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Translation Of "Conversations In The Realm Of The Dead" By M. Stepanova

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MARIA STEPANOVA

Conversations in the Realm of the Dead

Translated from Russian by Sibelan Forrester

I.

IN ONE OF HER DIARIES — and she kept them, day after day, year after year, from 1899 to 1967 (not counting the years of her *female life*, when she experienced all the things that make up the eternal material of novels: youth, falling in love, marriage, children, hurt feelings, rejection of any kind of hope) — Liubov' Vasil'evna Shaporina, née Yakovleva, recalled an incident with her classmate. It was in Naples, in 1905; her friend had wound up there without friends, without acquaintances, without money, in a filthy and frightening hostel, and she waited to be rescued, after barricading the door with a dresser. “When I went into her room, she threw herself into my arms with sobs. . . . After she had calmed down a bit, she said, ‘I kept thinking: what was going to happen next? Is this just a bad joke, or would it be for my whole life?’ And that’s what I think all the time too. Many people have died that way, without an answer to their question.”

Shaporina wrote this in Leningrad, in December of 1943, in the heart of a bad joke that would end, for her, only with her life. The role she was fated to play, the work of a builder of a *common monument*, and in a certain sense of the observer of a common graveyard, would have surprised her. The diary began as private, she thought of it that way, and the main motive that drove her through the years and pages was the energy of hurt feelings, the power of resistance that originated in the circumstances of everyday life and wasn't extinguished even after fifty years. The hurt feelings had a simple plot: she wasn't loved, and as you first read that seems inexplicable. Her life is the exemplary, purebred life of a good person, which if abbreviated easily fits on a hagiographic canvas. Decades of loneliness: her husband, the Soviet composer Shaporin, went through mistresses with funny last names; her son, the spit and image of his father, lived and moved farther and farther from her; her beloved daughter, born late, died at twelve, and the burning longing for her only became stronger over the

years; her grandchildren grew up and disappointed her. Decades of self-sacrifice: in 1938 Shaporina, whose own situation was unsettled, took in and raised as her own the two daughters of an acquaintance who had been shot (one of them, when she got older, would successfully sue to take Shaporina's room). At the same time, there was nothing stoic in Shaporina's loneliness: bypassed once and for all by what the Soviet dialect she hated called *happiness in personal life*, she continued (according to her own codex, which admitted neither weakness nor deviation) to accomplish feats to the glory of faithfulness and to hope in vain for a symmetrical response. The objects of her service would change, disappear, move into the background; the logic of self-immolation never changed.

This self-immolation, which she was ashamed of and secretly proud of, forms the general focus, the main labor of her life. All the rest (including her contributions in the army of the arts, spelled out on the book's cover) would be laid aside for the sake of the need to *help*, or would slip through her fingers, or would simply enable her family to survive. Survival, hers and other people's, in all of its multifaceted, sometimes unimaginable forms, quickly becomes the sole subject of the diary. Survival that was not only physical: Soviet jargon in the mouth of a young woman from the nobility, the imperfect Russian speech of émigré relatives, laziness, fear, stupefaction—Shaporina notices and describes all the traits of deterioration, simplification, and spiritual petrification, her own and other people's. What she assembles is a chronicle of common degradation, as unpromising as everything she did, and extremely precise.

Shaporina was one of those who went abroad in the first years after the revolution—and who voluntarily returned to the USSR. Many émigrés thought about it (in the 1920s, and especially in the 1930s, the years when the Soviet seedling was flowering demonstratively), and many decided to do it—some (like Aleksei Tolstoy, whose family was friendly with hers) out of love for life on a grand scale, and some because “the power is there,” as Marina Tsvetaeva said to Mayakovsky the only time they met in Paris. The peculiarity of Shaporina's story is that she both left and came back without seeming to notice that she was making a historical or political choice; she left her husband, in rage and sorrow, packing and collecting the children in haste, and she went back to her husband too, at the first call. The consequences of that nonchoice, by the way, were the same as for everyone: catastrophic.

