INTRODUCTION

All that we know about Woman is best described by the word "compassion". There are other words, too-sister, wife, friend and, the noblest of all, mother. But isn't compassion a part of all these concepts, their very substance, their purpose and their ultimate meaning? A woman is the giver of life, she safeguards life, so "Woman" and "life" are synonyms.

But during the most terrible war of the 20th century a woman had to become a soldier. She not only rescued and bandaged the wounded; she also fired a sniper's rifle, dropped bombs, blew up bridges, went reconnoitering, and captured identification prisoners. A woman killed. She killed the enemy who, with unprecedented cruelty, was attacking her land, her home, her children. One of the heroines of the book, trying to convey all the horror and the cruel necessity of what had happened, says: "Woman was never destined to kill." Another woman wrote the following on the wall of the Reichstag: "I, Sofia Kuntsevich, came to Berlin to kill war." Woman thus made tremendous sacrifices to bring about Victory and at the same time they accomplished an immortal feat whose magnitude we can grasp only gradually in time of peace.

In one of his letters, which he wrote in May--June 1945 and which Is now kept in the Slavic Anti-fascist Committee fund at the Central State Archives of the October Revolution, Nikolai Roerich said: "The Oxford Dictionary has licensed several Russian words now recognized throughout the world; for instance, the words 'ukaz' and 'Sovlet', One more word -- the untranslatable meaningful Russian word 'podvig' -- should be added. Strange as it may seem, no European language has a word with at least approximately the same meaning..." Should the Russian word "podvig" ever find its way into the world's languages, part of the credit for this should go to Soviet women who had to shoulder the burden of supporting the rear, saving the children and defending their homeland together with men.

...I have been following the scorched roads of other people's memory and pain for four tormenting years now. I have recorded hundreds of accounts given by women who fought at the front as medical workers, signallers, field engineers, pilots, snipers, gunners, anti-aircraft gunners, political workers, cavalrymen, tankmen, paratroopers, sailors, traffic controllers, drivers, privates in hath-and-laundry units, cooks and bakers, and also by those who fought in the underground and in partisan groups. Marshal A.I. Yeremenko wrote that there was "hardly any military skill which could not be mastered by our courageous women on a par with their brothers, husbands and fathers". There were women Komsomol leaders of tank battalions, drivers of heavy tanks, and commanders of machinegun companies, and submachine-gunners in the infantry, even though the Russian vocabulary lacks the feminine form of the words "tank-man", "infantryman" or "submachine-gunner", since never before had women been engaged in these activities.

The Leninist Komsomol alone managed to mobilize about 500 thousand girls for the army, including 200 thousand Komsomol members. Some 70 per cent of these girls served in the army in the field. All in all, more than 800 thousand women served at the battle front during the war.

The partisan movement was nation-wide, In Byelorussia alone, about 60 thousand courageous Soviet women fought in partisan detachments. Every fourth Byelorussian was burnt alive or killed in some other way by the Nazis.

We know these statistics. But behind them lie human destinies and human lives mutilated by the war; we do not know as much about the

loss of those who were near and dear, impaired health, women's loneliness, and the unbearable memories of the war years.

"No matter what our date of birth was, we were all born in 1941", Klara Semyonovna Tikhonovich, anti-aircraft gunner, wrote in a letter to me. I want to tell you about the young girls of 1941, or, to be more exact, they will tell their own war stories.

"I've had it on my mind all these years. I would wake up In the night and lie with my eyes open. It occured to me sometimes that I would carry it all into my grave and that nobody would ever learn about it; the thought filled me with fear.,." (Emilia Alexeyevna Nikolayeva, partisan).

"...I am so glad that I can tell somebody about it and that our time has also come..." (Senior Sergeant Tamara Illarionovna Davydovich, driver).

"If I tell you everything the way it was I would again he unable to live like the rest of the people. I'd he ill. I returned from the war alive, only wounded, but I was ill for a long time. I had been ill until I told myself that I should forget it all or otherwise I'd never be well again. I even feel sorry that a young girl like you should want to know about it..." (Sergeant-Major Lyubov Zacharovna Novik, medical orderly).

"Men could go through it all. They were men after all. But I just don't know how women could cope with it all. Whenever I recall the past now I am seized with terror hut at that time I could do anything, say, sleep next to a killed person, and I myself fired the rifle and saw blood; I remember only too well the especially strong smell of blood in the snow... It makes me feel unwell even to talk to you... It wasn't that bad then and I could go through anything. I began to tell all about it to my granddaughter but my daughter-in-law checked me: there is no need for a girl to know of such things. She said she was to become a woman ... and a mother... And I have no one to tell it to..."

"We shield them in this way and are then surprised that our children know little about us..." (Sergeant Tamara Mikhailovna Stepanova, sniper).

"...My girl friend and I went to the cinema. We've been friends for nearly forty years now: during the war we both were active in the underground movement. We wanted to buy tickets to the cinema but there was a large queue. My friend happened to have her Great Patriotic War veteran card on her so she approached the booking office and showed it. A teenage girl of about fourteen or so said, 'Did you women really fight? I wonder what sort of feat won you your cards.' Other people in the queue were, of course, willing to let us ahead of them but we no longer felt like going to the cinema. We seemed to be in the grip of a fever..." (Vera Grigoryevna Sedova, member of an underground organization).

I, too, was born after the war when the trenches had already been overgrown with grass, when three-layered dug-outs had crumpled and when soldiers' helmets left behind in the forests had gone rusty. But the war's deadly breath has affected my life, too. We still belong to the generations that have their own accounts to settle with the war. Our family lost eleven of its members: my Ukrainian grandfather Petto, my mother's father, is buried somewhere outside Budapest, my Byelorussian grandmother Yevdokia, my father's mother, died from starvation and typhus when the Nazis had sealed off partisan-controlled zones, two families of our distant relatives together with their children were turned alive by the Nazis in a shed in my native village of Komarovichi, Petrikov district, Gomel Region, and father's brother Ivan, who had volunteered for active duty, went missing in action in 1941 .

My own "war" also lasted four years, and I was often shattered by what I heard. To tell you the truth, at times I felt I couldn't endure it any longer. Many a time I wished to forget what I had head. I wished it but no longer could. All this time I kept a diary which I have also ventured to include in my book. It records my feelings and experiences, and also the geography of my search, which covered more than a hundred towns and cities, settlements and villages in various parts of the country. I was for a long time in doubt whether I had the right to use the words "I feel", "I am anxious" and "I doubt" in my book. What are my feelings and torments compared with their feelings and torments? Will anybody be interested in a diary concerned with my emotions? But the more material accumulated in my files the more confident I became that a document was fully valid only when its author had made his or her presence felt along with its contents. There are no dispassionate testimonies: each conveys a patent or hidden passion that the author experienced. And many years later that very passion will also serve as a document.

People's memories of the war and their related notions are "masculine" in nature. This is only natural since it was, for the most part, men who fought at the front; and yet it is an acknowledgement of our inadequate knowledge of the war. True, hundreds of books have been written about women who took part in the Great Patriotic War and quite a few memoirs have been published, which show that we are dealing here with an unprecedented historical phenomenon. Never before In the entire history of mankind have so many women fought in a war. We know a few legendary names from the past, such as the woman trooper Nadezhda Durova, and partisan Vasilisa Kozhina; and during the Civil War women served in the Red Army, however, mostly as nurses and doctors. But the Great Patriotic War furnished the world with an example of Soviet women's mass participation in the defence of their Motherland.

In his foreword to an excerpt from the notes of Nadezhda Durova, published in the "Sovremennik" magazine, Pushkin wrote: "What made a young girl of noble family leave her home, renounce her sex, assume duties and responsibilities which frighten even men, and appear on the battle-field -- and what battle-fields! -- where Napoleon fought! What were her motives? Private family troubles? A stirred imagination? An innate indomitable bent? Or love?..." Pushkin was speaking of the incredible fate of one woman, and there were scores of conjectures. But It is quite a different thing when 800 thousand women served in the army and many more applied to serve at the front.

They joined in because, as K.S.Tikhonovich, anti-aircraft gunner, has put it: " 'We' and 'Motherland' meant the same thing for us." They were allowed to play an active part in the war because the alternative for their people and country -- "to be or not to be" -- was being weighed on the balance of history. That was what was at stake.

As to the material included in the book and the principle involved, I deliberately avoided famous snipers or renowned pilots or partisans, as quite a lot had already been written about them. "We were ordinary girls who served in the army, like many others," I heard more than once. And I was looking for exactly such people, because their memories make up the treasure-house of what we call the people's memory. "If you look at the war with our eyes, women's eyes, it would seem the most dreadful thing imaginable," said Sergeant Alexandra Iosifovna Mishutina, medical orderly. These words of an ordinary woman who fought all through the war, then married and had three children, and is now helping to bring up her grandchildren, convey the idea underlying the hook.

Optics uses the notion of "illumination" taking care of the capacity of a lens to fix the image caught. By the intensity of their emotional experience and pain, women's memories of the war are the most

"illuminating" of all. They are emotionally charged, passionate, and furnish a wealth of detail which make the documents so authentic.
Signaller Antonina Fyodorovna Valegzhaninova fought in the Battle of Stalingrad. While telling of the hardships of the battle she failed for a long time to find an apt description of her feelings at that time and then, suddenly, she came up with the following picture: "One battle stands out in my memory. There were scores of dead,.. They were scattered over a huge field-like potatoes brought to the surface by a plough. They lay in the positions in which they had moved... Like potatoes... Even horses, such sensitive animals, who walk in fear of stepping on a man, even they were no longer afraid of the dead..."
Partisan Valentina Pavlovna Kozhemyakina retained the following episode in her memory: "The early days of the war, our units are retreating waging fierce battles; all the villagers left their homes to see them off. My mother and I are also there. An elderly soldier passes by. He stops near our house and bows low, to the feet of my mother... 'Forgive us, Mother... And save the girl. Oh, save her!' I was 16 then and had a very long plait..." She also recollects another episode: "I was weeping over my first wounded soldier ... and, before dying, he said to me: 'Take care of yourself, lass. You'll have to have children yet... Look how many men have been killed...' "
Women's memory retains that realm of human emotions which usually escapes men. While men's attention was held by the war as action, women's perception of the war was different if only because of their different mentality: bombing, death and suffering were only pan of the war for them. A woman, because of her different psychological and physiological make-up, felt more keenly both the physical and moral hardships of the war, and it was more difficult for her to adapt to the "male" setting of the wartime. All the more valuable today is her extraordinary spiritual experience gamed in the death inferno, testifying to infinite human possibilities, and we have no right to bury it in oblivion.
Perhaps these accounts provide little specifically military or other material (that was far from the author's intention) but they abound in human material, that which was largely responsible for the Soviet people's victory over Nazism. After all for the entire people to be able to emerge victorious It was necessary for every individual to strive towards victory.
Many of those who fought in the war arc still alive. Human life, however, is not endless, and it can only be prolonged by memory which is the only entity not subject to time. People who went through the war and won it are now aware of the significance of what they did and what they went through, They are eager to help anyone trying to preserve the memory for future generations. Time and again, when visiting families, I saw thick notebooks and schoolchildren's slender copybooks containing notes written and left for children and grandchildren. This legacy was banded over to a stranger reluctantly. The excuses given were usually very similar: "We wanted our children to keep them in memory of us" or "I'll make a copy for you because I want to leave the original to my son..."
However, not everybody makes notes. Lots of things remain unrecorded, and are irretrievable lost, forgotten. If a war is not forgotten there is much hatred, but if it Is forgotten, then a new war begins, the ancients used to say.
Brought together, the women's accounts depict the war's unwomanly face; they sound like the accounts of witnesses accusing the fascism of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Fascism is accused by mothers, sisters and wives. It is exposed by women.
One of them is in front of me, relating how, right before the war, her mother would not let her go to see her grandmother without an escort, saying she was too young, and two months later she went to the front,

became a medical orderly, and fought all the way from Smolensk to Prague. When she came back from the war she was 22. Other girls of her age were still young girls, while her experience was extensive and painful. She had been wounded three times, and one wound was a very serious one-in the chest; she had been shell-shocked twice and when it happened the second time, when she was dug up out of a buried trench, she was found to have turned grey. She had, however, to start her life as a woman anew, to get accustomed again to wearing light dresses and shoes, to marry and become a mother. All the men that returned from the war settled into family life, even if they had been crippled, while women's postwar fate was much more tragic. The war had made them part with their youth and their husbands, and very few of the young men their age returned from the front. Even without statistics they knew the situation only too well because they remembered how the men had lain-like heavy sheaves-on the trampled fields. And how impossible it was for them to believe, to reconcile themselves to the idea that nothing would revive those tall lads in sailor's pea-jackets, that they, fathers, husbands, brothers and fiances, would remain buried in their common graves forever. "There were so many wounded that it seemed as if the whole world had been wounded..." said Senior Sergeant Anastasia Sergeyevna Demchenko, nurse.
What kind of girls were they, these young girls of 1941? How did they come to volunteer for the front? Let us follow them on their long paths through life.

"I AM LOATH TO RECALL..."

The search which has been on for four years and is still under way now that I'm writing this book (something which I could hardly imagine at the time) began with an old three-storied house at the outskirts of Minsk. It was of the type built right after the war, long and snugly overgrown with jasmin shrubs.
My visit to it was prompted by a small news item in the city paper, which reported that not long ago the Udarnik Road-building Machine Plant in Minsk held a warm ceremony on the occasion of the retirement of senior accountant Maria lvanovna Morozova. The news Item said that during the war she had been a sniper and had eleven combat decorations. It was difficult to put together that woman's wartime and peacetime occupations but that incongruence gave an intimation of who became a soldier in 1941--1945.
...A small woman with a pathetic girlish crown of a long braid around her head, bearing little resemblance to the blurred photo in the newspaper, was seated in a big armchair, her face in her hands:
"Excuse me, but I'm loath to recall those days... My nerves are no good. To this day I'm unable to watch films about the war."
She then asked:
"And why me? You'd better talk to my husband who will be able to tell you a lot... He remembers all the names of his commanders and generals and the numbers of his units. It's different with me. I remember only what happened to me, what has stuck in my heart like a nail..."
She asked me not to use my tape-recorder:
"I have to see your eyes to he able to talk and the tape-recorder will get In the way..."
But a few minutes later she forgot all about it..,
Lance Corporal Maria Ivanovna Morozova (Ivanushkina), sniper:
"The Proletarsky district of Moscow has risen at the site of my native village of Dyalcovskoye. When the war broke out I was not eighteen yet. I worked on a collective farm, then graduated from an accountants' training course and found a job. Simultaneously I attended a course at the military registration and enlistment office, where they taught us to fire the rifle. The course was attended by 40 people, four of them from my village and five from a neighbouring one,

in short, every village had a number of people in it. All of them were young girls: men had already all gone to the front, everyone who could.

"Soon the Young Communist League Central Committee made an appeal to the young people to volunteer to defend their homeland, as the enemy was already approaching Moscow. Not only I but all the girls wanted to go to the front. My father was already there. We thought that we alone were like that ... but when we came to the military registration and enlistment office we found there quite a few young girls. We were subjected to rigorous selection. The first thing that was needed was, of course, hardy health. I was afraid lest I would be left out because I had often been ill in childhood and was rather weak. Besides, girls were also refused if they were leaving their mothers alone. I had two sisters and brothers, much younger than myself, but It still counted. There was another circumstance,however, namely, that the collective farm had almost entirely been abandoned and there was nobody to work in the field so the collective farm chairman was unwilling to let us go. To make a long story short, we were refused. We went to the YCL district committee and were also turned away.

"A delegation of our district then went to the regional YCL committee -- only to return empty-banded. As we were in Moscow, we decided then to proceed to the YCL Central Committee and debated for a while who was the bravest and would do the reporting. We thought that we would be alone there but It proved next to impossible to make our way through the corridor, let alone reach the secretary. Young people from all over the Soviet Union had come to the place, many of them from the occupied areas, seething to avenge the death of their near and dear.

"We finally made it to the secretary in the evening and were asked: 'Well, how are you going to fight at the front if you don't know how to shoot?' We answered that we had already been taught that, 'Where?.. How?.. And you know how to make a bandage, don't you?' And you know, during that very course at the military registration and enlistment office a district surgeon taught us how to bandage wounds. We had another advantage in that there were forty of us capable of shooting and giving first aid. We were told, 'Go home and wait. You'll be given a positive answer.' And virtually a couple of days later we had call-up papers.,.

"We came to the military registration and enlistment office, were immediately taken in through one door and out through another; I had had a very beautiful braid that I was so proud of and I had no braid when I left the place ... and my dress also remained there. I had no time to pass either the dress or the braid to my mother... She wanted so much to keep something from me... We were there and then clad in high-collared field-shirts and field caps, given knapsacks and put into a freight car...

"We still did not know where we would be assigned to nor where we were going. It did not matter much what we were going to be: our only wish was to get to the front. Everybody was fighting and we did not want to be left out. We were brought to the station of Shchelkovo, not far from which there was a women's sniper school. It turned out that we had been assigned to it.

"We began to study, learning garrison duty regulations, disciplinary regulations, camouflage terrain and chemical warfare defence. All the girls tried to do their best. We learned to mount and demount the sniper's rifle with closed eyes, to determine wind velocity, to evaluate the movement of the target and the distance to it, to dig in and to crawl. We could do it all, Upon graduation I got top grades in shooting practice and drill. I remember that the most difficult thing was to get up at the sound of alarm and to get ready in five minutes. We would take boots a size or so bigger so as not to lose much time when putting them on. We had five minutes to dress, to put on our

boots and to fall in. On some occasions we would fall in with boots put on bare feet. A girl once neatly had her feet frost-bitten. The sergeant-major took notice, reprimanded her and then taught us how to wind puttees. He would tower over us and grumble: 'How am I, lassies, to make soldiers out of you instead of targets for the Germans?'

"We eventually came to the front ... to join the 62nd Rifle Division ... outside Orsha... The commander, Colonel Borodkin, I remember it as if it were yesterday, grew angry upon seeing us: 'They had thrust some gills upon me.' But then he invited us to have lunch with him. We heard him ask one of his aid's: 'Do we have anything for the dessert?' We felt offended: what was he taking us for? We'd come to fight ... and he was receiving us not as soldiers hut as girls. We could have been his daughters, as far as age was concerned. 'What am I to do with you, my darlings?' that was how he treated us and how received us. Whereas we already saw ourselves as real warriors.

"The next day he made us show how we could shoot and camouflage ourselves on the terrain. We were quite good at shooting and even did better than the men snipers who had been recalled from the front line for a two-day course. Then came the turn of terrain camouflage, The Colonel came and waltzed about inspecting the glade, then stepped upon a hillock but still saw nothing, Suddenly, the hillock under him begged, 'Oh, Comrade Colonel, I can't stand it any longer, you're so heavy.' What a big laugh everybody had. He just could not believe that it was possible to camouflage oneself so well. 'Now', he said, 'I wish I had not referred to you as "some girls".' Just the same he was very anxious about us whenever we went to the front line and used to warn us to be careful and not to take risks for nothing.

"We went 'hunting' (in the snipers' idiom) for the first time together with fellow sniper pasha Kozlova, camouflaged ourselves and lay in wait, me observing the terrain and pasha holding the rifle. Suddenly I heard pasha say:

" 'Shoot, shoot! See there's a German,..'

" 'I'm observing. You shoot!' I replied to her.

" 'He'll be gone while we are arguing here,' she said.

" 'I have to make a fire map first,' I persisted, 'to designate the check points, locating the shed and the birch-tree...'

" 'Are you going to mount paper redtape, like they do at school? I've come here to shoot and not fiddle with papers!'

"I saw that Masha was already angry with me.

" 'Why don't you shoot then?'

"While we were arguing like that the German officer indeed gave orders to his soldiers. A cart appeared and the soldiers were busy passing some load along the file. The officer stood there for a while, then said something and disappeared. Meanwhile we went on arguing. I noticed that he had already showed up two times, and if we did not do anything about it the next time he appeared we would miss him alltogether. So when he appeared the third time -- it was after all only for an instant that he now appeared now disappeared -- I decided to shoot. I was full of resolve and then it occured to me that he was after all a human being, even though he was an enemy, he still was a human being. My hands began to tremble and a chill went down my spine. I was seized with inexplicable fear... I could not bring myself to take a shot at a human after plywood targets. Nevertheless, I graced myself up and pulled the trigger. He swung his arms and fell. I don't know if I killed him but after that I began to shiver even worse from the awareness that I'd killed a human being...

"We returned to our platoon, recounted everything that had happened to me and held a meeting. Our YCL organizer Klava lvanova tried to convince me: "We should hate them, not taking pity on them...' The Nazis had killed her father. Whenever we broke into singing she would

implore: please, girls, don't, we'll sing when these skunks ate vanquished.' "

Several days later Maria Morozova rang me up and invited me to visit her wartime friend Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina. There I heard still another story of how difficult it was for girls to become soldiers and to kill.

Senior Sergeant Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhina, sniper:

"We lay in wait and I was busy observing the area. Then I saw a German rise. I fired and he fell. You know, I began to shiver and tremble, then burst out crying. I never felt anything when I shot at the targets but that time I had a nagging thought: how come I'd killed a human being?..

"Then the feeling passed. Here is how it happened. We were passing through a small settlement in Eastern Prussia. There stood right by the roadside some hut or house, it was hard to tell because it had caught fire and everything had already turned down, only cinders remained. Human bones could be seen among them and charred little Red stars-it was wounded or captured Soviet soldiers who had been turned up... After that, I never felt pity whenever I killed. When I had seen those burnt bones I seemed to be unable to come to my senses -- all I felt was fury and a desire to avenge.

' ...I came back from the front with my hair grey. I was a twenty-one-year-old with grey hair. I had been wounded, shell-shocked and had only one good ear left. My mother met me with the words: 'I had faith that you would return. I prayed for you day and night.' My brother had perished at the front. 'It doesn't make much difference now,' she cried, 'whether you give birth to a girl or a boy. He was after till a man and had to defend his Homeland and you are a girl. I only begged that, should you be wounded, let you rather be killed than remain crippled.'

"I'm not Byelorussian: my husband brought me here. I was born in the Chelyabinsk region in a mining area. Whenever explosions were made, which was done at night, I would instantly leap out of my bed and, to begin with, grasp my overcoat and make for the door: I had to flee. My mother would seize me, press me close to herself and try to talk me out of it, as if I were a child. There were so many times when I rolled head over heels from my bed and made for my overcoat..."

It was warm in the room but still Maria Morozova wrapped herself up in a heavy woolen plaid; she was shivering.

"Our scouts," she went on, "captured a German officer. He was greatly surprised that so many soldiers had been put out of action in his lines, all of them exclusively with head wounds. 'A simple marksman,' he said, 'would be incapable of such an accurate shooting. Show me,' he asked, 'the marksman who had killed so many of my soldiers. I had received great reinforcements and been losing up to ten people a day.' The regiment commander said, 'Regrettably, I cannot meet your request: it was a young girl sniper and she was killed.' It was Sasha Shlyakhova. She was killed in a sniper duel, betrayed by her red scarf. She was very fond of it. But a red scarf on the white snow is a very revealing thing. When the German officer heard that it had been a girl he hung his head, not knowing what to say...

"We went on our missions in pairs: it was difficult to sit alone from morning till night, the strain made the eyes water and the anna and body go numb. Winter with its snow melting under you was especially taxing. We would set out at daybreak and return from the frontline at dusk. For twelve hours and sometimes even longer we had to lie in the snow or stay at the top of a tree or on the roof of a shed or a ruined house, camouflaged so that the enemy did not spot where we were, where our positions were and from where we reconnoitred. We sought to position ourselves as close as possible to the enemy sometimes at a distance of 700 m or even 500 m from the German trenches.

