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### A Life On The Left: Moritz Mebel's Journey Through The Twentieth Century

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The  
**Carl Beck  
Papers**

in Russian &  
East European Studies

Number 1805

**Robert Weinberg**, Editor  
**Marion Faber**, Translator

**A Life on the Left:**  
Moritz Mebel's Journey Through  
the Twentieth Century



*Moritz Mebel and his wife, Sonja*

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**A Life on the Left:**

Moritz Mebel's Journey Through  
the Twentieth Century

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**Robert Weinberg** is Professor of History at Swarthmore College. He is the author of *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps* (1993) and *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (1998). He is also co-editor, with Laurie Bernstein, of *The Russian Revolution: A History in Documents* (2007).

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*Photograph from cover taken by Robert Weinberg.*

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## **Abstract**

In *A Life on the Left*, Moritz Mebel describes life as a Jewish refugee from Germany in 1930s Moscow, service in the Red Army during the war, and what it meant to be a Jew in Stalin's Russia and communist East Germany. He also evaluates his life as a political activist upon his return to East Germany after Stalin's death and offers insight into the allure of communism.

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# Introduction

## Robert Weinberg

In 1997 and 1998 Moritz Mebel sat down with the journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt for four lengthy interviews about his youth in Erfurt, Germany, during the 1920s, his life after he moved to Moscow in the early 1930s, his stint as a soldier in the Red Army during the Second World War, and his professional and political life after 1959 when he returned to East Germany and became a prominent physician and member of the Central Committee of the ruling Communist Party. At the time of his retirement in 1988, Mebel was professor of urology at the Charite, the preeminent hospital in East Berlin, and author of nearly two hundred articles and texts on urology and renal transplantation. *A Life on the Left* is an abridged translation of these conversations, which appeared in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Mebel's reflections on his life are extremely revealing about issues at the very heart of the twentieth-century experience as lived by a German Jew who came of age in the Soviet Union. To read Mebel's recollections is to learn about war, ideology, nationality, and emigration from a fervent believer in the communist ideal.

Russian Jews in the twentieth century traversed many geographical and ideological paths that embodied particular forms of modernity. Many crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the New World, where they took advantage of the liberal politics of Canada and the United States to acculturate and integrate. Some chose to embrace Zionism by moving to Palestine and helping to establish a Jewish nation-state, Israel. Still others remained behind and joined with non-Jews to build a classless and internationalist utopia in the Soviet Union, successor state to the Russian Empire.

Mebel's story, like that of so many Jews in the last century, has connections to all three of these routes, but the road he chose and remains committed to is the one leading to socialism. During these conversations Mebel explains his lifelong devotion to politics and medicine. We learn about the allure and appeal of an ideology and state to a young German Jew who had found refuge in one of the few countries willing to take in Jews fleeing the Nazis. Mebel literally owes his life and career to the Soviet Union, a simple but powerful fact that helps to account for his sustained commitment to the communist movement. As Mebel notes, he did not view the world through the prism of national differences. Instead, he, like so many other devoted foreign communists who lived in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, describes himself as an "internationalist," with his Jewish and German identities occupying less significance in shaping his worldview. His comments echo those made by Mary Leder, an American Jew who lived in the Soviet Union from the early 1930s to the mid-1960s. When asked by my wife and me why she thought so

many American Jews embraced Stalin's Russia in the 1930s, she replied forcefully, "We didn't consider ourselves Jews. We were internationalists!"<sup>2</sup>

Mebel remains dedicated to his ideals of social, political, and economic equality and justice. He played a role in the formation of the Party of Democratic Socialism, which succeeded the East German Communist Party after 1989, has criticized NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1998, and has defended the right of East Germany to build the Berlin Wall.<sup>3</sup> He is still very active in left-wing politics and has raised his voice to protest the war in Iraq. Throughout the 1990s he forcefully expressed his criticism of the shortcomings of reunification. Like many other former East Germans, he and his wife refer to the unification process as "annexation" (*Anschluss*) and the era of the two Germanies as "peacetime." He is particularly disappointed by what he believes to be the health care system in the reunited Germany. As he notes in the German edition:

I am horrified by this medical system in which I fortunately do not have to practice. The doctor entrepreneur above all else! No thanks! I can't even listen to that! The doctor as entrepreneur? That turns disease into a commodity, and health, too. To be sure, a market economy has very effective levers to motivate people and to elicit intellectual innovations: economic pressure, competition, money. But in my eyes the kind privatized health system I've now had to live to witness is inhuman. . . . The human being is treated much too much like an abstract thinker, an insurance risk, as a market value, and not as a sufferer, as someone in need of help and attention.<sup>4</sup>

Mebel attributes the failings of the communist regimes to an erroneous understanding of the dialectical process. He blames the application of the Leninist model of political organization for most of East Germany's problems. His Marxist analysis of socioeconomic and political systems and his emphasis on the role of the dialectic in the historical process may seem quaint and out-of-date in the early twenty-first century. As he told me when we met in 2004, "Stalinism was not communism." Mebel's remark underscores the power of ideology to shape and influence our views and behaviors. It also evinces Mebel's steadfast belief that he has no reason to apologize or second-guess what he accomplished in his lifetime on behalf of communism and the East German government and society. As he puts it in *Rot und Weiß*, "I regret nothing that I did in my life. I see no reason to extract myself from my biography."

He adds a bit later, however, that "no new evaluation or new memory makes valueless what you thought before." Mebel cautions us against "retrospective assessment" gleaned from the benefit of historical hindsight. Yet he also acknowledges that the governments of the Soviet Union and East Germany "perverted" the teaching of Marx and the ideals of communism. In October 1989, at a meeting of the



Central Committee, Mebel asserted that “the great mass” of East Germans rejected “not socialism, but rather its deformations.”<sup>5</sup> In short, he remained a steadfast and loyal supporter of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) until the very end and believed that reforms could save the regime. Furthermore, he regrets that his loyalty to the regime and party stifled his willingness to speak out on matters that warranted criticism such as the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, the glorification of political leaders, and the insidious role of anti-Semitism in both Soviet and East German politics and society. At the same October 1989 meeting mentioned above, Mebel offered the following confession:

Why were we silent? Why was I silent and without the courage to come forward here and say: “Comrades, that, that, and that are not the case.” When facing the enemy in battle (I’m not saying this here to draw attention to myself) I was courageous. I was on the front, you know that. I was a combatant in the Soviet army. But here I did not show courage. I spoke in the corridors, but at this podium . . . Moritz Mebel was not to be heard, with negative or constructive criticism. And I must tell you (I’m no longer at the beginning of my life, after all) that that is a burden that will gnaw at me a lot.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the reader of *Rot und Weiß* may ask about the issues of personal responsibility and complicity. Mebel asserts that he did not know about the abuses carried out by Stalin’s regime or the government of East Germany. We cannot help but question his comments about what he did or did not know. While he rejects as wrong “an interpretation that projects my present knowledge and shame into the past, as if I had looked away despite my better knowledge,” he still acknowledges that anti-Semitic policies in the Soviet Union prevented him from entering the diplomatic service. He also tells us that he “repressed the show trials a few years earlier, too!” As we learn, his wife Sonja’s parents made sure that she understood the harsh realities of Stalin’s Russia in the 1930s. Still, the reader should keep in mind that Mebel was only a teenager in the 1930s, an impressionable time, especially for a boy from a communist-leaning family that found safety and security in the Soviet Union. Whether the reader wants to be as forgiving or understanding when assessing Mebel’s faith in communism as an adult is another matter.

### **Note on Translation**

My Swarthmore colleague and friend Marion Faber rendered the German text into English. I annotated the text, which follows a question-and-answer format on a variety of wide-ranging topics. We have chosen not to publish the first conversation, which explores Mebel’s experiences as a physician and offers insights into the medical profession and the health-care system, especially the matter of organ transplantation in East Germany. We have accordingly retitled the chapters to reflect

this omission. We have also omitted the preface by Mebel's interlocutor Hans-Dieter Schütt and addenda that present Mebel's comments to the October 18, 1989, session of the Central Committee. Finally, the Prologue is a questionnaire posed by Hans-Dieter Schütt to Mebel that appeared in the German edition. Marion Faber provided the translation.

*I am a witness to my times and am participating in these interviews so that you—  
Laura, Tino, Annele, and dear Jens—may know where I come from and what path I  
have taken.*

*—Moritz Mebel, from the preface to Rot und Weiß*

## **Prologue: A Questionnaire**

For what higher purpose does man live?  
To realize the ideals of the great French Revolution.

What do you find endearing about this century?  
That it is ending.

You are the ruler of the world: what would you abolish immediately?  
Man's exploitation of man. Every kind of weapon.

What does it mean to be on the left?  
Commitment to an existence with human dignity for everyone on this earth.

Which is your favorite place in the world?  
That is very hard to find at present on this globe.

Which three concepts characterize Germany for you?  
Arrogance, navel-gazing, Goethe.

What does homeland mean to you?  
That is where my children and friends are.

What would be your dream destination?  
The Antarctic.

What are you afraid of?  
Mankind's stupidity.

When was the last time you wept?  
At the children's memorial in Yad Vashem, in Jerusalem.

What do you no longer trust mankind to do?  
To stop destroying the biosphere in time.

What does betrayal mean to you?  
The attempt to save one's skin at the cost of others.

Which literary hero is closest to you? Why?

Pierre Bezukhov from *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. He is smart, kind, and brave.

Which work of art have you never understood?

*Ecclesiastical Action for Two Languages and Orchestra* by B. A. Zimmermann.

How would you describe people who know how to live well?

They have rock-solid principles—which also depend on the general weather.

Which art form would you like to master?

Painting.

What surprises you?

How people can be manipulated.

What absolutely has to be discovered?

A cure for cancer.

What is admirable about you?

That I never give up.

What is your soft spot?

I'm sentimental.

Which contemporary would you honor for service to mankind?

Albert Einstein.

Do you think Marx is obsolete?

Not at all.

Do you favor birth control?

Absolutely.

Which historical figure would you like to have as a pen pal?

August Bebel and Georgii Plekhanov.<sup>7</sup>

## **“I remember the Karl Liebknecht School very fondly.”**

### **The Early Years: From Erfurt to Moscow**

HS: Professor Mebel, in looking back over your early childhood experiences, what would you point to as having formed you for life? What occurs to you off the top of your head?

MM: In Erfurt,<sup>8</sup> on Rüdigerstrasse, there was a private kindergarten. I can still see the teacher in front of me, a woman with freckles. . . . Well, a young child is certainly formed by either having or not having love—I had this love. Another crucial factor when you are growing up is being protected. But it was definitely the Karl Liebknecht School in Moscow that formed me for life. We’ll talk about that. There I received an essential foundation for my education, my sense of community, and my political thinking.

HS: Let’s stay with Erfurt for now. . . .

MM: I went to the Barfüsser School. It all started with the obligatory cone of sweets [a traditional gift for German schoolchildren on the first day of school]; the school orientation was a big event for me. To be sure, my initial euphoria was soon mixed with bitter experiences. Our classroom teacher had a bad habit: the pupils he wanted to punish had to hold out their hands and he rapped their fingertips with a ruler. My parents quickly intervened, they protected me from this teacher. We lived at 44 Michaelisstrasse, not far from the Kraemer Bridge. The house is still standing, by the way, and it’s under protection as a historical monument, in fact, because Martin Luther lived there for a short time. Our apartment was on the third floor; we had four rooms. Once a week we dragged in a big zinc bathtub so that we could bathe. I remember the main room: there was a tile oven on the right, and on the left you went into the sitting room (we could only use that room when we had visitors). In the basement was a walled-up passageway that was supposed to lead to the cathedral. I was scared when I had to go down there to get apples or coal briquettes.

It’s interesting what occurs to you when someone asks you about your memories. I’m trying to let them come spontaneously, but they do seem to be rather unimportant details.

Now and then I had to go to the bakery and buy a cake, which cost one mark. The way went by the fish market—to me it seemed like a trip around the world. I always groused whenever I had to go buy this cake. After the war I walked the stretch again—literally just a hop, skip, and a jump—and couldn’t figure out why

I'd objected so much back then. I can also remember the Red Meeting [to organize the Communist demonstrations against National Socialism] in Erfurt, early in the thirties, in front of the cathedral on the market square. I can see the columns of red flags moving through the streets. The correspondent from *Pravda* often came to our house at this time. The speaker's platform on the cathedral steps was installed by my father. You could already tell that things were becoming uncomfortable politically. Unemployment was growing steadily. Even my Uncle Mitya didn't have any work; in 1928 he moved to Moscow with his wife, my Aunt Marie. Uncle Mitya died in 1956; he's buried in the Vostrikovsk Jewish Cemetery in Moscow. Aunt Marie died in Berlin in 1964. My other aunt, Enne, and Uncle Yuscho stayed in Germany, however. In 1943 Aunt Enne and her three children were deported to Auschwitz. Uncle Yuscho had been able to leave Germany in 1938; he'd gone to Argentina, intending to send for his family. That didn't work out. . . .

I also remember being beaten up because I was a Jew. Even in the early thirties you'd hear "kike," or "dirty Jew." The SA were in the streets in their brown uniforms, loudly greeting one another with "Heil Hitler!" A guy in an SA uniform would sit on a folding chair on the left side of the corner of Bahnhofstrasse, going in the direction of the fish market, and would sell the *Völkischer Beobachter*.<sup>9</sup>

I also remember the woods on the edge of Erfurt, a destination for excursions; sometimes on a Sunday we packed bread and butter sandwiches and our family had a picnic there. Grandmother Klara, mother, father, my sister Susi (she was five years older than me), and I. We sat in the gardens, an orchestra played on the bandstand, and I stood with the other boys in front of the stage and conducted. My mother slipped me fifty pfennigs, my sister too, because they were selling grilled Thüringian sausages for fifty pfennigs each at one corner of the stage. We had to eat the sausage right there, because grandmother wasn't supposed to see us. She was observant.

While our grandmother was alive, we kept the Jewish rituals at home, kosher food, for example. Before Passover, the Jewish Easter, we would clean everything; new dishes were brought down from the attic, the pots had to be boiled clean. I remember good food, Jewish dumplings. At Easter, we also left a glass of wine for the Messiah.<sup>10</sup> Father sat in one corner, hid a piece of matzoh under a pillow, and we children had to pull it out without being noticed. If we managed to do it, we could make a wish. Then father read in Hebrew, his hat on his head. When grandmother wasn't there, we ate ham with our matzoh. But we always had a lot of respect for our grandmother; if we broke the rules behind her back, we had a bad conscience. She had a little linen goods store on Marktstrasse. Our parents surely helped to support her, since the store probably didn't bring in very much.

Grandmother—she died in 1931—was a white-haired, good-looking woman. When I was a child I never knew that she was illiterate. Our family carefully con-

cealed that fact. She'd been a cook in my grandfather's house, and he came from a well-off Jewish family from Lemberg.<sup>11</sup> Grandfather fell in love with this cook; they got married, although he was then abruptly disinherited, because the match was not suitable. They traveled around from town to town selling linens. My grandfather died eleven months before I was born. Yes, grandmother left a strong impression on me. She bore eight children, five of whom died while they were still young. So three daughters were left. Aunt Marie was the oldest, then came my mother, Fanny, and then Aunt Enne. All three married engineers, two of whom were Russians—my father and Uncle Mitya. Uncle Yuscho came from Poland. Grandmother called me Munyo— dear little heart. My late grandfather had been called Munyo.

HS: Did you learn Hebrew?

MM: Yes, but only for a short while, and I also learned the New Testament quite well.

HS: Your father, Professor Mebel, was a civil engineer and worked in fact in a foundry.

MM: Yes, and then he was unemployed; later he owned one of the Thuringen lighting centers. It sounds so pretentious, but it was just a little business with electrical items. After grandmother died, my mother helped out in this store. In 1929 she went freelance and opened her own business, Fanny Mebel Electronics, on the Marktstrasse in Erfurt. We didn't have a bad life, but we couldn't have any large indulgences. Sometimes in summer, during school vacations, we'd stay in Friedrichroda<sup>12</sup> for two weeks. As thrilling as a world tour! Apparently my parents had acquaintances there who rented us two rooms. One room was for the grown-ups, the other for the children. Our parents would come on the weekends and we would stay the whole two weeks with our grandmother. I was allowed to ride a horse from the train station to the rooms—that was a real adventure.

HS: Were your parents politically active at home?

MM: My parents were members of the Friends of the Soviet Union League. Mother was a member of the German Communist Party. She was blond and had blue eyes. She didn't look at all Jewish. Of course, I couldn't understand why people were divided into Jews and non-Jews. I was proud of my parents and thought they were good people. Father, Chaim Mebel, came from Chechersk a little village in Belarus.<sup>13</sup> They didn't talk about it much. My paternal grandfather, whom I never met, was

a rabbi in the little community. There were three sons in the family, and in tsarist Russia all three of them had been forbidden from studying. Finkel, the oldest, immigrated to America, I never met him. Father, the youngest, went to Germany, to the Technical Academy in Arnstadt; he'd already received his preliminary technical degree in Odessa. The middle brother I saw a few times in Moscow in 1932–33, and then never again.<sup>14</sup>

HS: Did you speak Russian at home?

MM: No. My mother didn't know Russian.

HS: You left for Moscow in 1932. Did they keep secret from you the real reasons for your trip and the fact that you would probably never see Erfurt again?

