

My heart begins to pound. It’s all true. I’m a base coward and the lowest traitor of my motherland. They’re right! They’re right all around.

After all, I too sat out the war in Tashkent.

Back then, in the autumn of 1945, a child, I had no idea what was behind my classmates’ hallooing. The war was still giving off smoke in the hearts of those children who had grown up in it. Many of them were from the families that had chosen to stay on in Odessa, even with German troops advancing.

During the two and half years of occupation, first by German troops, then by Romanian troops, the newspapers and lecturers—professors of Odessa institutions of higher learning—unleashed Nazi-inspired anti-Semitic propaganda. Posters proclaiming, “Destroy the Jews!” were pasted on the walls at every street corner.

Many of those who stayed behind seized the opportunity to occupy the apartments of the Jews who had been driven into the ghetto or had escaped the Nazis on foot and horse carts, on cargo trains and boats, small and big. They looted Jewish belongings, acquired over a lifetime, on a massive scale. The authorities of the Romanian occupation opened up commission stores, and Jewish valuables left behind during the frantic escape—china sets, rare books, antique furniture—quickly filled up the store shelves and floors.

After the battle of Stalingrad, when it became clear that the Germans would lose the war, panic seized the city. Those who were hoarding any unsold loot hid it and reinforced the apartment doors with additional locks and bolts. When Jewish women and their children knocked on the doors

of their prewar apartments, after having survived the internal exile, famine, illnesses, and long exhausting travel, their former neighbors, clenching their teeth and breathing heavily with insuppressible hatred, roared from the other side, “Damn you! What dragged you here? Go back where you’ve come from. May you all go to hell!”

At times, determined to hold on at any cost to the seized rooms, which they had become used to during the war and now considered their own, the former neighbors reached for their axes. In despair, the refugees sought justice in the customary way of the time, by sending telegrams and letters to the Kremlin—to Comrade Stalin, to Comrade Kalinin, to General Voroshilov. Local courts had a hard time coping with the avalanche of claims from the homeless. Though, in these disputes, the Soviet law was on the side of families of front-line soldiers (and the overwhelming majority of the evacuated were from such families), it wasn’t very easy to win a case in court. Ironically, the defendants bribed the local judges with the money recovered from the looting of the very same claimants.

As was the case with Mama and me, while the trial deliberations stretched for months on end, the returnees had to spend nights in empty buildings that had been shattered by the bombardments or in the attics and basements of the buildings surviving the war. Some families found refuge with their relatives, often huddling up in one room with them. There wasn’t enough sleeping space for everyone. Some slept on the floors, some on stools and chairs thrown together, or on desks and tables. That was how my aunt Clara and her six-year-old daughter Eva lived in the apartment of my mother’s cousin Dunya.

The wartime Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda infected the young as quickly as measles or chicken pox could. For a long time after the war ended, in the quiet corners of Odessa streets, in the remote alleys of the parks, in the secluded places among the ruins, gangs of youngsters hunted for Jewish kids, survivors of the Holocaust, and harassed and beat them up, often till they bled. My second cousin Yan Tentser was seven when he returned from Tashkent with his mother. As he approached his building, two adolescents threw chunks of dried-out clay at him, shouting, “You little kike!” They got him in his ear. He fell down and lost consciousness. Blood oozed from his ear. He became partly deaf for life. They also shot at my Jewish schoolmate Boris Zamikhovsky’s brother with a slingshot, damaging his eye. So, as I realized much later, Mama insisted on escorting me to school because she knew that the reckless truck drivers were not the only ones she had to protect me from.

When Mama and I walked along the streets, I saw huge crosses drawn in chalk on the gates of many buildings.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“This is a sign that the building’s been disinfected,” Mama said, knowing that it was better to answer me right away. Otherwise I might wear her out with my questions: I was at the age of the incessant “whys.” For me, a war child, the word *disinfecting* was familiar. Usually it meant that they steam your clothing to kill nits, the typhus carriers. I didn’t ask any more questions, but Mama spoke in a muffled voice and somewhat strangely, with a bitter grin that seemed odd to me.

Only many years later did I learn the reason for Mama’s strange look. The Romanian occupation powers drew the crosses on the gates of Odessa buildings. Our standard sappers’ sign “CHECKED: NO MINES” still adorned the corners of every city block for a long time; in the same way, as a war memory, the chalk cross-marked the gates. It meant: the building is cleansed of Jews.