"'I don't know what made us so brave. But God forbid that a woman ever becomes a soldier. Let me tell you one story...
"We were on the offensive, pushing forward with great speed. Soon we came to a standstill, our support lagging far behind. We were short of ammunition and food and, to make matters worse, our kitchen had been hit by a shell. We had been munching dry bread for three days in a row and our tongues were all chafed and barely moving.
"My fellow sniper had been killed and I marched to the front tine with a tyro. All of a sudden we noticed a foal in the no-man's land. It looked very handsome with its fluffy tail, roaming unperturbed, as if there were no war around. The Germans, too, we heard, became noisy, apparently having spotted it. I heard our soldiers exchange remarks:
" 'I'll give them the slip. Could make a nice soup, though...'
" A submachine gun won't do the job at a distance like that...'
"They saw us.
" 'The snipers are corning. They'll get it now... Come on, girls!.."
"I did not even pause to think what to do, took aim and fired. The foal bent its legs, fell on its side and the wind brought the sound of its pitiful neighing.
"I realized it all only afterwards -- whatever for did I do what I did. It was so handsome and I killed it to make soup! I heard sobs behind my back, fumed and saw that it was my tyro fellow.
" 'What is it?' I asked.
" 'I feel sorry for the poor little thing,' she said, her eyes full of tears.
" 'Come, come! What a tender heart you have! And what about us, hungry for three days now? You feel sorry because you haven't buried anybody yet and don't know what it means to walk thirty kilometres a day with full packs and empty stomaches. We'll have to drive the Germans away first and then have feelings.'
"I looked at the soldiers who until a moment ago had been nudging me, shouting and asking. All of them looked away, as if they did not notice me, everyone attending to his own business. I could be dead for all they cared. I was on the point of collapsing in tears. As if I were some fleece and would not think twice before killing anybody. In fact I'd loved all things living since childhood. When I was still a schoolgirl our cow got ill and had to be slaughtered. I cried for two days. Mother was anxious lest anything had gone wrong with me because I cried so much. While now I just pulled the trigger and fired at the helpless foal.
"In the evening the cooks brought us supper with the words:
" 'It's been a jolly good shot, sniper... There is some meat in the cauldron today..,' They set the mess-tins for us and left. The girls remained seated and would not touch the food. When it occured to me what the matter was I burst into tears and rushed out of the dug out. The girls followed me, trying to comfort me with one accord. They snatched their mess-tins and began to eat. Thaw's how it was.
"Needless to say, we talked much at night. What could we talk about? Of course, borne; everyone spoke about one's mother, some had fathers or brothers at the front. We also tried to picture what we would be when the war was over and how we would marry and whether our husbands would love us.
" 'Ah, girlies,' our captain used to say with a laugh. 'You have everything going for you but few would date marry you after the war. You are excellent shots and, should you throw a plate at your husband's forehead, he is a goner.'
"I met my future husband during the war, we served in the same regiment. He was wounded twice and shell-shocked. He was in the fighting army throughout the war and had been a military man all his life. There was no need to explain to him that my nerves were frayed. Should I ever raise my voice, he would cither ignore me or just say

nothing. We've been living together for 35 years now in harmony, raised two children and seen them through university.
"What else can I tell you? I was demobilized and came to Moscow. From there I had to go by bus some way and then walk several kilometres to reach my place. There is a metre station there now but at that time there were cherry orchards and deep ravines. One of them was really big and I had to cross it. It was already dark when I reached the place. Of course, I was afraid to cross that ravine. So I stood there not knowing what to do, whether to go back and wait till morning or to pluck up courage and go. It may all seem funny now: there I was fresh from the front, where I had seen deaths and other grim things galore, now frightened to cross some ravine. It fumed out that war had changed precious little in us. When we were already returning home from Germany a mouse scurried out of somebody's rucksack in the carriage, making all our girls spring to their feet and those in the upper bunks roll head over heels from there with shrieks. The captain who was our travelling companion was amazed: 'How come, you all have decorations for bravery but are afraid of mice?'
"As luck would have it, a lorry came passing by and I decided to ask for a hike.
"The lorry stopped.
" 'Where to?'
" 'Dyakovskoye,' I said.
" 'Me too,' the lad laughed.
"I climbed into the driver's cab, he put my suitcase in the back, and we set off. He took in my uniform and decorations and asked:
" How many Germans have you killed?'
" Seventy-five.'
" 'You kidding. I bet you haven't laid your eyes on a single one,' he chuckled.
"It was then that I recognized him.
" 'Kolya Chizhov? Is that you? D'you remember me putting a Young Pioneers' tie on your neck?' At school I was a Young Pioneer leader one time,
" 'Is that you, Maria?'
" 'That's me...'
" 'It can't he true!' he brake the car,
" 'You better take me home, instead of stopping hallways,' my eyes were full of tears. I noticed that it was the same with him. What an encounter!
"We reached my place, he snatched my suitcase and rushed In to my mother:
" 'Hurry up, I've brought your daughter to you!'
"Back home, I had to begin everything anew, even to learn how to walk in shoes: we brad worn nothing but soldier's boots during the three years at the front. We got used to being strapped with belts and now clothes seemed to sag, matting us ill at ease. We had no use for skirts and preferred trousers, which we used to wash in the evening, then put under the mattress for the night to have them pressed. True, they were still a little damp in the morning and would become stiff In the frost. Wearing a civilian dress and shoes, I would at times instinctively want to salute a passing officer. We got used to having our rations, to be fully provided for by the state, and, dropping at a baker's, we would sometimes take as much bread as we needed and forget to pay for it. The saleswomen who knew us quite well understood what the matter was and felt shy to ask for money. We were ashamed afterwards and would return the next day with an apology, buy something else and pay for everything at a go. Knowing us, the saleswomen never bore a grudge against us..."
She fell silent, It was that type of silence when any question would be out of place.

"You know, something else has occured to me. The war lasted quite a while, didn't it? And all that while I don't remember seeing either birds or flowers. They must have been there for sure but I don't remember seeing them, Don't you find it strange?.."
"We found our pasha Alkhimova only quite recently, about eight years ago. The artillery battalion commander had been wounded and she went over to save him. As she crawled towards him, a shell exploded in front of her. The commander was killed and she had both legs crushed. While we were carrying her to the medical battalion she kept asking us, 'Girls, please, shoot me... Nobody would want to have me like that...' She begged us so... She was sent to hospital whereas we went into an offensive. We had lost track of her and did not know where and how she was. We had written to so many places but nobody could answer us, Young Pathfinders from School No. 73 of Moscow finally helped us. They found her in a hospital for invalids. All those years she had been moved from one hospital to another and been operated upon a dozen times. She had not even let her mother know that she was alive.,, Can you Imagine that? That's what war is... We brought her to our reunion. Seated in the presidium she kept crying, Then she was taken to her mother... and they met after thirty years...
"Even now we still have nightmares that we are at war, now running for shelter, now changing position. I wake up and find it hard to believe that I am still alive... And I don't want to recall it..."
I physically felt the enormity of pain that lingered on in that small woman wrapping herself in an old plaid. Bidding farewell, she called me daughter, slyly holding out her hot hands.
I left her, unable to return to my former self who had not heard the words: "Even if you come from there alive, your soul will ache. Now I come to think of it, I'd rather he wounded in a leg or an arm, I'd rather my body ache but not my soul.. It is too painful.., We were far too young when we went to the front... Very young girls... I even grew taller during the war..."

I know I'm not at all to blame
That there were others never came
Back from the war, that older, younger
Men died... None say this, none imply
Their lives could have been saved if I...
None say this, yet I wonder, wonder...*

This poem by Alexander Tvardovsky, his "I wonder, wonder" will never leave me in peace and I will go on looking for those women who had been to the front as young girls, recording their stories in dozens of writing-pads and on tapes, suffering together with them and hoping, never losing faith. I will discover a different kind of war because we know much about war and at the same time we know little about it. ----------* A late poem by Soviet poet Alexander Tvardovsky (1910--1971), whose poem "Vasily Terkin" is well known throughout the world. -- Translated by Peter Tempest. -- Ed.

"YOU MUST GROW UP A LITTLE, GIRLS...
YOU ARE TOO YOUNG..."
I leaf through the pages transcribed from the tape-recorder, read letters, and try to picture these young girls who in 1941 went with the retreating units and besieged military registration and enlistment offices, trying to get to the front and, on a noble and half-childish impulse, adding an extra year or two to their age. The women recall themselves as being ordinary schoolgirls or students when the world was split for them overnight into the past-the last ring of the school-bell, a new dress for the school-leaving party, vacations, students' probation work in a rural hospital or school, first love, dreams about the future-and the war. Whatever the war was, it meant implacably, above all, a choice, the choice between life and death.

And making it proved a simple enough thing -- like breathing -- for many of them.

I am trying to imagine myself faced with such a choice and see my morn with new eyes -- my favourite books, records, the warmth of the desk-lamp shedding its light, mother's familiar breathing in the next room... All that would have been forfeited... And I am no longer inclined to repeat that the choice was "simple like breathing", even though, for them that is exactly how It was. And I am much older than those young girls.

I read a letter from Private Zinaida Ivanovna Palshina, signaller, from Moscow: "I volunteered for the front. How could it be otherwise? Everybody did. There was no alternative in anyone's mind."

In Zheleznovodsk, where I was spending my vacation (while being continously absorbed by the work I had begun on this book), I met, by mere chance, Private Natalia Ivanovna Sergeyeva, medical orderly. The following is her story of her remarkable family.

"There were eight of us in the family. The four elder children were girls and I was the eldest of all. It was wartime. The Nazis were near Moscow. One day father came back from work and cried: 'I used to be glad that my first children were girls... future brides... But now every family sends somebody to the front and we have nobody to send... I am too old and they won't take me. You are girls and the boys ate too young...' The whole family took this to heart.

"When nurses' courses were organized, father took me and my sister there. He said: 'This is all I can give for the Victory... my girls...' "

There were many such cases. Cited below ate lines from a letter by Junior Sergeant Antonina Maximovna Knyazeva, signaller, from the town of Sivashskoye: "Mother had no sons. There were five daughters in the family, and we were evacuated with mother to Stalingrad. When the city was besieged, all of us volunteered for the front. The whole family-mother and five daughters-and father was fighting at the front then..."

There is nothing more noble in the world than such a mother's sacrifice. But who knew what she felt in her heart, who could look into it?

"All of us had only one wish -- to apply to the military registration and enlistment office to be sent to the front," recalls Sergeant Tatiana Yefimovna Semyonova, traffic controller, from Minsk. "We went to the registration and enlistment office where we heard: 'You must grow up a little, girls... You are too young.., We were then under seventeen. But I gamed my end; we were taken on. My friend and I wanted to enter a sniper school, but they said to us: 'You'll have to be traffic controllers. There's no time for other training.' Mother waited at the railway station for a few days to say goodbye to us as we left. She only saw us arriving at the train, gave me a cake and some eggs, and fainted."

They speak of different mothers, each one of her own, but it sounds as if they speak of only one single mother.

Captain Yefrosinya Grigoryevna Breus, doctor, recalled:

"There were four of us girls in the family. I was the only one who fought at the front. And father was happy that he had a daughter at the front, that she was helping to defend the Motherland. He went to receive my certificate at the registration and enlistment office early in the morning so that the whole village would know that his daughter was at the front."

Surgical nurse Lilia Mikhailovna Budko had the following to say:

"We went dancing at night on what turned out to be the first day of the war. We were sixteen and used to go out in a group, seeing everyone off one by one. We stuck together and had not paired off yet. Say, about six boys and six girls would go out together.

"Just two days later these boys, cadets of a tank school who had taken us borne after dances, were brought back from the lines all bandaged and crippled. It was horrible. If I ever heard then anybody laugh I thought it unforgivable. How could one laugh or be happy over anything when such a war was going on?

"Soon father joined the People's Volunteer Corps, while my younger brothers and I remained at borne with mother. One brother was seven and the other three. One day I told mother that I was going to the front..."

Lieutenant Yevdokia Petrovna Muraviova, junior technician, recalls:

"I graduated from the communication school and became junior technician by the beginning of the war. I immediately resolved that I had to and would go to the front. Of course, war is not a womanly occupation but we were needed there. Mother cried when I left for the front but said that she would have done the same thing. She was something special..."

Polina Semyonovna Nozdracheva, medical orderly and bearer of the Order of Glory of all the three classes, recalls the following episode :

"...We lined up by height and I turned out to co the shortest. The commander inspected the line-up and came up to me:

" 'And who is this Thumbelina? What are you going to do here? Perhaps, you'd better go hack to your Mummy and grow up a little?'

"And my mother was already no more..."

I met in Kishinev Anna Stepanovna Mavreshko, head of one of the city libraries, who had been a lieutenant and commander of a firing platoon in the war:

" 'What do you want to be?' the commander asked.

" 'An officer!'

"I was sent to the Smolensk artillery school. I passed all the entrance exams and was summoned by the school commander.

" 'You've done well at the exams but we cannot enrol you.'

" 'Why?'

" 'There has been no precedent in the history of Soviet artillery.'

" 'There'll be then. I'll go from here only to the front and only as an officer... I've even written home about it.'

"I wore only men's clothes and girls even sent me billetdoux. Still I graduated from the school."

The following letter came from Monika Kazimirovna Trinkunaite, from Vilnius:

"I had a good ear for music and mother was very proud of me. When the war broke out I decided that my good ear can be quite useful at the front and that I'd be a signaller..."

Lance Corporal Zoya Ivanovna Shavruk, telephone operator, recalled :

"I had to tell a lie. They enlisted only those who had already turned sixteen and I was only fourteen. But I said I was sixteen and they believed me because I was strong. Of course, I did not tell mother the whole truth. I told her that I'd been to the registration and enlistment office and was sent to work in Bryansk. I wrote her already from my unit when she could no longer make me return from there."

Lance Corporal Esten Borisovna Kozhemyatnikova, doctor's assistant, had the following story to tell:

"My father took part in the Civil War as a detachment commander and mother was next to him. She was a nurse. Komsomolskaya Pravda carried an article about my family on the eve of the war.

"With the war raging on, studies were out of the question, I quitted the institute along with my fellow students. We all had other things on our minds than taking exams. We thought that we had to take part in the fighting and that medicos should be the first to go.

"But we were evacuated to Pyatigorsk. I had a certificate saying that I was a third-year student of a medical institute. We were to have our first probation work only after we had completed the third year. In

Pyatigorsk I immediately found myself in a hospital and -- can you imagine it? -- with one hundred and forty heavily wounded soldiers to attend to...

"Our blood bank was running out of blood. So I or anyone else from the personnel would lie down on one table to give blood direct to a wounded soldier lying on the table besides. Each had to give about 400 g of blood,.. We would get up, have two cups of cocoa and a piece of white bread and go back to work. On one occasion I had my cocoa and a piece of bread and rose to go when my head suddenly swam: we stayed up round the clock at times.

"But still it wasn't the front line and I wanted to go to the front line. I wanted to be like my parents. My favourite photograph was the one showing father and mother in leather jackets. They were wonderful people. I've already told you that they were side by side at the front throughout the Civil War and it was there that I was born. I was born during one war and came of age by another..."

Senior Sergeant Sofia Mikhailovna Krigel, sniper, told me the following story:

"In December 1943 our cable company was deactivated. All the girls were sent home, hut I had heard that there was a sniper school outside Moscow. So when I was summoned by the commander I said that I was not going anywhere and that I had to fight at the front line. Anything else was sheer rubbish. Telephone, for example, was nothing but telephone. As for me, I had to take up arms and be an avenger myself. I already knew that I had no relations left. My mother was no more...

"I went to the sniper school, which I graduated from with flying colours. The day after the graduation ceremony I went to ask to be sent to the front: the others had their marching orders, hut they wanted me to stay as an instructor at the school. I would have none of it..."

Guards Sergeant Yevgenia Sergeyevna Sapronova, aircraft mechanic, never forgets the day she left her home town of Yelets for the front.

"I begged mother, 'Only please, don't cry, will you?' It wasn't night but it was dark and a continuous wailing was heard. They didn't cry, our mothers who were seeing their daughters off -- they wailed. My mother didn't; she stood quite lifeless. She was feeling sorry for me but she bore up for she was afraid that I would cry too. I had been mother's darling and a pet at home. And here I was with my hair cropped like that of a boy, with only a small forelock left. Mother and father had refused to let me go but I had thought of nothing but going to the front. I, for one, was greatly affected by the posters that are now housed in museums: 'The Motherland Calls You', 'What Did You Do for the Front?'. I thought that the women more advanced in age than I should stay behind in the rear, but that I had to go to the front.

"By the end of the war the whole family had joined in. My father, mother and sister became railwaymen who moved up behind our advancing troops and repaired the railroads. All the four of us -- mother, father, sister and I -- were awarded the medals 'For the Victory'."

A letter written by Sergeant Olga Mitrofanovna Ruzhitskaya, nurse, came from the Stavropol territory. "It was a fine day when I left for the front," she wrote. "The air was bright and there was nice drizzling rain. How beautiful it was! I went outdoors in the morning and stopped. Is it possible that I will never come back here, I thought. Mother was crying. She would grip me and wouldn't let me go. As soon as I started on my way, she would catch up with me, put her arms round me and stop me... But I believed that I wouldn't be killed, that I would return. How on earth could I die? How could I be killed and cease to exist?"

Every one of them chose a different road to the front but their motive and desire was the same-to save their Motherland.

But let me not make conjectures nor write their stories for them. Let them tell their stories themselves.

When the war began, Galina Dmitrievna Zapolskaya was working in the army as a telephone operator. Her unit was stationed in Borisov. The fighting reached there in the first few weeks of the war. Her parents lived near Borisov and she could have returned to them and been evacuated from the war area. However, like her girl friends, she made another choice.

"Together with my unit," says Galina Dmitriyevna, "I was evacuated to Mogilev. The Nazis bombed the city, especially the airfield where the signal service was set up. We were bombed day and night. Our troops were retreating...

"The signals commander formed us all up. We were civilians, not soldiers. He said: 'A cruel war has started, girls. It will be very hard for you young girls. Those who want to return home may do so before it is too late. Those who want to stay at the front -- one step forward!'

"And all the girls, as one, took a step forward. There were about twenty of us, and every one of us was ready to defend the Motherland.

"We were on duty round the clock. Soldiers brought our mess-tins to us while we worked. We ate right there, then dozed off for a moment-and back to work. I had no time to wash my hair, so I asked the girls to cut off my plaits..."

The war had not yet reached the town of Buzuluk in the Orenburg region when Lenochka Yakovleva had already asked to be sent to the front. The women who lived next door tried to talk her out of it: "You are still called Lenochka, not Yelena, and you ask to be sent to the front... Have pity on your mother at least!"

But do you think it was possible to dissuade them, those girls? This is how Yulia Drunina* described it:

I left my schoolgirl childhood in a dirty freight car
With an army med squad, all my hopes undone,
To the muffled booming of the distant battles then,
In the tired indifference of 1941.
I left the classroom cheer for a damp dug-out
And poetic lyrics -- for the soldiers' deadly oaths
'Cause I knew my homeland would never cringe or lout --
The sacred name of Russia foremost in my thoughts.

---

*Yulia Drunina -- Soviet poetess, went to the front in 1941 after graduating from school. -- Ed.

Sergeant-major Yelena Pavlovna Yakovleva, nurse, told me the following story:

"When we came to the military registration and enlistment office again (I don't remember how many times we had already been there), the military commissar very neatly turned us out: 'If only you had some sort of special training -- if you were a nurse or a driver... You can't do anything, can you? What will you do there, at the front?' We did not understand that wo were interfering with other people's work. For us the question of what we would do simply did not arise. We wanted to fight and that was all there was to it. We couldn't understand that to fight meant to be able to do some specific, necessary work. And we were taken aback by the question.

"Several girls and I entered nurses' courses. We were told there that the training would take six months. We decided that that was too long and would not do for us. There were other courses, however, with a three-month training programme (true, even that seemed far too long for us) but they were already in the final stage. We asked to be avowed to take the examinations. The classes continued for another month. We studied during the clay and had practical classes at a hospital at night. As soon as we passed the exams, we were sent to the

military registration and enlistment office. And so our training took us just a little more than a month...
"We were sent to a hospital, however, rather than to the front. It was the end of August 1941. And in February I left the hospital (I was what is called a deserter) and ran away to join a medical train... without documents, without anything. Just wrote a note saying: 'I won't be on duty. Left for the front.' And that was that..."
Leningrader Vera Danilovtseva dreamed of becoming an actress and was going to enrol in a theatre school; during the war she took up the sniper's rifle and was awarded two Orders of Glory. She told me the following story:
"I had a date on that day and expected that he would feu me that he loved me. But when he came he was downcast: 'Vera, war has begun! We'd be sent to the front direct from school.' He was a military cadet. I, of course, immediately imagined myself Jeanne d'Arc. My only desire was to go to the front with a rifle in my hands, even though I had never hurt a fly unto then, I rushed to the military registration and enlistment office only to hear that they needed at the moment only medical people and that it took six months to study for that. Six months seemed far too long, ridiculously long!
"Somehow they managed to convince me that it was necessary to get a training. All right, I would train -- but not to become a nurse..."
Anna Nikolayevna Khrolovich lived in Omsk before the war and graduated from a medical secondary school. In 1942 she became a first-year student of the 2nd Moscow Medical Institute, which had been evacuated to Omsk. In her letter to me she wrote:
"My friends were sent to the front. I cried bitterly because I was left behind alone and because I had not been sent together with them. There was no need to persuade people to join in: all and everybody strove to get to the front. People begged to be sent there,
"I did not study long though. Our dean soon addressed the students, saying:
" 'You'll finish your studies after the war is over, girls. We have to defend our Motherland...'
"We were seen off to the front by workers from our patron plant. It was summertime and I remember all the vans being swept with green branches and flowers... We were given presents. I got delicious home-made biscuits and a beautiful sweater. On the platform I danced Ukrainian gopak with such zest..."
Guards Lieutenant Antonina Grigoryevna Bondareva, senior pilot, told me the following story:
"When I was in the seventh grade an aeroplane came to our town. In 1936 it seemed something extraordinary. A campaign was launched spontaneously: 'Young Boys and Girls, Take Up Aviation!' Being a Komsomol member, I was, of course, in the front ranks and immediately joined an air club. Father was dead against It, though,
"Until then all the members of my family had been steelworkers, with several generations of blast-furnace operators. My father believed that a woman could he a steelworker but never a pilot. The head of our air club heard about that and allowed me to take father for a ride on a plane. That was exactly what I did. We took to the sky together with father and on that day he changed his mind. He liked it. I graduated from the air club with flying colours and was good at parachute jumping.
"I married before the war and had a daughter. I had not been sent to the front right away. All sort of changes took place at our air club-men were recruited and we women had to replace them. We taught trainees and in general had our hands full, working from morning to night. My daughter lived with me in camps all the while. I would lock her in early in the morning (flying sessions started at four o'clock in the morning), leaving her some porridge. On my return in the

evening I would find her all smeared with that porridge and never know for sure whether she had eaten it or not. She was only three at the time.

"By the end of 1941 I was notified that my husband had been killed, defending Moscow. He was a pilot, a section commander, Then I asked to be sent to the front..."

Junior Lieutenant Lyubov Arkadyevna Charnaya, cipher clerk, wrote in her letter to me:

"...My son was two years old and I was expecting another baby when the war began... My husband was at the front... I went to my parents and did everything that was necessary... I did not have that other baby...

"I finished cipher clerks' course and asked to be sent to the front. I wanted to avenge the baby that I could not have..."

Junior Lieutenant Serafima Ivanovna Panasenko, doctor's assistant of a motorised rifle battalion, had the following to say:

"I come from Sverdlovsk and it was from there that I went to the front. I had just turned eighteen when the war broke out. I remember people crying. All the people I saw on that day were crying. I was a second-year student of a doctor's assistant and obstetrical school then. The immediate thought was: 'With the war on, I have to go to the front.' My father was a veteran Communist who had been a political prisoner. He had been telling us since childhood that the Motherland was the most precious thing and that it should be defended. I've been raised always to think that who else would go if not me?"

Senior Sergeant Maria Semyonovna Kaliberda, signaller from the town of Borisov, recalled:

"I would have never worked as signaller or agreed to do the job as I did not understand that it was part of fighting. Once the division commander arrived and we fell in. Among us was Mashenka Sungurova. She stepped forward with the words:

" 'Comrade General, may I address you?'

" 'Yes, you may, Private Sungurova' he said.

" 'Private Sungurova asks to be relieved from the signal service and be sent to where the fighting is.'

"You see, we all were like that. Words fail me to describe precisely our state of mind in those days. We were of the opinion that what we were doing as signallers was too little, that It even humiliated us and that we should only be at the forward lines.

"The general stopped smiling:

" 'My dear girls!' (And you should have seen us at that time-all short of food and sleep-in a word, he spoke to us not as our commander but as if he were our father.) 'Perhaps, you are not aware of your role at the front, you are our eyes and ears, an army without communications is like a man without blood...'

"Mashenka Sungurova was the first to give in:

" 'Comrade General! Private Sungurova is ready to fulfil any of your orders, to the dot!'

"That's how we called her till the end of the war: 'The dot'.

"In June 1943 during the battles at the Kursk Salient* we were presented the regimental colours and by that time our regiment --the 129th Separate Signal Regiment of the 65th Army -- was already made up of women by 80 per cent. I'm trying to make you see what was going on in our hearts at the time. When receiving the colours, our regiment commander gave an order: 'Regiment, to knees under the colours!...' All of us women were so happy to have been given that trust and to form a regiment, like any other, say an armoured or rifle regiment... We stood there crying, our eyes full of tears.

----------*The Battle of Kursk which marked a radical turning-point in the Great Patriotic War against fascism. -- Ed.

We all were so happy. And we were ready to tackle any job because our Motherland was in trouble.

"And I'll tell you something, I know you won't believe it now. My entire body was under such strain that my night-blindness, the ailment which had been caused by undernourishment and nervous overstrain, receded. You see, the next day I was quite well, I recovered through that emotional experience..."

Muscovite Junior Sergeant Maria Sergeyevna Kolesnik, who was during the war an anti-aircraft gunner, wrote to me the following:

"I saw Vilnius on fire... Everything was burning, even stones. The burning red stone wall of some Polish Roman-Catholic church has engraved itself in my memory. I was paralysed with fear during the first three days: all around me were the killed and the wounded, while I was pregnant and alive. I ran along a road, recalling my mother say that, if you want to have a handsome son, you have to look only at beautiful things and listen only to beautiful songs. And there I was running and seeing nothing but conflagration, death and blood. That made me think what sort of a child I would bear in that nightmare.

"My son was not to live long, and I immediately asked to be enrolled in the army..."

I'd like to cite here but a couple of pages from a school copybook-long letter, which I received from Ksenia Sergeyevna Osadcheva from the town of Saki.

"...I fined eighteen on June 9, 1941, and less than a fortnight later that accursed war began. Right after finishing school, we went to build a railway between Gagra and Sukhumi. I remember what sort of bread we ate-it looked like a hedgehog. A little of flour was added to awn and chaff to connect thorn and that honeycomb of sorts was then filled with water. When left to lie on the table, a loaf of such broad would give out a small pool of water, which we used to lick with our tongues.

"In 1942 I volunteered to work at second-echelon Hospital No.3201. It was a very big front-line hospital belonging to the Transcaucasian and North Caucasian fronts and the Separate Maritime Army. The fighting was very fierce and there were many wounded. I had to give out food, which was a round-the-clock job: in the morning, when it was time to give breakfast, we often found that we had not yet finished serving supper. Several months later I was wounded in the left leg -- I hoped around on my right leg but continued working. I was then appointed hospital matron and again had to perform my duties practically round the clock.

"At one o'clock in the afternoon on May 30, 1943, Krasnodar came under a massive air raid. I ran out of the building to see if they had managed to take the wounded away from the railway station. Two bombs hit a shed where ammunition had been stored. I saw boxes fly up higher than six-storeyed buildings and explode. I was hurled by a shock wave to a brick wall and lost consciousness...

"It was six o'clock in the evening when I came to. I moved my head and arms -- they seemed to be all right. It took me some effort to open the left eye and, all stained with blood, I made for the hospital. The head nurse who met me in the corridor did not recognize me and asked who I was and where I came from. She came nearer, recognized me and said: 'Where have you been loafing about, Ksenia? The wounded are hungry and you are nowhere to be found.' They quickly bandage my head and the left arm above the elbow and I went to get supper. Everything was going dark in my eyes and sweat streamed down my body. I began to hand out supper and swooned. They brought me round and all I heard was: 'Hurry up!.. Be quick!..' I even donated blood to some heavily wounded soldiers.