MM: Yes. They told us we were only going for a few weeks to visit Aunt Marie in Moscow. They told me I should bring my toys along, but I wanted to leave them at home, logically, because I didn't need any of them for only a few weeks. I had no idea how much trouble our parents went to in order to pack the toys anyway. I'd noticed that in the streets the Nazis were becoming more brazen, of course, but at home no word was ever uttered in my presence about what kind of consequences that could have for us. I was much too young, after all. Mama, Susi, and I traveled to Moscow in the middle of 1932. Except for the unemployment and the Nazis, it was for me a departure from an intact environment to which I would shortly return. We took along only one single suitcase, and we stored the others. My father stayed behind. As I later learned, he was organizing the "liquidation" and didn't follow us until March 1933. When he arrived in Moscow, he described how he'd visited a female comrade in Berlin-Moabit before leaving and how very risky it apparently had been. I registered that without thinking, understandably ignorant of how dangerous the situation in Germany was. But, as you see, his remark did engrave itself on my memory. Even when we didn't return to Erfurt after a few weeks, for me it was still just an extended holiday. After all, we hadn't said any special farewells to Aunt Enne in Erfurt. Only little by little did it dawn on me that we'd be staying longer. From Germany we heard how strong the Nazis were growing. When Hitler came to power, we received news of the Reichstag fire and knew quite clearly that we could no longer hope to return. Of course, I still didn't know that this escape, this emigration, had been the plan from the beginning. Father was then working in Moscow, by the way, in the foundry of Zavod Il'ycha, the company where Lenin had been assassinated.<sup>15</sup>



HS: What was your arrival in Moscow like?

MM: First off, the journey itself! At the border between Poland and the Soviet Union, in Nikozeloya, on a wooden bridge, I saw the red star with hammer and sickle, the emblem of the Soviet Union, and a Red Army soldier. I was thrilled. I was less thrilled when I fell out of the upper bunk of our train compartment because there was no strap to buckle myself in with. It's strange, what sticks in our memories. The trip lasted nearly forty-eight hours. Uncle Mitya and Aunt Marie met us at the Belarus Station. All around the station, destitute people were loitering. It was a confusing sight. These dirty, degenerate people were sitting on the bridge, selling cigarettes for five kopecks apiece. We traveled by horse-drawn carriage. The streets were made of cobblestones—the coach shook terribly. The shop windows were all nailed up. The people we saw made a very down-and-out impression. But if the street scene was bleak, then on the other hand I can remember the very well kept Central Park for Recreation and Culture.<sup>16</sup> Here there were always lots of people; it was a popular meeting place for old and young. People learned and sang songs together, accompanied by the music of an accordion. They did folk dances. In a great room you could rent out board games. There were several libraries, a row of volleyball courts. Alongside the Moscow River you arrived at a large wooded area. In front of the few restaurants you saw enormous lines of people waiting.

What else did I notice? The streetcars at the time were so crowded that thick clusters of people would be hanging from the doors. Extremely dangerous. My first big Moscow adventure, incidentally, was traveling alone by one of those streetcars to my aunt's house; I kept all the grown-ups in the dark about it. Afterward, when they found out, I got into trouble, but they were also proud of me for having brought it off.

The Karl Liebnecht School<sup>17</sup> sent me to a geography youth group in the main meetinghouse of the Pioneers.<sup>18</sup> We learned how to find our way in the forest, made excursions into the countryside around Moscow, camped by a lake in Istra,<sup>19</sup> sang songs there around a campfire. I think it was 1935 when our group went to Leningrad for ten days. An unforgettable experience. I quickly gained a very good if limited insight into everyday Soviet life. Later on they built large, wide asphalt streets. Where on our arrival I'd seen nailed-up shop windows, businesses were now opening up more and more. I don't know how things were elsewhere, but in Moscow and Leningrad they were definitely improving. Those peasants with their bast shoes disappeared from the street scene.

I also experienced the reconstruction and modernization of Moscow. Tverskaia, later called Gorky Street, was widened by putting many houses on rollers and

pushing them back from the street.<sup>20</sup> New buildings sprang up. The food improved, literally from day to day.

HS: Where did you live?

MM: Our uncle and aunt had rented a little room in the courtyard of the Comintern<sup>21</sup> building. They were living there and waiting for an apartment in a new building cooperative. We lived with one of Uncle Mitya's nephews, on Nikitsky Boulevard. It was a rather large two-room apartment. Unfortunately, we got completely cleaned out there. There was a break-in, and thieves made off with all seven or eight of the suitcases that had arrived in the meantime and were standing "invitingly" in front of the window! I was using one suitcase as a headrest for my "bed" (I was sleeping on the floor). That was the only piece of luggage not stolen—plus a few things that had been in Aunt Marie and Uncle Mitya's room.

HS: Did your uncle and aunt have work?

MM: Our aunt was a trained bookkeeper; my uncle was a railway engineer. But he wasn't practicing his profession. He was working as an editor in a prosperous publishing house, and he seemed to be making a good living. Aunt Marie had been injured by a streetcar and was on disability. Our problem as newcomers was that you needed coupons for everything, but when father and mother were not working, we didn't get coupons.<sup>22</sup> And my father was still in Germany. Of course, we'd brought some money along with us, fortunately. And there was already Torgsin<sup>23</sup> in Moscow (in the GDR we'd have said "Intershop"), where you could bring foreign currency or silver or gold objects and receive sales chits for them. In Torgsin there was everything imaginable for a comfortable everyday life.

HS: So you were not living with privileges, even though you were foreigners.

MM: Because of my mother's illness (she'd fallen ill with cancer in Erfurt and died in 1936) we had a rather difficult life. My father was born in Russia, after all, and perhaps that's why we were categorized as Russian citizens and not as immigrants. Definitely no privileges. Strictly speaking, if you considered our domestic situation it was amazing that I turned into anything at all. I was very much left to my own devices. I say that without being coy. We had to be very, very careful with our money. Most of it went for medicine, in the hope that our mother would somehow be cured.

HS: But there was noticeable improvement in the provisions in Moscow?

MM: Yes. The coupons were eliminated, and grocery stores were increasingly better stocked.<sup>24</sup> Clothing was still a problem. There were certainly social differences. But we didn't complain. We had meager fare at home. Because my aunt didn't work at times, and Susi and I were still in school, only my father and uncle were working. The only culinary bright spot came if we were expecting company. Then we children could look forward to a good meal. Otherwise the meal plan consisted of gray bread in the morning (it was relatively cheap, one ruble for a whole loaf).<sup>25</sup> We had one or two pieces without butter, just with marmalade. For school we had a sandwich. You could buy milk or cocoa in school for a few kopecks. At home in the evenings there was a warm meal. Often a stew with a little meat or sausage. In summer we ate a lot of vegetables. They were cheap at the market. We had apples on the table only in summer, when fruit was very cheap. There were always apples in the stores, of course, but we couldn't afford them. I can only remember having really good food when I was visiting the Hagers, the Wolfs, or the Fischers. Medical care was free, luckily, but when the doctor, Professor Frenkel, made a special trip to see my mother (this was later in our Odintsovo apartment, in a suburb of Moscow), then we did have to pay him anyway.

HS: Did your father still have relatives in Moscow?

MM: We did get together with my father's relatives from time to time, but evidently they didn't have an especially close relationship. Why, I don't know. Father had two cousins; one of them was a highly placed military engineer, something in the range of a major general. The other one, Lonya, was director of a main division for baked goods in the People's Commissariat of Food Supplies.<sup>26</sup> Both of them owned cars. When we lived in Odintsova, as I mentioned before, outside the city, Lonya always loaned us his car when we had to pick up the doctor to see our sick mother.

HS: At first you thought that Moscow would be a vacation trip. Now the vacation was over—you had to go to school.

MM: We had a discussion about that at home: the principal of the German School on Sadovoe Kol'tso, Comrade Schinkel from the Karl Liebknecht School, suggested that I repeat the second grade although I actually should have been placed in the third grade. But they said that there was more material in the curriculum at the Karl Liebknecht School, and so it wasn't comparable to the situation in Germany. The

third grade might be too great a burden for me. But my family thought I was a good student, and that I'd be able to manage it.

HS: Did you manage it?

MM: I managed it, yes. The Karl Liebknecht School was a polytechnic school with ten grades, all subjects taught in German. The absolute majority of the teachers came from Germany, highly motivated and educated people. The school was housed in a two-story building. In 1935 we were able to move into a new, modern school building on Kropotkin Street, with a gymnasium and a well-kept garden. I wasn't a bad student, and I liked to participate in the Pioneer organization. Although time was short, I still always went to the geography youth group. I do think I was diligent and already somewhat ambitious, certainly, but there was quite a glitch with Russian, especially grammar. Since I wanted to go to university after high school, I had to be pretty good in Russian—otherwise I wouldn't have passed the qualifying exam. Our family council decided that I should go to a Russian school after the seventh grade. So I changed to the 118<sup>th</sup> School, which was located next to the planetarium. In the first dictation there, I made forty errors—on one single notebook page! Things were a lot better in the other subjects, thank goodness, but I still remember a miserable school year. In the summer vacation I had to prepare myself for the Russian test scheduled in the fall. Three times a week I went to a Russian teacher on Mayakovsky Square. I had to cram. The teacher made himself tea and ate a nice white bread-and-butter sandwich—I on the other hand was, and remained, hungry.<sup>27</sup>

HS: Did you find friends easily?

MM: In the Karl Liebknecht School that wasn't a problem. But with the Russian children, wherever I lived, it was far more difficult. Since I wore short pants and later plus fours<sup>28</sup> (my father's hand-me-downs), I was teased and also knocked around.

HS: When you were at the Karl Liebknecht School, Markus Wolf (son of Friedrich Wolf, brother of Conrad Wolf) was in the other section of your class.<sup>29</sup>

MM: Also in my section were Peter Florin, Albert Klein (with whom I was quite friendly), Elfriede Mager, Genya Frumkina (the daughter of my future urology teacher). The Wolfs stayed at the Karl Liebknecht School until the end, that is, until January 1938, when it was closed. Mischa went to the 110<sup>th</sup> School in Arbat, I was already in the 118<sup>th</sup>. Since we were separated from one another geographically, there

were fewer and fewer points of contact over time; we also had different interests. I only remember that Mischa was very interested in airplane construction.<sup>30</sup>

Most of the other students in the Karl Liebknecht School were children of emigrants from all over the world, primarily from Germany. Later there came children from the Spanish Republic,<sup>31</sup> children of participants in the Defensive Alliance [*Schutzbündler*] uprising (the fighting unit of the Austrian Social Democratic party opposing the Dollfuss regime),<sup>32</sup> and also children of communists who had had to escape. The school had a special department for English-speaking emigrant children. We also were with Soviet children who had lived in Germany with their parents.

Yura Fischer was in my grade; his father, if I'm not mistaken, was a correspondent for a U.S. newspaper in Moscow.<sup>33</sup> In the other section was the son of Lüttgens, who'd been guillotined by the Nazis in Altona-Hamburg:<sup>34</sup> one of Hitler's first crimes. The son learned about his father's fate in Moscow. His mother came to the school and read us her husband's last letter addressed to his family. We were very moved. This Lüttgens affair, we quickly understood, was not merely about one man's fate—many parents of our fellow pupils were in German prisons, in concentration camps. And so, very early on, we became familiar with the workers' movement and its struggle.

The Club for Foreign Workers was located on Herzen Street. We met with Heckert there, celebrated Wilhelm Pieck's fiftieth birthday.<sup>35</sup> Willi Bredel,<sup>36</sup> Martin Andersen Nexö,<sup>37</sup> and Erich Weinert<sup>38</sup> were in our school, and Wilhelm Florin went there for a while. Ernst Busch<sup>39</sup> sang in the Columns Room of the Union Building, together with our school choir. When I was a little lad, I stood on the black grand piano and proudly led the choir. We learned rather quickly what was happening in Germany, and then my political course was set. I remember when I was solemnly admitted into the Pioneer organization. In our class diary (which I saved over the years), I just now discovered, by the way, that I was a platoon leader in the Pioneer group.

HS: There are those who, looking back, interpret the schooling and the life at the Karl Liebknecht School as political indoctrination, as a kind of early form of what has been termed "educational dictatorship," in the usage of the official historiography of socialism. Even Wolfgang Leonhard doesn't have the best memories of that Stalinist time.<sup>40</sup>

MM: I have only the best memories of our school. And I know I'm not the only one who does. In late summer 1998, about sixty former pupils of the Karl Liebknecht School who now live in Berlin got together for a reunion. It was an unforgettable evening. We all agreed that the school educated us to be internationalists, without

wagging any intimidating index fingers at us, as you seem to suggest with your question. Comrade Schinkel was a generally popular principal. I remember an extremely democratic atmosphere at the Karl Liebknecht School. We didn't stand up when the teacher entered the classroom, for example. Insignificant? Perhaps. The class president was elected by the students. There was even an excess of democracy, including the fact that awards to our fellow pupils were determined by a vote.

Of course, the educational work had quite clear political underpinnings. On May 1 or on the anniversary of the Revolution, we'd march across Red Square. Sometimes we'd be with the school's drum corps, sometimes together with the woodwind band from Elektroavod, a company with many leftist workers and engineers, including some Communists. We captured the attention of most of the participants. Indoc-trination? A great experience! In the last analysis, our observations about society are always self-observations, too, and so we describe a society as we saw our own selves. Everything is subjectively tinted. I was glad to be living in that country and didn't feel like a foreigner. Or like someone being manipulated.

JHS: Did you meet other Germans? Not all of them in Moscow were immigrants.

MM: Not far from the Sadovaia Spasskaia, the great ring road in central Moscow, stood the German Embassy School. Died-in-the-wool Nazis as our neighbors! We sometimes got into heated discussions with the children of the embassy staff, as much as eleven- and twelve-year-olds are capable of that. After 1939, when the embassy staff openly wore Nazi party badges on their lapels, we were furious.

HS: What did you want to be when you grew up? Always a doctor?

MM: After graduating from school in spring 1940, I applied to the First Moscow Medical Institute. By the way, there was still no corruption in the application process back then, as was true after the war. It was honest, really according to merit. How did I come to medicine? In the tenth grade, I attended a student group at the First Medical Institute, run by a biology instructor, Dr. Schneider (he later worked in Thüringen and Jena in the GDR). We dissected rats—that was fun.

A bitter fact is that I actually had been more interested in a diplomatic career, but only very, very rarely were Jews accepted into the diplomatic service—that was generally known in Moscow. Yes, I'd hardly have stood a chance at the diplomatic academy. I have to tell you that I repressed this anti-Semitism. Just as I repressed the show trials a few years earlier, too! My wife Sonja's parents taught and impressed upon her that they were show trials. I didn't look at it that way at the time—we hardly

spoke about them at home. And the so-called fifth column was also constantly on our minds.<sup>41</sup> And that was all the thinking we did about this topic.

The entrance exams at all universities and academies took place at almost the same time, by the way, so you were running a risk of losing a whole year if one of the institutes rejected you. And for that reason, too, I acted quickly, played it safe and applied to the medical school, and didn't even try my luck with the diplomats. All applicants had to take four exams: chemistry, Russian as a foreign language (written and oral), and physics. This was in early summer 1940. Three weeks later, the lists with the test results were posted. I read my name: nineteen points out of a possible twenty. Seventeen points were the minimum for acceptance. I'd been accepted and was as happy as a young child. The fact that I was going into medicine—many people envied me that. Of course, I wasn't especially interested in anatomy, but you do get used to the unpleasant smell of formaldehyde. But that stupid memorizing of concepts and terms! Hundreds of Latin names, just for the cranial bones alone.

HS: May I read you something? Daniil Granin,<sup>42</sup> the Leningrad author, writes in 1991: “After the war, returning soldiers and officers entered businesses and organizations. All the leadership positions were already taken. As usual, the victors ended up empty-handed. Former prisoners of war encountered great injustice—they were considered traitors to the fatherland. For many years everyone who had lived in the occupied territories was under suspicion and treated like a second-class citizen. Nor was anyone concerned about disabled ex-servicemen. During the war years, our leadership had developed a commando style: it was crude and categorical—you couldn't voice criticism or express an opinion, the individual was suppressed. Under these conditions, one would have expected the servicemen to speak out. They were suffering most, after all. If only because, at the front, personal courage was valued more highly than opportunism. And yet the servicemen were silent. There was something irrational about our attitude.” Can you agree with this observation, this judgment? I ask because you were speaking just now about corruption.

MM: I'd rather not comment about that Granin quote. In my experience and that of my acquaintances, the returning servicemen, whether officers or enlisted men, got work after they were demobilized, according to their previous training or their desired professions. Demobilized servicemen were accepted with preference at all post-secondary schools. They had precedence before all other applicants, even if their poor grades spoke against it. And I'm not even talking about the fact that those who'd been students before the war were admitted for the current semester in the middle of the university year. Here too I'm speaking from my own experience. After 1945, returning servicemen got the best food stamps, special clothing allocations,

preferred holiday assignments at vacation resorts, etc. If all of that wasn't especially very much, that's another matter, but the rest of the population got even less. And disabled veterans were given special care. Former servicemen could also open their mouths without risk.

What I could not comprehend (to put it mildly) was the treatment of former Soviet prisoners of war. Many of them were considered traitors to the fatherland and some were deported to work camps.<sup>43</sup> A good many who'd lived in areas under German occupation were eyed suspiciously for years and treated like outcasts. People were sentenced for collaboration with the occupation forces or with Vlasov's Army. Vlasov was a Soviet general who had surrendered and later obeyed Hitler's order to form an army of imprisoned Soviet soldiers. Suspicions like these were obviously unfounded in most cases and remain a disgrace.<sup>44</sup>

HS: Were there any family reasons for your decision to study medicine after your graduation?