1933: “Now most people have realized that there's nowhere to go, no matter what there are prisons everywhere and hunger everywhere. The

intelligentsia still unconsciously wants to jump out somewhere, they run off into the polar circle, to the Pamirs, into the stratosphere, while the peasants just sit there on their benches, perishing.” 1935: “They’re exiling people to Turgai, Viloisk, Atbasar, Kokchetav, to places where you have to ride 150 miles on camels, to places you can get to only by dogsled.” 1938: “Vasya [Shaporina’s son] is often put out that I don’t go to the movies, to the theater. Impressions slide over him, over today’s young people, without reaching consciousness. They’ve been accustomed since childhood to the horror of the contemporary situation. The words ‘arrested,’ ‘shot’ don’t produce the least impression.” 1939: “And here they force us, poor people of the XXth century, to revert all the time to the XVIth or beginning of the XVIIth. And not to scream from horror, but to pretend that you don’t see, you don’t hear.”

2.

WHO IS SHAPORINA ADDRESSING, who is supposed to read this series of “*J’accuse*” that stretches over decades? Most likely a distant descendant, a new link in the family chain: she didn’t count on interest from her close relatives. Compared to the diaries and notes of her famous contemporaries, people with a more developed instinct of self-preservation (recall the later marginal note by Kornei Chukovsky in his own diary record: “this was written to show the authorities”), Shaporina’s notebooks say *everything* as frankly as a condemned or mad person. No Aesopian tricks, no softening, no omissions, sooner the opposite: the daring of her formulations seems also to have in mind the enemy reader, a person who reads *as an official duty*. Each assertion is formulated and realized as a slap. It is striking as well that she (from a noble family, with relatives in emigration, half her friends arrested or exiled) nonetheless remained at liberty, and that her diaries, which were written without a backward glance, don’t hold even a hint that any other turn of fate was possible, not a shadow of the fear that everyone shared then. Even after unwillingly agreeing to become an informer for the NKVD (“I just have to fool him, I don’t think it’s very hard”), i.e., having been assured of a persistent interest in her and her circle, Shaporina doesn’t give up her habit of daily writing from life: her “tail” becomes one of her characters: the shameless, the comical, and the powerless. She is persecuted by other fears: of poverty and a hungry death. The point where she comes face-to-face with these fears also becomes the highest point of her destiny.

Many blockade memoirs stress the necessity of preserving this experiment in the disruption of normal life for history. They also did this in order to lend value to one's suffering, to make it *work*, and moreover because life that gets out of the grooves seems exotic, exceptional, unique. Shaporina's diary is something of an exception. Long before the blockade, her text had turned into a strange travelogue whose author wasn't walking or traveling anywhere. The surroundings themselves change; the space one is accustomed to mutates and demands a new description, like an unfamiliar country where everything is alien and vital: the landscape, the language, the local mores. Soviet Russia here is described as a *new uncountryside*: a place as far from the well-ordered and coherent lands over the border as it is from its own past, a wild field overgrown, living outside sense and law. All that's left to do is to wait for a rescue, which can only come from outside, like a ship coming for Robinson Crusoe. For long years Shaporina was occupied with the everyday chronicle of waiting (getting hold of food, reading, prayer, concern about someone near and dear, meetings with the cannibal aborigines). As the blockade began, reality finally came together with her imagination, with no more pretense that it was adequate for life.

It was as if the world Shaporina had viewed from the start as phantasmagorical ("the land of the Morlocks," she writes, recalling H. G. Wells's novel), had once again confirmed its evil qualities, justifying her worst expectations. But at this very moment something unforeseen happens to the author and the text of the diaries: the accents get mixed up, the passive voice of proud suffering changes to the active, the inertia of expectation turns into a plot of overcoming. The diary's tempo changes, there are unexpected pauses ("the lamps were lit, it was getting dark, the fog turned blue"). Just as before, the author is like a handheld camera recording everything that moves: the large and small objects that enter the shot. But it's as if she allows herself to hover, to freeze, to pause, to fall into something like a hungry faint: stupefied contemplation of beauty. In the space of the diaries, which she had been keeping all her life at the tempo of the daily news (facts, rumors, dialogue, evaluations)—these pauses ("I got off the tram at the Academy of Sciences, and my spirit froze from the beauty of the Admiralty embankment"), filled with long, free descriptions ("while a weather balloon slowly sailed upward amid the quiet trees")—something resembling a protective cover. Here, for almost the very first time, the author and the reader manage to *catch their breath*—or to *regain consciousness*.