"For twenty months I had had no relief. My left leg, swollen to the knee, was bandaged, my arm after the operation was also bandages, the same as my head. In my school years I took part in physical fitness competitions out I bet there is no athlete in the world who would have

hoped like that for twenty months round the clock. I had done that and withstood it all.
"...We have restored everything now, everything is in flowers, but I am tormented by pain and have an unwomanly face to this day. I am unable to smile and my every day is one long groan. The war had changed me to such an extent that when I came back home my mother did not recognize me. I was shown where she lived, approached the door and knocked.
" 'Yes, who is it?..'
"I came in, said hello and asked to be put up for the night.
"Mother was making fire in the stove, my two younger brothers were seated on a heap of straw thrown on the floor, almost naked for lack of clothes.
" 'Couldn't you go somewhere else?' Mother said, still not recognizing me.
"I persisted, saying that perhaps we could manage it somehow.
" 'Don't you see, madam, how we live? And we sty had to put up soldiers. You'd better move on before it is too dark.'
"I came closer to her only to hear again:
" 'You'd better move on, ma'am, before it is too dark.'
"I leaned over her, embraced her and whispered:
" 'Mom, Mammy!'
"They rushed to me with sobs.,.
"My road has been hard indeed. To this day no boolc or film had described what I've gone through."
Now I know that, to understand those seventeen- and eighteen-year-old girls, we have to examine what they had had before-their childhood, school and parents.
Guards Junior Sergeant Sofia Ivanovna Shevereva, radio and telegraph operator, told me the following story:
"I grew up in a children's home. We had just finished the seventh grade and were preparing for the graduation party. Then all of a sudden our headmaster Vassily Nikiforovich Zimonets (we still write to each other and he calls me his daughter) assembled us and said: 'Children, the war has begun! ..'
"We expected to he evacuated. Our children's home was situated outside Vinnitsa. But for some reason no evacuation order arrived and the headmaster decided that we should make it on our own. He led us on foot to the station and only asked that the elder children took care of the younger ones. "Take what you can," he said. But what could we take along, perhaps, a piece of bread each... We walked for a long time, then went by train. Whenever our heated goods vans stopped in a field we would collect ears of wheat or whatever there was, giving them to the younger children and eating them ourselves.
"In this way we reached Penza and were sent from there to Buzuluk. There, in Buzuluk, with no bombs exploding over our heads we finally felt safer. We were first put up in a church and then transferred to a separate house. The headmaster told us: 'Children, you certainly want to study but the Motherland needs your help. Some of you will go to factories, others to vocational schools and we'll take care of the little ones.' I chose to go to a vocational school. We studied in daytime and worked at a factory at night. I was not sixteen yet, and there were workers even younger than me. Machinetools were big for us so we climbed wooden blocks to be able to work. We did bayonets and ground them on grinding-machines. It was all for our Victory...
"Then my entire group, all the girls, who had already read about Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya* in 'Pravda', decided to go to the front. The Party taught us that there was nothing dearer than Motherland. It saved my life and prevented me from starving to death. (She cried.) It gave me education and, had it not been for the war, I'm sure I would have

graduated from a university. I've had my schooling at the front and I'm proud of that..."

----------*Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya (1923-1941) was a partisan scout executed by the Nazis. -- Ed.

There lived a girl in Leningrad beyond the Nevskaya Gates. She was born there and went to school there. She went with her girl friends to dances and took part in Komsomol subbotniks. Then she worked as a milling machine operator at the Bolshevik plant.

In 1941 army units marched by the plant and she begged the men to take her along to the front.

Her name was Nadezhda Vasilyevna Anisimova and here is her story.

"Everybody tried to spare me, to keep me away from the front line. And still I became a medical orderly of a machine-gun company. I was not afraid to die, perhaps, because I was young. One night an entire company carried out reconnaissance in force in the area of our regiment. By day-break it retreated, and moans could be heard from the neutral zone. 'Don't go, you'll gel killed,' soldiers told me, 'don't you see it's getting lighter,"

"But I wouldn't listen and crawled on. I found the wounded man, dragged him for eight hours, having tied my belt to his arm, and brought him alive. The commander heard about this and in the heat of the moment ordered me five days under arrest. His deputy was of a different opinion: 'Deserves to be rewarded.' I understood both of them...

"At nineteen I had a medal For Valour and it was at that time that my hair went grey. At nineteen, during the last battle, a bullet went through my lungs and another between two vertebrae. My legs were paralysed and I was thought to be dead... When I came home my sister showed me a card notifying them of my death! .."

Senior Sergeant Albina Alexandrovna Gantimurova, scout, told me the following story:

"I don't remember my mother, I only have a vague Idea of what she was like, I was three years old when she died. Father served in the Soviet Far East, he was a regular officer. He taught me to ride a horse and that was the most striking impression of my childhood. He did not want me to be a prim young lady. I remember myself being five and living with my aunt in Leningrad. My aunt was a nurse in the Russian-Japanese war.

"What sort of a girl was I in childhood? If defied, I could jump from the first-floor window of my school. I enjoyed football and always acted as a goalie in a boys' team. When the war with Finland began I ran away from home to the front several times. In 1941 I had just finished the seventh grade and managed to send my documents to a technical secondary school. "There is war!" my aunt cried. As for me, I was glad to be able to go to the front and show my true worth. How was I to know what gore was?

"When the 1st Guards Division of the People's Volunteer Corps was being formed several girls, among them myself, were enlisted in the medical battalion.

" 'I'm going to the front,' I telephoned my aunt.

" 'Hurry up home! Lunch has already got cold,' came the answer.

"I hung up.

"I felt sorry for her afterwards. Later the city was sealed in blockade and she, an old woman, was left all alone.

"I remember being allowed to go to the city. Before visiting the aunt, I went to a shop. I had been terribly fond of sweets before the war.

" 'Give me some sweets,' I said.

"The saleswoman looked at me, as if I were mad. I did not know the meaning of the words ration cards and the blockade. All the people in the queue turned to have a look at me and saw that my rifle was bigger

than myself. When they gave us those rifles I wondered when I would be as big as my rifle.
" 'Give her sweets. Take our rations,' all the people in the queue began to say suddenly.
"And I was indeed given sweets.
"In the street donations were being made to help the front. Tables with big trays stood right in the square, and people would come up to them, taking off their gold rings and ear-rings and bringing watches and money... Nobody took any record nor signed anything,.. Women took their wedding rings off. I cannot forget that scone and that tiny bag of sweets to this day.
"Then Order No.227 -- 'Not a Step Backs' -- was issued. It was that order that at once made an adult of me.
"We went without sleep for days on end: there were so many wounded. On one occasion we stayed up for three days in a row. I was sent to accompany a lorryful of the wounded to a hospital. I left the wounded there and on the way back slept soundly in the empty lorry. I was as fresh as a daisy when I came hack and found all my mates ready to drop.
"I met our commissar:
" 'Comrade Commissar, I feel ashamed.'
" 'What's matter?'
" 'I slept.'
" 'Where?'
"And I told him how I accompanied the wounded and went back in the empty lorry, sleeping like a log.
" 'So what? It's nice to hear that you've had a good sleep. Let at least one person here be fit to work, while the rest are falling down with fatigue.'
"Just the same I was ashamed and it was with such conscience that we lived throughout the war.
"Everybody treated me well at the medical battalion, hut I wanted to be a scout. I said that I would run away to the front line if they did not let me go. I got nearly expelled from the Komsomol for that."
Two Orders of the Red Star, two Orders of Glory and two medals For Valour -- this is by far an incomplete list of the military decorations she received during the war or, as she herself put it, "for scouting".
"I'm one Order of Glory short of the full complement... Fellow scouts joked: 'The war was not long enough for you, Albina.' The first medal For Valour I received is my most cherished award, It was like that. The soldiers were lying low. 'Forward! For Motherland!' came an order but no one rose. The order was sounded once again to no effect. I took my hat off for them to see that I was a girl and rose to my feet.,. The rest of the company rose and we all went into battle.
"I was awarded that medal and that same day we went on a mission. It was then that I had my first period, you know... I saw blood and shrieked:
" 'I've been wounded...'
"Among the scouts on that mission was an elderly man -- a doctor's assistant.
" 'Where's the wound?' he rushed to me.
" 'I don't know.,. But here's blood.,.'
"And he told me everything, as if he were my father.
"I continued 'going on missions' for fifteen years after the war was over. Every night I dreamt that either my submachine gun got jammed or that we found ourselves in an encirclement... I used to wake up with my teeth chattering.
"When the war came to an end I had three wishes, first, that I would no longer crawl on my stomach hut would ride a trolleybus instead,

second, to buy and eat at a go a whole loaf of white bread and, third, to have a good sleep in a clean bed with crispy sheets."

Anti-aircraft gunner Valentina Pavlovna Maximchuk recalled the following:

"On June 28, 1941, we, students of a teachers' training institute, assembled in the yard of a print shop at midday. After a short while we left the city, following the old Smolensk road towards the town of Krasnoye. With great caution we moved in separate groups. By the end of the day the heat subsided, we found it easier to walk and pushed forward at greater speed, without looking back. It was not until we reached a stopping --place that we looked eastwards. Half the sky shone with the purple glow of a fire, which at a distance of about forty kilometres seemed to have engulfed the whole of the city. It was clear that the whole of Smolensk was on fire rather than merely a dozen or hundred houses...

"I had had a new flimsy dress all bedecked with flounces, which my girl friend Vera laked immensely. She had tried it on several times and I had promised to make her a gift of it for her wedding. She had a nice guy and they were planning to get married.

"Then the war broke out all of a sudden. Leaving to dig trenches, we checked our belongings with the warden. And what about that dress? 'Vera, take it along,' I said when we were leaving the city.

"But she wouldn't and now that dress was gone in that conflagration.

"We walked and kept looking hack all the time. Our backs seemed to be scorched. We walked throughout the night without stopping and at dawn got down to work. We were told to dig anti-tank ditches, making steep walls seven metres high and digging underground for another three metres and a half. I dug on, with the spade all aflame and the sand looking purple, and our house with flowers and lilac bushes in my mind's eye all the while...

"We lived in cabins in a water-meadow between two rivers. It was hot and humid and the air teemed with mosquitoes, We would smoke them out of the cabins before going to sleep but at dawn they would again make their way inside and not let us sleep.

"From there I was taken to a medical unit where we were put right on the floor. Quite a few of us fell ill at that time. I was running high temperature and feeling shivery. I lay there on the floor, crying. The door to our ward opened and, standing at the threshold (it was impossible to come in, as the mattresses lay close to each other), the doctor said: 'Ivanova, plasmodium in blood.' She was referring to me, you know.

"She could not know that ever since I read about it in a textbook way back I was in the sixth grade that plasmoduim was precisely what I feared most. At that moment I heard for the first time the song 'Rise up, the land so vast and big...' over the radio.

"I was brought to Kozlovka -- not far from Roslavl -- and pi on a bench. I sat there, trying hard not to fall down and hearing as if in a dream:

" 'Is that her?'

" 'Yes,' the doctor's assistant answered.

" 'Take her to the canteen.'

"And there I was lying in bed. Can you imagine what it meant to find oneself in a warm hospital bed rather than on ground by a bonfire or else on a waterproof cape under a tree. I did no wake up for seven days in a row. They said that nurses would wake me up and feed me but I don't remember it. When after a week I woke up on my own the doctor came, examined me and said:

" 'She's strong enough to cope with it.'

"I fell asleep again.

"The most difficult thing at the front was to resist sleepiness.

We had not had enough sleep for days on end and then there would come a time when a person could no longer control oneself. You don't notice it while you're working but as soon as there is some respite you are dropping with fatigue. When I was on duty I would walk to and fro, reciting poetry out loud and trying not to repeat myself within two hours."

War was waged not only at the front. Everybody in my land became a soldier.

Here is what Franya Vasilyevna Adashkevich told me:

"When they began to bomb Minsk we tried to leave the city. And I remembered that there were no men among the refugees -- only women, children and old people. I had never seen so many children in my life. I wonder why I had that impression, Perhaps, because they sought to save the children first of ail. But I was never to see so many children afterwards either...

"What did I do during the early days of the invasion? I collected cartridges and hid them in the ground in boilers or saucepans. Weapons, too: there were many of those in forests. I was not alone in doing that. We knew that, if we stayed alive, all that would come in handy one day. No one wanted to reconcile oneself to having Nazis trampl-ing our land underfoot."

Maria Vasilyevna Zloba who fought in the underground says:

"We were taking the wounded out of Minsk. I was wearing high-heeled shoes because I felt too shy to be so short. One of the heels got ruined just when somebody cried out: 'A landing force!' I ran barefooted, my shoes in my hand -- I could not part with those beautiful shoes.

"When we were encircled and realised that we would not be able to break through, medical orderly Dasha and I rose out of the ditch, no longer hiding, and stood erect, preferring to have our heads torn away by shells than to be taken prisoner and mocked. And those of the wounded who could rise also rose...

"When I saw the first Nazi soldier I was tongue-tied, unable to utter a word. And they marched on -- young, merry and grinning. Wherever they stopped or saw a water fountain or a well they would begin to wash themselves. They always had their sleeves fucked up and kept washing themselves... All around there were gore and cries but they went on washing themselves... I felt such hatred swell inside me that I could hardly contain myself. I came home and changed: I had sweated so much and my entire nature revolted to such an extent against their being on our land. I could not sleep at night."

Maria Timofeyevna Savitskaya-Radyukovich, member of the underground from the town of Slutsk, recalls the following:

"The Germans entered the village on motocycles. I kept staring at them: they were young, cheerful and laughed all the time. They roared with laughter! The thought that they were there, on our land, laughing at that, made my heart miss the beat.

"My only dream was to avenge, to die and to have a book written about me. I was ready to do anything for my homeland."

"But you had a small baby?" "I had my daughter in 1943, giving birth to her in a haystack on a marsh. I dried the swaddling clothes on myself, putting them under my bosom and warming them up in this way, and would use them again to swaddle the baby. Everything around was on fire, villages burning together with people... Nine villages were burnt in our Gross district (it existed before the war and now its entire territory forms part of the Slutsk district).

"I myself gathered burnt bones to find my friend's family. We found bones and recognized whose bones they were by bits of surviving clothes. I picked up one such piece, and she said: 'That's mother's blouse...' and fainted. People collected bones in sheets or pillow-

cases -- whatever clean cloth they had-and put them into a common grave. Those small white bones were all that was left...
"After that I was willing to go on any mission there was. I wanted to do as much as possible and tried to spare nothing.
"I had a three-month-old baby and would take it along on missions. The commissar would send me, adding though, that his heart ached to do that. I brought medicines, bandages and serum from the town, potting them between the baby's arms and legs in swaddles. Wounded soldiers were dying in the forest and I had to go. Nobody else managed to pass the German and police sentries-I alone could do it.
"I find it hard even to speak about it now... To make the baby run temperature and cry, I rubbed it with salt. It would turn red then, have rash and wriggle in its swaddles. I would approach the sentries with the words: 'Typhus, herr, typhus...' They would shout to chase me away: "Weg!.. Weg,..' Yes, I rubbed it with salt and put garlic into the swaddles. My poor little baby... I had been taking it along on my missions ever since it was three months old... It was still breast-fed at the time,..
"As soon as we passed the sentries, I would enter a forest and cry my heart out there, groyning with pity for my baby, But in a day or so I would again have to go through the ordeal..."
Maria Savitskaya's friend, Maria Mikhailovna Matusevich-Zayats who was, together with her, active in the underground movement and then joined the partisans, was seated all the while next to her, listening and crying. Her own story was just as heart-rendering.
"Three days before the war I gave birth to a son... We called him Anton... 'There is war!' came the grim news, while we were having babies at the maternity hospital. I remember that most of the new-born babies were boys.
"Beginning with the early days of the German invasion we sought to pick up every cartridge in the forest and to amass weapons. Mother would not let me go: "Where are you off to with the baby in your arms? You have no fear of God!' 'And what about them? Do they fear God?' ! replied. 'Look what they are doing to our people...'
"They would take young men out of their houses and shoot them right at their porches. Two young boys next door were killed at their own porches this way...
"I was a Komsomol member and could not remain passive. I distributed leaflets and collected information, all the while carrying my baby in my arms. I was risking two lives at a go and shed rivers of tears.
"My little son died. I was not with him but it was through my fault: I was with the partisans at the time, He was burnt together with my mother. When I reached our house ... the earth was still warm... All that I managed to find was a few grammes of bone ashes... I had already known how they looked...
"After the war I gave birth to another son and prayed to God that I had enough time to see him grow and embrace me with his tiny anna and know that I was his mother. I had been so sick with the war..."
Vera Iosifovna Odinets, partisan, said the following:
"We were full of so much hate. We had already seen the crimes they perpetrated on our land and our hearts knew nothing but hate. I had seen so much blood and deaths on roads... I saw a child being killed in front of its mother. Nobody keened the dead any longer..."
Natalia Nikolayevna Akimova, member of the underground organization from Minsk, told me the following story:
"I worked in a mental asylum at Novinki where people were both treated and had labour therapy. There was a big farm with an area of about 300 hectares and hotbeds and 300 inmates Minsk was bombed and our house got burnt together with our street. I remember corning to where our house had stood and finding there nothing but the grand piano

sounding-board and two Chinese vases in the middle of the site of the fire.

"The head doctor of the asylum immediately went to the registration and enlistment office. The inmates could not be left to the mercy of fate, however, and I remained in the city. It was soon seized by the Nazis, who assigned an SS group to our asylum and the farm. A certain Werner was put in charge of the whole compound. One day he told me: 'Let's go the rounds together to see what your people are doing at their posts.' At one of them we were approached by a woman inmate who asked for a cigarette. Our inmates were known to have uninhibited attitudes. He waved her away but she flung herself to his chest and began to kiss him. His Aryan purity insulted, he snatched his pistol and shot the inmate who was still hanging on his neck in the back of her head.

"I can even show you the place where that happened -- we have Ward No.2 there now. I rushed to him, shouting and saying that he had apparently forgotten where he was and that they were sick people, I was trembling. Somebody took me to another room and Werner soon came there. He tried to explain something to me through an interpreter, saying that I should not take it so much to heart and that I should understand that it was necessary to cut off deadwood.

"What happened next?.. Gas vans came, all the Inmates were driven into them and then taken away. The weaker ones who could no longer move were carried to the bath-house and left there. They closed the doors, inserted the exhaust pipe into the window and gassed all of them. Then the corpses were stacked on a lorry, as if they were logs.

"The head who supervised It all saw that I was virtually hysterical and ordered me to be taken to his study. He even tried to explain his behaviour. 'You are too distressed now but after a while you'd be glad that we have saved you the trouble of tending to this dead-wood. After all they are hopeless cases and a nuisance to everybody. Forget all about your womanish sentiments.' They did it calmly, as if it were their regular chore.

"This Is the type of people they were. How could we let such monsters walk upon our land?"

There are dozens and hundreds of such stories in my notebooks. Life gets condensed in one's memory which retains the most essential things, and my today's world has been "blasted", as it were, by that memory of the past.

Former partisan yelena Fyodorovna Kovalevskaya wrote to me from Kiev the following:

"The three of us -- my father, my husband and I -- were leaving on one and the same day and my brother was already at the front. Mother remained alone with the cow...

"I, alone, returned from the front. Together with mother I yoked the cow and went to the forest to get some firewood..."

Sofia Vasilyevna Osipova-Vygonnaya, member of the underground organization from Gomel, told me the following story:

"I had just graduated from an institute and was returning home with a suit-case. On my way I met recruits, marching to the front. I then decided that if they'd be short of men I would also join in...

"I came borne and found mother in tears and father quite upset. Mother embraced and kissed me and said: 'It's good that you are back and we'll be together! What are we going to do?' I answered that we would fight.

"That same night Nazi planes bombed the city and the bombs fell upon its sleeping inhabitants. It struck me in the morning that Nature was in full contrast with what the people had to go through. The sun was rising, lighting up every piece of our native land. Only we stopped smiling. Everybody understood that it was time to become a soldier."

Another member of the underground organization from Gomel, Olga Adreyevna Yemelyanovna, recalled:
"I was pregnant when the war began. Everybody said that It was necessary to go away, to evacuate. I reasoned differently: how could I leave my native place now that I had to give birth to my baby? Whatever for should I carry my baby to some other place? I gave birth to it on the tenth day of the war...
"Mother was paralysed as soon as she saw the Nazis in the city. I had but one thought -- to find a partisan detachment. There was nothing dearer than Motherland in our hearts."
Guards Senior Lieutenant Anna Semyonovna Dubrovina-Chekunova, pilot of the 4th Guards Novgorod Bomber Air Regiment, described the early days of the war in the following way:
"I had had a training that was necessary at the front. So I did not ponder or hesitate a second to join in.
"I remember taking my pot flowers out of my room and asking my neighbours: 'Please, water them for a while. I'll be back soon.'
"It was not until four years later that I came back, however.
"Many girls left for the front, Younger girls who remained at home envied us, whereas women cried. One of the girls who was leaving together with me just stood there quietly, while all and everybody around her cried. She then moistened her eyes: she felt ill at ease not to be able to shed a tear when everybody around her was crying. How could we know what war was? We were far too young..."
Medical officer's assistant Maria Afanasyevna Garachuk told me the following story:
"I finished a medical school ... and came back home: my father was Ill. Then the war suddenly broke out. I remember that it was in the morning when dew-drops were still on trees that the war was announced! At the front I kept remembering those dew-drops which I suddenly noticed on trees when I heard that announcement.
"Despite everything we had faith in our victory, even when we were retreating, we never lost faith. I had no time to think of myself-whether I'd he killed, wounded or would remain alive. There was not a minute to be wasted on myself: all I saw in front of me was the wounded. I remember lying somewhere in a wheat field on a sunny day. German submachine guns went rat-tat-tat and then there was a hush. Alt I could hear was the rustle of the wheat, then again the rat-tat-tat of German submachine guns,.. I wondered if there'd ever be another chance for me to hear wheat rustle.
"...I was carrying a wounded man when all of a sudden I clearly heard a child cry, Somewhere a child was calling out desperately. I was almost out of my wits after I had rushed all around the field, driven by thought-where, who and could it really be? I did find a five-year-old girl under a ruined tank. I had a pang of feat when I saw that girl and blood on her cheek, It was frightening to see children burn in that conflagration..."
Below is the story told to me by Anna Konstantinovna Antuskova of Gomel.
"In my childhood I was especially influenced by my uncle, who had fought together with my father in Budyonny's* Army. My uncle was fond of telling stories about his fellows-in-arms and singing songs about the Civil War and its heroes. It was from him that I first heard such songs as "Far Beyond the River", "Along Uplands and Green Valleys" and "The Red Army Is the Mightiest of Them All..." And it is thanks to him that I love Civil War songs to this day.
----------*Marshal Semyon Budyonny (1883--1973), was a popular hero of the Civil War (1918--1920) and Commander of the 1st Cavalry Army. -- Ed.
"I had just finished a nurses' training school before the war and been appointed a nurse at the Nedoi medical centre of the Buda-Koshelevo

district of the Gomel region. There I was elected secretary of the collective farm Komsomol organization with a membership of seventy. We engaged in amateur theatricals and that was the merriest and happiest time in my life. It was not to last long, however, out short by the war. I remember the morning of June 22, as if it were yesterday...
"We were returning from a concert, approaching the collective farm board premises with songs and music, when we heard about the war. Everybody fell silent there and then, grew pensive, serious and nearly all grown-up. It was clear that everybody was ready to defend the Motherland that very minute. That night I received call-up papers, since I had been registered in for military service as a medical worker. The time had come for me to part with my friends. Many were crying. I was afraid to cry lest people thought I was a coward and did not want to go to the front. On the contrary, I had no fear and was inwardly ready to go. Perhaps, I still could not grasp it all with my mind but was utterly ready in my heart of hearts..."
From a newspaper article I learned that Second Lieutenant of the Wojsko Polskie Lyubov Ivanovna Lyubchik, commander of a submachine-gunner platoon, lived in the village of Perevoz, Berezino district.
I reached Berezino on a new Ikarus bus. Once there, I heard that no buses ventured in the direction of Perevoz because the roads were such a muddy mess that at times not even milk tankers or post office vans made in there. It turned out that the post office van had already left in the morning, and the milk tanker could only take me to a neighbouring village where the farm centre was. I had four more kilometres to go on foot or by horse if I found anyone to give me a lift. I was lucky to find a forester going to Perevoz on business who gave me a jolly ride to the very house I needed: "Hello, Lyubchik! How come, with you being a veteran soldier, it is to your wife that correspondents keep coming..."
We lit a stove together with Lyubov Ivanovna, peeled and boiled potatoes, and sat down to the table.
And I heard again what I had already heard from other women.
"...I was evacuated to Saratov. In about three months' time I was trained as a lathe operator there. We worked for twelve hours a clay with the only thought to get to the front. Together with my girl friend we went to the military registration and enlistment office but did not tell there that we were working at a factory, for otherwise they would not have enlisted us.
"We were sent to the Ryazan infantry school and graduated from It as commanders of machine-gun sections, I had marched all the way to Warsaw... always on foot..."
This made me recall a story told by Vera Sergeyevna Romanovskaya, a partisan nurse during the war and now a guide at the Byelorussian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War.
Though it was not the early events of the war that she spoke about, she seemed to convey the same idea. They all somehow recalled similar things, with each account adding new, unexpected details that allow to pinpoint exactly the atmosphere of those days and years.
Vera Sergeyevna Romanovskaya:
"Our partisan detachment joined Red Army units and after a parade we were told to hand in arms and go and find ourselves jobs. We could not somehow understand why we had to hand in arms while the war was still going on and Byelorussia alone had been liberated. Every one of us wanted to continue fighting. All our girls came to the military registration and enlistment office... I said that I was a nurse and asked to be sent to the front. 'All right, we will register you in and then summon you in case of need,' they promised me. 'Meanwhile start working somewhere,'
"I waited for a while... Nobody summoned me... I went to the military registration and enlistment office again and continued calling on them

many more times until, finally, I was frankly told that I was not needed, that there were enough nurses and that hands were needed to sort out bricks in Minsk.
"You want to know what sort of girls we had? Well, we had a certain Chernova who was pregnant and carried a mine pressed to her side, next to the beating heart of her baby. That's for you to decide what sort of people they were. Why should we explain it? We were as we were. We were brought up to believe that 'Motherland' and 'we' were the same thing. Or take another friend of mine who wrapped leaflets all around the body of her little daughter and took her around the city. The little girl would raise her arms and say: 'Mummy, it feels tight,.. Mummy, it feels tight...' And there were Germans and policemen all around in the streets.
"Yes, even children... We had taken them along to our partisan detachment out still they were children. So when we found ourselves in a blockade and everybody saw the danger we decided to send the children beyond the front line. But they would run away from the children's reception centre to the front, be caught on the roads and run away again to the front...
"It will take history perhaps another century to figure out what it all was. Just imagine, a pregnant woman carrying a mine... Why, wasn't she expecting a baby... She loved and wanted to live ... and sty she went, carrying a mine..."
Where can one find the words to give this phenomenon a name? Tolstoy called it a latent warmth of patriotism. Women themselves put it more simply: 'Why should we explain it ? We were as we were. We were brought up to believe that 'Motherland' and 'we' were the same thing.' However, wo need to understand and to explain it, because we are their children and grandchildren,
Listening to them, I try to imagine .,. no, not myself in their place. What right have I to speak here about myself? I am trying to measure up to them not only to record their accounts hut also to experience for myself what they felt. I form a mental picture of how they travelled in heated goods vans filled with a persistent smell of soldiers' tobacco... Girls with their hair cropped like boys', and wearing similar clothes. How awkward and absurd they looked in their thick greatcoats, too long for them. How ashamed they were before their comrades for their own tears and the long embraces of their mothers: they were heading for the front, weren't they?
They recall today that their elderly co-travellers were silent and concentrated, while they, the young ones, laughed and sang songs. Surprisingly, when I asked them what they remembered best about their departure for the front, the answer was unanimous: they had song their favourite songs! What did they know about war? And what can one know about it when one is 17 or 18 years old?
Doctor's assistant Maria Vasilyevna Tikhomirova recalls the following: she had graduated from a medical school one month before the war started and had been sent to a rural hospital in the Leningrad region. No sooner had she arrived and settled there than she was summoned to the military registration and enlistment office. She was told: "You have two hours to pack. You are going to the front." "I packed-put all my things into one small suit-case," she said.
"What did you take with you to the front?" I asked.
"Sweets."
"What do you mean, 'sweets'?"
"A suit-easeful of sweets. In the village I had been sent to, I received a travelling allowance and I spent all the money I had to buy a suit-case of chocolates. On top of them I put a photograph of all the girls in my course.
"When I came to the military registration and enlistment office, the military commissar asked me: 'Where shall we send you?' I said: 'Where

will my friend be going?' We had both been sent to the Leningrad region and she was working in a neighbouring village, 15 kilometres away from mine. The military commissar laughed: 'She asked me exactly the same question!' "

Senior Sergeant Tamara Illarionovna Davidovich, a driver from the district centre of Berezino in the Minsk region, recalls the following episode :

"I finished a six-month drivers' course, Nobody mentioned that I was a teacher (I had studied at a teachers' college before the war). Who needed teachers during the war? Soldiers were in demand. In the drivers' battalion we were all girls.