MM: Hardly. Except for the uncle who lived in America and had apparently studied medicine, everyone in my family was an engineer. Or, thinking of my maternal grandfather and my grandmother, they were poor devils.

HS: What did you think about international politics at the time? The war was imminent. Did you "smell" the war coming?

HS: At the end of 1940 I heard a lecture at our institute about the political situation. Among other things, the speaker said that the pact with Germany could by no means be compared to a love match, but was rather a marriage of convenience. France and Great Britain had, after all, signed a mutual-support treaty with the Soviet Union. The agreement with Nazi Germany came only later.<sup>45</sup> I have to tell you that when I saw the movie newsreels of Molotov in Berlin, being escorted by Nazi troops, that was a shock. When sections of Poland were occupied by the Red Army, it was said that this was to prevent that half-Fascist country from being turned into a German staging area against the Soviet Union. Everything was supposedly done to keep things calm. Even shortly before the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, the Moscow news agency was reporting that the Soviet government was unconcerned about German troops advancing up to our borders. Everybody believed the slogan that if it were to come to war against the Soviet Union, German workers would reverse their weapons—against the enemy in their own land. And that would be the beginning of a new Germany.



My mother died of cancer in Moscow in 1936, at the age of 46. When she was laid out in the crematory and the casket slowly disappeared into the floor below, I called out, “Mama, we’ll take you along to Soviet Germany.” That was a comfort, a hope. We simply could not imagine that Hitler would attack Moscow. And besides, the Germans had a good reputation in the Soviet Union. There were historical reasons for that—Rathenau’s peaceable policy toward the young Soviet power, for example.<sup>46</sup>

The attack on June 22, 1941, was a shock, but even in the days immediately following it, people in Moscow remained calm and hoped that the class-conscious German proletariat would not allow itself to be misused for a war against Stalin, against the Soviet Union, but would reverse its weapons instead. But nothing like that happened—our greatest hopes were dashed. But despite Hitler’s successful *Blitzkrieg* in Europe and even in the first days after his attack on the Soviet Union, our ships continued to leave for Germany loaded with wheat. We never had any idea how closely the two countries were cooperating militarily, even after Hitler had come to power. You asked me if we “smelled” the imminent war. No, but more and more soldiers were populating the cityscape, provisions for the population became worse again. Cellars were put in order, windows fitted out with curtains.<sup>47</sup> Of course, the teachers kept doing their work.

HS: After the Soviet pact with Hitler, German anti-Fascists were expelled.

MM: That is a very tragic, evil chapter. Even much earlier, many bitter things happened in Moscow, and it’s painful to think of their consequences when we speak about the Soviet Union today. Certain films, *Professor Mamlock*, based on the play by Friedrich Wolf, for example, disappeared from movie theaters overnight.<sup>48</sup> The club for foreign workers was closed. Schinkel, the principal of the Karl Liebknecht School, disappeared one day—another fact that we ignored. And other teachers were suddenly missing. All of a sudden it was frowned upon to have contact with foreigners. We broke off our connection with Aunt Enne in Erfurt. We were told to remember that Hitler’s “fifth column” was forming or was already active. We had to be alert. Because that argument made sense to us, we acted accordingly. I took the conjuring up of the fifth column at face value. And why shouldn’t I? When you saw how Germany had helped to infiltrate and destroy the Spanish Republic years earlier? Furthermore, I had my own world view, and once you have such a firm world view, you incorporate every phenomenon into it, unconsciously and seamlessly.

It was in the Columns Room of the Union Building that the first trials took place, some of them publicly.<sup>49</sup> We learned that Trotskyist centers were working in collaboration with Nazi Germany. We had to protect ourselves against them. It

seemed logical. This was about 1936–37. It was a universal Soviet conviction that enemies were everywhere. And I shared this sense. Nor were things particularly quiet in the far eastern region of the Soviet Union. The Japanese had seized Manchuria. There were bloody battles with the Japanese at Chao-Chin-Gol in 1938.<sup>50</sup> They were beaten back. The Fascist axis Berlin-Rome-Tokyo was developing. In January 1938, the Karl Liebknecht School was closed, but by then I was already at my Russian school. This was the year in which I was admitted to the Komsomol.<sup>51</sup> Two years later I finished school. Only after some time had passed did I learn that people in the foreigners' quarter were being rounded up and deported during the night. Prison was a way station before their banishment to Siberia. We were living among Russians, after all, and I myself had no experience of such a terrible state of affairs.

HS: After the war, the Germans who had lived in Germany under Hitler were reproached for not having seen the sort of crimes that were taking place. Shouldn't you be reproached for the same thing? You should have seen what was taking place in Moscow.

MM: You can reproach me, of course. But that's easy to do. I reject an interpretation that projects my present knowledge and shame into the past, as if I had looked away despite my better knowledge. That's wrong. And incidentally, the public scenes in Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union were quite different. Smoke from the Buchenwald crematoria hung over Weimar; columns of prisoners were driven through the streets—these inmates were visible. The Nazis' agenda was open to view. The Jews were rounded up in public, they were made literally illegal. As were large portions of the Slavic peoples, the Sinti and Roma, Communists, resisting Social Democrats and Christians. Anyone who had read *Mein Kampf* knew all about it.

The terror in Moscow did not take place in the street. The repression was not noticeable in public. And the gulags were far away in Siberia. Now that we are far removed from that earlier socialism with a Stalinist cast, I would really like to recommend that people who equate Hitler and Stalin read *Mein Kampf*. The Nazis' agenda and their policies were in harmony. Socialism was characterized by the contradiction between agenda and reality, between the idea and its realization. The hope that the idea would triumph over all the early distortions and nasty, criminal derailments—that was precisely what led so many smart people to socialism and called forth such great, unbounded loyalty, especially among intellectuals. A loyalty that today makes so many people shake their heads. If you think about everything in hindsight, that may be a sensible reaction. But it would be an ahistorical approach.

HS: The literary critic Gustav Seibt writes: “Anyone who wishes to understand the history of Soviet socialism as it really existed, cannot avoid taking the dominant ideology seriously as an idea, a belief, for which people willingly suffered and died. We cannot overestimate the heavy memory of Hitler’s crimes. The defeat of the belief in Communism—just like its earlier bloody victories—is in our experience a terrible human tragedy, because it casts its shadow over all of humanity’s attempts to take their history into their own hands.” Professor Mebel, what did Stalin mean to you?

MM: A hero. He embodied the Soviet Union—the father of all workers, the ideals of Socialist Communism. I have to put it that dramatically if I want to describe honestly the feelings I had back then in Moscow. Before and after the war. For us, Stalin was the leader, and people met death with his name on their lips. The Soviet Union won the war despite Stalin. “Despite” is what I say today. At the time I saw it differently. When Stalin died, I wept, but my wife (she wasn’t yet my wife at the time) was glad. Today you might say she was smarter and I was dumber. But what does that explain! We lived in different circles, with respectively different familial experiences and different methods of dealing with disagreeable knowledge and history. What might the reasons have been? After my mother died, my father remained alone. We lived together with my aunt and uncle and my sister Susi. Maybe our great family troubles caused us to repress our critical faculties regarding dubious national political events. I don’t mean that as an excuse, but rather as an attempt at an explanation: we had other things on our minds.

In retrospect, I remember fragments of seemingly unimportant occurrences that suddenly gain in meaning: one evening my father, uncle, and aunt were looking at old photos, family photos. They destroyed one portion of the pictures. My father’s middle brother and both his cousins disappeared. One of the two cousins had been condemned to ten years’ exile. We know today that that was for all intents and purposes a death sentence. His family was expelled from Moscow. Lonya, that cousin, had previously spent some time in Germany. Might he have been enlisted by the Nazis while he was there? Did we know? As soon as suspicion rears its head, a judgment quickly follows. That’s the way it worked in the subconscious. It’s sad. But there’s no other way to describe it.

My father was always working very hard and long hours. One evening he came home very upset. He’d been asked to go to the director’s office. A representative of the NKVD was sitting there and asked him about his contacts with Lonya.<sup>52</sup> My father said that Lonya had always let us use his car when we had to go get the doctor for my mother. The man surprised my father with his exact knowledge of which days the car had come to our house. Since nothing happened after this interrogation, my

father thought nothing of it. Who knows why the NKVD was looking for particular details about particular people. You just had to be alert. That's the way we at home thought about it at the time.

Today I'd say that the aborted relationship with my father's relative should have made us ask questions. Me, too! I didn't ask! I don't even know his name any more, so quickly did we forget about it. That shouldn't have happened. But it did happen. But there were also other reactions in the family. The Hager family, close friends of ours, were supposed to return to Germany within a few weeks. We were all beside ourselves. My aunt and father wanted to go with the Hegers to Kalinin directly.<sup>53</sup> But that didn't happen. Our farewell at the Belarus Station was sad. Old Hager was arrested immediately at the German border. When that happened, my Aunt Marie said angrily that we should definitely have insisted on seeing Kalinin. Maybe that would have helped; sometimes he really could do things in individual cases. And in retrospect, self-delusion was also a factor: we didn't grab at the straw that might have saved us.

HS: Daniil Granin again: "In 1937 fear became a mass phenomenon, deforming the character of the people. Everyone acquiesced to their fate. Prisoners' relatives and acquaintances dared make only timid requests, and did not insist on their claims. They did not demand their release, but instead only inquired diffidently what their relatives were being accused of—as if that had mattered. Trembling with fear, everyone wanted to find out 'Because of what?' hoping that they could then cut themselves off from it with an explanatory, 'Oh, because of that. I have nothing to do with that, they'll leave me alone.' 'Chur menya!'—keep away from me! People avoided going to gatherings where they didn't already know everyone. Part of the mission of these 'organs' was to divide society and destroy relationships between people.<sup>54</sup> The worse, the more oppressive the atmosphere of fear, so much the better for the powerful."

MM: I was fourteen years old in 1937. Because of the trials I was afraid of a hostile environment and the Soviet enemy agents who were apparently in our country. I was appalled: suddenly, so it seemed, Old Bolsheviks had turned into traitors.<sup>55</sup>

HS: What did you think about the war with Finland?<sup>56</sup>

MM: I knew about that only from the Soviet press, of course. They said that the Soviet border had to be pushed westward because it ran directly along the edge of Leningrad—this would be only a temporary protective measure. In return the Soviet Union would give Finland much larger areas of land, which to be sure lay further

north. Mannerheim<sup>57</sup> was very well disposed toward Hitler. That was well known. Finland refused. The war began. To tell you the truth, it was one shock after the other when we saw the Red Army, for which we'd all sacrificed so much, materially and socially, having such a hard time all of a sudden. The relatives of the Red Army had it good. A lot of money had been spent to arm them, and now it was taking so many months and costing considerable sacrifices before the army had finally finished its mission.

HS: Did you have anything to do with the Lux Hotel, where so many Communists were rounded up?<sup>58</sup>

MM: No. That's where the Comintern comrades were living. As I said, I was virtually a Russian among Russians.

HS: Did you actually have your own apartment by now, as you were becoming a student?

MM: No. Susi, who was meanwhile a grown woman and a German teacher in Moscow, our aunt, uncle, father, and I lived in a room of about twenty-four square meters. I had a little table by the window with a view of the Savikovsk Station train tracks, and its accompanying noise. That's where I wrote my dissertation after the war. When I was chief physician in Friedrichshain I insisted that my staff also do research along with their practical activities. A newlywed, still without children, came to me and said that he had no place to work in his two-room apartment. I made it very clear to the young man that in Moscow I'd had working conditions that I wouldn't wish on anyone, but unfortunately they'd more or less ruined my standards of tolerance in this regard.

HS: Did you always try to imbue others with your own ambition?

MM: Throughout my life, I always worked gladly and hard. The reason I insisted on academic work came from the experience I brought from Moscow: At the First Medical Institute (where my future wife, Sonja, also graduated in 1937), I'd had the good fortune of having great physicians as my role models. Dr. Dubinin and other assistant physicians (I'm not even talking about the heads of departments)—they could all have been professors! So well educated, so competent! Outstanding teachers and bedside doctors. Later in the GDR these experiences led me to advocate a practicum-oriented education within the smallest groups possible. Experienced teachers, not beginners still in the middle of their own specialized training, should educate the students. A failing in GDR medical training, in my opinion, was the

inadequate hands-on instruction of future doctors. When I became head of the urology department at the Charité, I introduced that into my discipline. But now I'm getting ahead of myself. . . .

HS: Back to Moscow, in the period immediately before the Fascist attack: you were a student, what was your sister doing?

MM: At first, Susi went to the Karl Liebknecht School, as I did, and then attended the German-language section of the School for Workers and Peasants.

HS: How did you experience June 22, 1941, and the days immediately following?

MM: The second semester was over. We were preparing for our exams. My father had promised me a two-week trip to the Crimea if I passed the final exams for the second semester with an A. I was really looking forward to it, especially since I'd never been to the Caucasus or the Crimea. It was to remain a dream. . . .

On June 22, I was sitting in the library on Nikolaev Street, two seats away from the window, occasionally looking out to the street. I often sat here, because I had so little room at home and no quiet for studying. At 11:00 came the news that was to change our whole lives. An incredible number of people had already been standing on the street for an hour, discussing things in front of the loud speakers. There was this sort of loud speaker system on almost every street corner. You could see that the people didn't really know anything precisely, but they weren't totally without a clue. In all their faces was the certainty that an extraordinary announcement was coming. The well-known music of Radio Moscow was playing, and then we heard the voice of the likewise well-known announcer Iurii Levitan: "This is a message from all radio stations in the Soviet Union. In a few minutes, you will hear an important communication from the administration."

Again music, and then we heard Molotov—his teeth were chattering.<sup>59</sup> He'd always had a stutter, but this time it was extreme, and it was for a bad reason: "Last night, without provocation and in violation of our treaty, German Fascist troops attacked the Soviet Union. Kiev, Minsk, and Riga are under bombardment. We find ourselves in a state of war. Even before the commencement of hostilities, Schulenburg arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and delivered the declaration of war. Soviet Army troops have been ordered to repel the German Fascist invaders."<sup>60</sup>

I was disheartened, but calm, and I went home. Our family had heard about it. I took the electric trolley to the institute. A group of fellow students had already gathered. Ignoring the general unrest, our dean said that there was only one thing to do: keep on studying! That seemed logical and reasonable, for in the end we were all

convinced, despite this terrible news, that the Red Army would quickly sweep the invaders from our country. So everyone should continue working at his place. Now all our trust in the army and all the materials, money, training, and political education that we'd invested in the military would finally pay off. Then in the following days we had the first anti-air raid exercises. Anti-air raid shifts were also instituted at Mokhovaia,<sup>61</sup> where the institute's first- and second-year classes were housed. We were able to forget the gravity of the situation during these exercises because of our basic conviction that there was no way the Fascists would ever get this far.

HS: Did Stalin react publicly to the situation?

MM: It was puzzling that Stalin himself had not yet spoken to us. He made his first speech only on July 3, fourteen long days after the beginning of the war. Unimaginable! The first and last time that I heard him address his countrymen as "Dear brothers and sisters."<sup>62</sup> Despite the heroic battles of the Red Army, which had inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy (he told us on the radio), the Germans, with the military experience they had gained in acts of European aggression, were advancing onward. He informed us that a National Committee for Defense had been established, with himself as its president. We were depressed and shaken by the speed of the German advance. They were already deep in our country. Discussions flared up again about the sacrifices the people had made—made bravely and wisely—to build up the army and pay for equipment. Where was the might of the Red Army in these crucial hours? A people's militia [*Volkssturm*] was established, and volunteers stepped forward from all strata of the population. There was a great readiness to die for the Soviet Union, but extremely little military know-how.

HS: *Volkssturm*—that sounds unpleasantly "German."

MM: Yes, but it's a term that comes from defensive battles in Napoleonic times. A people's militia was first deployed against the French. The Nazis later adopted the term, but in fact the first people's militia regiments were organized in Moscow. Among the first volunteers were faculty members from our Institute. They were immediately deployed to the front. They were miserably equipped, unfortunately, and not at all prepared for such a tough situation. Not to mention the lack of standard uniforms. This war required modern weapons, a modern military doctrine. The fighters in the people's militia were in no way up to the task, they didn't have a chance.

In mid-July 1941, it became quickly apparent that there was no point in continuing our studies. We students from the First Moscow Medical Institute (I was

now in my third semester) were assigned to excavation work. Near Orel, southwest of Moscow, we excavated trenches for armored tank defense. Of course we were surprised at these security measures so close to Moscow. It was rather difficult work physically, and mainly, after a few weeks, it proved to be senseless. Either the German tanks simply went around the trenches we had excavated out of the hard earth with such effort, or else the *Wehrmacht* sappers laid long armor plates over them.

In the first week of October we returned to Moscow. People were looking nervous. The city was stirred up, feverish, the population irritable; Moscow seemed to be wagging its head back and forth without direction, like a man in his bed struggling with a nightmare. Businesses and organizations were evacuated to the east and to the south. Our institute was supposed to go toward Kuibyshev<sup>63</sup> where we would take up our studies again—we were to go by train. I stayed in Moscow and did anti-air raid service at the Institute. Studying was now out of the question.