This experience in extremis became an unexpected reward for Shaporina. In a later minute of happiness she'll say "this is to pay me back for the blockade," for years afterward she'll call the blockade the main value in her own life. "From the next room, empty like the whole apartment, came the sound of a radio. . . . The soprano voice, a tenor came pouring out. In the dark of night the cannons boomed heavily and terribly. A dying voice monotonously asserted, 'Everything goes away. . . . everything collapses. . . . everything falls. . . . everything goes away. . . . I'm dying.' . . . I would get up in the dark, heat up some tea, give her something hot to drink, I brought in camphor. And went back to bed indifferently, because I had no strength. But now it seems to me that I could have helped her spirit more, I should have read the Gospel aloud. Although she could very well have taken that for the last rites."

3.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that strike you in the two-volume body of this book is the scale: over a thousand pages, hundreds (if not thousands) of surnames, the many-legged and many-headed human mass, descending before one's eyes under the ice of an anthropological catastrophe. From time immemorial diaries have been made up of domestic matters—one's own era, friends, one's own little universe, sometimes ripped along the seam upon contact with faceless and indiscriminate common fate. Here there's something else. Already by the early 1930s the main content of these notes turns out to be the background: big and little history change places, and big history more or less lives at the cost of little history: it's used for nourishment, its space is taken up, its air is drunk up.

Diary writing acts on its own will: it gets saturated, gets heavy, before your eyes the flesh of pages and other people's stories accrues. Was that what Shaporina wanted? Who knows? She, and she was not the only one (the same dream is present in Olga Freidenberg's postwar notes), considered it essential and unavoidable to have a Moscow Nüremberg trial—a trial of the Soviet system. Shaporina's notebooks can also be read as a corpus of evidence prepared by the prosecution. But even in that capacity it is obviously, flagrantly overabundant—as if it lacks a filter to distinguish the important things from the unimportant, the superfluous from the essential, the verisimilar from the fantastic. Rumors, gossip, jokes, conversations in lines and worldly salons, news of exiles, executions, and hungry deaths come billowing in a thick, blind wave. The index of names at the end of

the second volume takes up twenty-seven pages; the book, issued by NLO Press, is a Noah's Ark where everything that breathes and talks swims out of nonbeing: peasants, Red Army soldiers, the ranks of writers.

A ramified and extensive system of acquaintances (and Shaporina was on good terms with all of St. Petersburg/Leningrad and half of Moscow) and the rituals conjoined with it, which already seemed very odd in the growing shadows of twilight—these are one of the main constants of her life. Maintaining connections (visits, flowers, correspondence, carefully thought-up little gifts) required tremendous time and energy. Shaporina is an entirely social animal who knows and loves her place on the class ladder, thinking of herself (unlike Mandelstam, whose dissident verses she quotes sympathetically and incorrectly) as *one of*: a continuer of her family, a representative of her class, an heir to and preserver of European culture. She notices and furiously records any traits of degeneration from the well-known and beloved norm, and some of her evaluations are surprising: “I’ve read half of Tynianov’s book *Death of the Vázir-Mukhtar*, and I’m suffering physically from disgust and anger. To dare raise a hand against Griboedov, against Pushkin. But why not? (With an accent.) We blow up the Simonov Monastery, the great icon of God’s mother ‘Utoli moi pechali,’ the church of St. Nikola the Wonder-Worker and so on—and you keep quiet; we do a lot of other things and you tolerate it, well now we’re bathing your final treasure, your first love, in the slops: you’ll tolerate everything, it serves you right. It serves us right.”