"Once, during exercises... I cannot help crying when I think of this. It was spring. We had finished firing practice and were walking back. I picked a small bunch of violets and attached it to the bayonet of my rifle, and I was walking along like that.

"We came to the camp. Our commander made us form up and called me out. I stepped forward, forgetting about the violets on the rifle. He began scoffing at me. 'A soldier's a soldier, and not a flower picker..,' It seemed strange to him that one could think about flowers in a situation like that.

"However, I didn't throw the flowers away. I took them quietly off the rifle and put them in my pocket. I was punished for this and had to do three extra spells of duty.

"Another time, when I was at my post and my replacement came at two o'clock in the morning, I wouldn't go off duty. 'I'll continue and you can relieve me for the daytime,' I said. I was wring to stay there all night long, till daybreak, just to be able to hear the birds sing.

"When we were leaving for the front, we were walking down a street which had crowds of people on both sides-women, old men, and children, and they were all weeping: 'Girls going to the front..,' We were a battalion of girls... Then we bearded a train. In a way we were still like children. I remember I was standing with another girl on the carriage platform, and some lads said to us: 'You must be hungry, girls. We've got some rusks...' But we declined the offer: 'No, thanks.' We had to be independent."

Surgeon Vera Iosifovna Khoreva described her impressions of the early days of the war in the following way:

"I was going to the front, thinking that it wouldn't he for long. I took along just one skirt, my favourite one at that, two pairs of socks and a pair of shoes, We were retreating from Voronezh and nevertheless I remember myself going to a shop and buying myself a pair of high-heeled shoes. Yes, I remember the retreat, the terror and mess around and myself entering a shop and wishing all of a sudden to buy those shoes. I remember those elegant shoes, as if it were yesterday... I also bought some perfume... It was difficult to give up one's customary way of life at a go. I was still a very young girl when the war began,.."

Why is it that I have chosen those two facts -- a suitcaseful of sweets and violets attached to the bayonet -- from a wealth of other facts? Perhaps, because the girls whom I want to understand are much more real and closer to me when surrounded by things familiar to me. Be that as it may, it is the frivolous suitcaseful of sweets and three spells of duty out of turn for the sake of a bunch of flowers that affect my imagination much more today than the number of blown-up trains, shot-down planes, destroyed weapons and equipment and captured war trophies. We know now that we had destroyed enough of those for us to win the victory. It is not a description of military operations but details of human lives during the war that touch one most deeply today.

War lends appreciable significance to every fact, to every minute detail of everyday life, which becomes a symbol of human existence during wartime.

How did these ordinary girls become unusual soldiers? They were prepared to perform a feat of valour, but they were not ready to join the army. And the army, in turn, was not ready to receive them because most of the girls were volunteers-they were not counted upon or even expected to enter the army. Private Lyubov Ivanovna Osmolovskaya, scout, recalls: "The first days of the war. As small as can be, I am standing in front of a military commissar. 'Whoever told you we'd be enlisting young girls too?' he asks. A year passes. I constantly think about how I can help. However, there isn't anything I can do for the army, except send a pair of mittens to the front. I would have gladly sent my felt-boots, but they are too small, anyway -- size 34. And I go again to the military registration and enlistment office."

The soldier's life did not come easy to these girls. They had to wear tarpaulin boots, size 40, or American-made boots with long puttees, which they called "caterpillars", and greatcoats. They also had to have their plaits cut off (a loss mentioned by all the girls and described by them as a great one, For them it signified a demarcation line between their young-girl past and their soldier present). They had to get accustomed to their uniforms, learn about the insignia, be able to hit "targets", crawl on their stomaches, wind puttees, stay awake for several days on end, put on gas masks quickly and dig trenches... There was a physical aspect to everyday life at the front that they didn't even imagine to exist when they applied for enlistment.

Private Nonna Alexandrovna Smirnova, anti-aircraft gunner from the Georgian village of Obcha, recalls:

"We were accommodated at a carriage and classes began. Everything proved to be different from what we had imagined back home. We had to get up early and knew not a minute of privacy. Whereas our old mode of life abided. We were indignant to have Junior Sergeant Gulyaev, who had had four years of schooling and was our section commander, teach us regulations, mispronouncing certain words. We thought: What could he teach us?..

"After the quarantine, before we took the oath, the sergeant-major brought our uniforms -- greatcoats, forage caps, field-shirts, skirts, two coarse calico man's underwear with sleeves instead of slips, stockings instead of puttees and heavy American-made boots with iron plates covering the whole of the heel and the toes. I happened to be the smallest in the company, as far as height and built were concerned -- I was 153 cm high and wore shoes size 34. Naturally enough, the war industry provided nothing of so small a size and, needless to say, the US did not send anything of the kind either. I got boots size 42, which I put on and took off without unlacing. They were so heavy that I shuffled instead of marching.

"When I tried to do the parade step sparks shot from the cobbles and it looked anything but what it should co. I can't bear even to remember that agonizing first parade.

"Upon seeing me march, the commander summoned me:

" 'Smirnova, what's wrong with your parade step? Didn't they teach you that you have to raise your feet higher? Three spells of duty out of turn...'

" 'Yes, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, three spells of duty out of turn!' I replied and turned to go but my boots slipped, revealing my legs which had been rubbed sore by the boot-tops.

"Everybody saw then that I just could not walk otherwise. Our company shoemaker Parshin, was ordered to make a pair of boots out of an old waterproof cape for me, size 36..."

They left behind their youth, their free life and, once in the army, often continued to behave like children, military discipline notwithstanding.

The following is an excerpt from a letter written by Guards Lieutenant Antonina Grigoryevna Bondareva, senior pilot, from Moscow:

"We were young girls like you are, and you mustn't think we were any different. Discipline, regulations, insignia -- all this military knowledge didn't come easy to us. One day, we were on duty guarding planes. There is a provision in the regulations to the effect that any person approaching must be stopped by 'Halt! Who goes there?' My girl friend saw the commander of the regiment approaching and cried: 'Will you stop! Who goes there? Will you excuse me, I shall fire!' Just Imagine her shouting 'Will you excuse me, I shall fire's"

Another pilot from Moscow, Captain Klavdia Ivanovna Terekhova, told me the following story:

"...The girls arrived at the school, each with her own halt-do. I had plaits arranged around my head. But where could our hair be washed and properly dried? It so happened that frequently an alarm was raised when you had just finished the washing, and you had to run. Our commander, Marina Raskova*, ordered us all to cut off our plaits. The girls cried when they did this. Only Lilya Litvyak, later a renowned pilot, wouldn't part with her plait.

"I went to Raskova. 'Comrade Commander,' I reported, 'your order has been executed, except by Litvyak who has refused.'

"For all her woman's gentleness, Marina Raskova could be a very strict commander. She sent me back:

" 'What sort of a Party organizer are you if you can't see to it that an order is obeyed? About turn! March! ..'

"Our dresses, high-heeled shoes... How sorry we were, rucking them away into our bags. During the daytime we wore boots, hut at night we sometimes put on our shoes just to walk a little in front of a mirror. Raskova saw this and a few days later issued an order: all women's garments were to be sent home in parcels.

"On the other hand, we mastered a new plane within six months instead of the two years allocated for the purpose in time of peace. And to lac able to do this, the girls had to feel themselves soldiers, not to distract themselves In any other way. Do you think it was easy? When we were taken in trucks to a bath-house, we saw women walking in shoes in the city, women wearing kerchiefs. They led a different, old-time life. And I saw that the girls felt sad.

"We lost two crews during the early days of training. All the three regiments, all of us sobbing, stood in front of the four coffins.

" 'Friends, wipe out your tears,' Raskova spoke. 'These are our first losses and much more are still to come. Keep your chins up...'

"Afterwards, at the front, we did not cry when we buried our dead. And now, you see, I'm in tears. But at that time we stopped crying. Thaw's how it was.

"We flew fighters and the height itself was a terrible strain on the woman's body: I sometimes felt my stomach crush against my spine. Nevertheless, our girls flew and even brought down famed air aces! You know, when we marched men looked at us in wonder -- women pilots were on the march. And they admired us. My flying was the best thing I've had in life..."

----------*Marina Mikhailovna Raskova (1912--1943), pilot-navigator, commanded a women's bomber regiment during the war. -- Ed.

Having finished six-month and even three-month courses they received nurses' certificates; or, on graduating from a snipers', pilots' or sappers' school with crash training programmes, they were enlisted as snipers, pilots or sappers. They had military certificates hut they were not yet soldiers. All this was still like the school classes that

were familiar to them, but not the war or the front about which they had only unreal, frequently purely romantic notions.
The military commissions faced quite unusual soldiers. For example, they sent a soldier like that to a partisan detachment and heard the following question: "And how shall I write to mother in Moscow?.."
Senior Lieutenant Vera Vladimirovna Shevaldysheva, surgeon, tells her own story:
"In the autumn I was summoned to the military registration and enlistment office. A colonel there asked me: 'Can you jump?' I confessed that I was afraid. We talked a long time: he tried to persuade me to join the paratroops-a beautiful uniform, chocolate every day. But I had been afraid of heights since childhood. 'How about anti-aircraft artillery?' I wished I knew what it was. Then he suggested: 'What if we send you to a partisan group?' 'And how shall I write to mother in Moscow from there?' I asked. He took a red pencil and wrote 'The Steppe Front' on my papers.
"When I was travelling on a train, a young captain fell in love with me. He spent the whole night standing in my carriage. He was a man who had already been singed by the war; he had been wounded several times. He looked at me for a long time and then said: 'Verochka, please don't let yourself become coarse. Stay the way you are. You are so delicate now... I have seen so many things...' He went on in the same vein, meaning that it was hard to come out of the war unblemished.
"It took me and my girl friend a month to reach the orb Guards Andy of the Second Ukrainian Front, but we finally caught up with it. The chief surgeon came out to see us for a few minutes, had a look at us and took us back to the operating-room. 'Here's your operating table,' he said. Big Studebaker ambulances came one after another; the wounded were on the ground, on stretchers. The only question we asked was: 'Whom shall we take first?' He answered: 'Those who are silent...' One hour later I was at my table, operating. And so it went... We used to operate round the clock. We dozed off for a while, rubbed our eyes open quickly, scrubbed up, and there we were again at the operating table. We did not have enough time to help everybody and would lose every third man...
"At the Zhmerinka railway station we were caught in a heavy air raid. The train stopped and we scattered in all directions. Our political instructor ran too, even though the day before he had been operated on for appendicitis. All night long we hid in the forest. Our train was completely destroyed. Towards morning the low-flying Nazi planes began to comb the forest. There was nowhere to hide-you couldn't dig into the ground like a mole. I put my arms round a birch tree and stood still: 'Oh, Mother, dear. Is it possible that I shall die? If I survive, I'll be the happiest person in the world!' Later on, whenever I told the story of how I held on to a birch tree, everyone laughed. I was an easy target, standing upright against a white birch tree!
"I celebrated Victory Day in Vienna. We went to the Zoo; we wanted to go there so much. We could have gone to see concentration camps but we were reluctant to do that,,. Now I wonder why I hadn't gone there but at that time we just didn't feel like It..."
Private of the field bath-and-laundry detachment Svetlana Vasilyevna Katykhina recalled the following:
"...There were the three of us -- mother, father and me. Father was the first to go to the front. Mother wanted to go together with him: she was a nose, but he was sent in one direction and she in another. I was only 16 and they did not want to enlist me. I kept calling on the military registration and enlistment office and was enrolled in a year's time.
"It was a long train journey. Together with us went soldiers returning from hospitals, among them young boys. They told us about the front, while we sat there gaping and listening. They said that we'd be

shelled, and we sat there eagerly waiting for shelling to begin. Imagine, we'd come and say that we had already received a baptism of fire. I remember seeing there a very young lad with a brand-new order on his tunic. The way we pictured war was a far cry from what we saw at the front. Instead of giving us rifles they equipped us with cauldrons and tubs. All the girls were of my age and had been doted upon and pampered by their parents. I, for one, was the only child in the family. And there we were carrying toads of firewood and lighting stoves. Then we used ashes instead of soap and the linen we had to wash was all so very dirty and lice-ridden..."

The hardest thing of all to endure was the first days, weeks and months at the front because a person's feelings and sensations were sty the same as in peacetime. One dreaded the dreadful and perceived the abnormal as abnormal. And the person being put to the test was none other than a young girl who had previously, before the war, been pampered and sheltered by her mother because she was still considered a child.

Senior Sergeant Sofia konstantinovna Dubnyakova, medical orderly from Leningrad, trying to convey the full scope of the contradiction between a woman's nature and what she had to do, experience and see during the war, called this young girl "a damned young lady straight out of Turgenev". She had to become quite a different person with different emotions, perceptions and vision.

"We were told that the most serious wounds were those in the abdomen and the head," Sofia Dubnyakova recalls. "And so when we were bombed or under fire we tried to protect our heads and stomaches. We once picked up a seat cushion from a destroyed truck and used to cover ourselves with it; and we used to hide our heads between our knees...

"I still remember my first wounded man -- and his face... He had an open fracture of the hip. Can you imagine, a bone sticking out, a fragmentation wound, everything in a complete mess? I knew theoretically what to do, but as soon as I crawled up to him and saw all that I felt sick. Suddenly I heard the words 'Nurse, have a drink of water' spoken by the wounded man himself. I remember the scene as vividly as If It had just happened. When I heard him say this, I came to my senses, 'Oh, you damned young lady out of Turgenev! A wounded man is dying and you, sensitive creature that you are, feel sick..." I opened a first-aid kit and covered the wound;I felt better then and gave the man first aid properly.

"There are films about the war In which one sees a nurse at the front line. There she goes, so neat and clean, wearing a skirt, not padded trousers, and with a side-cap perched on top of an attractive hair-do. It is just not true. Could we have hauled a wounded man dressed tike that? In actual fact, we were issued skirts only near the end of the war to complete our full dress uniform. We also got knitted underwear instead of men's underwear at that time. We were beside ourselves with joy. We unbuttoned our field-shirts to show it off..."

A veteran of the 48th Army, Anna Ivanovna Belyai from Minsk, recalls: "An air raid. Everybody rushes to the ravine. I am running too. Suddenly I hear somebody moan 'Help! Help!' I keep on running... A few minutes later I come to my senses and feel the first-aid bag on my shoulder ... and also feel ashamed... I am no longer afraid, and run back to the moaning soldier and start dressing his wound. Then I rush to a second wounded man, and a third..."

Olga Vasilyevna Korzh, medical orderly of a cavalry squadron, was deeply affected by the sight of a dead man -- something one became quite accustomed to on the battle-field. She was seventeen at the time but she still can't forget him.

"When I was at the front I thought: '1'11 never forget anything.' I am forgetting, however... But that scene I remember in minute detail... It was a young, handsome fellow. And he lay dead. I thought he would

be buried with military honours, but he was just hauled to a nut-grove and a grave was dug.,, And he was put into It without any coffin, without anything, and just covered with earth... It was summer. The sun was shining brightly, and on him too. There was no waterproof cape on him. He was buried in his field-shirt and riding-breeches, the way he was dressed, and all his garments were still new. Apparently, he had been a newcomer. And he was put in the grave and buried like that. The grave was quite a shallow one, just big enough to hold his body. And the wound was small but fatal-in the temple, with very little bleeding. So he lay as if he were alive, only very pale.

"The shelling was followed by an air raid, and a bomb hit a box full of shells which exploded in all directions... Planes were hovering above us. In such a situation the best we could do was to put the dead into the earth, And do you know how we buried people while in the encirclement? Right where they were killed, near the trench, where we ourselves were hiding. Just buried them in the ground, nothing more. There were only small mounds left. And these were trampled down and levelled with the ground if we were followed by the Nazis or their vehicles. There were no traces left, just smooth ground. We often buried the dead in the forest, under the trees... Under these very oak and birch trees...

"I still can't bring myself to go to forests, especially where there are old oak and birch trees.,. I can't sit there..."

These cruel memories live on in the minds of the women veterans. They begin teeing their stories quietly and then, towards the end, they ate almost shouting. Then they sit depressed and confused, and you feel guilty, because you know that when you leave they'll be swallowing pills, taking sedatives. Their sons and daughters look at you pleasingly, making signs: "Isn't it enough? She shouldn't be upset..." And you've got only one justification: their living voices will be preserved by the tape and the sheet of paper, and although these ate not everlasting, they ate still more durable than the best human memory. Even so, it has been very hard to sit and listen to the women's stories, to say nothing of the way the women themselves felt.

Senior Sergeant Maria Terentyevna Dreichuk, medical orderly of a marine battalion, told me the following:

"I saw the first killed soldier, bent over him, realized that he was dead and began to cry. I stood there, crying, till the mates came. It was a fierce battle with many wounded, my company broke through and forged ahead. I was left behind with the heavily wounded in a big hole formed by a bomb explosion. They all had been wounded in the abdomen and died one after another, and I was weeping for every one of them.

"One had his leg hanging by his trouser-leg and asked me to bandage his leg. I cut the trouser-leg and heard him say: 'Nurse, put my leg next to me! ..' "

Maria Seliverstovna Bozhok, dentist at the Minsk republican policlinic who was a nurse during the war, recalled the following:

"I found amputation most unbearable. They often had to cut as much as a whole leg so that I could barely hold and carry it to put it into the basin. I remember limbs being very heavy. I would take it as noiselessly as possible so that the wounded did not notice and then carry it tike a baby.,. I just couldn't get used to it especially when they amputated the leg above the knee. I used to have dreams that I was carrying a leg.,.

"I wrote nothing about it to mother but said instead that everything was all right, that I had warm clothes and boots. After all she had three people at the front and that was not easy for her..."

The following is an extract from a letter by a medical orderly, Maria Petrovna Smirnova (Kukharskaya), from the township of Leningradsky in Kazakhstan. Its author was awarded the highest decoration of the

International Committee of the Red Cross -- the Florence Nightingale Gold Medal.

"I was born and grew up in the Odessa region. In 1941 I graduated from the Slobodka school in the Kodyrna district. I rushed to the military registration and enlistment office in the early days of the war but was sent away. I came back again twice and was twice refused. On July 28, retreating troops went through our Slobodka and together with them I went to the front without any papers.

"When I saw my first wounded man, I fainted. Then it passed. When I crawled under shellfire for the first time to help a wounded soldier, I cried and it seemed to me that my crying was louder than the roar of the battle. Then I got accustomed to it... In about ten days I was wounded, I myself extracted the fragment and dressed the wound.

"On December 25, 1942, our 333rd Division of the 56th Army seized a height on the approaches to Stalingrad. The Nazis were determined to recapture it at any cost, and the fighting began. German tanks started the attack but were stopped by our artillery. The Nazis rolled back and there he was, a wounded lieutenant, gunner Kostya Khudov, lying on no-man's land. The medical orderlies who tried to haul him back to our lines, were killed. So were two of the sheep-dogs of the medical corps (it was the first time I had seen them). I felt it was my turn-I removed my cap with ear-flaps, stood upright and started singing, first softly, then louder and louder, our favourite pre-war song "I Saw You off for You to Perform a Feat of Valour". Both sides, ours and the German, stopped firing. I reached Kostya, bent over him, put him on the tow-sledge and pulled it towards our lines. As I did so I had one thought in mind: I hope they won't shoot me in the back. Better in the head. But not a single shot was fired before I reached our lines...

"Our uniforms were always covered with blood so that there were never enough clean ones for us. Senior Lieutenant Belov was the first wounded man rescued by me; the last was Sergei Petrovich Trofimov, sergeant of the mortar platoon. In 1970 he came on a visit to me and I showed my daughters the wound in his head-there was still a big scar there. In all, I rescued 481 wounded from under fire. One reporter calculated that I had rescued a whole rifle battalion!"

Weapons for human annihilation were perfected during the war, but ways of rescuing people remained the same: the wounded were hauled by the rescuers. I have never seen this operation performed under fire. Bet once I saw sturdy, strong men unloading grain from railway trucks. They carried bags weighing 60 to 80 kilograms (the average weight of a man) and their shirts were dripping wet from perspiration. It is a crude analogy, but it makes the unfamiliar work of the medical orderly more understandable to me. I also keep in mind that a wounded person, being inert, is heavier -- to say nothing of the shellfire above the rescuer's head.

"When we found ourselves at the front line," writes A.M.Strelkova, medical officer's assistant, "we proved to be capable of greater endurance than those who were older. I don't know how to explain this. We carried men who were twice or three times our own weight. On top of that, we carried their weapons, and the men themselves were wearing greatcoats and boots. We would hoist a man weighing 80 kilograms onto our backs and carry him. Then we would throw the man off and go to get another one -- also weighing 70 or 80 kilograms. And we did this five or six times during an attack. Our own weight was often some 48 kilograms -- the weight of a ballet dancer, I can't imagine how we managed..."

Vera Safronovna Davydova had graduated from the Moscow Institute for Historian-Archivists just before the war started. To be more exact, she received her diploma on July 6, 1941, and right away she applied to be sent to the front. She was sent with a subversion group to the

enemy's rear and, following partisan paths, fought against the enemy all over Byelorussia. After the war she worked at the Institute of Party History under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Byelorussia.

"As an historian," said Vera Safronovna, "I was concerned with war problems for a long time. And, quite naturally, one of the questions I posed myself was what had prompted Soviet women to participate in the win? I think it was because of something in our character as a nation- a Soviet woman cannot bathe her baby or cook meals when she sees her country and her people being destroyed. Another important contributing factor was our emancipation,women's equality of rights with men, which had become a fact of life towards the beginning of the war.

"On the second day of the war we ran from our institute to the military registration and enlistment office. 'We want to be sent to the front,' we said, although we had no idea what it was like to be at the front, none whatever. We were, of course, sent back. 'Go and take your exams first,' we were told.

"We passed the examinations and again applied to be sent to the front. The girls pleaded... Although, of course, war was not women's business. It was men's business. Women could not get used to fighting, no matter how capable of endurance they were (surpassing men manifold in this), or how well they could adapt themselves to various situations, showing greater flexibility than men. A woman is a mother and nature has seen to it that she is capable of protecting and preserving her child. All the same, women could not get accustomed to the war...

"In 1942 we crossed the front line and stopped near a cemetery. We knew that the Germans were about five kilometres away. It was night and they were sending up parachute flares which burned for a long time and illuminated the area far and wide. The platoon commander took me to the end of the cemetery and showed me where the flares were corning from. He also showed me the bushes from which the Germans might come. I am not afraid of the dead, I never have been since my childhood. But I was 22 years old then and it was the first time I was on duty at my post. Within those two hours my hair went grey. I found a whole grey mesh in my hair in the morning. I remember how I stood and looked at those bushes which rustled and moved and how I fancied that the Germans were coming...

"Was it a woman's business to be left at a post in a cemetery? On an emotional plane, we perceive everything differently from men.