Early in the morning of October 14, 1941, the announcer Levitan read the latest news from the Soviet Information Office agency as usual. We were especially interested in the situation on the Western front. We listened breathlessly. Suddenly there was complete silence, as if everybody had been struck dumb. Even today I can still hear the words of the communique in my ear: “The situation on the Western front has worsened. Despite heroic resistance by the Red Army, the German Fascist troops have succeeded in breaking through our defensive lines near Mozhaisk, approximately one hundred kilometers outside of Moscow, and are advancing in the direction of Moscow. The capital is in ‘mortal danger.’” Then they played the song “Arise, arise, ye mighty land.”<sup>64</sup> Even today, when I hear it, it cuts me to the quick. The capital is in mortal danger? We stared at the radio speaker as if paralyzed. This was unexpected, terrible news.

After a few minutes we jumped out of bed and quickly got dressed. Papa, Susi, and Uncle Mitya raced to work, and only Aunt Marie and I remained behind. I went to the Komsomol Committee at the institute, a little wooden building on Pirogov Street where all the social organizations of the institute were housed. It was closed. There was a note on the door, saying that we should meet at the local committee in the Frunze district, on Kropotkin Street. I took the trolley and was there in ten minutes. I noticed at once that the local secretary was wearing boots and carrying a pistol on his belt. “Comrade Mebel,” he said straightaway, “over there are the lists for the Volunteer Communist Workers Battalion.” Unaffiliated people, Komsomol members, and Communists could enlist. Without thinking much about it, without hesitation, I too put my name on one of the lists. The First Medical Institute was evacuated toward the east, to Kuibyshev. Doctors would continue to be needed. But I was certain that if German Fascists were marching on Moscow, I could not be a



student, I had to defend the capital. There was no way for me to imagine at the time that this struggle would cost me four bloody years.

The same evening, or at the latest the next morning, we were supposed to meet at the 90<sup>th</sup> School in Krasnopresnensk district—with a backpack, underwear, stockings, toiletries, and enough provisions for one day. When I came home, only Aunt Marie was there. Father, my uncle, and Susi were at work. Aunt Marie's eyes misted over. I packed my backpack, and the others came home that evening. All of them supported my decision. Somehow everything happened without any particular dramatics; no one could really guess what lay before us. Or did it only seem that way to me? I was young, and we young people quickly adapted to new situations whose consequences we could not yet foresee. Mankind has the ability to protect itself against all excess of inner pressures, against anxiety and fear of the unknown. Especially if you have a goal. You keep on living, and much later you're surprised that the great historical moments you've been a part of sometimes remain quite banal events in your memory. That's the way it was then, too. We didn't speak much that evening. We went to bed early—I had to leave the house at 5:30 the next morning. Everyone embraced me. As I was leaving, my father said, "Son, be careful, take care of yourself." One of my Uncle Mitya's brothers lived in Arbat, where he was a building superintendant. We'd always been close to him. I absolutely had to say good-bye to him and his wife, which I did on the way to the staging area.

In his novel *Soldiers are not Born*, Konstantin Simonov described the school where we too spent a few days.<sup>65</sup> There were similar volunteer staging areas in all twenty-four districts of the city. During the short time that we spent in this school, my first impression was that we were fed marvelously; young and silly as we were (we're ashamed to admit that today), we stuffed ourselves with sausage sandwiches and sweets. We received Red Army uniforms. Another trainee and I had to go to a store to get puttees<sup>66</sup> and high boots for our company. We heard that at Mokhovaia (where, as I mentioned, the Institute's first- and second-year classes were housed) all the pictures of Stalin and Lenin had been taken down (as they were everywhere) and collected in a big storage area. This was preparing us psychologically for the possibility that the Fascists really would take over Moscow. Under these conditions we did drills like crazy: approach your superior and salute! For hours!

Meanwhile the population was buying up flour and other food. People tried to get aboard freight trains that were going east or south. The ones who didn't get on a train even tried to leave by foot—there was chaos on the streets and in the train stations. But the National Committee for Defense didn't declare a state of emergency in Moscow and its environs until October 20. The first barricades went up, as did control points at all the city's exits and entrances. You could only go in or out with a valid document. Around this time I was able to go home again; my aunt reported

that they were being evacuated to Tashkent. We said good-bye. I was glad that my relatives were leaving Moscow.

Defense lines were hastily constructed right outside Moscow and along its flanks. The Volunteer Communist Workers Battalions were divided into three regiments, which were then united on October 26 into the Third Moscow Communist Infantry Division. I was a soldier and then an army medical orderly in the First Company of the Third Regiment. A few days went by, and then came the alarm. We fast-marched toward Volokolamsk Highway, passing the inner harbor in Khimki. Barricades everywhere. We passed the control point, and kept going farther to the west. About twenty kilometers from Moscow we dug ourselves in as best we could on an open field, already covered with snow. We froze. I thought I'd die there for sure. Drenched with sweat from the march, in this lightweight uniform, with only a military coat over it. . . . But nothing happened. It grew dark and bitter cold. You could distinctly hear cannons and machine-gun fire. On the next day we advanced another few kilometers. We were lying more or less at the place where today, if you come from the Sheremetevo Airport, you see these symbolic, oversized tank barriers on the highway. Trenches and bunkers had already been excavated there; we occupied the section that was assigned to us. Our task was to secure the streets and suburbs directly outside Moscow. Moscow must not fall. We were told that divisions from Siberia were on the march. We agonized about two vital questions: How was it possible that Hitler's army had been able to penetrate our land so quickly and so deeply? And when would we finally be properly outfitted?

On November 8 we went on the offensive and together with other Red Army units we fought the German Fascist troops back about eighty to one hundred kilometers. We saw terrible things in the areas we liberated. In December the German troops succeeded in checking our advance. In early February 1942, our division was detached from the Moscow zone of defense. We were given yet another name: within the 130<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division our third regiment became the 664<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. For us, it was more important that we now received proper weapons, quilted jackets and pants, warm underwear and felt boots. We'd already been issued gas masks and a little bottle with a preparation against chemical weapons. We were loaded onto freight cars and off we went toward the northwest.

**“Strange—the units I fought with always advanced.”**

### **The War Years**

*We were still busy growing up when our country demanded that we be brave soldiers. With the advancing infantry, one generation after another went into battle, becoming equal in every respect. In that great war, now many years removed from us, a significant part of our generation is still going its immortal way—the ones who will remain forever young. And among those who did not return from the war there might have been a Tolstoy for our time or an Einstein.*

—Grigori Baklanov<sup>67</sup>

HS: Moritz Mebel, would you please describe what it is like to feel fear in your first encounters with war?

MM: The sky was booming, and flying black shadows descended upon us. The detonations merged into one single thundering. In this deafening roar there was no room for your own scream. War squeezed all feeling out of you, you couldn't think of anything. Over time, fear becomes a good teacher. Fear that has been lived through (not to be confused with cowardice) changes a person. You even react differently to the very next bombing. At one point or another you understand that it isn't quite so easy to hit a soldier. Mortal fear turns into military experience: you look carefully for protection; you no longer run over the ground panic-stricken, but instead you go purposefully to cover. Even our widespread fear of the German army, of its superior weapons, its mastery in the air, slowly receded. The fear ebbed when we noticed that our grenades, too, were hitting the mark, that German soldiers, too, were screaming, suffering, and dying. In the first month of the war, we also had, for example, the very great fear of being trapped in a pocket. Later the Soviet troops learned how to get out of a pocket and even trap the *Wehrmacht* troops. The pocket lost its terror. But that was a long time coming and exacted great losses.

HS: At first you were fighting with muzzle-loaders. When did you get your first proper guns?

MM: Not until November 1941. But at first there was only one gun for every two soldiers. A bitter disappointment. But during our first counterattack outside Moscow in November 1941, we'd already seen well-armed divisions, deployed from the East. Our platoon leader had been with the partisans back in 1917, and he really knew very

little about modern warfare. Our company commissar, Panteleev, was a lecturer in Marxism-Leninism at my First Moscow Medical Institute. He knew even less. It was all very deplorable. It became ever more evident that this was a terrible war and we had a lot to learn. What the Fascists were doing in the occupied territories slowly trickled down to us; at first we couldn't even believe such brutality. The parade on Red Square on November 7, 1941, gave a great lift to our morale. Very, very many Soviet fighter planes were flying overhead, and we in our formations had no idea what was going on until we learned that they were flying to Moscow to guard the parade. Stalin, the symbol of the Soviet Union, was at the parade; he stood at the top of the mausoleum grandstand. From Red Square the troops marched immediately out of the city, directly to the Western front, right in our direction. That quieted us. For the first time, Stalin named the old military leaders in his speech, thereby linking the Red Army with a binding historical tradition. Our motto was: "Death to the German invaders!" At the beginning of November, as I already mentioned, the counterattack began toward the northwest. Our division was renamed the 130<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I was in the first company of the 664<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, a soldier and medical orderly. A few months later there wasn't much left of this company. Strange – the units I fought with always advanced.

HS: You never had to experience a retreat during the war?

MM: No. But our losses in the battles on the Northwest Front were terrible. Out of my company of 380 men, three survived, I among them. An improbable piece of luck. During the advance near Moscow I also saw Istra again, where I'd gone on that excursion with the Pioneers when I was a boy. Burned houses, massacred children thrown into wells. I'll never forget that. With my own eyes I saw the cruelty of the Germans—enough for a lifetime. I'd never had illusions about the Fascists, but for me Istra was critical for my understanding that this kind of warfare that Hitler was waging was barbarism, and barbarism also on the part of the regular troops in the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>68</sup>

In February 1942 our unit was pulled out of the Moscow defensive zone. They loaded us onto freight cars, and off we went in the direction of the Northwest Front. On the way, German fighter planes attacked our train! There was only one thing to do: get out of the cars and try to become invisible in the snow. As I said, after a while these situations became routine. You lie on an open field and look up. The bomb doesn't fall vertically, but it follows a parabola. Therefore you have to run in the direction of the enemy bomber's flight pattern. But instinct always tricks you into running in the opposite direction.

Worse than the bomb explosions were the aircraft machine-gun rounds. We waited in vain for our fighter planes. I also remember a quick march in icy weather with the wind whistling around our ears. You could hardly breathe. There was deep snow as far as the eye could see, at times a meter high. And we had to go through it, in full infantry garb. And we were supposed to be quick about it, too!

Right after that march we were deployed to the battle for the village Pavolovo. In a little forest, which we had to traverse, sat enemy sharpshooters. A different company had liberated the village a short time earlier, but it had been driven out again by the Fascists. We were supposed to recapture Pavolovo. A very, very bloody battle. Against the horizon in the sunset we saw the glare of a fire. Apparently the village was on fire. Another soldier took his hand machine gun and was about to crawl onward. All at once a shot fell, and he lay dead next to me. That was the first dead man I ever saw close up. I lay alone with him since the others had already moved ahead. My head was empty, I couldn't grasp it. A very creepy, nasty feeling. "Get me out of here!" I thought, but I couldn't jump up and run after the others. I had to crawl; my gas mask slid down to my belly, my ammunition pouch, too. So I couldn't make any forward progress. I threw everything away except for the gun so that I could quickly join the others. At the edge of the little forest I finally made it.

The burning village lay before us. It grew dark and we got the order to attack. Shouting "Hurrah!" we stomped forward through the snow, some of us were hit. Suddenly breathtaking stillness. We had conquered what was left of the village: burning or smoldering ruins. In a bunkerlike turf cottage we found the body of the regiment's commissar. He was leaning against the wall with both his lower arms charred. The retreating Nazi soldiers had set him on fire. The bodies of Red Army soldiers lay on the hard-frozen floor. We collected them together. The warming, burning ruins of the houses attracted us like a magnet. Soon, as was to be expected, German grenades landed in our midst. One grenade hit home—a terrible vision: in the crater, torn-up corpses, a few wounded men. We got them out of there and attended to them. Over and over again in the night we were shaken awake by our commanders, as the danger of freezing was too great. The next morning we pushed onward to another village and liberated that village, too, and thought that we'd keep winning now. A big mistake . . .

HS: I keep coming back to the question, where was the legendary Soviet military excellence? Why did it take so long for the Red Army to find itself? Did you know at the time what the causes were?

MM: No. Today it's clear that the purging of the Red Army on Stalin's order was largely to blame, the liquidation even of the Soviet Union's youngest marshal.

Tukhachevskii, for example. Nazi Germany's secret service had leaked convincingly forged documents to Stalin via Czech President Beneš that compromised Marshall Tukhachevskii. The official thinking was that Hitler's fifth column would naturally be rampant in the army, too—Tukhachevskii was sentenced to death by a military tribunal and shot. Rokossovskii was sent to prison. Bagramyan, too. A cousin of my father's, a highly placed military man, was likewise arrested and shot. The army's leadership was weakened and also lacked experience with modern warfare. While he was in charge, Tukhachevskii had requested that armored tank battalions be deployed. He believed that the imminent war could not be won without the latest technology, that the days of Budennyi's cavalry were over.<sup>69</sup>

In 1939–40 the Soviet Union again incorporated West Ukraine, which had once been occupied by Pilsudski. The old border fortifications were dismantled so that they could be rebuilt on the new border, which now lay farther to the west. And that took time! Poland wasn't exactly well disposed toward the Soviet Union, and so in 1941 the German *Wehrmacht* turned it into a staging area. And despite all that, right before the war we still thought that Hitler would not attack Moscow. The Soviet news agency denied reports that German troops were gathering on the Soviet border. The French and the British were biding their time: they thought that if Hitler marched east, the Bolsheviks would soon be finished and Hitler would be waging their war for them. As I already said, at the time of the attack on the new border fortifications, the military technology had not yet been built up, and the troops weren't ready for battle. Stalin didn't want to give Hitler any cause to attack. And so he didn't begin any mobilization. It was announced only after the Fascists had already set foot in our country.

The Soviet Union was unprepared to a degree that beggars imagination. Our aircraft were not in the skies, but were in hangars and were bombed immediately. German Communists—the first deserters had already crossed the Bug early in the morning on June 22—told us that the German order to attack had been issued. And Maiskii, our ambassador in London, had also informed the Soviet leadership in good time.<sup>70</sup> Nothing of that changed Stalin's attitude: he didn't want to provoke Hitler. But that didn't help. By now, Nazi Germany had lots of experience with its *Blitzkrieg* and the resources of all Europe behind it. Its army was fully mobilized. At that time the Soviet press reported that the Germans had only ersatz materials for everything: ersatz gasoline, alloys—the Soviet Union on the other hand, with its natural riches, with its iron and oil, must be invincible from this point of view alone. But our industrial capabilities were concentrated in the western districts of the country and were vulnerable to being quickly destroyed. Only during the first months of the war did we begin to relocate our armaments industry to the east, behind the Urals.

In addition, before the war people believed the arrogant slogan: “If it comes to war, we will defeat the enemy very quickly on his own soil, without much bloodshed.” Those were fine words—but how did it look in reality when war broke out? A hair-raising example, which I can remember very well, and it’s unfortunately not the only one: in Moscow they had concentrated the flak defense in the center of the city. The city was blacked out, but the flak defense lit it up in order to illuminate the enemy planes and make them visible. You couldn’t have pinpointed yourself any better as an enemy target.

HS: You said that you spent the whole war advancing. But you didn’t remain an infantryman the whole time?

MM: All during the war I was a foot soldier, in knee-high snow on the Northwest Front and in knee-high mud during the advance in Ukraine. I wore synthetic boots, the clay pulled everything away, and sometimes we only advanced from footstep to footstep. At the end of May 1942, the 130<sup>th</sup> Division received orders to penetrate farther west in order to trap Seidlitz’s army group.<sup>71</sup> This operation, the Demiansk pocket, was only partially successful, however, as Seidlitz was able to hold a narrow corridor. But when that happened I was no longer with them.

Likewise, at the end of May 1942, a new army was deployed, the 53<sup>rd</sup> Army, about twenty kilometers behind the front. Reserves were brought in, and with that kind of an army it’s like creating a state, with its own jurisdiction and prosecution authority, its own hospitals and transportation, its own artillery, and even its own bureaucracy. Because I knew German, I was ordered to work in a political division there. Our job was to do political work among enemy troops—we were supposed to enlighten them about how cruel and senseless their war was. Afterward I worked with civilians in the liberated territories, especially the occupied ones. We produced pamphlets and organized radio programs along the outermost front. There was a lot to do: deployments to the front, triage and analysis of captured *Wehrmacht* documents, military mail and reports on the morale of the German units situated just ahead of our front lines. It was very time-consuming to write pamphlets dealing directly with events in the *Wehrmacht* troops facing us. Every sentence had to be right, especially the names of the soldiers, non-commissioned officers, or company commanders, and the losses in people and materials in the respective troop. The more concrete the content, the more overwhelming the effect. That was confirmed for us by German prisoners of war.

HS: How do you get to be in such a department?

MM: How do you get there? I'd already been promoted to medical orderly instructor, that's more or less the equivalent of a sergeant. One day I received an order to go to the regiment commander, and I reported to his bunker. He let me know that I was to report to the army's personnel division and handed me the written order. I quickly said my good-byes to my friends in the medical unit, we wished each other luck, and off I went. . . . Ah yes, and then you simply leave, you're off on your own, and enemy patrols can catch you. But I already had a pistol by then, and it was always ready to fire. There'd be no captivity for me. I was certain about that.