It’s not for nothing that “With an accent” appears here. Simple-hearted and ineradicable anti-Semitism is just as much a part of her spiritual profile as passionate patriotism—and the desire to die in Rome (“there alone”), as love and hate of the Russian element (“it’s the people that is vile, not the government”), as sensitivity to hurt feelings and not bearing grudges. Like aristocratic arrogance (everything that irritated her in her unloved son was explained by Shaporin’s middle-class blood) and an inborn democratism (“What does aristocratism have to do with this? It’s just that I, apparently, just like you, am not the daughter of a bitch! I just despise them”). And—like the ability to change and readjust her attitude toward an event, a person, a country.

Russia and Europe constantly outweigh each other on her internal scales. “There’s no place here for people with a free spirit, and we should make every effort to expatriate in the future.” The dream of emigration, the shaky hope in the Varangian (“let a German Schutzman stand on every corner”), the constant glance over her shoulder at Europe as the image of

a better, undistorted way of being—these are among the diary’s main themes. But then, during the “Thaw” when she’s already a very old woman (“My God, can it be that I’ll really never go abroad?”), Shaporina makes it to Geneva for two months, to visit the family of her adored brother, and immediately starts a debate about the fates of Russia: “For forty-two years already we’ve been fighting off everyone who hoped to take Russia with their bare hands, and we’ve grown stronger than ever.” “What’s the point of this great power talk?” they answer her. Then and there Shaporina discovers with deep sadness that her history, her extreme (as people would say now) experience has no value and no interest for her nearest and dearest. “At first I didn’t understand the reasons for their indifference, it seemed to me, toward Russia, toward everything I had lived through over this time. Sasha wouldn’t let me ask questions about the blockade, the war.” She herself seems to feel a certain inappropriateness in her story at the table of the *living*: “I wouldn’t start talking about something that’s painful to touch on.”

4.

THE DEFENSIVE MECHANISMS established by life itself (by the habit of safety, the need for spiritual balance) provoke us to shy away from a certain kind of information: the kind that causes pain without being able to soothe it. This knowledge, with which there’s nothing to be done, is what Shalamov writes about in his *Kolyma Tales*: experience that is tormenting, useless, and corrupting in its fruitlessness. The reality Shaporina documents has a similar nature. What she describes is the experience of sinking slowly into death and posthumous existence in a world with disrupted conceptions and sagging logical connections. This is not the *Gulag Archipelago* or Primo Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved* (that is, not an outright imitation of hell). Be it hell or Hades—but the fact that its landscape recalls ours, and that one can make out glimmers of concerts, dachas, and florists’ stands, explains the despair that comes with reading these diaries.

If you like, it’s as if they are incommensurate with life, they are not a text but something else: a tear, a rift, a yawning abyss, a black hole. And also a pit: a sated maw with threads, scraps of cloth, and fibers of flesh dangling from it. This pit lies before the reader in place of the text (of the text that could have arisen here if history and culture had been uninterrupted), like the wreaths of artificial flowers that mark the place where someone died in an accident along our roads.

No one, I think, is ready for such a death, and is it even possible to prepare for it? It-can-happen-to-anyone is a watermark that comes through on each page of Shaporina's text. The chronicle of a certain kind of person being gradually crowded out of life is horrifying in itself. But it is precisely this type (even without any right to it) that seems to us *our own*. Lyuba Yakovleva-Shaporina with her splendid education, her knowledge of five languages, her Europeanism at home and her love for art (painting/theater/translations) would recognize herself in a typical young woman in a Moscow café (design/photography/journalism)—if only in her lack of preparedness for the catastrophe, in her collection of pointless knowledge and desires, unsuited to life on an uninhabited island. Her fears and prejudices are a near echo of our own; her circle's opinions and doubts hardly need to be translated into new Russian. Our way of living too, brought down to the average, severed, distorted, attempts to remind us of another, a better one, which we weren't the ones to establish—whereas it is precisely the memory of *what should be* that was an unceasing torment for Shaporina. She knew better than anyone that her life had not been lived right, had gone off into *another channel*, away from law and grace, and (unlike many people) she could never make peace with that.

A hundred years ago she was thirty-two, she was sitting on the sun-drenched Garibaldi piazza, a Russian woman in Rome, happy and of no interest to anyone. We too, for now, still possess that possibility, and a certain amount of time to take advantage of it.