They took everything more easily; they were, in a way, prepared to accept the thought that one had to be at one's post, that one had to shoot... And we, because of our woman's nature, always felt such things to be quite unnatural. Of course, we tried to adapt ourselves, but It was much more difficult for us.

"Men, by their very nature, have a different view of things. My friend's daughter mentioned recently that she felt resentment against her husband: 'He didn't remember that it was the tenth anniversary of our wedding. He doesn't love me any more.' But he merely attached no importance to it. It was something that had happened and was past, something that was quite matter-of-fact to him... Men have a different level of emotional perception. When discussing the question of women in war, this should necessarily be taken into account and an attempt should he made to understand a woman's mentality.

"Under extremely difficult conditions, however, women, these fragile, highly emotional creatures, proved stronger and capable of greater endurance than men. We marched for 30 or 40 kilometres; horses dropped dead, men fell, but women kept on walking and --can you imagine it? -- singing. Young girls dragged robust men from the battle-fields, and wounded men are very heavy to carry. Today it's hard to believe all this."

Years have passed, and Vera Safronovna, looking into the past with the eyes of a historian and a participant In the events of the past, is herself surprised: how could she, how could they-volunteer, endure, fight? Morally, the fact itself of women's self-sacrifice is invaluable.

Senior Sergeant Nina Vladimirovna Kovelenova, medical orderly of a rifle company, recalls:

"They wouldn't let me go to the front: I was too young, only sixteen, far short of seventeen. Our doctor's assistant, however, received call-up papers. She cried bitterly because she had to leave her small boy behind. I went to the military registration and enlistment office and asked to be sent instead of her... Mother wouldn't let me go, though: 'You are far too young, Nina. Perhaps, the war will be over soon.' Mothers are mothers, but who was there to defend the Motherland?

"Soldiers felt sorry for me," she went on. "One would leave a rusk, another a lump of sugar for me.., I didn't know we had a 'Katyusha' jet rocket concealed behind us... When it started firing there was a terrific thundering ... everything was burnt. I got such a shock, was so started by the fire and the noise that I fell Into a puddle and lost my side-cap. The soldiers shouted with laughter: 'What's the matter, Ninochka? What's the matter, dear?'

"Attacks involving hand-to-hand fighting... What do I remember? I remember the crunch... Once such fighting began, and there came that sound of crunching as human bones were broken. During attacks I went together with the soldiers, just a little way behind, but very close to them, and everything happened before my eyes...

"I had fought for less than a year and when I came borne in Tula, I cried all the time. My mother and sister sat beside me at night and wept..."

Private Nina Alexeyevna Semyonova, signaller, told me the following story:

"We came to Stalingrad where fierce battles were fought. We had to get from one bank of the Volga to the other. But nobody wanted to listen to us: 'What? Some girls?.. Who the devil needs you here! We need riflemen and machine-gunners but not signallers.' And there were eighty of us. By the night the taller girls had been taken to the other bank, while I and one more girl were left behind because we were small. They wanted to leave us in the reserve but I raised such a howl. Everybody sought to join the fighting and only those who had done some wrong were left behind by way of punishment.

"When we had just arrived at the front we feared nothing. But when we had been given a respite and were in the second echelon we wear through some real horror. We knew by the flight of a shell whether It would hit you or not. We could also tell where a mine would land by the noise it produced. You could walk safely if you heard it whistle, but if you heard the sound and no whistle you'd better rush aside 'cause it was bound to hit you. At the outset we knew nothing of the sort, During the first battle officers would push me down the breastwork: I used to stick my head out to be able to see everything for myself. I had some childish curiosity..."

The girls were pitied and protected as far as it was possible in that situation. Sometimes, however, circumstances modified human feelings in incredible ways, with pity, for example, being concealed by cruelty. Private Yekaterina Mikhailovna Rabchayeva, medical orderly, recalls the following episode:

"When I carried my first wounded man, my legs were giving way under me. I dragged him along and murmured: 'I hope he won't die... I hope he won't die...' When I bandaged him, I wept. I talked to him, full of pity for him. Our commander passed by and shouted at me. He said something nasty to me, as men sometimes do in similar cases..."

"Why did he shout at you?" I asked.
"Because I shouldn't have been showing my pity like that, or weeping. I would just have become exhausted and there were lots of wounded to be attended to.
"We went by the killed, their heads close-cropped and green, like sun-drenched potatoes..."
Nurse Maria Borisovna Kovnatskaya says:
"I was young and as yet knew nothing nor understood anything... We were on the retreat... There were so many German planes that they had covered both the sky and the earth. One night the forest was shaved off, as if with a razor blade. The killed were left behind together with our wounded soldiers...
"And even the word 'horrible' is too weak to convey it all..."
The story told by Private Natalia Ivanovna Sergeyeva, medical orderly, also touches on this:
"The wounded were delivered right from the battle-field. Once there were two hundred men in the shed and I was quite alone... Don't remember the name of the village where it happened... So many years have passed since then... I hadn't had any sleep for four days, nor even a minute to sit down, Everybody was crying: 'Nurse... nose... Help me, dear!' I ran from one wounded man to another and suddenly I stumbled and fell and was Immediately asleep, I was woken up by a shout 'Silence! Silence! I order you!' It was a commander, a young lieutenant, also wounded, who had raised himself a little on his unwounded side and shouted. He understood that I had strained myself to the limit, and everybody was crying out in pain: 'Nurse! Nurse, dear!'... All of a sudden I jumped up and rant don't remember where or how. It was the first time I had wept since coming to the front.. "
It was never a repetition of something I had already heard: each had her own beginning, her own first cattle, her own first wounded or killed soldier... I want to leave everything as it is, very much like Vera Sergeyevna Romanovskaya wants to preserve in her museum all the memorabilia of partisan life, be it a wooden mug, an oil-lamp made of a cartridge-case or women's underwear made of parachutes. "Not so long ago," she said, "a former partisan brought to our museum a blouse and a brassiere that we used to make of parachutes in our partisan detachments. She had been keeping it for forty years but when she grew gravelly ill and feared lest she might die, she brought it all to our museum. The people there just chuckled 'Whatever for? Who needs it? What's so very heroic about It?.."'
My desk is cluttered with piles of letters and tapes, which are a testimony to the fact that the heroic has a thousand faces.

"I, ALONE, RETURNED TO MY MOTHER..."

I was travelling to Moscow to see Nina Yakovlevna Vishnevskaya. All I knew about her was contained on one page of my notebook: at the age of seventeen she left for the front and was a medical orderly in the 1st Battalion of the 5th Army's 32nd Tank Brigade, with which she took part in the famous tank battle at Prokhorovka. After the war she worked in the Komsomol. I found her, thanks to help from the Young Pathfinders of Borisov, who had gathered a great deal of material about the 32nd Tank Brigade that had liberated their city. After I had published several articles in newspapers, letters began pouring in, especially from Young Pioneers. That was how, quite unexpectedly, I enlisted voluntary helpers.
The question immediately arose: how should I make my choice from among dozens of addresses? At the beginning I wrote down all the interviews with the people I met. Then I realized that I would not be able to cope with them all. Another principle was needed to select and collect material. Having sorted the available addresses, I formulated that

principle for myself in this way: I would try to record the material according to what the women did during the war. For each of us sees life through the activity he is engaged in. It was logical, therefore, to suppose that a nurse saw one aspect of the war, a cook another, a woman paratrooper a third, a woman pilot a fourth, a woman submachine-gun platoon commander a fifth, and so on. Each had her own scope of vision of the war: one saw an operating table ("I saw so many amputated arms and legs... It was even hard to believe that there were still men somewhere who were all in one piece. It seemed that all of them were either wounded or killed..." Senior Sergeant A.S.Demchenko, nurse). Another saw the cauldrons of her field kitchen ("Sometimes after a battle no men were left... I would cook a cauldron of porridge and another of soup, but there wasn't anybody to serve it to..." Private I.N. Zinina, cook). A third saw the cockpit of a plane ("Our camp was situated in a wood. I landed after completing my mission and decided to go to the wood: it was already summertime and the wild strawberries were ripe. I was walking along a path and suddenly came across a dead German... You know, I was so frightened. I had never before seen a dead person, although it was my second year at the front. Up there, in the sky, it was different... Everything down below was ablaze and seemed to be crumbling,.. When you fly, you have only one thought in mind: to find the target, bomb it and fly back. We had no occasion to see dead people. We were free from that kind of horror..." Guards Lieutenant A.G.Bondareva, senior pilot).

And a woman partisan still associates the war with the smell of a burning camp-fire. ("We did everything on a camp-fire-baked our bread and cooked, and, if the cinders were still live, we would pi our sheepskin coats, felt boots and whatever other clothes we had, around them to dry..." Ye.V.Vysotskaya).

Medical orderlies in tank units were usually men, but, lo and behold, here was a young girl among them!

When I received Nina Vishnevskaya's letter, I started on my journey to see her at once.

There were three of us in the compartment. We were having tea and, as is the custom at tea, we fell into conversation.

"We should've had something stronger than tea but I'm not allowed-medical orders. I've got a weak heart... Too little physical exercise, they say. Too much nervous strain and not enough physical exercise."

"I've had heart trouble recently too. It's just as well I have a summer cottage in the countryside. One looks after oneself as best one can. Some jog in the morning, others exercise with dumb-bells, and I relax in the countryside..."

"My daughter is a doctor... A neurologist. She says that now people smile too rarely and have too little fun. It turns out that this Is harmful to our organism. We need it..."

"We're all short of time,,. Always hurrying somewhere... After the war, when we were younger, it was different-we didn't have anything, sometimes not even sugar in our tea, but we would all get together and it was such fun. We used to get together frequently and to sing songs... Nowadays even young people get together so rarely..."

The name of the man who had complained of a weak heart was Nikolai Borisovich, the other's was Kochetkov: "They call me by my surname. My parents chose eccentric names for their children, Electrica for my sister, Ruby for my younger brother and Mir for me. Mir Kalistratovich... Thanks God they did not call me Radio... It was the time when they were crazy about technical devices. Now that we already make spaceships rather than merely radios other names are in vogue, such as Ksenia, Natalia, Yevdokia..."

Both had fought at the front and both were wearing battle ribbons on their jackets.

"Young people don't understand the hardships of those days..."

"Oh yes, they do... We shouldn't ready complain about them."
"No, they don't want to understand. Because we've given them too easy a life. We ourselves had been through a lot of hardship and we did our best to protect them from everything. What do they know about us ? About how we lived?"
That question was also addressed to me, so I told them who I was going to see and why...
"I'll tell you what, my dear," Nikolai Borisovich, who, I found out, had commanded an engineering battalion during the war, nervously clattered with his spoon against the glass, "When some idiot from the personnel department sent me two girls as platoon commanders, I immediately told them to go back, although they were terribly offended. They wanted to go to the front line as engineering platoon commanders and clear minefields."
"Why did you send them back?" I asked.
"For a number of reasons. In the first place, I had enough fine sergeants who could do what those girls had been sent for; secondly, I knew the girls very well; they were my fellow-students at the architectural college where I had studied. I considered it unnecessary for women to go to the front line. There were enough of us men for that. And I also knew their presence would cause no end of trouble with my men who had their hands full as it was. It would've been necessary to dig a separate dug-out for them and, besides, for them to be giving orders would have involved a lot of problems, because they were girls."
"So you think that girls just caused unnecessary complications at the front?"
"No, I didn't say that. If we recall history, we'll see that at all times Russian women not only saw their husbands, brothers and sons off to the battle-fields and grieved and waited for them, but in perilous limes also stood beside their men. Yaroslavna* used to go up the fortress wall and pour hot tar onto the enemies. But we men had a guilty feeling about girls having to fight; and that feeling is still with me... Ill toll you one episode. We were retreating. It was autumn and it rained round the clock, And by the roadside I saw a dead girl... She was a medical orderly... A lovely girl with a long braid: she was all covered with mud... The girl's presence among us and her death amidst all that horror, mud and chaos ... it was all so unnatural. I saw many deaths, but that one stuck in my memory..."

*Yaroslavna, second wife of Prince lgor (1150 1202), Russian prince who organized in 1185 an unsuccessful military campaign against the Cumans described in the "Lay of the Host of Igor", famous Russtan medieval epic song. Ed.

"Why recall it all today?" Kochetkov exclaimed. "When I heard that in encirclement our medical orderlies opened fire to defend the wounded soldiers because the latter were as helpless as children, I found it all understandable, but when two women crawl to kill somebody on no-man's-land with a sniper's rifle, it looks like "hunting", I should say... Though I myself was a sniper and myself took part in shooting... But after all I'm a man..."
"But she killed an enemy and not just a man in the street, didn't she?"
"Well, I don't know," Kochetkov interrupted me impatiently. "Perhaps, I would take a woman like that along on a scouting mission but not for a wife... No... I can't imagine myself having a sniper for a wife. We are used to thinking of the woman as a mother or a bride. My younger brother told me how German captives were being taken through the city and he, together with other boys, shot at the column with their catapults. When mother saw it she boxed his ears. The captives being led were greenhorns from among Hitler's last recruits. Though my brother was only seven at the time, he remembered how mother looked at

those Germans and cried: "Let your mothers go blind for having allowed you to go to the front!" War is a man's business. And there are more than enough men worthy of being written about."
"But girls went to the front not because they liked killing. It was a critical time for our country and our people; professors asked permission to join the People's Volunteer Corps..." Nikolai Borisovich continued agitatedly, "please keep in mind that girls went to the front voluntarily and a coward would never volunteer for the front. They were extraordinary, courageous girls. Do you know, for instance, what it means to carry a wounded man from the battle-field? I'll tell you... One day we went into the attack, and they began to mow us down with machine-gun fire. And that was the end of our battalion. Everybody was lying on the ground... Not everybody was killed, many were wounded. The Germans kept on machine-gunning us... And then, all of a sudden, first one girl, then another, then a third jumped out of the trench ... and began to bandage and drag away the wounded men. Even the Germans were taken aback and stopped firing for a moment. By about ten in the evening all the girls had been seriously wounded. And each had saved not more than five to six men. Awards were given them sparingly: at the beginning of the war medals and orders were not awarded freely. The wounded had to be dragged away together with their weapons. The first question asked at the medical battalion was, "Where are his arms?" There was a shortage of weapons then. So a wounded man's rifle, submachine gun or machine-gun had to he dragged along, too. In 1941, Order No. 281 was issued concerning decorations for saving the lives of wounded soldiers: for fifteen seriously wounded soldiers carried from the battle-field together with their personal firearms the person concerned was to be awarded the medal For Combat Services; for saving twenty-five soldiers, the Order of the Red Star; for saving forty soldiers, the Order of the Red Banner; and for saving eighty men, the Order of Lenin. But I've just told you what it was like to save five or six men in battle..."
Kochetkov went out into the corridor for a smoke. Nikolai Borisovich and I remained in the compartment.
"There were many good-looking girls among those at the front," he continued. "But we did not look on them as women, although, in my opinion, they were wonderful girls. We looked on them as friends."
"Didn't you like them?"
"What do you mean? They were our friends, who carried us from the battle-field. I was thus carried on two occasions when I was wounded. How could I not like them? But you don't marry your own sister, do you? They were our sisters."
"And after the war?"
"Once the war was over, they turned out to be frightfully defenceless... Take, for instance, my wife. She is a wonderful woman and we've lived heart to heart with her for thirty-five years now. And she, too, is of a very low opinion of the girls who had gone to the front. She thinks that they went there to look for husbands and that all of them had affairs there. Though in real fact-and I'm telling it to you quite sincerely they were modest girls. But after the war every one of us went his own way..." Nikolai Borisovich grew pensive. "You won't be able to understand it. We longed for something beautiful after all the filth, lice and deaths. We wanted beautiful women... I had a friend who was loved at the front by, as I see it now, a wonderful girl, a nurse. But he did not marry her after demobilization but found another, perhaps, prettier girl. He is very unhappy with his wife ... and is now recalling the other one, who could have been his friend. And yet he had no desire to marry her after they had been at the front together. For four years in a row he had seen her in the down-at-heel boots and a man's quilted jacket... And he wanted to

forget about the war as soon as possible. We tried to forget everything. And we also forgot our wartime girl friends..."
Such was the unexpected conversation I had in the train.
...I emerged from the Underground station and soon found myself in a typical Moscow courtyard. For some reason, courtyards in winter look less alike than in summer, as though an invisible artist had settled in each and painted all the trees white and the benches, the children's playgrounds and the swings. And since even invisible artists work independently, the courtyards turn out to be different. The artist who had worked in this particular yard had made the swings look like a big drum and the trees like snow-covered hayricks-either he had been in a hurry or his hand failed to keep pace with his thoughts and mood.
For me, my meeting with someone I am going to interview begins before I enter her house. Superimposed on her imagined portrait will be both a projection of her courtyard and her surprised voice over the telephone, "You want to come to see me right away? Wouldn't it be better for you to ask for details at the War Veterans' Council? They have all my particulars." I am in a hurry to imagine, to guess. And each time life puts my romantic imagination to the test and never spares it.
A plump, shortish woman opened the door. She greeted me by extending her hand in masculine fashion. Her little grandson was clinging to the other hand. His calmness told me that frequent visits by strangers were not unusual in that house.
Nina Yakovlevna took me to her room.
"It's a pity you gave me so little notice. I haven't had time to get ready..."
"Perhaps it's better that way. The most important memories may come to mind..."
"I have some newspaper clippings. A lot's been written about our 32nd Tank Brigade. I'll give you that material..."
The large room is spacious, like an office. No unnecessary things, There are books mostly memoirs many enlarged wartime photographs and a tankman's helmet hanging from an elk's antler. On a lacquered occasional table are a number of small model tanks with dedication plates: "From the men of N unit", "From the cadets of the tank school"... Three dolls-in military uniforms-are "sitting" on a sofa near me. Even the curtains and the wallpaper in the room are khaki-coloured.
"My neighbours are surprised, "Why did you turn your home into a museum?" they ask. But I just can't live without it all," Nina Yakovlevna said.
She sent her grandson into the adjoining room and I turned on my tape-recorder.
Sergeant-major Nina Yakovlevna Vishnevskaya, medical orderly of a tank battalion.
"In tank units they were reluctant to take girls. You might even say they didn't take them at all. How did I.get there? We lived in Konakovo, the Kalinin region. I had just passed my examinations in the eighth class and had been promoted to the ninth class. We didn't understand then what war was like, but we very much wanted to know to find out. In our curiosity it seemed some sort of a game for us.
""We stared our flat with many other families. Every day more of our men went off to the front: Uncle Petya, Uncle Vasya... We saw them off, and we children grew more and more curious. We would see them as far as the train, and when the music started playing the women burst out crying. But even that didn"t frighten us on the contrary, we found it entertaining. And our greatest wish was to get on the train and go off. It seemed to us that the war was being fought somewhere far away. For example, I liked the buttons they sewed on the military

uniforms. They shone so brightly, I was already taking a medical orderlies training course, but none of it seemed real...
"Then our school was closed down and we were mobilized for the building of defence facilities. We were housed in sheds in the middle of a field. We were very proud of having been sent to do something connected with the war. We had been enlisted in a battalion for the "weak ones". We worked from eight in the morning till eight in the evening twelve hours a day digging anti-tank ditches. And we were all fifteen- to sixteen-year-old girls and boys,,. One day, as we were digging, we heard voices shouting, "Air raid!" and "Germans!" The grown-ups ran for shelter, but we wondered what German planes were like and what Germans were like. The planes flew overhead, but we couldn't see them very clearly. A little later they came back, flying lower this time, and we made out the black crosses on them. We were not at all afraid, merely curious. And then, suddenly, they opened up with machine-gun fire on us, and went on firing. We saw our friends fall boys and girls with whom we had gone to school and had worked together. We were petrified. We couldn't grasp what was happening. We stood there and looked on, but the grown-ups were already running up to us and throwing us on the ground. But all the same we felt no fear...
"Soon the Nazi invaders came very close to our town; they were only about ten kilometres away. So I, together with the other girls, hurried to the military registration and enlistment office. We wanted to help defend our country, we believed It was our duty. But they would not accept any but the strongest and the hardiest; and first of all those who were already eighteen. A captain was selecting girls for a tank unit. He refused even to listen to me, because I was seventeen and wasn't tall enough.
""When an infantryman is wounded, he falls on the ground", he explained to me, "you can crawl to him and bandage him on the spot or drag him to shelter. But it"s quite different with a tankman... If he is wounded in his tank, he must be dragged out of it through the ha(eh. And you wouldn't be able to do that. Do you know what hefty fellows tankmen are? Besides, when you climb up onto a tank, you're under enemy fire, with bullets and shell fragments flying all round you. And have you any idea what it's like when a tank's on fire?'
" "But aren"t I as good a member of the Komsomol as the others?' I said, nearly crying.
" "Of course, you are. But you"re short...'
"However, he accepted my schoolmates with whom I had attended the medical training course. They were all tall, strong girls. It hurt me to think that they were to leave for the front and I was to stay behind.
"I didn't say a word to my parents, of course. But I went to see the girls off and they took pity on me and hid me in the lorry under a tarpaulin. We rode in an open thirty-hundred-weight lorry, all wrapped in kerchiefs: some wore black kerchiefs, others blue or red ones. Shura Kiselyova even took a guitar with her. We rode on and soon we saw trenches. The men saw us and shouted, "Singers have come! Singers have come!" We were even offended: we had gone to the front to fight and they thought we were entertainers...
"We rode up to the headquarters and the Captain gave the command, "Fall in!" We all lined up: I was the last. The other girls had some luggage with them, but I had none. I had gone to the front unexpectedly, so I hadn't taken anything with me. Shura gave me her guitar, "Well, at least you"ll have something to hold..,'
"The chief of staff came out and the captain reported to him:
" Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, twelve girls have arrived to serve under your command.'
"The chief of staff looked at us and said:

" "Not twelve-thirteen!"
"But the Captain insisted:
" "Sorry, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, but there are twelve." He was absolutely sure there were twelve; but when he turned and looked it us, he immediately went up to me, "Why are you here?"
"And I said, "I"ve come to fight, Comrade Captain!'
" "Well, come nearer!"
" "I"ve come with a friend...'
" "You can go to a dance with a friend. But there"s a war going in here,.. Come nearer, please.'
"My mother's pullover wrapped around my head, I walked up to them, banded them my certificate from the medical orderlies training school, and said: "I"m strong, Uncle Officers, I've worked as a nurse. I was a blood donor... Please...'
"They looked at all my documents and the lieutenant-colonel said:
"Send her back home! By the first passing vehicle!"
"And until such a vehicle came I was temporarily attached to the medical platoon and was given the task of making gauze swabs. When I saw a car approaching the headquarters, I immediately stole into the wood and stayed there an hour or two until the oar drove off. Then I returned to my place...
"It continued like that for three days until our battalion went into battle the 1st Tank Battalion of the 32nd Tank Brigade... Everyone set off for the battle and I was left behind to prepare the dug-outs for the wounded. It wasn't half an hour before the first wounded men began to arrive... And dead men, too... One of our girls was also killed in that battle. And they had forgotten about me, of course; they had already got accustomed to me. The commander had stopped thinking about me...
"What was I to do next? I had to be dressed in military uniform. We had all been given kit bags for our belongings. The bags were brand new. So I cut off the straps, ripped the bottom open, and put it on. It looked like a uniform skirt... I found a tunic that wasn't torn too badly, put it on, fastened it with a belt and decided to show off before the other girls. Hardly had I finished my "demonstration" when our sergeant-major walked into our dug-out, followed by our unit commander.
" "Tention!"
"The lieutenant-colonel walked in and the sergeant-major addressed him:
" "Permission to speak, Comrade Lieutenant-colonel? The girls here have created a problem. I"ve issued them kit hags to put their things in, but instead they've got into them themselves!'
"The commander recognized me and said:
" "Aha, so it"s you, Miss Stowaway! Well, Sergeant, you must fit out the girls!
"And no one remembered about the car to take me home. We were all given issue clothing. Tankmen wore strong canvas trousers, which in addition were reinforced at the knees, but we were issued thin overalls made of a kind of cotton print, But the ground was half earth, half metal and lots of loose stones, so very soon we were again wearing rags, because we did not sit in tanks, but had to crawl on the ground. Tanks often caught fire and the tankmen, if they remained alive, were all covered with burns. And we also got burns, because, to get hold of the burning men, we had to rush right into the flames. It's very difficult to drag out a man, especially a turret gunner, from the hatch.
"...We had come to the front without any previous training and we couldn't tell insignia. So the sergeant-major would teach us, explaining to us that we were now real soldiers, had to salute

everyone who had a higher rank and should always look smart, and that our greatcoats must always be buttoned up.
"But the men, who saw that we were very young girls, liked to play jokes on us. One day I was sent to bring the tea to our medical platoon. I went to the cook. He looked at me and said:
" "What is it you want?"
" "I"ve come for the tea,' I said.
" "The tea isn"t ready yet.'
" "And why?"
" "The cooks are washing in the cauldrons. Soon they"ll have finished washing, and then we'll boil the water for the tea...'
"I took what he said literary, collected my empty buckets and went back. On the way I ran into the doctor.
" "Why are you coming back empty-banded?" he asked.
" "The cooks are washing in the cauldrons," I said, "so the tea isn"t ready yet.'
"The doctor clutched his head: "What cooks are washing in the cauldrons?"
"He sent me back and told off that cook. So they quickly poured me two bucketfuls of tea.
"As I was going back with the tea, I came across the chief of the political department and the brigade commander, I remembered at once that we had been told to salute everyone, because we were privates. But there were two of them. How was I to salute both of them? And they were approaching. Soon we drew level. I pot down my buckets and brought both my hands to the peak of my cap, saluting each of them. They had been walking without talcing any notice of me, but now they stopped in their tracks in amazement.
" "Who taught you to salute that way?"
" "The sergeant-major did. He says we must salute everyone. But there are two of you walking together..,"
"Everything in the army was complicated for us young girls. It was very difficult for us to learn to distinguish the badges of rank. When we joined the army, they still wore rhombuses, squares and rectangles. Just try and determine a man's rank! Somebody would say, "Take this packet to the captain." But how was I to know who was the captain. On the way I often clean forgot even the word "captain". I would come and say:
" "Comrade Uncle, eh, Comrade Uncle, the comrade has told me to give you this..."
" "What comrade?"
" "The one in the blue trousers and a green tunic..."
"We remembered not that this man was a lieutenant, and that one a captain, but other things: whether he was handsome or plain, or red-haired or tail... We would remember, "Oh, that tall one!"
"Soon, of course, when I had seen burnt overalls, burnt hands and burnt faces, I understood what war was. When tankmen jumped out of their burning machines, they were all ablaze. Besides, they often broke their arms or legs. They were serious cases. They would lie and beg us, "If I die, please write to my mother or to my wife..." And we had already experienced something more terrible than fear.
"When tankmen themselves picked me up with wounded legs and took me to a village it was the village of Zheltoye, the Kirovograd region, the old woman who owned the cottage where the medical platoon was quartered, wailed: "Oh, what a fine young lad! How young he Is!.."
"The tankmen laughed:
" "But it"s not a lad, Granny, it's a lass!'
"She sat down beside me and peered at me: "It"s not a lassie. Not a lassie at all. It's a young lad...'
"My hair was cropped short and I was wearing an overall and a tankman's helmet I did look like a boy... She put me on the best