Until early 1943 I was on the Northwest Front. It was a terrible sector; with no halfway continuous front line, you were always in danger of stumbling into enemy foxholes. It was a miserable region, nothing but swamps. We had rather a lot of lice, and the guy with the most was Lieutenant Fradkin, a literary scholar from the University of Moscow, a typical, incorrigible civilian. In the evenings we'd strip to the waist and hold the seams of our shirts up to the fire until they were almost scorched. The rather clumsy Fradkin looked at the little vermin and tried to crush each one. Fradkin had been posted to the artillery at the beginning of the war; compared to the infantry, that's a good post, but he'd quarreled with his superior and they sent him to the outermost front. Hierarchies matter in the army, too, just as they do in everyday life—but in this case with the important difference that in war, if the offended superior is petty and holds a grudge, it can cost the other man his life. Fradkin was later pardoned and ordered to our 7<sup>th</sup> Division in the 53<sup>rd</sup> Army. That's how I met him. He was operating on the outermost front with a primitive megaphone, with no technical equipment, speaking in good German in the direction of the enemy. Because, as I said, there was no clear front line, he just marched off and suddenly behind him rang out a warning voice: "Comrade, where do you think you're going?" He turned around, threw himself on the ground, and already shots were whizzing by him from the German side. We served together in our 53<sup>rd</sup> Army Division for quite a while. After the war he visited me in the GDR. He had become an expert on Bertold Brecht at the Institute for International Literature in Moscow.

HS: Did you kill anyone in the war?

MM: I don't know. I shot from my trench in the direction of the enemy, of course. But I was spared hand-to-hand combat. I never harmed a hair on the head of a prisoner of war or a civilian, not even in occupied territory. It was on the Northwest Front in 1942. Our air-raid defense had shot down a bomber and taken the pilot prisoner. Major Shkurin, a white-haired man, no longer young, took me along to the interrogation as translator. The prisoner behaved arrogantly; he was a real Nazi. During the interrogation the major remained very quiet. Afterward he told me—apparently



he'd noticed my surprise at his self-control—"Never hit anyone. If you hit someone, you show your own impotence and the truth is left by the wayside!" I never forgot those words.

HS: Were your agitprop methods of influencing the Fascists effective at all?

MM: Agitation and propaganda were always effective as long as our weapons had proved effective first. The critical thing was always the respective morale of the enemy troops. If they'd had military defeats, then their individual soldiers were also physically and psychologically impaired, and thus susceptible to doubt. They were receptive to cogent arguments from our side.

HS: Was the mood in the Red Army somewhat better in early 1943?

MM: Things were going forward; Stalingrad had been decided. Leningrad of course was still under siege. At this time, our army was withdrawn from the Northwest Front. We went in a southeasterly direction, into the Kursk arc. When the battle for the Kursk arc began, the Soviet generals had already had a lot of experience on the front and had learned an enormous amount. They abandoned the frontal attacks they'd been using until then, which had resulted in heavy losses. By now the Soviet tank technique was superior, as was the artillery, but the Germans were still masters of the air. It's true that the enemy could no longer attack us anywhere on the Eastern Front, but there were still concentrations of strong forces at certain spots.

A front was set up on the steppes, virtually a second line, to halt the Fascists' penetration. Our 53<sup>rd</sup> Army was sent to this new front. Our 7<sup>th</sup> Division was given a wider sphere of operations. But not a larger staff, unfortunately. We had our own printing press; the typesetter didn't know any German, it's true, but he set our pamphlets flawlessly, just following the typeface. The piles of pamphlets were brought to flight teams and the so-called sewing machines (biplanes that could hover almost to a standstill in the air over enemy positions) threw the papers down directly over enemy trenches. We also had large sound trucks; the loudspeaker took up the whole back portion of the truck, in the front part were the technicians and announcers. The truck had to be driven backward up to the front line. This "mousetrap" for announcer, technician, and driver was called an MGU.<sup>72</sup> It was clearly a target, but in war, you just disregard such things.

Our first, still primitive speaker systems had a radius of about one hundred meters, the MGU had about five hundred meters or more. We read pamphlets aloud, and it sometimes came to a not a very pleasant dialogue: we'd say something—and

our answer was drumfire. We also analyzed military mail, personal mail, too—that was terrific. We were amazed at the bitter realism of some of the soldiers' letters.

We were also assigned to make speeches to our own troops about the morale of the Fascist army. We asked our prisoners if they were prepared to talk to their friends. Concretely, including their own names. Not all of them were brave enough to do this. Whoever refused was left in peace, not forced to do anything. In battle the Soviet soldier is terrible, he forgives nothing, but the moment the enemy has been caught, he treats his opponent like a human being. Russians are good-natured. I must qualify this—that was my experience. Certainly, bad things happened on the Soviet side, too, especially when we were in enemy territory, but I still resist the perspective that blames the effect for the cause. It wasn't so uncommon for our soldiers to share a *makhorka*<sup>73</sup> cigarette with their German prisoners after the battle was over. Prisoners were considered defenseless people.<sup>74</sup>

HS: Were there also German deserters, soldiers, officers, and generals?

MM: Yes, but in 1943 they were still the exceptions. They were amazed that I could speak such good German. When we took our first prisoners, by the way, we found them to be extraordinarily arrogant. The Germans thought we'd present them with the key to Moscow on a silver tray. They didn't take their captivity so very seriously. But it wasn't easy later on, either: the prisoners became more unsure of themselves, but we didn't know whether they were just telling us more and more of what we wanted to hear in order to save their own lives. I was amazed at how uneducated many of the German soldiers were. When they were permitted to write personal letters to friends from prison, some of them couldn't even put together a single sentence, not to mention their many grammatical errors. It wasn't so very different on the Soviet side, to be sure, especially with the non-Russian peoples—but I was used to thinking of that language of poets and thinkers with special respect.

Late in 1943 the National Committee for a Free Germany was founded; their officers sometimes came over to us in the army, too, and spoke with captured German soldiers, as well as to soldiers on the outermost front. Over time, military reconnaissance became better and better; if German troops were relocated, the new troop sections would be amazed that the Soviets were suddenly welcoming them on the loudspeaker with their "names and addresses."

HS: If the army staff conducted unsatisfactory interrogations behind the front, was that ever followed by something like liquidation or other acts of vengeance?

MM: No. Definitely not. I already described what I knew of this in 1942. And I don't know of any acts of vengeance or liquidations of prisoners of war during later periods, either.

HS: How did you hear about the famous, notorious Order 227?

MM: One night—if I'm not mistaken it was in February or March 1942—we were awakened. Stalin, the commander-in-chief of the Red Army, was reading out Order 227, a very tough order: Soviet soldiers were not to be guilty of any cowardice before the enemy and should not be taken into captivity voluntarily or alive; cowards would be punished without mercy.<sup>75</sup> As would those with self-inflicted wounds. Stalin discussed the fact that our Soviet "eagles" were turning back when they saw German airplanes. That was unpardonable. As regards courage in battle and discipline at the front, we were to learn from our enemies. And in addition, according to the order, penal units would be established; penal companies for the soldiers, penal battalions for the commanders or commissars. If you were lacking in any way, a commander could send you into one of those companies, and that was usually a death sentence. These troops were sent to the outermost front, directly to the most dangerous sectors. When there was an attack, they were the first ones there. These soldiers and officers were to redeem with their blood their crimes against the fatherland, that's what it said in the order.

When we heard the order that night, we were depressed. For the first time, Stalin himself was rudely exposing his legendary "eagles." "Are there any questions?" they said that night. "If not, then you are dismissed." No one said anything; everyone was stunned. I don't know any more whether we even talked about it afterward. Everyone tried to go back to sleep. The order we'd just heard revealed the desperate situation of the Soviet Union; the bitter truth was suddenly before our eyes. In short, the order meant "no step backwards." We were shaken.

Even today I am deeply moved by the grim words in Konstantin Simonov's novel *Soldiers Are Not Born*, written in the spirit of this order: "The only peoples worthy of life are those who are fearless and know how to die; the grim logic of history has proved this more than once." Today I am appalled by the mercilessness of this remark. He is right, of course, but it is cruel nevertheless. But inevitably we also have to ask this question along with it: In unleashing the World War, was it not the crime of Nazi Germany that resulted in this mercilessness, this barbaric coercion?

HS: You were saying earlier that you were relatively relaxed about going to war. Weren't you afraid of death? What do you think of the heroic legends that figure after the fact in the narration of Soviet military history, especially in a certain kind of art?

MM: One time, it was on the Northwest Front, a high-level commander called us together; he had fought the Japanese and he said: “This war is terrible, many hundreds of thousands have died already, you too will die—you absolutely have to come to terms with the idea that your life is almost over. If you can internalize that, only then do you have a small chance of surviving. Whoever is afraid is the first to die and cowards will die in any case.” We listened to that. My God, we were young; despite everything that we’d already seen and experienced, no one thought he’d actually die himself.

Heroism in war is an unpredictable reaction in an unpredetermined moment. The interpretation is always found only after the fact—like every philosophy of the meaning of life. In my opinion, heroism means consciously going to a concentration camp because of your convictions. If you as a German helped others, if you hid Jews or members of the resistance, if you did it even though you could clearly calculate the consequences—that is heroism. Heroism always comes about if there is an alternative for action. In war there usually isn’t one. What looks like heroism—and is heroism objectively, too—is born out of a very concrete situation. I don’t think that anyone has the intention of using his body as a shield against machine-gun fire. I never experienced it or heard about it that way. It happens in battle, it’s a reflex reaction, a feeling. A pilot has no ammunition left, he flies into a German bomber, both of them crash. Afterward it’s appropriate to speak about a heroic act, of course. But if you’re sitting or standing on the outermost lines, in ice-holes at forty degrees below zero, you’re not thinking about heroism. At the most you become apathetic.

HS: And what about the idea of death? You said that captivity wouldn’t have been an option for you.

MM: In one swampy region on the Northwest Front, troop maintenance was terrible from every point of view. The trucks didn’t get through, and we hadn’t eaten anything for days. Then to be sure you sometimes think: “Oh, if only I could take a bullet right now.” When we captured a village we’d warm ourselves at an open fire. Instinctively we’d go up to the glow in our felt boots, and the snow melted immediately. It was pleasant. But if you walked away again, the boots became icicles—and you did, too. Then you sometimes wished you could die, die quickly. Peace, peace pure and simple. We blame it on the fire if we suffocate, on our breath if we choke, and on life if we murder. Even if we murder ourselves. After all, there was Hitler’s commissar decree, according to which all political officers (commissars) were to be shot by martial law. I was a German in the ranks of the Red Army, a Jew and an

officer in the political department! My only worry was that I'd hopefully still have time to put a bullet through my head first.

Yes, I sometimes thought about death, more and more I accepted it as a possibility. But strangely enough, I never seriously considered the possibility of being "merely" disabled—despite the fact that I came into contact with these disabled every day, every hour. I was once hunkering down in a shell hole with a female orderly; I crawled away for a short time. When I came back, a grenade had torn away one of her legs. I bound up her thigh with a bandage and dragged her to the sick bay. That I myself could have become a cripple, no, I was never afraid of that; for some reason my fantasy couldn't take in that possibility.

To be honest, I was also insanely lucky. We once set up our loudspeakers and amplifier behind an embankment in front of the German positions, for example. A technician and the battalion commissar were with me. I was standing on the left, the commissar on the right, and the technician in the middle. "Ready," he said. We exchanged places and in the very same second that we'd changed places, the technician collapsed: shot through the lung, right past the heart. He came through. As by some miracle that lasted the fraction of a second, I myself had been spared. It's times like that that you believe in fate.

Another time—it was near Kharkov in 1943—we were supposed to broadcast a message with our MGU. During the day we'd identified our position on the outermost lines and dug out a trench for the truck. We were supposed to broadcast when it was dark. I started to shiver, had a high fever, was sweating profusely, and had to be brought back to the post. Another announcer had to jump in for me. Right after he was deployed, a grenade hit the truck. The driver lost his leg, the mechanic died, and the announcer was also badly injured. Again, I was lucky. I'm no fatalist, but these were coincidences that rendered me speechless.

For example, after we were withdrawn from the Northwest Front at the end of 1943, the Steppe Front was opened up. When the Fascist attack came, north of Belgorod, we advanced in the direction of Poltava. It was terribly difficult to make any progress; civilians carried the ammunition and the trucks couldn't get through the mud. I was wearing synthetic boots and the soaked loamy earth literally pulled them off my feet. Exhausting! Unspeakable physical exertion. We covered at most ten kilometers a day. We were part of the advance in the direction of the Dnepr. This is where as an infantryman I crossed the one hundred-kilometer-wide dead zone—a scorched earth zone. With my own eyes I saw the burned villages and barns into which children, old people, along with their remaining animals had been driven earlier. It wasn't only the SS thugs, but also soldiers from the regular *Wehrmacht* who'd also had a hand in these crimes. Of course you can't call every German soldier a murderer, but every German soldier was serving in an army that

has been condemned by history. That compromises every case of personal innocence or coercion by orders.

But what I wanted to say is that we advanced up to Kremenchug on the Dnepr. We were on the second Ukrainian Front. The western shore of the Dnepr is higher than the eastern shore. That's where the *Wehrmacht* had its defensive line, the "Eastern Wall." One of our regiments was located on the western shore—a bridgehead. The enemy was trying to destroy this bridgehead. And it was at just this very bridgehead that I was supposed to cross over, in order to broadcast our agitprop over the loudspeaker. I couldn't swim. The Dnepr is wide, and I had to cross it in a rubber boat packed with ammunition. That was a situation where I actually said my farewells to life. I was put across during the day, and I had my guardian angel with me. I reported to the commander, but I couldn't broadcast because the shooting was too dense. At night I went back again, and again to my astonishment I arrived safely.

You also can't imagine how casual we were about the danger we faced. We were in a village near the Dnepr shore. I was always the youngest in my division, younger than Kotelnikov and Fradkin. We were up by the Dnepr, trying to find a place to position our MGU. There was one solitary tree there, reaching up to the sky, a precise, highly visible target for the Germans. And just imagine this: we saw that tree and wagered which of us would be brave enough to climb it. Russian roulette. There were three of us and we all three climbed up, one after the other. Only later were we overcome by fear, breaking out in a sweat at the very thought of how deadly our casual attitude could have been. We were young!

HS: And then you went to Romania.

MM: Yes. After liberating the Soviet Republic of Moldavia on August 21, 1944, we crossed the Romanian border. Our 53<sup>rd</sup> Army was the first to reach the western border of the USSR. The units of the second Ukrainian Front, among which was our 53<sup>rd</sup> Army, had accomplished its mission of liberating the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Pro-Nazi Romania, which was officially a kingdom, was ruled by the dictator General Antonescu. The royal family didn't have much of a say in things. That's why Prince Michael conspired with the illegal Communist party to topple Antonescu.<sup>76</sup>

In mid-August 1944, after Antonescu had returned from a meeting with Hitler and was in the palace with Michael, the Communists arrested him. That was followed by an uprising in Bucharest, in which the illegal Romanian Communist party had a significant role. The Red Army was outside the gates of the capital. Our troops were able to capture Bucharest without any bloodshed. Romania left the coalition with Hitler and joined the Allies. When Romania had entered the war with Hitler against

the Soviet Union, Hitler had rewarded it with Moldavia and a portion of the Soviet Black Sea coastline. From Odessa, Professor Alexianu<sup>77</sup> ruled the occupied territory with an iron hand. Even civilians were condemned to death and their names were listed publicly in all the larger towns. When I had the opportunity of speaking about this with Mr. Alexianu in early September 1944, he couldn't remember anything about it. According to him, he was primarily a professor of administrative law at the University of Bucharest.

The poverty in the Romanian villages was shocking, and the bad conditions in the Russian countryside looked positively classy in comparison. We were appalled: sloping, straw-covered cottages; *mamaliga* (corn bread made with water) was often the only nourishment; there were no electric lights; and they didn't have any streets.

Meanwhile, when the German troops began their paniclike retreat, it was very hard for us to catch up with them. When we picked up German radio broadcasts and heard talk of an orderly retreat, we knew it would really be a desperate flight. It was around this time, in Korsunchevtchenko in 1944, that I narrowly missed being captured—it was the first and only time. I was ordered to go up to the front lines. We were trying to find a position for our large sound system, and I set off on a motorbike, enemy booty, to the outermost unit they'd mentioned. The road was in good condition. When I arrived, they looked at me flabbergasted: "How did you get here?" "On the road," I answered placidly. "My God, that's in the hands of German troops!" Some of them had made it out of the pocket. Again I'd had a narrow escape. I'd passed by the road just before it was occupied by the *Wehrmacht*. It was a matter of minutes.

We then went via Polesti to Bucharest. We stayed about two weeks in Romania, passed along the Carpathians, and crossed the border into Hungary on October 7, 1944. In March 1945 we were in Slovakia. The Hungarian units had put up a fierce resistance, by the way. The Salaschists<sup>78</sup> were fanatical Nazis. When it came to cruelty, they could keep pace with the SS gangs. We spent a few months near Debrecen.<sup>79</sup> Our numbers were rather decimated. Among the Soviet soldiers who'd been deployed to the liberated USSR territories there were also undercover Vlasovites. They were often very brutal toward civilians. An elderly lady pulled me into her yard—a young woman was lying there—dead. A Red Army soldier had shot her. When after a long war you as a military man see a dead civilian, that is something different from the sight of a dead soldier. Finding the perpetrator would have been like finding a needle in a haystack. But we did find him; he'd wanted to rape the young women, but she'd defended herself. The soldier was brought before a tribunal. He admitted that he was a Vlasovite. . . . He was executed. Meanwhile, the fighting troop had marched on. We advanced to the Danube. In Pest there was

heavy fighting, because the Fascists had turned Buda, the higher part of the city on the west bank, into an armed fortification. We captured Pest and saw the Danube (but it wasn't as blue as we'd imagined it from Johann Strauss's music).

In 1945 whenever a city had been captured, we in the 7<sup>th</sup> Division had to report there immediately. Our job was to help establish the local authorities and to advise the Soviet commanders; we also had to unearth any possible anti-Fascist forces. On March 31, 1945, I did get wounded by a hand grenade that came flying out of a window in Nitra.<sup>80</sup> I turned away quickly, got a fragment in my back; another fragment sliced the throat of the officer standing next to me. He was dead on the spot. They operated on me but didn't find the fragment. Again, it was my lot to survive through happenstance. The x-ray that they took the next day showed the fragment right next to my spine. It's still lying there today, encased by connective tissue. A souvenir.

On May 10, 1945, we left our post in Goloski to resume direct "conversations" with German soldiers by means of the sound truck. But we made almost no forward progress. There were traffic jams for kilometers; the streets were being swept for mines, so we decided to wait in a nearby forest. I'll never forget this moment. Not a single human soul. The trees untouched by acts of war. Twittering birds and the sun's rays penetrating the green foliage. It was truly wonderful, like a miracle of nature just for us. Until then we'd seen only scorched or cleared forests—or was it that we'd simply "unlearned" how to take innature's beat "I fought for my ideals. I was able to help people. I regret nothing."



## The Postwar Years: Return to Germany

HS: When a German, a Soviet Army officer, returns as a victor to the country that used to be his homeland, what are his thoughts?

MM: I'll anticipate a bit. We left Czechoslovakia; the 53<sup>rd</sup> Army had received marching orders to the Far East. We traveled via Cottbus and Dresden, where terrible sights awaited us. Dresden—the evening walk through the old city—terrible! I saw the rubble women,<sup>81</sup> I saw the many empty faces. But when I thought of the scorched earth along the Dnepr my sympathy slackened. I always tried to differentiate between the horrible deeds of the Fascists and the suffering of the civilian population in the territories we now occupied. The crimes of the Nazi army in the occupied territories were perpetrated by Fascist Germany—now we were dealing with the civilian population. This humaneness is something like a cultural duty, and it existed in the thoughts and actions of many Soviet soldiers and officers.<sup>82</sup>

The Red Army was in the den of the conquered lion. I had hoped to be quickly demobilized, because I wanted to continue my medical studies. But I would have liked to see Erfurt again beforehand. How Germany would look after the war—I hadn't given it any thought. Our 7<sup>th</sup> Division was intercepting enemy broadcasts, and we learned from a broadcast how the Führer had allegedly kept fighting until the last minute and had died like a hero. Germany surrendered unconditionally on May 8—but we kept fighting until the eleventh and twelfth. Field Marshall Schörner had given his troops the order!<sup>83</sup> After about a week, the whole staff along with the political division was summoned. The head of the political division made a speech. It surprised us. He basically told us that we were soldiers, and as soldiers we had to fight—to fight, in fact, until there was peace all over the world.

We were amazed: the war was over after all. We knew nothing about the Soviet Union's obligations toward the Allies to fight Fascist Japan. Even if I think about the Ardennes offensive, which dates from much earlier, that was Churchill's desire to advance the attack, the Soviet offensive. Moscow indicated its agreement, but saying "yes" is easy in politics—that "yes" was bound up with an additional, terrible cost in Soviet blood. But Stalin and the Soviet Union kept their word.

In late May we got our orders, as I indicated—we were to go to the Far East! The technical equipment was loaded up, along with the nice blue Horch twelve-cylinder that had belonged to Field Marshall Schörner: he himself had cut and run. We left by a train that was loaded with vehicles, among which were plundered automobiles. During a short stopover in Moscow I saw my relatives again for the first time since October 1941.

HS: Where were you stationed in the Far East?

MM: In Mongolia, in Choybalsan.<sup>84</sup> The place was called a city, but it was actually more of a large village. Wood huts, many yurts, only one street. The nicest building was the club. The Soviet consul lived in a green wood house. Arriving slowly, the units of the Soviet Army were assembled. Time went by. Empty time. Water was rationed, one liter a day—for everything. The greatest plague was the countless fleas; the lice we'd had during the war seemed like a trifle in comparison. We lay on the steppe, surrounded by mountains, and we were to cross over them toward China and defeat the Japanese.

In August we got word that the Americans had detonated the atomic bomb. For a long time now, this terrible act has quite naturally been linked to the idea of unfathomable senselessness. But we thought only one thing: the war is really over. After all, the Japanese had made their dastardly attack on Pearl Harbor, and the USA was our ally. I hoped to be ordered either to Moscow or to Germany, but I landed in the West Siberian military district of Novosibirsk and there I was supposed to tend to Japanese prisoners of war. Our battalion of guards was complete—the only thing missing was the Japanese prisoners of war. I was quartered at the home of an elderly woman whose most proud and well protected-possession was a pig. More or less her life insurance. She kept the animal under her bed.

Then, in October 1945, the Soviet Army Central Administration for Political Work requested that I work in the military administration of the Soviet occupation zone in Germany. So in November of the first year of peacetime, I returned to Germany, to help in strengthening and advising the anti-Fascist, democratic self-government. In Merseburg I worked in the military administration for the district of Halle-Merseburg. I met committed communists, social democrats, and bourgeoisie who were committed to building up a really new Germany. But there were also many others. . . .

I had housing by the park, at the home of a dentist and his wife. They had two children; I lived on the lower floor of their house. I was well provided for by the commandant, and got at the time about 2000 marks. That was a great deal. My driver came from Merseburg, and got 300 marks a month. I had to pay him myself because I wasn't entitled to a staff car.

HS: Quoting Moritz Mebel, from a newspaper interview: “My Soviet soldier's passbook turned out to be very important in calculating my pension. In the Federal Republic in 1991, I had to prove that I hadn't been a professional soldier.”

MM: Yes, if I'd been a professional Soviet soldier, the Soviet Union would have had to pay my pension. But fortunately I could prove that I'd been a volunteer. I find it quite appropriate that the legal successors to the so-called Third Reich are paying me for having fought against German Fascism.

HS: As a military officer, did you wear civilian clothes after the war?

MM: Yes, that too. In Halle I received my clothing at a large warehouse. Two suits, shoes, underwear. The military administration office, later the party building, was located on Thälmannplatz, not far from the university. Across the street on the corner was the army store.

HS: Did you have to pay for your clothes?

MM: Yes. But to the best of my memory, they didn't cost much.

HS: When did you see Moscow again?

MM: In 1946 I got my first furlough from the army; I could spend almost a month in Moscow. It was the first time in five years that I saw our home, my whole family. All of them were terribly haggard: the war. During this furlough I went to see a good acquaintance of mine, the head urologist in the Soviet Army, a colonel. I wanted to resume my studies as quickly as possible. He tried to help me through his contacts. At the same time I put in a petition to the army. But understandably, they weren't particularly enthusiastic; I was a lieutenant and then a captain. But in February 1947, I finally got the order I'd been longing for: demobilized to continue studies!

HS: You've already told us about becoming the head physician in a district hospital in Estonia after you completed your studies. A place with thirty-five beds—did your ambition eventually outgrow it?

MM: No, that's not right. I just knew that a good doctor has to know an enormous amount. I wanted to keep educating myself and engage in research. Without advanced training that wasn't possible in Estonia. That's why I returned to Moscow in 1954 to the Central Institute for Advanced Medical Training. When I applied to be a candidate there in 1953, I was rejected on the specious grounds that three years at a local hospital weren't enough for a certificate of specialization. I lodged a complaint with the General Division of the Central Hospital of the Soviet Communist party. They took my complaint on to the Ministry of Health. There, in the appropriate depart-

ment, my case came by a lucky coincidence into the hands of Minchnik, who'd been a friend of mine. Although all the tests had already been held, I was allowed to take a special admission exam for candidacy. I was glad, despite the fact this "special treatment" didn't suit me at all because these exceptional cases are usually tested more rigorously than the others. I was given oral and written exams in Marxism-Leninism, German, and urology. But everything went well.

HS: In 1957 you petitioned to return to Germany.

MM: Yes. My Aunt Marie and my sister Susi also submitted a petition. My father and my uncle had already died. There were priority lists, and all the applications went through the Moscow Red Cross. My request was rejected at first, because I was still an officer in the reserves. But there was an agreement with the Soviet government that provided for people who'd been born in Germany to be repatriated there. I went to the GDR embassy, to the consul, and they encouraged me to submit my petition again.<sup>85</sup>

HS: Is your sister Susi still alive?

MM: No, my dear Susi died in 1988, here in Berlin.

HS: Were people in Moscow offended that you were leaving the Soviet Union?

MM: No one held it against me that I left. But I suddenly didn't feel quite comfortable in my skin. After all, I was saying farewell to a large, important part of my life, to my second homeland. My good friend Sonja and her father had returned to the GDR, to Berlin, in 1957. A year later she came to Moscow for a visit. She had been working at an institute in Berlin. We decided to marry. Were they to deny me my exit visa again, Sonja was prepared to return to the Soviet Union. After finishing my candidacy, I was to become a lecturer in urology at the medical institute in Khabarovsk.<sup>86</sup> We got married in Moscow on July 7—on the very next day my official exit visa was lying in my mailbox, along with the ones for Marie and Susi! We were happy. After a few days, Sonja had to return to the GDR, and meanwhile we began to pack. We collected all our belongings, stowed them in a big trunk and four suitcases. The exit formalities were completed. Farewell to our friends. It wasn't easy, but Sonja was waiting in Berlin.

In Brest we had to change trains. But no one had told me that the trunk in the baggage car had to pass customs, too. Twenty minutes before the train left they asked me if my trunk had passed customs. No. "Either one of you stays here or else the

luggage does.” We left the trunk—and kept going. And despite all the chaos of the time, the trunk was forwarded to me. We arrived at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder. They said we had to get out. We refused, and we were so stubborn and persuasive that the officer in charge agreed to let us travel on. Otherwise we would have landed in a camp for repatriates. Sonja and Comrade Kaden from the personnel division of the Central Committee were waiting for us at East Station. At first, my aunt and Susi lived on Ostseestrasse, in a little hotel there; later they got a very nice apartment on Andreasstrasse. And I had my own lodging, because Sonja was living in a two-room apartment in Hohenschönhausen.

HS: You were still a member of the Soviet Communist party.

MM: The SED gave me credit for that time, so strangely enough I’ve been an SED member since 1943.<sup>87</sup>

HS: How did the SED approach you?

MM: The party was expecting me and in fact made the well-intentioned suggestion that I begin by having a good rest. But I didn’t want any of that. I got a position as assistant in the surgical clinic of the Charité.<sup>88</sup>

HS: You were content?

MM: Yes and no. I was received in a very cool fashion in the clinic. Everything was strange. They’d quickly found out where I’d come from. Two of the three doctors in urology were West Berliners. They were not particularly well disposed toward me. I was a specialist in urology, but subordinate to a nonspecialist from West Berlin. At the time, it was said that the power of the Worker and Peasants’ State stops in front of the gates of the Charité. Usually it was former *Wehrmacht* doctors who had their say. For a long time, the Nazis had stipulated that doctors in the fighting forces could not belong to the NSDAP.<sup>89</sup> (That was revised in 1944.) Highly placed military doctors such as division doctors and general army doctors got off easy when it came to de-Nazification.

The director of the surgical clinic of the Charité was a former army doctor. My superior, Hagemann, was a former division doctor. The majority of the doctors knew one another because they were West Berliners. These doctors thought that I, coming from Moscow, was supposed to take over from the current head of the urological division in the surgical clinic collective. Of course I only found out later about this rumor—you can imagine how welcoming Dr. Hagemann was. Here comes a com-

munist from Russia and wants to displace him. And of course it wasn't true at all, no one was thinking of removing him.

Hagemann, as I said, had been a division doctor in the *Wehrmacht* and had fought near Leningrad. During the cold winter of 1961–62, at a conference in Leningrad, we stood together at the Piskarev Cemetery. I'd meanwhile gone to Friedrichshain, and he was still at the Charité. He'd known that I fought in the Red Army, but not that I held the rank of officer. Suddenly, his behavior toward me became friendly, based so to speak on our shared rank. . . .

At that time I was rather unhappy at the Charité. Nearly every day, I had to administer anesthetics. Always breathing in this ether. . . . I felt humiliated. Here I was, a urology specialist, anesthetizing people from morning to night. I had nothing against anesthesiologists, but I'd committed myself to urology, and specialists in that area were very rare at the time. The evenings were the only time I could do my experimental research. I still think with gratitude of the surgical nurses and the head technical assistants from the radiology division who helped me in their free time to lay the foundation for my dissertation. The few other comrades at the Charité at this time supported me, too, but they were still being trained themselves and were still trying to find their way in their clinical work. Professor Felix gave me permission to sift through the medical records of the hospital and write an article for a professional journal about genital tuberculosis. When I'd finished the article, I gave it to Felix for his approval. Six weeks went by without his answer. I was champing at the bit. I went to the professor's offices. His secretary told me he wasn't available. I stubbornly remained in the anteroom. Wouldn't budge, told the secretary that she'd have to stay, too, even after closing time. Half an hour later she gave up, announced me, and I could go into the boss's office. My work had been approved.

I was allowed to treat patients in the out-patient clinic. But up until the end of 1959, I wasn't allowed to perform one single operation, just assist several times—they let me do that. I thought that was very severe. You forget your craft, forget how to operate. When I heard that a urological department was being opened up at the hospital in Hufeland, I asked to be transferred there. Dr. Krebs, the head of the new department, received me warmly. We worked hard, as many as fifteen night calls a month, but for me it was fun.

HS: Mr. Mebel, as someone who lived for such a long time in the Soviet Union, how did you take to vodka?

MM: Vodka was part of it all, of course—and in some ways, I have to add, unfortunately. During the war, at least, but afterward, too. I stopped this dangerous “fooling around” cold turkey. After the war, as you know, I was working in the commandant's

office as an officer in the administrative district of Halle-Merseburg, in the political division. We always ate lunch in a canteen. The meal began with vodka, 150 grams. We swallowed the stuff down without thinking. One day, for some reason or other, there was no vodka available. We ate, but the food didn't taste good. Aha: the vodka was missing. We became aware of our habit. That set off an alarm in me: first survive the war and then drink yourself to death? No, there was no way I wanted that. Of course I got teased. But I stuck to my decision; I wanted to live my life as sensibly as I'd imagined it. My desire was to become a proper doctor, and good health was simply part of that package. So enough! Without any wavering. Of course I'll still drink a little vodka today, on special occasions. But I prefer dry wine. Or sometimes a sip of Metaxa.

HS: Were you ever a smoker?

MM: During the war, I tried to roll my own. But I could never get the hang of it. We also smoked because the winter of 1941–42, say, was so freezing cold. After the war I stopped smoking—when I noticed that I liked the taste. I became a totally casual smoker, if you can call it that for two or three cigarettes a month.

HS: Was there a lot of drinking in the war?

MM: And how! Most important was just to have something. Anything at all. Whisky from red beets, for example! In Mongolia some people were even swilling a stinking cologne. Not me.

HS: Were you harassed as a Jew in the Soviet Union?

MM: As a child? Never. The children teased me for being German. Because the likes of us were different from the Soviet children in Moscow, just on the outside. By wearing plus-fours, for example: “Nemetz, peretz, kolbassa, kislaya kapusta—German, pepper, sausage and sauerkraut, ate a herring without its tail and said it tastes very good.”<sup>90</sup> I was also sometimes beaten up. That's the way boys are at a certain age. No, until 1940 I had no experience with anti-Semitism. But, to be sure, when I decided whether to become a doctor or a diplomat, I already knew, as I mentioned, that the “fifth space” played a role.

HS: The fifth space?

MM: Yes. The entry in your passport in space number 5, nationality: “Jew.” But

let me say at this point that I never felt any anti-Semitism in the GDR. Only after November 9, 1989, did I receive a few phone calls referring to me as a “Jewish pig.” The past can catch up with us that suddenly.

HS: The Soviet Union was a republic of nationalities. Is there anything to the charge of Russian nationalism in the army?

MM: All the nationalities in the country had a role in the victory over Fascism, not just the Russians. But it’s true that the role of other nationalities was later played down. Although the Jews stood third, after the Russians and the Ukrainians, among the “heroes of the Soviet Union,” and although many tens of thousands of them had fallen, the word got around that they’d never fought at the front. But of course it’s also true that the Russians paid the highest price with their own blood.

HS: What is German about you, Professor Mebel, and what is Russian?

MM: For a while now I’ve lost the habit of judging people by their nationality. As I said, the Karl Liebknecht School trained us definitively to think internationally. What about me is Russian, what German? Perhaps my Prussian love of order is German. Yes, I was always extremely neat. Even as a child. It was an occasion for me when I got my first pair of long pants in Moscow, and I paid strict attention to the crease. It was also an occasion because I now no longer got the teasing I’d had to endure when I turned up in short pants. At one point or another, I got my first suit. I also always tried to be neat in the war. As soon as I got hold of some shoe polish, I shined my shoes. Finicky, downright finicky!

Yes, and what might be Russian about me? Maybe a certain form of generosity, a feeling of solidarity, sharing at any price, even if it costs your last ruble. In the surgical clinic at the Charité, I always nearly choked if I saw one student buying a cigarette from another one for 5 pfennigs. And the other one actually took the money! In the Soviet Union that would have been impossible! And what else is Russian about me? I can make do with very little. But I do believe that above all else what has remained with me of my life in the Soviet Union is that I have absolutely no relationship to money. May I go back for a minute? As a fighter in the Soviet Army I got 250 or 260 rubles, as an officer much more, say, 1800 or 2000 rubles. After the war, a student again, I got a scholarship of 380 rubles. That meant quite a shift for me. When we got our scholarships we went to an elegant restaurant, ate, drank vodka. The money was almost gone by the following day. But we always had a good time and were merry and happy.