sleeping-bench in her house and even had a sucking-pig slaughtered to feed me and get me on my feet as quickly as possible... She was sorry for me, and would grumble:
" "Aren"t there enough men that they call up our children?.. and lassies at that...'
"At eighteen I was awarded the medal For Combat Services and the Order of the Red Star for participating in the Battle of Kursk, and at nineteen I was awarded the Order of the Patriotic War Second Class. When reinforcements arrived they consisted of young boys, of course, who were surprised to see my decorations. We were the same age-they were also eighteen or nineteen-and they would sometimes ask me ironically, "What were you given your medals for?... But have you ever taken part in the fighting?" Or they would tease me with questions like, "Can bullets pierce a tank"s armour?'
"Once I happened to bandage one of those teasers on a battle-field under enemy fire. I even remember his surname Shchegolevatykh. He had a broken leg... As I was putting his leg in splints, he was begging me to forgive him:
" "Please forgive me for teasing you then, Sister..."
"And what did we know about love then? The love some of us may have known was school pupils' love, which is but puppy love. I remember we were encircled by the enemy one day... We were being pressed from all sides. And we had decided to try to break through at night: either we would succeed or we would all die. We didn't think much of our chances... I really don't know whether I should tell you about this...
"Well, we were sitting there, waiting for nightfall in order to try to break through. And Lieutenant Misha T., who had taken over the command of our battalion because our battalion commander had been wounded-he wasn't any more than nineteen said... Well, he said to me:
" "Have you tasted it yet?"
" "Tasted what?" I asked we hadn't eaten for a long time and I was terribly hungry.
" "Not what, but who..."
" "No-o-o!"
" "And I haven"t either. We may die without learning what love's like... We may be killed tonight...'
" "What are you talking about, you idiot!" I said when I finally understood what he meant.
"What was frightening was not that you might be killed but that you would die without knowing life, without experiencing anything. That was the most frightening thing. We were ready to die for the sake of life without even knowing what life was."
And again Nina Yakovlevna returned to the most tormenting, the most gnawing theme:
"...In tank units medical orderlies didn't last long. There was no place in a tank for us. We clung to the armour and thought about one thing only: how to keep our feet clear of the caterpillars so we wouldn't get dragged in. And all the time you had to watch if there were any tanks on fire. You had to run, to crawl there... There were five of us, five friends at the front: Lyuba Yasinskaya, Shura Kiselyova, Tonya Bobkova, Zina Latysh and me. The tankmen called us the "Konakovo girls," And they were all killed, except me...
"The day before she was kited in a battle, Lyuba and I sat side by side in the evening. We sat there arm in arm and talked. It was the year 1943. Our division had reached the Dnieper. Suddenly Lyuba said, "You know, I"m going to die in this battle.,. I have a foreboding. I went to the sergeant-major and asked him to give me fresh underwear, but he was mean. He said, "But I've given you a change quite recently." Let's go together in the morning and ask him again.' I tried to calm her, "We"ve been fighting for two years now; the bullets are afraid of us.'

"But in the morning she persuaded me to go to the sergeant-major. And we got a change of fresh underwear from him. And then that new undershirt... It was snow-white with tapes, you know.., It was all covered with blood... And that combination of white and red- the bright-red of blood-haunts my memory. She had imagined herself to look just like that...

"The four of us brought her in on a waterproof cape: she had become so heavy. We laid all the boys we had lost many people in that battle and Lyuba on top. I just couldn't comprehend that she was no more, that she was dead. I decided to take at least something in memory of her. There was a ring on her finger-I don't know whether it was of gold or something more modest-and I took it, even though the lads cade me not to take it, saying that it was a bad omen. When we were paying them our last tribute and, as is customary, throwing a handful of earth into the grave, I also threw a lump of earth, and the ring slipped off my finger and into the grave... To where Lyuba was... It was then that I recalled that she had loved that ring very much... Her father fought throughout the war and returned alive and her brother, too, returned from the front. The men in their family all came back and Lyuba perished...

"Shura Kiselyova who was the most beautiful of us got burnt. She was hiding the heavily wounded soldiers in haystacks, when they were shelled and the hay caught fire. Shura could have saved herself but she would then have to abandon the wounded, none of whom could move... The wounded got all burnt ... and Shura together with them...

"It was only recently that I learned how Tonya Bobkova had died. She shielded the man she loved from a mine fragment. Fragments fly... Well, it's a matter of a split second... How did she manage? She saved Lieutenant Petya Boichevsky. She loved him. And he remained alive.

"Thirty years later Petya came from Krasnodar and found me at the meeting of our war veterans, and told me that. We went to Borisov together and found the clearing where Tonga had died. He picked a handful of earth from her grave and then wrote to me that he had buried it in his mother's grave. "I have two mothers," he wrote; "the one who bore me, and Tonya, who saved my life..."

"Five girls, five schoolmates, had left for the front, and I was the only one who returned home. Why was I the one who came back? The other girls died and I returned... There are their portraits hanging over there...

"I travel a lot and tell people about them... And write... My son says, "You never have enough time." I haven't missed a single reunion of war veterans. No matter how ill I may be, I'll go, even if I have to crawl... It's my life... From one reunion to the next..."

And all of a sudden Nina Yakovlevna broke into poetry:

Of all the brave acts that I haven seen
And I have seen a lot of them, believe me,
The shielding of a friend from death,
And taking him away from danger is the noblest...

"It's my own verse," she said, slyly. "I wrote a hit of poetry at the front and still do now. Our girls liked my verses..."

Surprisingly, quite a few of them wrote poetry at the front, and even today their verses are carefully copied and preserved in family archives-those awkward, moving, heartfelt lines, which, after so many contacts and meetings, I have come to regard as documents. In these "heartfelt documents" I hear a specific epoch and see a specific generation.

But Nina Yakovlevna had not yet finished her story:

"Ten years ago I found Vanya Pozdnyakov. We thought he had been killed, but he turned out to be alive. The tank he commanded destroyed two German tanks in the battle of Prokhorovka but then it caught fire. The rest of the crew all died; only Vanya remained alive alive, but

he had lost his eyes and was terribly burnt. We sent him to hospital, but didn't think he would pull through. I found bun thirty years later. I remember I was climbing the stairs and my legs were about to give way: was it him or not? He opened the door himself, touched me with his hands, and recognized me, "It"s you, Nina, isn't it?' Can you imagine? After so many years he recognized me!
"His mother was very old. He lived with her. She sat with us at the table, crying. And I said:
" "Why are you crying? You should be happy that two war comrades have met."
"And she replied:
" "Three sons of mine left for the front. Two were killed. Vanya alone came back alive."
"And Vanya had lost both his eyes... The last thing he had seen was the field near Prokhorovka and the tank battle... I asked him what he thought about that day. And do you know what he said?
" I'm sorry only about one thing I ordered my crew to leave the tank too early. The boys would have died all the same, but we could have cripped one more German tank...'
"And that's the only thing he's regretted all this time..."
My meeting with Nina Yakovlevna had a follow-up in the form of letters. When I had made a transcript of her story I sent her a copy, as I had promised. Several weeks later I received a heavy parcel by registered post from Moscow. Inside were newspaper clippings, articles and official reports on the military and patriotic work carried out by war veteran Nina Yakovlevna Vishnevskaya. The copy I had sent her was also included, with the funniest episodes all crossed out, among them those of the cooks washing in the cauldrons and even the innocuous "Comrade Uncle, eh, Comrade Uncle, the comrade had told me to give you this...", so that little remained of her original story. Three indignant question marks had been put on the margins against the story of Lieutenant Misha T.
I was to witness more than once afterwards that one and the same person had two truths, as it were. Or if, for example, there happened to be some relation, friend or neighbour during our conversation the hostess would be less sincere and confiding than when the two of us were alone. I even observed a certain pattern, namely, the bigger the audience the drier and less compelling the account. Everything was exactly the way it happened with Nina Yakovlevna, who told me one story of the war, as "to a daughter, so that you understood what we quite young girls had to go through" and had another story intended for a big audience "the way others tell it or as it is described in newspapres..."
I was reading Nina Yakovlevna's letter, recalling how we cosily drank tea with her in the kitchen and she spoke and the two of us wept.

"TWO WARS ARE STILL ON IN OUR HOUSE"

As soon as I opened the door to a small house on Kakhovskaya Street in Minsk I heard: "Two wars are styll on in our house". Petty Officer First Class Olga Vasilyevna Podvyshenskaya served in a naval unit on the Baltic. Her husband Sergeant Saul Genrikhovich served in the infantry.
Together with him I looked through their family album, while Olga Vasilyevna was talking over the telephone with her daughter.
"Giving the end-of-the-day instructions," Saul Genrikhovich laughed.
I could hear through the glass door:
"Coughing? Why, she never coughed a single time in the whole day she was with me. Give her a cup of hot tea with raspberry jam and wrap my scarf around her neck..."
Granny's scarf is, of course, the surest remedy.

"Could that be me?" she said when she joined us again and took a photograph showing her in a sailors uniform with military decorations. "Whenever I look at these photographs, I never stop being amazed. Saul once showed them to our granddaughter-she was five at the time and she asked me: "Granny, you were first a boy, weren"t you?' How d'you like that?' she grew sad. "Could we hope then that we would live to see our grandchildren? We had a reunion last year all of us are already grandmothers and grandfathers. Can you imagine a whole battalion of grand-mems and grand-dads?.."

She seems to be fond of those "can-you-imagine" questions Looking at her, so swift and girlishly easily amused (her merry laughter often rings out like a bell), I indeed want to imagine her the way she was in 1941...

"Olga Vasilyevna, did you go to the front right from the start?"

"No, I was evacuated at first and throughout the journey our train was shelled and bombed by low-flying planes. I remember a group of hoys from a vocational school jumping out of a carriage, all dressed in black greatcoats. They were an easy target and got all shot down. The planes flew so low above the earth... I had the feeling that they were shooting and counting... Can you Imagine that?..

"We worked at a factory where we were fed and rather wellplaced, but our hearts were on fire... I received call-up papers in June 1942. Thirty girls, with me among them, were taken on open barges under fire across Lake Ladoga to besieged Leningrad. My recollections of the first day in Leningrad are those of the white nights and a marching detachment of sailors dressed in black. It was felt that the situation was tense: I could see no inhabitants, only searchlights and sailors marching, all strapped by belts, as if it were a scene from the Civil War. Something like a movie. Can you imagine that?..

"The city was completely sealed and the Nazis were very close. Tram No. 3 went as far as the Kirov Works and that was where the front started. Whenever the weather was clear, the city came under fierce shelling with direct laying. Big ships were moored at the peer camouflaged, of course, out stir under the threat of being hit. Our task was to provide the smokescreen. A special smokescreen detachment was formed under Lieutenant Commander Alexander Nikolayevich Bogdanov, former commander of a torpedo boat flotilla. The girls had in the main a secondary technical schooling or had had one or two years of higher school. Our task was to shield the ships with smokescreen. As soon as the shewing began, the sailors would say: "We wish the girls hang the smokescreen as quickly as possible. It feels safer with it." We would go out in lorries with a special mixture, while all the people were hiding in bomb shelters. We were actually drawing the enemy's fire upon ourselves, as the saying goes, because it was at the smokescreen that the Germans fired...

"The food we got was that of the besieged city, but somehow we managed to survive... To begin with, we were young, which Is of no small importance, and then we admired the Leningraders themselves. After all we were provided with at least the bare necessities, whereas in the city you could see people walk and then collapse all of a sudden. Several children used to call on us and we shared our meagre rations with them. They didn't look like normal children but rather like some small withered old people, We tried hard to hold on, working on a par with men. When Leningrad ran out of fuel in winter we were sent to pull down houses in one of the city districts where they still had some wooden buildings. We found it most oppressing to approach a house like that... They stood there, handsome, their inhabitants either dead or gone, and we now had to pull them down. For about half an hour or so nobody would be able to raise a crow-bar and we would just stand there. It was not until the commander stepped forward and plunged the crow-bar in that the rest of us would join in.

"We also felled trees and carried boxes with ammunition. I remember carrying one such box and having a nasty fall... That was one thing and another thing was that we, being women, had to go through so many difficulties. There was, for example, the following fact. Later on I was appointed section commander and the whole of the section was made up of young boys. We used to spend the whole day on board a launch. The launches were small and had no latrines. The boys could relieve themselves just overboard. And what were we girls supposed to do? A couple of times I held it back for so long that I finally jumped right overboard and had a swim. They would call out: "Petty Officer overboard!" and pull me out. I seems a trifle, doesn't It? Or take the weight of weapons, which was also much too heavy for women. We were at first issued rifles which were bigger than ourselves. Girls marching with bayonets towering above them for half a metre. Can you imagine that?..

"It was easier for men to adjust themselves to many things. We felt terribly homesick and missed our mothers and the cosiness of our homes. We had a Muscovite, Natasha Zhilina, who was awarded a medal For Valour and was given a leave to go home for a few days as a reward. When she came back we all wanted to smell her. Thaw's right, we would virtually queue to smell her, saying that she smelted home so wonderfully, That was how we missed our homes...

"Whenever there was a minute of respite we would sit there embroidering some kerchiefs. Given some cloth for puttees, we would trim it with crochet and make scarves out of it. We wanted to do something women usually do: we missed our women's chores. It was all downright unbearable so we sought any pretext to take a needle and mend something in order to look natural at least for the time being.

"I think we had gone nimb as it were, in the war nobody had ever had a hearty laugh or been really happy all the while. Why, we had, of course, laughed and been happy but it was different from what it had been before the war. And as long as the war lasted people were in some special state that they couldn't escape. Can you imagine it?..."

The question came as a surprise and reminded me of what I had come to their place for. The tape would preserve the words and the intonation, while it was for me to "record" the eyes, the faces and hands and the way they grew agitated and moved. It was necessary to "record" how well the pathetically girlish out of the blouse with a dotted tie suited Olga Vasilyevna and how high-strung Saul Genrikhovich became excited, seemed to outgrow the chair, which was too narrow for him, and moved to the sofa where, broad and thickset next to his wife, as miniature as a statuette, he seemed even bigger. Looking at the two of them, it was difficult, almost Impossible to imagine that both of them had fought in the war.

But they had.

"Both of us have fought in the war," Saul Genrikhovich said, "but one may think that we had been in two different wars... When we start to recall things I have a feeling she had remembered her own war and I that of my own. I, too, experienced something of the sort she described to you when she spoke about home or about them queuing to smell the girl who had come back from home. But I don't remember such things,.. She hasn't told you yet of sailors' caps. Have you forgotten about it, Olya?"

"No, I haven't," Olga Vasilyevna grew tense all of a sudden. "I just haven't had the heart... We had been under attack till nightfall. I went out in the morning and there were sailors' caps flowing along the Morskoi Canal... Our sailors had been thrown into the Neva somewhere. Those caps kept flowing by as long as I stood there."

"I've memorized many of her stories to be able to tell them to our grandchildren. And I often note that I tell them about her experience in that war rather than my own. They find it more interesting, I

should say," Saul Genrikhovich admitted. "I have more concrete military knowledge and she is richer in feelings. And feelings are always more impressive. I mean it was the same during the war. We, too, had girls in the infantry. And whenever one of them appeared among us we would Immediately brace ourselves up. You can't imagine... That's her word by the way. But you just can't imagine how good it was to catch woman's laughter or glance at the front!

"Was there love at the front? Yes, there was and the women we met there have become wonderful wives and loyal friends. Those who got married at the front are the happiest people and the happiest couples. We, too, fell in love with each other at the front. I am not going to deny that there also were quite different things because it was a long war and so many of us had gone to the front. But I remember better things that were bright and pure... They are not, as they say, for comment, We are afraid to admit it to ourselves... Not all of our daughters are happy in their private lives. Quite a few of them have had unhappy marriages. And you know why-their mothers who had been at the front have taught their daughters to respect the morals they themselves stuck to at the front. At the front the worth of every person could be seen immediately. And their daughters had no idea that in life things could be different from what they were in their families. They hadn't been warned against meanness which exists. These girls sometimes became an easy prey to rogues who married them and then cheated because It was easy to cheat them. This happened to many children of our wartime friends and to our daughter as well..."

"For some reason we never told our children about the war," Olga Vasilyevna grew pensive. "I didn't even wear my battle ribbons. I took them off on one occasion and never pinned them hack. I was director of a mechanized bakery at the time. At one of the conferences my chief, also a woman, saw my ribbons and told me off in public, saying that I wore my ribbons just to show off. She herself had a labour order, which she wore, hut for some reason objected to my wearing my military decorations. Later, when we were alone, I told her the way sailors do what I thought of her and she felt embarrassed for her own behaviour, As for me, I grew loath to wear my decorations. Not even now, though I'm proud to have been to the front and to have won credit for that. However, It was not until some time after the war that they began to talk about

front-line soldiers. Our granddaughter knows everything about us: she Is keen to know, we tell her about our past and they write compositions at school on the topic. On the other hand, we never told about it to our children and they never asked...

"We front-line soldiers are very grateful to journalist Vera Tkachenko who was the first to write in "Pravda" that there were women who had fought at the front and remained single, insecure and without flats of their own and that we all owed them an apology. It was only then that some attention was bestowed upon former women soldiers. Those women were already forty or fifty but they sty lived in hostels. Then one by one they began to receive separate flats. My friend... I shan't give her name for she may get offended... She had been wounded three times. When the war was over she entered a medical institute. She had no relations, lived in poverty and washed floors for a living. She did not want anybody to know that she was an invalid and had torn up all her papers certifying to it, I asked her, "Why did you do that?" "And who would take me for a wife with those papers?" she answered. "Well," I said, "you were right to do so." But she burst into tears. "Those papers could have come in useful now. I"m so ill...'

"One hundred seamen, Great Patriotic War veterans from all the fleets, including three women, were invited to Sevastopol to mark the 35th Anniversary of the Victory. Two of them were my girlfriend and me. And

the Admiral of the Fleet bowed to each of us, publicly thanked us and kissed our hands."
"And why didn't you tell your children about the war?"
Olga Vasilyevna remained silent.
"Perhaps, we didn't yet see at the time nor comprehend what we had accomplished," Saul Genrikhovich said. "Decades later life made us ponder on things we had gone through. Until then the war had been too recent a past and too horrible to be recalled. We wanted to save our children from the horror,"
"Did you want to forget it?"
"That was impossible even if we tried hard. My wife has a sister who is seventy-five and a widow. Her two sons die! not return from the front. One had been blown up by a grenade, the other had sent her only one letter, saying: "We"re going in a merry mood, going to the front. Everything is fine.' It was only after the war that she was notified that he had been reported missing. She doesn't even know in what area, where it happened. She Is still hoping to find a common grave and meanwhile comes to the Eternal Flame. I've been a soldier after all and I'm no softling but I can't keep away tears when I think of her. And you ask if we wanted to forget it...
"Do you remember, Olya, how we met a very old woman on Victory Day? She had a worn-out placard hanging on her neck: "Looking for Thomas Vladimirovich Kulnev, reported missing in besieged Leningrad in 1942." One could see by her face that she was long past seventy. Just think how many years she had been looking for him. I would show a photograph of her to anyone who asks today why we should recall the war for so long... And you ask if we wanted to forget it..."
"And I did want to forget it.,. I do want to forget it,..." Olga Vasilyevna said slowly almost in a whisper, as if to herself.
"Whenever she is sleepless I know she had been recalling the war... Compared to her, I've done nothing for the Victory: It was just my duty to do what I did as a man. As for the girls who had been able to go through such a war, we can't do enough for them. Any former front-line man would tell you that. I don't know whether young girls should have been allowed to take part in the war. But they did take part in the war and their contribution was immense. Like us, they wore tarpaulin boots and heavy greatcoats, slept in the snow and were hit by bullets and fragments. I recall a festively dressed woman marching along Leninsky Prospekt of May 9. She had only one medal but it was a medal for Valour and she marched somewhat shyly. And I had an urge to come up to her and embrace her, saying: "My darling, we should bow low to you for your only medal..." We all are greatly indebted to them..."
I remember them together the way they figure on wartime photographs.
"A TELEPHONE RECEIVER DOES NOT SHOOT..."
"We'll have some pies. I've been busy making them since morning..." Such was Valentina Pavlovna Chudayeva's jovial greeting. And then, anticipating my bewilderment, she immediately assured me, "I'll tell you my story all right... I'll be shedding tears yet... I've already scolded the girls for having given you my address. I have a weak heart as it is and live on tablets and pills. But first let's try the pies. With bird-cherry filling... The way they make them in my native Siberia..." And then, addressing someone else in a louder voice, to make sure she was heard, "We were waiting for a reporter... Now come here and see what she's like. She spoke seriously on the phone, but she's really just a young girl." And then, speaking to me again, "Don't pay any attention, please ... that's the sort of person I am I always say what I think."
"Let our visitor look around first. Leave her in peace... What a boor you are!" came a voice from the kitchen.

"Oh, she won't mind. She's one of us; she'll understand." But she still had some doubts: "Are all your reporters so young? Or is it just my luck?" There and then she offered a reassurance: "I won't be young any more, whereas you are still to grow old. Don't hurry.., Do come in. No need for ceremony here. D'you mind my talking to you like that? We're still on wartime terms: "Well, girls! C'mon, girls!..," As you see, we have made no fortune... A chocolate box is big enough to hold all that my husband and I have accumulated a couple of orders and some medals. They are in the sideboard; I'll show you later." She took me into the room. "The furniture, as you see, is also quite old. We're used to it and want no changes, Our daughter at first laughed, then turned to scolding. You young people want everything new and modern..."

Alexandra Fyodorovna Zenchenko, who during the war was a Komsomol organizer in besieged Leningrad, helped me to feel at ease at the table.

"D'you know how long we've been friends?" Valentina Pavlovna asked me after introducing me to Alexandra Fyodorovna. "As many years as have passed since the war..."

"Take care you don't interrupt her," Alexandra Fyodorovna warned me. "If she stops, she's start crying. I know that already..."

"The tea's been ready a long time. I'll go and bring it."

"You sit here... I'll go myself..."

Oh, how hard it was for her to go back to that time even in her memory! How frightening,..

Sergeant Valentina Pavlovna Chudayeva, anti-aircraft-gun crew commander.

"What made me, a girl from remote Siberia, volunteer for the front? From Siberia, from the end of the world, as they say. A United Nations representative I met one day asked me about that "end of the world"... He had been looking at me attentively now and again in the museum there, and I even began to feel embarrassed. Then he approached me and addressed me through an interpreter, "Will Mrs. Chudayeva be kind enough to give me an interview?" I was terribly agitated, of course. What can I tell him? I thought. I'll tell him what I've already said in the museum, But he seemed to be interested in something else. First of all he paid me a compliment, "You look so young... How could you have gone through the war?" And I said, "Well, you see, we were very young when we went to the front." But this wasn't what he was interested in.

"He said he believed Siberia to be the. end of the world. "Oh, no," I guessed. "You must be wondering if there was total mobilization in our country and what made me, a mere schoolgirl, go to the front?" He nodded, "Yes, yes." "All right," I said, "I"ll answer that question.' And I'm going to tell you now all I told him all about my life...

"I don't remember my mother. She lost her life young. My father was a representative of the Novosibirsk District Committee. In 1925 he was sent to his native village for grain. The country needed grain badly, but the rich farmers kulaks hid the grain and rotted it. I was nine months old then. My mother decided to go with father to that village. She was born there, too. And he took her along. They also took me and my sister: there was no one to leave us with. One evening at a meeting of the villagers my father threatened the kulak he had worked for as a farmhand, "We know where you"ve hidden the grain; if you don't hand it in yourself, we'll come and take it from you by force.'

"When the meeting was over, all our relatives got together my father had five brothers. None of them, including my father, returned from the Great Patriotic War. Well, they sat down at the table, on which there were our traditional Siberian meat dumplings. The benches ran along the wall... Mother was sitting in the space between two windows,

with one shoulder turned towards a window and the other towards father. And father was sitting where there were no windows. It was April... In Siberia there are still frosts in April sometimes, Evidently mother felt cold. I understood it later, when I had already grown up. She stood up, threw on father's sheepskin jacket and began to nurse me. At that moment the report of a rifle was heard. They wanted to shoot my father and aimed at the sheepskin jacket... All my mother managed to say was, "Pa..." And she dropped me on the hot dumplings. She was twenty-four years old them..

"Later on my grandfather was chairman of the village Soviet in that same village. He was poisoned with strychnine added to water. I still have a photograph showing grandfather's burial. There was a banner above the coffin, saying: "Died at the hand of class enemy."

"My father was a hero of the Civil War; he commanded an armoured train, which was in action against the mutinied Czechoslovak Corps. In 1931 he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner. At that time very few people had that order, especially in Siberia, where we lived. It meant great prestige and was very highly respected. Father had nineteen bullet wounds on his body; he was all covered with scars. Mother told, of course, not to me but to our relatives that
the white Czekhs had sentenced father to twenty years of penal servitude. She asked to be allowed to see him; she was at that time eight months pregnant with Tasya, my elder sister. There was a long corridor in prison, along which she was not allowed to walk. She was told: "Crawl, you, Bolshevist scum!.." And she thus crawled along that long cement corridor to father a few days before giving birth to a child. That was how they were avowed to see each other in prison. She hardly recognized father: his hair had gone completely grey...