HS: When you returned to the Soviet Union after the war, you had to give up everything you'd had in Halle-Merseburg.

MM: I didn't have that much to take along, mostly clothing. I sold my auto to a friend. But you're right, it isn't so easy to leave what was in those days the safety and prosperity of military administration for this quite different life. Luckily there were workers' food cards for students, because a loaf of bread cost 100 rubles on the open market.

I also earned money by doing translations. Translation jobs in the news bureau were well paid. After my studies at the institute, I went over there and looked into my cubbyhole—if there was a red stripe on one of the texts that they'd put in there for me, it had to be translated by the next morning. The topics were a potpourri: politics, technology, critical essays. It was hard work, but as I said, it paid well. The hardest part for me, however, was that I, as a man who'd lived through the war, now had to share the school bench with very young people. The institute was at the same place as before the war. I was an adult, yet a beginner, and at first I was eyed with great suspicion. People looked over very carefully to see how important my medals or wounds were to me. When would I commit my first mistake? The fact that I mastered this situation may be the achievement that I can be most proud of. I didn't let myself be distracted, I studied, I helped others with their German lessons, and slowly the ice began to thaw. After a while I was part of things. That was a good feeling.

HS: When you were in the Soviet Union, did you think in Russian or in German?

MM: When I spoke Russian I thought in Russian, when I spoke German, then in German.

HS: What salary did you receive when you began to work in the GDR?

MM: At first I earned 1000 marks at the Charité. Sonja earned 1300. As head physician in Friedrichshain I got 1200; Sonja still had an infectious diseases bonus. We had to set ourselves up from the beginning in the GDR, but we lived very frugally.

HS: Did you later have reunions with war buddies, with friends from the time in the Soviet Union?

MM: Right after the war, as a student, when I got together with former servicemen, we only talked about silly incidents from the war years. Listening to us, my father

and my uncle must really have thought that the war had been a bed of roses for us. Maybe it's part of human nature: some people are fixated on their difficult and bitter experiences, while others repress them and remember the camaraderie. More and more, I'm coming to the view that there is no way to describe anything really objectively; everyone always has only his own truth. . . . During my time in the GDR there were also some class reunions at my institute in Moscow. But the circle grew smaller and smaller. Many had passed away, and others only described their aches and pains. I don't like that kind of whining. I was in Moscow for the last time in 1989. At that time, things were already hard because of the bad economic situation. Since then I haven't wanted to go back. I want to hold on to my good memories. Oh, but I'll go there again despite that. I'm drawn there. Friends, my parents' graves, and relatives. Nothing is that simple. . . .

HS: Professor Mebel, back to the present: you're a member of the PDS.<sup>91</sup> As a Communist, what do you think about your oppositional party's participation in the government?

MM: If a PDS member, as a local politician, say, has to agree to social cutbacks, then I think he should step down. I know of course that that's a complicated question. But it means not going along with every compromise in the name of *Realpolitik*. But on the other hand, only today do I understand fully the value of bourgeois rights—if they are truly realized and not just continually undermined. In many respects we in the GDR had our greatest problems with human rights. There's no justification for that, because, after all, our charge had been to set up a better society.

HS: Did Marxism fail then?

MM: The *Communist Manifesto* was not Marx's last word, you know. He always wanted his discoveries and teachings to be understood as a guideline, never as dogma. But we turned his dialectical and historical materialism into a rulebook—we perverted it. We "eliminated" the contradictions, first the antagonisms, then all of them. We eliminated the reasoned center: to bring about the freedom of the individual as a precondition for the social freedom of all, and vice versa. And in exchange we invented the party's leadership role. You can look for that in Marx, but in vain. Lenin created the cadre party under quite specific historical conditions. Even he remarks that it should be a transitional construct, and that we have to create a very democratic, cosmopolitan party as soon as possible. A real party of the people.

HS: What about the SED can you not forgive?

MM: In plain language, this also means: What about myself can I not forgive? There were two measures in the GDR that I absolutely cannot support, right up until today: denaturalization, which had been practiced by the Nazis, and buying the release of prisoners.<sup>92</sup> When I heard about this “buying release” for the first time, I didn’t want to believe it. But unfortunately it was true. And I was quiet about it! Bad, too, that for all intents and purposes we eliminated the division of power because the party doubled as the state apparatus. If something went well, the party claimed it as their achievement; if it went badly, they blamed the deficient state apparatus. There were very competent, able party functionaries in the economic sector, in science, in organizations, but too many of them with a corresponding measure of self-satisfaction. These people always did all the talking. “The party is always right!” In a sense, that undialectical motto sealed our fate.

HS: Heiner Müller said: “How can the Communist party clench its fist when it has its fingers in every pie?”<sup>93</sup>

MM: For all our self-criticism, of course, we mustn't pretend to explain the disintegration in the GDR and the whole socialist camp as an outgrowth of state structures alone. The GDR didn't exist in a vacuum. Indeed, our "brothers and sisters" [in the West] were not simply sympathetic toward us. On the eleventh floor of the Berlin City Hotel they tried (in a very elegant way, admittedly) to recruit me. "You're such an educated man, you could help us. . . ." I was a senior physician at the time.

HS: There's a saying that every people has the government it deserves. Did the SED have the general secretary it deserved?

MM: Basically, yes. You see, I had experience with many politicians and always saw them with the eyes of a doctor. Many people picked on Ulbricht,<sup>94</sup> for example. The man was an autodidact, it's true, but he understood that the economy of a society is its foundation and its politics merely the superstructure. He ventured into an area that today we take for granted as “management.” They accused him of being a technocrat, but his New Economic System of Planning and Guidance was an attempt to achieve cost effectiveness; it was also an attempt to free us from Soviet paternalism.

Unfortunately, Ulbricht became more and more pig-headed as he got older. For a long time, comrades who knew him better than I did thought they could convince me of the opposite: “Just look at him, he still can do everything, he gets up at 6:00, does his morning exercises or swims, he's at the office by 8:00 on the dot.” Clichés, embellished over the years, that's all! Hierarchy and Faith always won out over

Reason. With every general secretary, what began well ended with ossification—and that cursedly disciplined silence of the people who knew better.

There were not only know-nothings in the Central Committee, you know. General directors like Biermann or others knew quite well what was going on—and we spoke about it quite freely. But we only debated internally. I told you that they were the ones who were the captains of the economy, and after all I didn't come to them with my medical questions. That too was a kind of imperceptible retreat. We ourselves were to blame that the democratic mechanism necessary for life did not function. But please don't forget one thing—there was also “big brother.” He has his great merits, without a doubt. Among them I count above all the struggle against Fascism and support for the collapse of colonialism. Yet the Soviet Union—it would be more correct and fairer to say its leadership—also succeeded in perverting the ideals of communism and forcing many people to join them in doing so.

HS: Professor Mebel, after these long conversations a last word about a concept that has been dominating all acts of remembrance recently: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [mastering the past]. For some people that is a complicated personal task, for others the concept serves as an ideological club to bring something categorically to a logical, concise, clearly nameable conclusion. Can you please say something about this ominous *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, after these long conversations, which, as I said, have largely to do with memory, with the past.

MM: Despite all the criticism, the GDR for me remains linked with something I am proud of. I regret nothing that I did in my life. I see no reason to extract myself from my biography. Unfortunately, looking back, I have to say that we were on the lookout for enemies everywhere. And unfortunately we also found them where there were none. You might accuse me of being naïve, but I really didn't know anything about that universal surveillance. Quite apart from the fact that today we know with certainty how stupid that excessive apparatus was. To be sure, at some point I'd like to look through the dossiers of the defenders of the constitution and the West German news services.

So today, with distance, I can criticize quite differently than I would have ten years ago. And I also think that there is a connection between power and corruptibility that affects all societies. That's an insight that I find most bitter. But again: I resist memories that are accrued with the better knowledge of hindsight—and then the puzzled question, “Why at the time didn't you. . . .” Why not? Because every life situation consists of infinitely many factors that affect thinking and behavior. Your life can be exactly in line with a historical tendency, but also have the possibility of taking a course completely, diametrically opposed to it.

I look back on my life and say that I've remained true to my convictions. But of course, set against the background of many facts, my political understanding has changed. My assessment of the Non-Aggression Pact and the friendship treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, for example, would have been quite different if I had known at the time that there was a secret paper (simply put) that divided up the world between Berlin and Moscow.<sup>95</sup>

Or take overcoming the split in the German working class—after the war, many people saw that as an urgent necessity, you know. Now I'm constantly hearing something about forced unification!<sup>96</sup> I never felt any pressure for a forced unification, at least not in the governmental district of Halle-Merseburg, where I was working at the time. I can't speak for anything else. Were they forcing 700,000 SPD members and 600,000 Communists to unify? If you didn't like what was going on back then, you high-tailed it out of there on the subway! What do they mean by "forced"? To apologize as a Communist for the way unification happened back then? I see no reason for that, if I judge by my own experiences.

No, you don't have to jump over every stick the Social Democrats hold up these days. The SPD demands that I apologize for the injustice that we did to the Social Democrats. Where have they apologized for the injustice that Noske and the other outlaws did to the communists and honest bourgeois democrats?<sup>97</sup> Apologizing for historical events is a very dubious business. It's usually bound up with old and new unilateral accusations, with the construction of new ideological barriers. For my part, I believe I've learned from history. And I consider it urgently necessary to cooperate with Social Democrats of the left and with leftist bourgeois forces—with everyone who is against the deployment of German soldiers outside the Federal Republic, for whatever reason, and who is against the unbridled rule of capital, against racism and anti-Semitism. Gustav Noske, a socialist politician, was head of the armed forces that suppressed the communist insurrection in Berlin in 1919.

Here's another example that occurs to me. I went into Czechoslovakia with the Red Army and know how the Sudeten Germans suffered. But at one time most of the people there had been for Henlein's party and had cheered their alleged liberation by the Nazis.<sup>98</sup> Now they're submitting claims as victims and no one will admit to having heard the cheers, let alone having led them.

A single life has innumerable truths, and the judgment of history does not have to agree with evaluations of an individual life. You cannot master the past. At the most you can analyze it, and try to understand it, taking into account the dominant political configurations of the time in your own country and in the world. When you make retrospective assessments, you have to guard against being a know-it-all. And also, of course, against watering down unpleasant truths that have come to light in the meantime.

HS: Man can be as greatly deceived by his reason as by his faith.

MM: No social order should live in the delusion that its foundation includes no sealed-in errors. But if reason does not triumph, mankind will go under—it will die a biological death. Given global experiences, I resist the absolute dominance of the capitalist system. Just as I have meanwhile come to resist the absolutist thought that communism should be the deterministic final phase of human development. That was clearly a great error. How in the world did we forget about the dialectic?!

HS: In 1992 you wrote: “My own opportunism was clearly evident here, too, because I was not in agreement with our economic policy or with the official GDR position toward the Soviet Union and Comrade Gorbachev. But I remained silent in the plenary meeting. Was it cowardice? At home, with Sonja, in the circle of our family and with friends, we often spoke about whether I should not stand up right in the plenary of the Central Committee. I knew about the problems in the health sphere, after all, and in research policy; I knew about the mood among the workers. Together we always came to the conclusion that the general situation did not warrant the disruption of our own ranks. Only too easily did I allow myself to be persuaded, as I see today, by false thinking. Always with an eye to the worldwide conflicts of the two systems, it seemed that unconditional, but general solidarity with the basic principle was more important than concrete work on concrete conditions. That also applied to our friendship with the Soviet Union, and its serious abuses and bad decisions (invasion of Afghanistan, personal cult around the general secretary, flirtation with the FRG to the cost of the GDR, anti-Semitism and Russian nationalism).”<sup>99</sup>

MM: Unfortunately we have to admit that only greater distance brings more clarity. Remembering has to be understood as something in motion, as a process. At every point in time we remember differently and different things. But no new evaluation or new memory makes valueless what you thought before. Every memory is correct, because it is linked to a unique time, place, and situation that every individual remembers differently. To repeat: I see no reason to extract myself from my biography; I lived honestly, fought for my ideals, and was able to help many people by means of my profession. Let me conclude our conversations with a quotation from Benjamin Franklin: “No wound is so great as disappointed expectations, but it is certain that nothing else can so powerfully incite a mind capable of reflection to study the nature of things and his own behavior—in order to discover the source of his former assumptions and possibly to act more correctly in the future.”

HS: It is wrong to want to subject the past to present-day logic after the fact. We have to confess that every memory is both truth and error. Excepted from such errors, of course, are the people who always stand on the right side, blessed with the ability to avoid the greater life-determining errors.

MM: I'm not one of those people, I have to admit.

HS: Are you sad about that? Or glad?

MM: I'd like to say, despite everything—I'm glad.

## Afterword

### Robert Weinberg

Although they never met, Moritz Mebel is my mother Sylvia's first cousin: they share the same maternal grandparents whose children fled to Europe and America in an effort to escape anti-Semitism and the grinding poverty of the Pale of Settlement. Along with Sara Mebel, another first cousin who, until 2001, lived her entire life in the Soviet Union, these three cousins spent most of their adult lives without knowledge of each other. Yet their fates shared one characteristic common to nearly all twentieth-century Russian Jews: the encounter with modernity. Moritz, Sara and Sylvia—and their respective families—each responded in their own manner to the challenges and demands of the twentieth century. While we are not exposed to the lives of Sara and Sylvia in *Rot und Weiß*, we learn that their cousin Moritz survived the terrors of Hitler and Stalin. He dedicated himself to a medical career that reflected his deeply ingrained impulses to help others. By doing so he found fulfillment as an activist determined to bring social, political, and economic justice and equality to the world.

Moritz's father, Chaim—my mother's maternal uncle, was born and reared in Chechersk, a mostly Jewish, Belarusian town of several thousand people not far from Gomel. Chaim's father was rabbi of Chechersk, one in a long line of prominent Hasidic *rebbe*s that included Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev and, through marriage, Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, a member of the Lubavitcher dynasty. Chaim's father could also trace his rabbinical roots to Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century Kabbalah master.

By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Chaim's oldest brother, Finkel, had moved to America. Three of Chaim's sisters, one of whom is my maternal grandmother, would follow Finkel to America, but not until the early 1920s. Zolla, the middle brother, went to Palestine, but he returned for his betrothed on the eve of the war and had to remain in Russia. He moved to Moscow soon after the Bolshevik seizure of power, working as an economist for the fledgling Communist government and falling victim to the Stalinist purges of the mid-1930s. He was arrested in 1934 and died not long afterward while in custody, leaving behind his wife, Gita, and a teenage daughter, Sara Mebel (born 1919).

As for Chaim, after earning an engineering degree in Odessa, he followed in the footsteps of his two older brothers and left the Russian Empire. He enrolled in a technical institute in Arnstadt, Germany, and settled in Erfurt, where he found employment in a factory. He married a Jewish woman named Fanny, the daughter of a cook and the disinherited son of a well-off family from the Austrian city of Lemberg (known today as Lviv). In 1918 Fanny gave birth to their first child, Susi,



and then to Moritz five years later in 1923. On the eve of the Nazis' seizure of power, Chaim and Fanny, in double jeopardy as Jews and Communist activists, fled east to the socialist motherland, the Soviet Union. There, they reunited with Zolla and his family, but broke ties with Aunt Gita and Cousin Sara not long after Zolla's arrest. This was a cold decision, but probably a wise one because the German Mebels could not afford to associate with "enemies of the people."

The paths of the three cousins—Moritz, Sara, and my mother Sylvia—did not cross again for over half a century. In the 1970s Sara made the acquaintance of a cousin whose existence she had forgotten when my mother located her in Moscow through the auspices of the International Red Cross. As for her German relatives, Sara always remembered them. In the mid-1970s, around the time she met Sylvia, Sara came across a Moscow newspaper article about a visiting delegation of the members of the Central Committee of East Germany's Communist party, including a distinguished urologist by the name of Moritz Mebel. Sara realized that her cousin was still alive and kept on the look-out for his name after that.

After moving to the United States as a political refugee in 2001, Sara learned about the wonderful world of personal computers and Google searches. At her request my wife, Laurie Bernstein, entered "Moritz Mebel" in the search engine, which immediately provided his name, address, and phone number in Berlin. Sara, who was at first reluctant to renew contact with Moritz after so many decades, changed her mind when she saw one extraordinary reference: among the Google hits for "Moritz Mebel" was mention of his leading role in East Germany's first renal transplant in 1967. In 1999 I had my own experience with organ transplantation, having donated a kidney to Laurie. Learning of this coincidence prompted Sara to overcome her reluctance, and she placed a call to this long-lost cousin. Moritz, who still speaks excellent Russian, broke down in tears when he learned that he had a living relative and has been in frequent telephone contact with Sara ever since.

A new turn in our family's history occurred in 2004, when I traveled with Laurie and our son to meet Moritz and his wife, Sonja, in what used to be East Berlin. Awaiting us at the station was one of the warmest, most heartfelt welcomes we have ever known. Moritz and Sonja treated us as close family, introducing us to their daughter, Laura, her husband, Tino, and their grandchildren, Annele and Jens, as well as to the Berlin that they know and love.

## Appendix

### The Life of Moritz Mebel

- 1923 Born in Erfurt, Germany, on February 23  
Elementary school in Erfurt
- 1932 Emigration with mother and sister to Moscow  
Father follows in March 1933
- 1940 Secondary school graduation  
Medical studies at the First Moscow Medical Institute
- 1941 October until March 1947: military service in the Red Army
- 1943 Becomes a member of the Soviet Communist party
- 1945 Service in the Soviet Military Administration in the district of  
Halle-Merseburg, Germany
- 1947 Continuation of studies in Moscow
- 1951 Completion of medical studies in Moscow; practicing doctor in the  
county hospital in Keila, Estonia
- 1954 Until 1958 candidate in the Urology Department at the Central Institute  
for Advanced Medical Training in Moscow
- 1958 Completion of specialty in urology, advanced degree
- 1958 Until 1960 research assistant at the surgical clinic of the Charité at  
Humboldt University in Berlin
- 1959 Senior physician in the urological division of the Hufeland Municipal  
Hospital (animal experiments in ureter replacement)
- 1962 November, medical dissertation “Bypassing Total Ureter Defects with a  
Contribution on a New Surgical Method”  
Until 1981 head physician at the Urology Clinic and Outpatient Clinic of  
the Berlin-Friedrichshain Municipal Hospital

- 1963 Establishment of the first kidney transplant center in the GDR and a research division treating problems in organ transplantation, especially kidney transplantation
- 1966 Appointed professor of urology at the Charité
- 1967 First successful kidney transplant (in cooperation with Professors Harald Dutz and Otto Prokop)  
Appointed director of the research project “Chronic Kidney Deficiency” (held post until 1990)  
Appointed director of the Urology Department at the GDR Academy for Advanced Medical Training (held post until 1977)
- 1972 Election as a candidate of the SED Central Committee
- 1973 June, election as a corresponding member of the GDR Academy of Sciences, two years later election as a regular member
- 1977 Promoted to full professor of urology at the Charité. At the same time director of the Urology Outpatient Clinic and the Department of Organ Transplantation at the Charité
- 1981 Director of the Urology Clinic and Outpatient Clinic and director of research at the Charité
- 1982 Chairirman of the GDR Section of the IPPNW (GDR Doctors Opposed to Nuclear War)
- 1984 External member of the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences
- 1986 Member of the SED Central Committee
- 1988 Retirement
- 1992 External member of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences

178 scientific publications; collaboration on the *Handbook for General and Special Urology in 11 Volumes*, on the *Handbook of Surgical Operating Practices*, monographs on organ transplantation

Membership in numerous international medical societies; founding member of the European Urology Society, 1972

Order of the Red Star from the Soviet Union, Gold Order of the Fatherland War, Meritorious Physician of the People of the GDR, National Prize first class (in collective), Work Banner, Order of Karl Marx

Education of students and specialists in urology: sixteen doctors became associate professors under Mebel's supervision

## Notes

1. See Hans-Dieter Schütt, *Rot und Weiß: Gespräche mit Moritz Mebel* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1999). The two colors symbolize Mebel's commitment to politics and medicine.
2. For Mary's story, see *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, edited by Laurie Bernstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
3. On Mebel's political and social activism since 1989, see the addendum in *Rot und Weiß*. A Google search also will provide links to his activities for the past decade.
4. See *Rot und Weiß*, 27–28.
5. *Rot und Weiß*, 141.
6. *Rot und Weiß*, 152.
7. August Bebel (1840–1913) was a founder of the Social Democratic Party in Germany; Georgii Plekhanov (1857–1918) helped introduce Marxism to Russian revolutionaries and played a crucial role in the formation of the first Marxist political organization in Russia.
8. Erfurt is located approximately two hundred miles southwest of Berlin.
9. Official paper of the Nazi party. The SA (*Sturmabteilung*, or Stormtroopers) was a Nazi paramilitary organization.
10. The glass of wine is left for the prophet Elijah. In this sentence Mebel uses the German word for Easter (*Ostern*) to refer to Passover. In the previous sentence, however, he describes Passover (*Passa*) as the Jewish Easterfest (*Osterfest*).
11. Known today as Lviv.
12. A small vacation spot not far from Erfut.
13. Located in southeastern Belarus, near Gomel. In 1897 Jews numbered 1700 in a total population of 2316. In 1926, 9762 called the town home. The land and forests around Chechersk were contaminated by radioactive fallout from the nuclear power plant explosion in Chernobyl in 1986.
14. Mebel is referring to Sara Mebel's father. See afterword for more information.
15. Mebel evidently means assassination attempt. In August 1918 Fanny Kaplan, a Socialist Revolutionary, opened fire at Lenin as he was leaving a factory where he had addressed the workers. Kaplan seriously wounded Lenin in the lung and shoulder, injuries from which he never fully recovered.

16. Mebel is referring to Gorky Park whose official name is Park of Culture and Recreation in Honor of M. I. Gorky. The park opened in 1928 and was renamed for Gorky after his death in 1936.
17. Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919) cofounder of the German Communist Party. He was executed after the failure, in January 1919, of an armed uprising against the government established by the German Social Democratic Party following the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II.
18. Mass youth organization for children aged ten to fifteen.
19. Istra is located a short distance to the northwest of Moscow.
20. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow's municipal authorities changed back the street's name to Tverskaia.
21. The Comintern, or Communist International, was the worldwide association of communist parties that promoted proletarian revolution in the two decades after 1917.
22. Serious shortages of food and consumer goods existed because of the Five-Year Plans, The government resorted to rationing and allocated coupons that were redeemable in stores.
23. Name for stores in the 1920s and 1930s where Soviet and non-Soviet citizens could purchase hard-to-find food and clothing with hard currency and valuables such as jewelry.
24. Rationing ended at the start of 1935.
25. Mebel is referring to low-quality, adulterated bread, probably made from buckwheat which yields gray flour after processing.
26. Mebel is referring to Narkomprod, the government ministry responsible for supplying the populace with foodstuffs.
27. White bread was a sign of privilege.
28. Baggy pants gathered and fastened just below the knee.
29. Markus Wolf headed foreign intelligence for the East German Ministry of State Security (*Stasi*) from its establishment in 1953 until his retirement in 1986. His father was a writer and physician, and his uncle directed films.
30. Presumably Markus Wolf, who attended the Moscow Institute of Airplane Engineering.
31. The Soviet Union provided aid to the Spanish Republic in its struggle against General Franco and the fascists. Many children of Spanish communists found refuge in the Soviet Union.

32. Engelbert Dollfuss (1892–1935) served as chancellor of Austria from 1932 until his assassination in 1935 by Austrian Nazis. Dollfuss assumed quasi-dictatorial powers in 1933 and, in addition to outlawing the Nazi Party in Austria, harassed the political left. In 1934 he ruthlessly suppressed an uprising by Austrian socialists.
33. Louis Fischer (1896–1970) lived in the Soviet Union from 1923 until 1938 as a correspondent for *The Nation*. He also wrote a well-received biography of Lenin.
34. Altona is the westernmost district of Hamburg.
35. Wilhelm Pieck (1876–1960) was a prominent German communist who found safe haven from the Nazis in Moscow. He was the first president of the German Democratic Republic. Given the fact that Pieck turned fifty in 1926, Mebel is in all likelihood referring to Pieck's sixtieth birthday.
36. Willi Bredel (1901–1964) was a novelist involved in cultural affairs in the GDR.
37. A Danish novelist (1869–1954) who became a communist after visiting the Soviet Union in the early 1920s.
38. Erich Weinert (1890–1953) was a composer involved in communist politics before and after World War II.
39. Ernst Busch (1900–1980) was a well-known singer and actor.
40. Like Mebel, Wolfgang Leonhard (1921–) found refuge from the Nazis in the Soviet Union. In 1945, as a young communist, he returned to Berlin, where he helped establish the communist regime in East Germany. He defected in 1948 and eventually taught at Yale University.
41. A clandestine organization that works inside a country to assist an invading enemy's aims.
42. Born in 1918, Granin rose to prominence with several novels that appeared in the decade after Stalin's death in 1953. In the early 1980s he coauthored *The Blockade Book*, a collection of personal narratives about the siege of Leningrad.
43. Soviet soldiers were under orders not to surrender to enemy troops. Stalin regarded Soviet prisoners of war as traitors and sent some two million repatriated soldiers to prison and labor camps. At the end of the war, some five to six million Soviet citizens found themselves outside the borders of the Soviet Union. Along with captured soldiers, civilians engaged in forced labor in German-occupied territory were subject to imprisonment upon return to the Soviet Union, though not all returnees suffered such a fate.
44. Andrei Vlasov was a Soviet general who, after his capture, commanded the Russian Liberation Army, a volunteer force comprised of tens of thousands of Ukrainians who fought alongside the Germans.

45. The Soviet Union signed a mutual assistance pact with France in 1931 when Stalin hoped that Great Britain and France would join forces with the Soviet Union to stand up to the threat of fascism. Mebel is mistaken with regard to Great Britain, which refused overtures by the Soviet Union for a mutual assistance pact. By the end of the decade, however, Stalin lost faith in this policy of “collective security” to avert war and decided to reach accommodation with Hitler. The result was the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, signed in August 1939. Secret protocols of the pact allocated eastern Poland, the Baltic republics, and eastern Romania to the Soviet Union. The treaty gave free reign to Germany in western Poland.

46. Walter Rathenau (1867–1922) was an industrialist and politician who served as minister of foreign affairs in 1922. Two right-wing army officers assassinated Rathenau because of his diplomatic overtures to the Soviet Union that led to the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo. In the early 1920s both Germany and the Soviet Union were diplomatically isolated.

47. Soviet citizens were instructed to draw the curtains at night in order to make it difficult for the German air force to find its targets.

48. *Professor Mamlock* was 1937 Soviet film that attacked Nazi anti-Semitism. The signing of the non-aggression pact led to the withdrawal of the film from circulation.

49. Mebel is referring to the show trials of 1936–1938 at which many leaders of the Revolution and the Bolshevik party confessed to unsubstantiated accusations of anti-Soviet activities.

50. Japanese troops seized Manchuria from China in 1931, and the following year Japan established the puppet-state Manchukuo. Mebel is referring to the Battle of Halhin Gol (also Khalkin Gol) in 1939 when Soviet and Japanese troops clashed in a dispute over the border between Mongolia (under Soviet control) and Manchukuo.

51. Komsomol, or Young Communist League, was a party organization that prepared young adults for entry into the Communist Party.

52. Soviet secret police.

53. As titular head of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Kalinin (1875–1946) frequently received petitions and grievances from Soviet citizens and sometimes intervened on behalf of the petitioners, thereby earning the nickname “kind grandfather Kalinin.”

54. Mebel is referring to the secret police.

55. Old Bolsheviks were those members of the Communist Party who joined prior to 1917.

56. In November 1939 the Soviet Union attacked Finland in an effort to seize territory that had once been part of the Russian Empire. Finland surrendered in early 1940 and ceded the Karelian Isthmus to the Soviet Union.



57. Baron Carl Mannerheim (1867–1951), formerly a general in the tsarist army, commanded Finnish forces in the war against the Soviet Union.
58. The Kremlin housed foreign Comintern agents in the Lux Hotel.
59. Vyacheslav Molotov (1890–1986) was minister of foreign affairs.
60. For another abridged version of the speech, see Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 119.
61. A street near the Kremlin and site of the original campus of Moscow State University.
62. Stalin started his radio address with these words: “Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters!”—a not very subtle effort to appeal to the diverse sentiments (religious, socialist, and nationalist) of the populace.
63. Renamed to honor Valerian Kiubyshev, a prominent communist, in the mid-1930s, Samara is located on the Volga River, several hundred miles southeast of Moscow. The city reverted to its original name after 1991.
64. Vasily Lebedev-Kumach wrote the words and Alexander Alexandrov put them to music immediately after the announcement of the invasion. It remains to this day an anthem about the war.
65. Konstantin Simonov (1915–1979) wrote novels, poems and plays. He wrote several novels about the war, including *Soldiers Are Not Born*, which appeared in 1964.
66. Strips of cloth wrapped around the lower leg from ankle to knee.
67. Grigorii Baklanov (1923–) has written several novels about the war that do not shy away from portraying the cowardice and selfishness of soldiers. The quote may be from *July 1941*, first published in 1965.
68. On the role of the German military in the killing of Jews and other Soviet citizens, see Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986).
69. Estimates place the number of officers removed from their posts at thirty-five to forty thousand. That is, at least one-third of the officer corps was purged and either shot or imprisoned. Mikhail Tukhachevskii and most of the military’s general staff fell victim to the purges. Semen Budennyi (1883–1973) commanded the Red Cavalry during the civil war. Konstantin Rokossovskii (1896–1968) was imprisoned in 1937 and then rehabilitated in 1940. He played a crucial role in the Soviet victory over Germany. The information that President Eduard Beneš unwittingly passed on to Soviet intelligence was forged.

70. Ivan Maiskii (1884–1975).

71. Refers to the German military operation in 1942 under the direction of General von Seidlitz that led to the rout of Soviet troops on the front northwest of Moscow.

72. Acronym for “loudspeaker installation” (*moshchnaia govorishchaia ustanovka*). According to Mebel, the MGU usually saw action at sunset when the Soviet soldiers would blare German folk music. The German soldiers would stop shooting at the sound of the music, but they would resume their firing when the MGU began to broadcast pro-Soviet propaganda and appeals to surrender. “Mousetrap” refers to the fact that the Soviet soldiers, who were luring the Germans, found themselves trapped by enemy efforts to bombard the MGU.

73. A coarse, cheap, smelly tobacco.

74. The Germans treated Soviet prisoners of war abominably. Several million Soviet soldiers died while in captivity, either from execution or other causes such as starvation and illness. The Soviet Union returned the favor by sending German prisoners to forced labor camps. It is estimated that only about twenty thousand German prisoners of war out of a total of two to four million were repatriated to Germany.

75. Mebel here confuses two military orders. Ordering that troops take “not one step back!” Stalin issued Order 227 (July 1942) that commanded Soviet soldiers not to retreat and authorized the shooting of soldiers who did flee battle. Order 270, issued in August 1941, proclaimed that any Soviet soldier or officer taken prisoner would be guilty of treason and subject to imprisonment.

76. Marshall Ion Antonescu (1882–1946) seized power in 1940 and forced King Carol of Romania to abdicate in favor of his son, Prince Michael. Antonescu then established a dictatorship and allied with Germany.

77. Gheorghe Alexianu was a law professor. Antonescu appointed him governor of Transnistria, an area in southwest Ukraine including the city of Odessa and surrounding territory. The government of Antonescu designated Transnistria as the annihilation center for Romanian Jews as well as Soviet Jews found in the region.

78. The Salasch are a group of people who inhabit Slovakia.

79. A city in Hungary.

80. A city in Slovakia.

81. Women who salvaged bricks and other materials from buildings destroyed during the final months of the war.

82. Mebel is either unaware of or ignores the rapes of German women by Soviet soldiers. Tens

of thousands of women, including women in their seventies and young children, fell prey to Soviet troops. Red Army soldiers, for example, raped some one hundred thousand women after the conquest of Berlin. This does not include the mistreatment and violence suffered by German nationals who fell victim to the Red Army as it moved westward in 1944 and 1945.

83. Ferdinand Schörner became commander-in-chief of the German military on April 30, 1945. It is unlikely that he had directed his troops not to obey the order to surrender because he abandoned his post and fled to Austria on May 8.

84. Choybalsan is the fourth largest city in Mongolia today.

85. East Germany was formally known as the German Democratic Republic.

86. A city in the far eastern Soviet Union on the border with China.

87. Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands or Socialist Unity Party of Germany governed East Germany from 1946 to the unification of the two Germanies.

88. Founded in 1710, the Charité is the medical college and hospital of Humboldt University. It is the largest university hospital in Europe.

89. English acronym for National Socialist German Workers Party, the Nazi Party.

90. Mebel provides only the first five words of the ditty in Russian.

91. Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus, or Party of Democratic Socialism, was the successor party to the SED in the reunited Germany. In 2005 it renamed itself the Left Party.

92. “Denaturalization” refers to the practice of revoking the citizenship of intellectuals critical of the regime. “Buying release” was the GDR’s policy of allowing West Germany to buy the freedom of East Germans, usually relatives serving time in prison for trying to leave the GDR illegally. Between 1963 and 1989 some 33,755 political prisoners and some 2,000 children were repatriated to West Germany in this manner.

93. A prominent writer and dramatist (1929–1995) in East Germany. Also a member of the SED.

94. Walter Ulbricht (1893–1973) was leader of the SED between 1950 and 1971.

95. The Soviet Union did not acknowledge the secret protocols of the Non-Aggression Pact until 1989. Although the agreement was not a well-guarded secret, it is entirely possible that Mebel had never encountered any information on the matter until it was divulged in the late 1980s.

96. Mebel is referring to the elimination of the SPD as an independent party in the part of Germany under Soviet control after the war. In 1946 Communists in the Soviet zone of influence

engineered the merger of the SPD and Communist Party by forming the SED. Mebel implies that SPD members unhappy with the communist takeover of the party could have, in the years before the erection of the Berlin Wall, left for those parts of Germany not under Soviet control.

97. Gustav Noske (1868–1946) was a Social Democratic politician who helped engineer the brutal suppression of the communist rebellion in early 1919.

98. Konrad Henlein (1898–1945) was a German politician who agitated for the integration of the Sudetenland with Germany in the 1930s.

99. FRG is the English acronym for the Federated Republic of Germany, or West Germany.

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