"How could I remain indifferent when an enemy had once again invaded my country I, who had grown up in such a family and who had such a wonderful father? He had gone through a lot... Somebody wanted to slander him and produced a delation in 1937. But he insisted on being received by President Kalinin and was restored his good name. Everybody knew my father...

"And now imagine-it was 1941. The farewell party for the school-leavers was under way in our school. We all had our own plans, our own dreams-we were young girls after all. After the party, we sailed down the river Ob to an island. When we left the city, it looked normal, as it always did. We were all so merry, so happy... We had never yet been kissed by any boys; we didn't even have boy friends. We watched dawn breaking and then sailed back... But the whole of the city was in commotion; many people were in tears. And from all sides came, "There"s war! There's war!' All the radios were turned on. But we couldn't grasp it. What war? We had been so happy, we had made such plans what college we would enter, what we would become... And then like a bolt from the blue: there's war! Grown-ups were in tears, hut we felt no fear; we assured one another that it would take us less than a month "to smash the Nazis to smithereens", a song we sang before the war, it was a current idea that we would carry the war back onto enemy territory... We understood everything when people began receiving "killed in action" notices.

"They refused to call up my father for active duty. But he kept pestering the military registration and enlistment office and soon he went to the front. In spite of his poor health, his grey hair, and his weak lungs he had tuberculosis and in spite of his age! But he joined the "Steel Division" it was also called "Stalin"s Division' which included many Siberians. We, too, felt that there could he no war without us taking part, that we, too, must fight. We wanted arms at once! So we hurried to the military registration and enlistment office. And on the loth of February I was ready to leave for the front. My step-mother was weeping bitterly, "Don"t go, Valya... What

are you doing? You're so small and so thin! What kind of soldier d'ye think you'll be?' I had for a long time suffered from rickets. That happened after my mother was murdered. I couldn't walk till I was five years old... But after our country was invaded I felt a surge of energy !

"For two months we travelled in heated goods vans. Two thousand girls a whole train. We were accompanied by officers who trained us. We were to be signallers. We arrived in the Ukraine and it was there that we were bombed for the first time. It happened just as we were taking a shower in an army bath-house. When we entered the bath-house, there was a man on duty there he was in charge of the bath-house. We felt embarrassed in his presence: we were quite young girls, you know. But when the bombing started, we all rushed to that man, thinking only about our safety. We got dressed somehow. I wrapped my head in a towel I had a red towel and we rushed out, A senior lieutenant, also a mere boy, yelled at me:

" "To the bomb shelter! Throw down that towel! You're giving away our camouflage!..'

"But I ran away from him, shouting: "I"m not giving anything away! Mother doesn't allow me to go out with wet hair.'

""After the air raid, he found me and said, "Why didn"t you obey my command? I'm your superior officer.' But I didn't believe him. "What! Superior officer indeed!" I quarrelled with that young lieutenant. He was just a boy, not more than a year older than myself.

"We were Issued greatcoats; they were thick and too large. We moved about, looking like hayricks: we didn't walk, but waddled, At first there were not even any boots for us. That is to say, there were boots, but they were all men's sizes. Later they replaced our boots; they gave us now, red ones, with black tarpaulin tops. Didn't we show off then!

"We were all short and thin, so our field-shirts hung loosely on us. Those of us who could sew, fitted them for themselves somehow. But we wanted to do better than that. We were young girls, after all! Well, so our sergeant-major began measuring us. You'd have roared with laughter, if you'd seen it, but it wasn't really funny at all! Our battalion commander dropped by and asked us, "Well, have you received all your gear?" And the sergeant-major replied, "I"ve taken their measurements... It'll be issued...'

"So I became a signaller in an anti-aircraft unit. I was assigned to a command post to receive and send messages. And I might have remained a signaller right to the end of the war, had I not received a notice that my father had been killed in action. When that happened I asked them to send me to the front line, "I want to avenge my father, to settle scores with the Nazis." I wanted to fight, to take revenge, to shoot... They tried to tell me that a telephone was very important for the artillery. But a telephone receiver does not shoot you know... I wrote an application to our regimental commander. But he turned down my request. Then, without wasting time, I wrote to the commander of the division. Soon Colonel Krasnykh came, lined us all up, and said, "Where is the girl who wants to be a gun-crew commander?" And there I stood a short girl, with a thin neck. And from that neck a submachine gun was hanging a heavy one, with seventy-one cartridges... I must have been quite a pitiful sight... He looked at me, "What do you want?" And I said, "I want to shoot." I don't know what he thought. He gazed at me for a long time, then turned round and walked off. Well, I thought, that's a flat refusal. Presently our commander came running. "The colonel has given you permission,.."

"I took a short-term training course, very short indeed just three months and became a gun-crew commander. I was sent to Antiaircraft Regiment 1357. At first my nose and ears bled and my stomach was

completely upset... It wasn't so terrible at night, but in the daytime it was simply awful. The planes seemed to be heading straight for you, right for you gun. In a second they would make mincemeat of you... It was not really a young girl's job... At first we had '85s; they had acquited themselves well at the approaches to Moscow. Later they were used as anti-tank guns, and we were given '37s. That was in the Rzhev sector. Heavy fighting was under way there then... In the spring the ice on the Volga began to break... And one day we saw an ice-floe drifting downstream and on it two or three Germans and one Russian soldier... They had died gripping one another, got frozen into that floe, and the whole floe was splashed with blood. Can you picture it? All the water in Mother Volga was mixed with blood..."

Valentina Pavlovna suddenly paused in the middle of a word and appealed, "I can't... Let me catch my breath... It's so hard... Alexandra has persuaded me to take some sedative; that at least holds my tears back..."

"And I recalled besieged Leningrad, while listening to Valentina," Alexandra Fyodorovna said. "Especially one occasion which stunned all of us. We were told about some elderly lady who opened the window every day and ripped out a saucepan of water into the street, reaching out farther and farther with every throw. We thought at first that perhaps she was insane so many things happened during the siege but then somebody went to her and asked her what she was doing. And just listen to what she said. "If the Nazis enter Leningrad and step upon my street I"ll scald them with boiling water. I'm old and no longer capable of doing anything else, so I'll scald them with boiling water.' And she kept practising... She was an educated lady, and I remember her face even now.

"She chose that method of opposition that was in her power. You have to picture that period... The enemy was already close, battles were fought try the larva Gates, and the shops of the Kirov Works were being shelled... There were many people who sought any way to join the fighting even when It seemed that they were not capable of much. That was what impressed us most of all..."

"I returned from the front a cripple," Valentina Pavlovna continued her story. "I was wounded in the hack by a fragment. The wound was not large, but I was thrown far away into a snowdrift. And it so happened that for a few days I hadn't dried my felt boots; either there was no firewood to hand or my turn to dry my boots hadn't come round yet our stove was small and there were a lot of us to be dried out. So when they found me, my legs had been badly frozen. Evidently I had been buried under the snow; but I was breathing and that had formed a kind of pipe through the snow. I was discovered by dogs. They dug in the snow, and brought my hat to the orderlies. In it was my identification card. Everybody had such cards-with the names and addresses of relatives to be informed in case of death. They dug me out and put me on a waterproof cape. My sheepskin coat was all soaked in blood... But nobody paid any attention to my legs...

"I stayed in hospital for six months. They wanted to amputate one leg above the knee, because gangrene had already set in. And it was at that point that I showed the white feather: I didn't want to live as a cripple. Why should I live? Who would want me? I had neither mother nor father. I'd be a burden to everyone. And indeed, who would want me, a human stump? I'd rather hang me... And I asked a hospital attendant to give me a big towel instead of a small one... Everybody at the hospital used to tease me: "We have an old woman here," because when the hospital chief saw me first and asked, "And how old are you?" I promptly replied: "Nineteen... I"ll soon be nineteen...' He laughed, "Oh, that"s quite an age. You are already old...'

"That was how Aunt Maria, a hospital attendant, teased me. On that occasion she told me: "I"ll give you that towel, as you're being

prepared to be operated upon. But I'm gonna keep an eye on you, girl. I somehow don't like that look in your eyes. Could there be something bad on your mind?' I kept silent... But I noticed that I was indeed being prepared for an operation. Though I did not know what it meant to be operated upon I'd never been operated upon before, it's now that my body looks like a geographical map-I realized what was coming. I hid the big towel under my pillow and lay there, waiting for everybody to leave and to fall asleep. We had iron bedsteads and I decided to tie the towel to the bed and hang myself by it. But Aunt Maria did not leave me for a second that night and saved my young soot. She never moved away from my bed till morning...

"And my ward doctor, a young lieutenant, would walk after the head of the hospital pleading, "Let me try, please. Just let me try..." And the head would say to him, "What will you try? One of her toes is already black. The girl is nineteen. She"ll die because of us.' It turned out that my ward doctor was against the amputation. He had proposed another method, which was new at the time: to introduce oxygen under the stein with a special syringe. Oxygen feeds... Well, I can't tell you exactly, I'm not a medical specialist...

"And that young lieutenant managed to persuade the hospital head. They did not amputate my leg, but began treating me according to the new method. And two months later I already started walking-on crutches, to he sure, My legs were like empty stockings;they wouldn't support me. I didn't feel them, I only saw them. Then I learned to walk without the crutches. People said, "You"ve been born a second time.' After I was discharged, I was entitled to convalescence leave. But what kind of leave could I have? Where could I go? To whom? So I went hack to my unit, to my gun. There I joined the Communist Party. At the age of nineteen...

"I celebrated Victory Day in Eastern Prussia. There had already been a lull in the fighting for a couple of clays; nobody was shooting. Suddenly in the middle of the night, there was an air alarm. We all jumped up. And then we heard, "It"s victory! They've surrendered!' That they had surrendered was very good, but the main thing which we grassed at once was that it was victory. "The war"s over! The war's over!' Everyone started firing whatever was to hand a submachine gun, a pistol... And a gun was fired, too... Some men were wiping away tears, others were dancing. "We"re alive! We're alive!' Afterwards our commander said, "Well, you won"t be demobbed until you've paid for the shells. What have you done? How many shells have you fired?' It seemed to us that peace would reign in the world forever, no one would ever want another war, and that all the shells must be destroyed. So that people should never even speak about war...

"And how I longed for home! Even though I had neither mother nor father. But I bow low to my step-mother... She gave me a motherly welcome. I called her mother afterwards. She had been waiting for me eagerly, although the hospital head had written to her so that she should be prepared, that they had amputated my leg and that I would be brought to her like that. He wrote that I would stay with her a while and then they would take me away... But she wanted me to come back alive. And she was waiting for me...

"We went to the front when we were eighteen to twenty and we returned when we were twenty to twenty-five. At first we rejoiced, then we got frightened: what would we be able to do in civilian life? Our former schoolmates had already graduated from colleges or universities. But what were we? We weren't fit for anything: we had no profession or trade. All we knew was war and all we could do was fight. We were eager to forget all about the war. I quickly made myself a coat out of my greatcoat, and replaced the buttons. I sold my tarpaulin boots at the market and bought myself a pair of shoes. When I put on a dress for the first time, I burst out crying. I didn't recognize myself in

the mirror: for four years we'd been wearing trousers. Who could I tell that I'd been wounded and shell-shocked? If I told them, they wouldn't give me a job. But the fact was I had bad legs and my nerves were in a terrible state...

"We kept mum and didn't tell anybody that we had been at the front. True, we stayed in touch with each other and wrote letters to our wartime friends. It was only much later that we began to be honoured and invited to meetings, but then we had kept mum and hand't even worn our decorations. Men did wear them: they were victors, heroes and eligible young men who had fought at the front, whereas we were looked upon with altogether different eyes,

"At the front, the men were very, very considerate to us; they did their best to protect us. I've never seen them treating women in the same way In civilian life. When we retreated, the moment we lay down to rest, they would give us their greatcoats and themselves would lie down on the bare ground in their tunics, "The girls must have something to cover themselves with..." If they found a piece of bandage or a bit of cotton-wool, they would bring it to us, "Take it, perhaps, it"ll come in useful...' They would share their last rusk with us. We saw nothing by kindness and warmth from them. And we were so hurt when after the war we had to hide our soldier's papers...

"When my husband and I got demobilized and came to Minsk we had not a single sheet, nothing. He, too, had been at the front, where he was a battalion commander. We found a map, a good one made on coarse calico. We soaked it... That calico sheet was our first possession. When my daughter was born we made nappies of it,

of that map. I remember clearly, as if it were yesterday, that it was a political map of the world... My husband once came and said: "C'mon, dear, I've seen an old sofa somebody had thrown away...' At night we went to fetch that sofa so that nobody saw us. How glad we were to have that sofa!

"And still we were happy. We never despaired. We would get foodstuffs for our rations and ring each other up: "Do come, I"ve got some sugar. We'll have tea'... We had practically nothing above our heads and nothing under our feet; there were no carpets, no nothing,.. And we were happy to have stayed alive, to be able to breathe, laugh and live... We were warmed by love and compassion for people. Somehow people needed each other and we, too, needed each other. Though, of course, looking back now, those were hard, very hard years.

"We have, to co sure, been elevated now and given credit. I'm often invited to speak to people. Recently I spoke to a group of young Italians. I'd been told they were the children of rich parents. They asked me what doctor had treated me and for some reason wanted to know If I had consulted a psychiatrist, what dreams I had, If I saw war in my dreams and if I had known fear at the front. I told them that every human being wanted to live and had a fear of dying but there were moments when one did not feel that fear. One saw that an enemy had entered one's house and then one conquered one's fear. They said in response that Soviet women were a mystery for them. They asked me whether I had married after the war. For some reason they thought I hadn't. I said, hitting on their tone, "Everybody brought home some trophies from the war, hut I brought a husband... I also have a daughter. Now my grandchildren are growing..." Of course, I would've liked to have more children, but I had neither health, nor strength, or means. Well, why talk about that?... And I couldn't get a higher education either. I worked as a lab assistant in a polytechnical institute. I liked my job-was always among young people. It helps to stay young...

"Two years ago our chief of staff, Ivan Mikhailovich Grinko, visited us. He's already retired. We sat at this table. I had also baked some pies then. He talked with my husband and they exchanged memories and

mentioned our girls. All of a sudden I burst into tears: "You speak of some honour and respect. And quite a few of the girls have remained single and not all of them have separate flats even now. Having to share a flat with other families throughout their lives. Was there anybody to take pity on them or to defend them? What d"you know?' In a word, I dampened their festive spirits...

"The chief of staff sat where you are now sitting. "Just show me," he said, "who had done you wrong. I"ll let him know what sort of girls you were!' He begged his pardon: "Valentina, there is nothing I can do for you but grieve." Well, what's the use? It's too late already..."

When I was leaving, Valentina Pavlovna banded me a paper bag of pies in spite of all my protestations. "They are special ones-Siberian," she insisted. She also gave me a long list of names, addresses and telephone numbers: "Please, do find all our girls. They're sure to respond; we're not a coddled lot. Even though I'll be ill after this meeting of ours, I'm still glad to have you listen to all that. Let it be remembered..."

"WE WERE DECORATED WITH MINOR MEDALS..."

By memorable May of 1980, after two years of searches, meetings and dozens of letters sent to every corner of the country, my private correspondence began to look rather like that of a military registration and enlistment office or a museum: "Greetings from women pilots of Marina Raskova's air regiment...", "I'm writing to you on behalf of women partisans of the Zheleznyak Brigade...", "Congratulations ... from women members of the Minsk underground organization... Wishing you success in your undertaking...", "This letter is from privates of a field bath-and-laundry unit..." I seem to be living the lives of two generations, one of those who were young in 1941 and the other of my peers, those who are in their twenties now. My mind embraces two realities, two human worlds which cross and diverge, in turn expanding or shrinking, or else merging together. My memory is already their memory and their memory is my memory.

Sometimes I hear: how long can you write about the war? Yes, it occured to me that the knowledge I confine to my notebooks and my heart is oppressing and unbearable to people. We, living in this highly sophisticated technological age and facing the danger of not merely a war of the type mankind had already lived through out ecological catastrophe, have one hope that human memory is the most powerful and invincible weapon. That's what memory is, but every new day of search convinces me that it has highly involved circuits and patterns, by far more intricate than those of the most devilish machine, which has been invented or is to be invented to kill millions of people, rather than hundreds or thousands, together with their memories, that immaterial matter without which we people would cease to be human beings. How shall I grasp it and put it into words?

Usually, my correspondents were willing to meet me, though there were but a few refusals: "No, it's like a nightmare... I can't... I won't..." or "I don't want to recall and I don't remember anything.., I don't want to remember!.." Few, however, ventured to commit their reminiscences to paper and even fewer succeeded in doing this: it is not at all easy to put one's feelings and ideas on paper. Contrary to my expectations, therefore, most of my correspondence gave me only addresses and new names.

"I have a lot of metal in me," medical orderly Valentina Dmitriyevna Gromova wrote. "I've had a fragment embedded in my lung three centimetres from my heart ever since I was wounded near Vitebsk. Another fragment sits in the right lung and two more in the stomach...

"I left for the front a young girl and returned an invalid. I did my best to combat illness. I finished a night school, then graduated by correspondence from a technical school but failed to graduate from a culture Institute. It is my poor health that is to blame.

"I live alone. As I had been wounded and shell-shocked, I could not have children. Come to see me and we'll have a talk, "cause I won"t be able to write about it all..."

Telephone-operator V.P.Voronova had the following to say:

"I've come from the front and the doctors did not allow me to study. Accursed war. Accursed shell-shock...

"I wandered about for quite a while. I had neither a husband nor children, all because of the war. I have no major decorations, just a few medals. I don't know whether you'd be interested in my life but I would like to tell somebody about it..."

Junior Lieutenant Alexandra Leontyevna Boiko, tank commander, wrote to me the following:

"...I lived with my husband in Magadan in the Far North. My husband was a driver and I an inspector. As soon as the war started, the two of us volunteered for the front and were told to work where we were needed. Then we sent a telegram to Comrade Stalin, saying that we wanted to donate 50 thousand roubles to build a tank and to be sent to the front together. The government thanked us and in 1943 my husband and I were sent to the Chelyabinsk armoured technical school, from which we graduated as external students.

"At a camp we were given a tank. Both of us were senior driver-mechanics, but only one driver-mechanic was assigned to a tank. The command decided to make me commander of an IS-122 tank and my husband its senior driver-mechanic. We fought together throughout the war, liberating the Baltic republics, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany. We were both wounded and decorated. "Many young girls were crew members of medium tanks but I was the only one to command a heavy tank. Sometimes I think that should I tell some writer about my life, my story could well make a book..."

Ivan Arsentyevich Levitsky, former commander of the 5th Battalion of the 784th Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment, wrote to me the following letter:

"...In 1942 I was appointed battalion commander. When I met the regiment commissar he said, "Mind you, Captain, you"re taking charge of an unusual, girls' battalion. Half its personnel are young girls, who need a special approach, attention and care.' I certainly knew that young girls served in the army but had a vague idea of what it meant, We regular officers were somewhat wary of the "fair sex" taking up soldiering, which had always been men's domain. We were used to seeing women as, say, nurses. They made a good showing in the First World War and later in the Civil War. But what were young girls to do in anti-aircraft artillery where heavy shells had to be hauled by hand? How were they to be stationed at a battery alongside male crew members when there was just one dug-out? They would have to sit for hours on end on steel seats in front of instrument panels or gun controls. But they were girls after all and not supposed to be subjected to all those rigours. And how were they to wash and dry their hair? The whole affair was so unusual that a host of problems arose...

"I began to make my rounds, taking everything in. I confess I felt slightly ill at ease to see a girl standing sentry with a rifle and another atop a watch tower with binoculars: after all I had come from the front line. Besides, they were all so different shy, timid, coquettish or spirited. Not all of them knew how to obey military discipline: women's nature is opposed to the army routine. One would forget what she had been ordered to do, another would get a letter from home and waste the whole morning crying. I would sometimes order a punishment and then feel sexy for the girls and repeal it. There was a time when I thought that I'd come to a bad end with them.

"But soon my doubts were dispelled. The girls made fine soldiers, even more precise and meticulous than men. And precision in artillery is a

great thing. From the city of Gorky where we had been activated, I went with my girls' battalion as far as Poznan. The tankmen have armour, the infantry trenches but the anti-aircraft gunners have nothing: as they take up positions they shield everything hot themselves. They dig no slit trenches, nor make trench shelters, nor do they leave their guns even when a plane dives at their battery. It was a gruesome road and I've long been tempted to tell somebody about it or to write about It..."

Letters came from most diverse places, among them Moscow, Kiev, Apsheronsk in the Krasnodar territory, Vitebsk, Volgograd, Yalutorovsk, Galich and Smolensk... I felt nothing but bewilderment when, upon getting another letter, I would try to find some unknown town or settlement on the map and figure out how and when I would be able to reach it. Then I had the salutary idea of bringing together as many women as possible. But how to accomplish that? All of a sudden, Lady Fortune gave me a hand. One day I received by post an invitation from the veterans of the 65th Army of General P.I.Batov:

"...We usually meet on Red Square in Moscow on May 16-17. This has been our practice for many years now, our tradition and rite. Everybody still capable of travelling comes. People come from Murmansk, Karaganda, from everywhere. In short, we'll be waiting for you.

Transparent May flowers streamed slowly to the red-stone Memorial in the Alexandrovsky Garden.., Seen from above, they, In their abundance, looked like a huge fire. I was carried by that stream, bathing in the waves of a quiet and happy chatter: "Is that you, Maria? I would never have recognized you, had it not been for your eyes... They haven't changed a bit...", "And this is your son Fyodor, isn't it? He is the image of you. I see you've taken your daughter-in-law and grandson along. Why, you've brought a whole platoon along, Sergeant...", "D'you remember, Vanya? D'you remember us marching here in 1941. You had no puttees and a woman came up, took off her scarf and gave it to you. Remember?", "The roses are from Kishinev... They've faded a bit on the plane but will perk up. I wanted to lay those of my own..."

And all around us Moscow was very much alive with its everyday and festive bustle. It was used to those solemnly sad processions and would have been surprised to see them end. Even the faces of the youngest showed no surprise. It occured to me that my generation, which had not fought nor seen a single explosion, apart from those roaring in quarries when rocks were mined, had a genetic memory of the war: it was too close less than the human life-span away and what had happened was too horrible. It was diffused and hidden in an ordinary crowd but on that occasion that memory seemed to stand on its own, apart from the rest of the world, like the elements do-bad floods or fires-which then live their own lives governed by their own laws. It, too, lived its own life.

In the evening the Moskva Hotel, which housed the veterans of the 65th Army, resembled yesterday's festive lobby of the Soviet Army House: people embraced, cried and took pictures all around. They were no strangers there and they all formed one family. Your youth was taken notice of if only in questions of the type: "And whose daughter are your?"

Yours!

Room 52 on the sixth floor housed the staff of hospital 5257. Captain Alexandra Ivanovna Zaitseva, medical officer, sat at the head of the table: "Girls here will confirm that we wait for this day and the opportunity to get together all through the year... I have both children and grandchildren and sty nobody is dearer to me than my wartime girl friends. My children know it and take no offence," Alexandra Ivanovna introduced me to everybody present. I put down the names: surgeon Galina Ivanovna Sazonova, doctor Yelizaveta Mikhailovna

Aizenstein, surgical nurse Valentina Vasilyevna Lukina, senior surgical nurse Anna Ignatyevna Gorelik, norses Nadezhda Fyodorovna Potuzhnaya, Klavdia Prokhorovna Borodulina, Yelena Pavlovna Yakovleva, Angelina Nikolayevna Timofeyeva, Sofia Kamaldinovna Motrenko, Tamara Dmitriyevna Morozova, Sofia Filimonovna Semenyuk and Larissa Tikhonovna Deikun.

Other people, too, dropped in to listen to the talk.

"That's true. For instance, I have to leave tomorrow. It's such a pity. I had asked my chief to let me have one more day off even if it is unpaid, but was refused. My chief is young and doesn't understand what these meetings mean to us."

The conversation quickly shifted to things remote that had brought thorn together dozens of years since and that continued to unite them.

"D'you remember, girls, how we rode in heated goods vans and soldiers kept laughing at the way we held our rifles. We held them not the way weapons are normally held but like that.,. I think it was something like that.,. We held them as if they were dolls..."

"People were crying and shouting: "There"s war!', while I thought: "What war can there be if we have an exam tomorrow at the institute? Exams are so important what war can there be?"

"Air raids started a week later and we were already saving people. Three years of medical schooling were quite an asset at a time like that. But I saw so much blood in the very first days that I developed a fear of it. One could hardly have guessed that I was half way through a medical college and had had excellent marks for my practicals. But the people showed exceptional understanding and it was encouraging.

"D'you remember, girls, what I told you? After the raid was over, I noticed that the ground in front of me moved. I rushed there and began to dig, feeling under my hands somebody's face and hair... It was a woman... I unearthed her and began to cry, As soon as she opened her eyes, that woman, instead of asking what was wrong with her, asked:

" "Where is my purse?"

" "Whatever for d"you need it now? We'll find it.'

" "I have my party card in it."

"D'you see? She worried about her party card rather than about her condition. I began to look for the purse and found it. She put it against her breast and closed her eyes. An ambulance came soon and we put her aboard. I checked once again if she had her purse. In the evening I came home and told my mother the story and said that I had to go to the front."

"I remember how we went to the front in a big van full of girls. It was In the dark of the night, branches kept hitting against the tarpaulin and we were so tense that we thought they were buyers..."

"I was my mother's darling and had never left the city before being appointed a junior medical officer at a mortar battery, Well, what I went through! As soon as the mortars opened fire, I would go deaf and feel as if I were being scorched. I would sit down and whisper: "Mother, dear Mother..." We were stationed in a forest and, coming out in the morning, we could see how quiet it was and the dewdrops hanging on the leaves, Could there indeed be war when it was so beautiful and felt so good?..

"We were told to put on our military uniforms and I was 150 cm tall. When I put the uniform trousers on girls tied the top ends around my neck. So I continued wearing my dress, hiding from the superiors. Well, I was confined to the guardroom for having violated military discipline."

I asked them to recall what was the hardest of all. The work, they answered. Daily work to the limit of their physical powers: "I would have never believed that I would he able to sleep while walking. I would sleep while marching in formation, wake up for a second, upon

bumping into the back in front of me, and then fall asleep again. Once, marching in the dark, I swayed sideways instead of forward and I continued marching along some field, alone and still fast asleep. It was not until I fell into some ditch that I woke up and rushed back to catch up with the rest of the company." Military statistics show what is behind that ordinary word "work"-there was a great number of the wounded, shell-shocked and burnt, but 72 out of every 100 wounded soldiers returned to the lines. Losses among the front-line medicos ranked second after those in rifle battalions. But it was not the figures that the people remembered: they had no time for counting. They remembered something else.

"We stood by the operating table round the clock, at times unable to lift a hand and even burying our heads right in the patient being operated upon. Our legs would get so swollen that our tarpaulin boots would not fit. And the eyes used to get so sore that we found it hard to close thorn."

"We worked round the clock and would swoon from hunger. We had enough food but no time to eat..."

"I'll never forget how they once brought in a wounded man, took him off the stretcher and said: "Why, he is dead." I knelled in front of him and he sighed; I burst into tears and called out: "Doctor! Doctor!" They tried to wake the doctor up, shaking him, but he would go down like a ninepins: he was so fast asleep. They couldn't wake him up not even with smelling salts. He hadn't slept for three days before that."

They also recalled the following:

"There was a ski battalion made up of seventeen-year-old school-leavers. They had come under machine-gun fire... One of them was brought in all in tears. We were of the same age but we already felt we were older. I embraced him with the words: "Darling babe..." only to hear from him: "Had you been there, you wouldn"t have called me babe then...' He was dying and crying all night: "Mother! Mother!" There were two lads from Kursk whom we used to call "Kursk nightingales". We would come to wake them up and see them fast asleep with saliva on their lips. They were so young..."

Whence had those young girls derived that feeling that they were older than the boys of their own age? Whence came into those girls' hearts the women's commiseration which usually develops only with time and as a result of an emotional experience? They themselves explained it in the following way:

"Women grew older with commiseration. I was a young girl myself and worthy of somebody else's compassion but I saw and went through so much in the very first years of the war that I felt I was a grown-up woman. When a young boy lake that has his arm or leg cut off before your very eyes childishness quickly gets wiped out of your mind. And then he would cry throughout the night: "Have we reached it? Have we reached it? Forward, lads..." And he was not even allowed to move. There were no two wounds alike: the war mutilated everyone in its own way.., I remember one dying soldier his chest all torn inside oof... I was bandaging him for the last time barely able to hold back tears. I wished it was all over soon so that I could hide myself in some nook and cry my heart out. Then he said to me: "Thank you, sister..." and banded some small metal thing to me. I saw a sabre crossed with a rifle. "Why should you give it away?" I asked. "Mother said that this charm would save me. But I won"t need it any more. Perhaps you'll be luckier than me...' With these words he turned to the wall.

"Another would call out: "Nurse, my leg aches". But actually that leg was missing... I feared it most to carry the dead ones "cause the breeze would lift the sheet and the corpse would stare at me. I couldn"t carry them when they had their eyes open and would close them..."

"A wounded soldier was once brought In all in bandages: he had a head wound and could barely be seen for all the bandages. Apparently, I reminded him of somebody and he addressed me: "Larissa... Larissa... Lara..." He must have been calling the girl he loved. I knew that I had never met him, but he kept calling me. So I came up, still bewildered, and looked closer at him. "You"ve come, haven't you? You've come...' I took him by his hands and leaned over him... "I knew that you would come..." He began to whisper something but I could not understand what he was saying. Even today I can't talk calmly when I recall him: tears come to my eyes. "When I was leaving for the front," he said, "I didn"t kiss you, Kiss me...' And I cent down and kissed him. A tear rolled on of his eye and into the bandages. And that was all. He was dead..."

A woman is sitting next to me. She has a beautiful, stem face of the type old teachers usually have. She is detached, as if it were not in public but entirely alone that she is silent Her fate is quite similar to that of the rest of them and it is only her recollections that are her own.

"People did not want to die. We responded to every moan and every cry. When he felt that he was dying, a wounded man once put his arms round my shoulders like that and would not let me go. It seemed to him that as long as there was somebody by his side, as long as the nurse was there close to him, life would not depart from him. He asked for five minutes, then two minutes more of life... Some died noiselessly and quietly, others cried: "I don"t want to die!' A dying man stir did not know nor believe that he was dying. Whereas I could see an intense yellow colour appearing from under the hair and a shadow moving and descending directly under his clothes... And the man lay there dead with a surprised look on his face, as if he were lying there thinking: I cannot he dead. Could it be possible that I'm dead? And I would tell him till the very last moment that no, he wouldn't die, kissing and embracing him with the words "there, don"t you worry!' Their names have gone from the memory but their faces are there..."

The talk shifted to more specific things, rambled and darted here and there, as commonly happens when many people get together "And d'you remember?...", "Remember...", "On one occasion..." Somebody else knocked at the door and entered the room, Those who came later were warned that they should better bring then own chairs along.

"And how about one's own samovar and a borne-made cake?"

"Wonderful!"

And there was the samovar, brought for the occasion from the opposite end of the city, boiling on the table.

"Our front-line brotherhood," somebody said and I was pierced by the touching meaning of these, seemingly ordinary, words warmed by the breath of a score of people. For them they were not an abstract poetical trope but a symbol of their youth and their idea of loyalty, friendship and, if you want, life in general. They appraise even our today's life, as if looking from the past and using the yardstick of that rigorous and lofty time.

It seemed to me that I could no longer distinguish faces and voices but saw and heard a chorus, the women's chorus of memory because the men at the table kept silent listening. In their opinion women could tell better at what price human lives had been saved.

"Father thought that we had been evacuated and would be safe. But mother and I went to work at a hospital. I had had no training to speak of and helper to carry the wounded. Mother insisted on our enrolling in a course: "Let"s take it and become qualified nurses.' Before the war she had worked as a lab assistant at a veterinary institute .

"When they began to bomb Saratov, a public address was made at the hospital on the Motherland being in danger. We were just graduating

from that course and Mother told me that we should go to the front together. She volunteered to be sent to the front and took me and my younger sister along. Though she had only attended a six-month medical course, she quickly became a surgical nurse thanks to her abilities. Mother adopted a strange girl and we treated her as if she were our sister and were even jealous of each other over mother's attention. Mother for her part treated all of us equally, even in those horrible circumstances...

"When an arm or a leg is cut off, there's no blood but just clean wife flesh it is only later that blood appears. To this day I can't dress a chicken with clean white meat. It makes my mouth go so salty..."

What was most shocking, however, was the enemy's cruelty, even towards them women, cruelty which ordinary human mind could not comprehend. They vied with each other in telling their stories:

"We were bombed when we were on the retreat. It could be seen from above that ours were medical vehicles bearing red crosses. But the Nazi pilots flew very low and chased every human being. We tried to hide in the forest and the planes flew directly at us. I could see the pilot, his face. He saw that we were girls and how we tried to hide behind the pines and he fired at us virtually point-blank and grinned impertinently at that. I've remembered that impertinent, horrible grin and the handsome face of the Nazi pilot."

"They bombed our convoy to bits and began to hedgehop along the road. I was running and one of the planes went after me. I plunged into a maize field only to be followed by it, I made for the forest and it continued pressing me to the ground. I darted into the forest, falling either into some hole or just a heap of leaves. My nose bled from fear and I was not sure whether I was alive or not. I moved first my leg then my arm yes, I was alive. I've been afraid of the planes ever since. When I hear one still far-off I'm already seized with fear, unable to think of anything beside that it is coming and that I have to find a place where to hide myself, to huddle so as not to see or hear anything. I can't stand the sound of a flying plane to this day nor can I travel by air. This is what the war made to me..."

Others remembered something else:

"Our train with the wounded and another one with horses were standing at a railway station when the air raid started. We began to open the vans with the wounded so that they could escape, whereas they all rushed to save the burning horses. It is horrible to hear the cries of wounded people hut there is nothing worse than to heat wounded horses neigh. After all, they are not to blame for anything or be held responsible for what people do. Well, nobody rushed into the forest, on the contrary, all and everyone hurried to save the horses. What I want to say is that, despite the terrible war, people did not become brutalised. The Nazi planes were flying very low. It occured to me afterwards that the Nazi pilots saw It all and must have been ashamed..."

"I also thought about the same during the war, We once entered a village and saw murdered partisans lying at the edge of the forest. I can't recount what had been done to them: they had been tortured to death... Quite nearby horses were grazing. They were obviously partisans' horses complete with saddles. They either had run away from the Germans and returned later on or perhaps the Germans had no time to take them away, I don't know. The horses were quiet and there was a lot of grass. I thought how could people have done such horrible things in front of the horses, in front of animals. These had been watching, seeing it all."

"The forest was on fire and so was the grain... The smoke was so suffocating and acrid... Iron was oil fire... One had to get used to that smell, too..."

"No sooner had we come to some place, set up a hospital and brought in the wounded, than there would come an order to evacuate the area. We would manage to put only some of the wounded on board and leave others behind. There were no vehicles and no people to do the job. We were told, "Leave them behind... Go away yourselves..." And we would go away while they were looking at us. Those who could get up left together with us, those who couldn't stayed behind. We could do nothing for them and were afraid to look them into the eye... I was young then and cried a good deal...

"When we were on the offensive we never left a single Soviet wounded soldier behind. We even picked up wounded Germans... I attended to them for some time. When I had got used to it I dressed their wounds and seemed to have no ill feelings. Then all of a sudden I would recall 1941 and how we had left our wounded behind and what had been done to them, I would not be able to look at the Germans. I thought I would never approach any one of them... But the next day I would go and do the bandaging...

"Among the things that had engraved themselves on my mind was the extraordinary silence in the wards with gravelly wounded people."

"They had all sorts of wounds some had their spines broken and could do nothing hut move their hands. We had to clean their excrements from under them... They were so helpless, I felt pity for all of them and not only for people but for all living things. The birds returning along their old routes also caught fire and perished...

"During an air raid we were lying in a ditch when a goat came running from the village and lay down next to us. It just lay down nearby and kept beating. When the air raid stopped it followed us, trying to stick closer to the people: after all, it was a living thing and was also afraid. We reached some village and told a woman there: "Please, take the poor thing." We wanted to save it..."

Could the people, who in infernal horror retained their humanity and found strength and feelings to remember that birds, animals, trees and grass all the living things also suffered, have been defeated? Those people helper them, tried to ease their lot and commiserated with them. And when the enemy was defeated, wounded or taken prisoner, they knew how to forgive him, and not only forgive but also dress the wounds and give medical aid. This is all the more amazing since such feelings are quite understandable today, in peacetime, but when your land was on fire and your friends were being killed it was agonizingly difficult to take it all in. Nevertheless, these women described it as something quite natural, to which no human being had an alternative.

"I had a German and a burnt Soviet tankman in my ward. I would enter it:

" "How are you today?"

" "I"m quite well,' our tankman said, "and he is bad..."

" "But he is Nazi..."

" "Well, I"m all right and he is bad.' "We seized a German hospital outside Bobruisk. We did nothing bad to them and the wounded there were treated by German doctors. I once saw one of them make an operation without anaesthesia.

" "Why no anaesthesia?" I asked.

" "What does it matter where he dies here or in your camps."

"And he was a doctor. I couldn't comprehend it..."

"We all give the Hippocratic oath after all, we are doctors duty bound to help anyone in trouble. Anyone...

"A group of SS officers were once brought in to have their dressing changed. A nurse came up to me:

""How shall we dress them tearing away old bandages or the normal way?"

" "The normal way. They are wounded.,."

"And we dressed them the normal way. Two of them ran away afterwards. They were caught and I cut the buttons off their drawers so that they would not run away again..."
"We saved people but many of us were sorry that they were medicos and could only dress the wounds instead of wielding weapon.
Previously they had talked much about their homes and parents but in the last months of the war everybody avoided such talk just from superstition. They wanted to believe so much that the war had spared at least their home, their mother and their younger sister, if only their own. But they were denied even that.
"When I went to the front I was afraid of nothing, I imagined that during an air raid the bombs ruined only buildings and did not believe that I could be killed by a shell or a bomb. Well, I could imagine a bullet hitting me but never a shell or a comb my mind just refused to grasp it. I was to see later on how it could happen.,.
"One of our nurses was taken prisoner. About a day later we liberated the village and found her her eyes had been put out, her breasts lopped off. She had been impaled... It was frosty and she was all very white, her hair completely grey.., She was a young girl of nineteen,.. And we always kept a cartridge for ourselves: we would rather die than co taken prisoner. We only feared lest we should be captured, while nothing else was that frightening.
"By the end of the war I was afraid to write letters home. I decided not to write because, should I get killed, Mother would cry that the war was over and that I should have died on the very eve of the Victory. Nobody spoke about this but everybody thought about it. We already felt that we would soon win and the spring was already in the air."
That day came. And even though it had been long awaited it came unexpectedly for all and everyone. Ask any war veteran what days of the war he or she remembered best. The first and the last. They are remembered most vividly, to the slightest detail, among them the following pathetic ones:
""When someone came in and said: "The war is over!" I sat down on the sterile table. We had agreed with the doctor that when we heard that the war was over we would sit down on the sterile table. That is to say, we would do something impossible. I had never let anyone approach that table. I had been wearing gloves, a mask, a sterile gown, banding everybody whatever they needed-tampons, instruments and so on... And there I was sitting on that table,..
"What did we dream about? To begin with, to win, of course, and then to stay alive. One girl said: "When the war is over, I"ll give birth to a lot of children,' another said: "I"ll enrol in an institute,' and sty another: "And I"ll he going to the hairdresser's all the time. Ill dress myself up and be ladylike.' "
"We entered our villages to find only chimneys there. In the Ukraine we came into villages where there was nothing save for water-melons. And the people had nothing to eat besides those water-melons. When we entered their villages they brought us water-melons the only thing they had.
"I refined home and found Mother and three children living In a dug-out. Our doggie ate boiled goosefoot. They would boil it, eat it themselves and give the same to the doggie, And it didn't refuse... We had had so many nightingales before the war, and for two years after the war nobody heard them sing: the earth had been upturned to, as the saying goes, the grandfathers' manure. It was only on the third year that the nightingales reappeared. Nobody knew where they had been. They returned to their native lands in three years' time. They came back when the people had rebuilt their homes."

They were as yet to live out their lives full of all sorts of women's joys and sorrows. But once they had gone through things unforgettable, they lived "looking back" throughout their lives.
"Doting the war we remembered certain days and afterwards certain years sank into our memory, say, when I married, when I had my first baby, when the son graduated from the institute and got married, when we celebrated our silver wedding and when my grandson was born. The life had flown by in an instant, The war lasted four years and I have lived for nearly forty years since then and sty I have the feeling that the war had taken up half my life. Those very four years..."
"When I pick up field flowers I begin to recall the war. We never picked flowers then."
They were talking about their grandchildren, their cares and illnesses and would seem to be quite ordinary women to a chance onlooker-mothers and grandmothers. And yet I knew that from now on I would he able to distinguish them anywhere, be it the largest crowd or the merriest festival.
"Every man at this table had been wounded once or twice. And Is it not thanks to our hands that they are now alive, that they have children and grandchildren? We have minor medals but we were given them for saving lives," Alexandra Ivanovna Zaitseva proposed the last toast.
A monument to the medical people-heroes of the Great Patriotic War-was built on the Devichye Pole in Moscow on the funds raised by people. It could have well be made of gold! And for that matter it is a monument of gold, though of a different standard it is of the noblest gold of human gratitude and human memory.

"THAT WASHN'T ME..."
Each woman had her own story to tell. It was in Moscow, at a 65th Army veterans' get-together, that I saw Olga Yakovlevna Omelchenko. All the women were in spring dresses with bright kerchiefs, but she had a military uniform on. I thought her face was somehow out of the ordinary: it bore an indelible imprint on it, only slightly softened by time. We became acquainted and later I visited Olga Yakovlevna in Polotsk.
She was ill, but insisted on getting out of bed nonetheless to meet me.
"What do you mean by "another time?" Our generation is already departing... I wanted to give you the address of my friend in Vinnitsa, we fought together, but yesterday I had a telephone call to say that she had died. The war has cut short our lives."
I sensed that hidden reproach on more than one occasion during these conversations: "You've come too late!" I remember several letters that came back with the inscription written on an envelope: "Addressee no longer living". Not moved to another town or another flat, as had happened several times before, but gone for ever. A human voice had vanished, a human memory melted away in the world. What had it carried away with it? No one will ever know.
Olga Yakovlevna recalled the past almost dispassionately, with an unexpected calm that I could not immediately understand or explain. It troubled me, for by now I was more accustomed to tears. Then I knew exactly where the pain lay. It was hidden deeper in those emotionless, faded eyes...
Olga Yakovlevna Omelchenko, medical orderly in a rifle company:
"My mother wanted me to be evacuated with her, she knew how uch I longed to go to the front, so she tied me to the cart with our belongings. But I untied myself on the quiet and walked off, the rope still attached to my wrist.
"Everyone was fleeing, Where was I to go? On the road I met a group of girls. One of them said: "My mother lives near here, let"s go to her'. We arrived at night and knocked on the door. Her mother opened it and

as soon as she saw us, dirty and in tattered clothes, she said: "Stay where you are". We stood there. She brought two enormous cast-iron pots and stripped all our clothes from us. We washed our hair with ashes for soap, climbed on the top of the stove, where I fell sound asleep. In the morning the girl's mother cooked cabbage soup and baked bread from bran and potatoes. How good that bread seemed to us and how tasty was that soup!
"And so we spent four days with her while she fed us up. She gave us a little at a time: otherwise we would overeat and die, she said. Then, on the fifth day, she said: "Go". Before that a neighbour had dropped in on her while we were sitting on the stove. The mother raised a warning finger to us: she had not told even to her neighbours that her daughter had come. She had told everyone that she was at the front. This was her one and only daughter, but she did not spare her and could not forgive her for the shame she had brought by returning.
"At night she woke us, gave a food parcel to each and said: "Go..."'
"And she didn't even try to keep her daughter hack?"
"No, she kissed her and said: "Your father is fighting, go and fight, too".
"On the road this girl told me that she was a nurse and had been surrounded.
"I wandered from one place to another for a long time and at last found myself in Tambov, where I got a job in a military hospital. It was good at the hospital; I put on weight after going hungry and became a right little fatty. Then, when I turned sixteen, I was told that I could give blood, like all the nurses and doctors. I began to give blood every month. I received a donor's ration-a kilogram of sugar, a kilogram of semolina, a kilogram of salami to build up my strength. I made friends with Aunt Nyura, a nurse. She had seven children, but her husband had been killed at the beginning of the war. The oldest boy was seven years old;he lost the family's ration card when he went for food, so I gave them my donor's ration. I was giving half a litre of blood twice a month. Once the doctor said to me: "Let"s write down your address, maybe the person who is given your blood will turn up'. We wrote down the address and attached the slip of paper to the bottle .
"Then, some time later, about two months afterwards, no more, I came off duty and went to bed. Someone shook me:
" "Get up! Cot up, your brother"s come to see you!'
" "What brother? I haven"t come to see you!'
"Our hostel was on the upper floor. I went downstairs and there was a young, handsome lieutenant.
" "Who wanted to see Omelchenko?" I asked.
" "I did," he said. And he showed me the note the doctor and I had written. "Look,.. I"m your blood-brother.' "
"He had brought me two apples and a small packet of sweets at a time when you couldn't buy sweets anywhere. Heavens! How good those sweets tasted! I went to the head of the hospital and told him: "My brother is here..." I was given leave. "Let"s go to the theatre,' he said. There I was, going to the theatre and with a fellow, too, when I'd never been to the theatre before in my life.
"He left a few days later, ordered to the Voronezh Front. When he came to say goodbye I opened the window and waved to him. I wasn't given leave: there were too many wounded.
"I never received letters from anyone, I even had no idea what it was like to receive a letter. Then, out of the blue, I received an official triangular envelope, opened it and read: "Your friend, machine-gun platoon commander.., has met a hero"s death'. It was my blood-brother. He had been brought up in a children's home and probably the only address on him had been mine. When he went away he had asked me very earnestly to stay at the hospital, so that it would

be easier for him to find me after the war. Then, a month later, I received the news that he had been killed and I was petrified. I decided to get to the front'at all costs to avenge myself-I knew that somewhere my blood had been shed,..

"But it was not so easily done. I wrote to the head of the hospital three times and the fourth time I went to him and said:

" "If you don"t let me go to the front, I shall run away'.

" "Very well, then, I"ll give a recommendation if you're so stubborn...'

"The first battle is most terrible, of course. The sky thunders, the earth thunders and you think your heart will explode and the skin on your back is about to burst. I hadn't thought that the earth could crack. Everything cracked, everything roared. The whole world seemed to be swaying. I simply couldn't... Flow was I to survive all this... I thought that I couldn't hear it. I was badly frightened and so I decided that I would prevent myself from being a coward by dipping my Young Communist League membership card in the blood of a wounded man and buttoning it into my breast pocket. That was how I took my oath not to give in and, most important, not to show cowardice, because if I showed cowardice during my first battle it would be all up with me. I would be withdrawn from the front line and sent to the medical battalion, But all I wanted was to stay at the front and take vengeance personally for my brood. We were advancing, walking through grass and the grass was waist-high... Nothing had been sown there for several years. It was very difficult to walk. That "as in the Kursk salient...

"After the battle I was summoned by the chief of staff. He was in a kind of ruined hut , which was quite vacant. I went in . There was one chair and he was standing. He made me sit down and said:

" "Well, now, I"m looking at you and thinking: what drove you to come to this hell? You'll be killed like a fly. This is war. you know! Let me transfer you to a medical unit at least. If you're killed, well, that's all right, but what if you're left without eyes or without arms? Have you thought about that?"

" "I have, Comrade Colonel," I replied. "And I only ask one thing: please let me stay in the company."

" "Very well, go!" he said, yelling at me so loudly that I even felt frightened.

"The fighting was heavy. I saw hand-to-hand fighting... That was awful. A person becomes something... it isn't for human beings... Men strike, thrust their bayonets into stomaches, eyes, strangle one another. Howling, shouts, groans... It's something terrible even for war, it's more terrible than anything else. I went through all that and I know it all. War is hard for the airman, for the tankman and for the artilleryman, it's hard for everyone, hut war for the infantryman is incomparably harder.

"I won't believe anyone who says he has never been frightened. You see the Germans rising and advancing and in another five or ten minutes there would be an attack. You begin to tremble with fear.., But that only lasts until the first shot. As soon as you hear the order you don't remember a thing, you stand up and run forward with all the others. And you aren't frightened. But then, on the second day, you can't sleep any more and you're frightened. Everything comes back, all the details, it comes home to you that you could have been killed and you are absolutely terrified. It's better not to look at people's faces immediately after an attack, they're completely different, not human faces at all. I can't put it into words. Everyone seems a bit abnormal. They're terrible to look at...

"Was it terrible to die? Of course it was terrible. But we understood something else, too, that to die then was also history. I felt like that. Even now I don't believe that I remained alive, wounded and

shell-shocked, but alive. I only have to close my eyes and I can see it all again before me. A shell hit an ammunition depot and it burst into flames. A soldier standing beside it on guard was singed. He was no longer a human being, but a blackened piece of flesh. He was just jumping up slightly and everyone was looking out of their trenches, no one doing a thing; they had all lost their heads. I grabbed a sheet, ran up to him, covered him up and immediately lay on hint. He jerked about like that until his heart burst and then was still...

"My nerves gave way and I was covered in blood. One of the veteran soldiers came up, put his arms round me and I heard him say: "When the war is over, even if she"s still alive, she won't be a normal human being any longer, it's all up with her.' It was such a terrible thing I had gone through, he said, and me so young. I was shaking like someone having a seizure, and they took me by the arms and led me away to a dug-out.

"Then the battle began again... Near Sevsk the Germans were attacking us seven or eight times a day. That same day I was carrying hack the wounded with their weapons. I crawled up to the last man, whose arm was completely smashed. The arm had to he amputated immediately and bandages, otherwise it would be impossible to bandage it. But I didn't have a knife or scissors. My bag had been bouncing against my side and they had fallen out. What was I to do? I gnawed at the flesh with my teeth, gnawed it through and began to bandage the arm... As I bandages it the wounded man said: "Hurry up, nurse, I"ll still have a crack at them...' He was burning with fever.

"During that battle, when we were attacked by tanks, two men showed cowardice. Many of our comrades were killed. The wounded men I had dragged into a crater were taken prisoner. A vehicle was supposed to come for them... But panic broke out when those two showed cowardice. The line wavered and men began to run. The wounded were abandoned. When we came back to the place where they had boon lying we found some with gouged-out eyes, others with their stomaches slashed. The fascists showed our wounded no mercy...

"When I found out about this and saw what had happened, I turned black overnight. In the morning the entire battalion was drawn up and those cowards were brought out in front of the men. The sentence was read out: death by firing squad. Seven soldiers were needed to carry out the sentence... Three men stepped forward, the others held hack. I took a sub-machine gun and stepped forward. Everyone else followed when I did that... There could be no forgiveness. Because of them such brave boys had been killed. The very best had died... "Tire commander of the reconnaissance company fell in love with me. He sent me notes which were brought by his men. Once I went to meet hint. "No," I said. "I love a man who has long been dead." He came right up close to me, looked straight into my eyes and then walked off. The Germans were firing but he didn't even bend his head.

"Later we were in the Ukraine by now we liberated a large village. "I"ll go for a stroll and have a look around,' I thought. It was a bright day, the villagers' houses were painted white. When I reached the other side of the village I saw graves and freshly-dug earth... The men who had been killed in the battle for the village were buried there. I don't know myself what it was, but I felt drawn towards the graves. There was a photograph on a board and a name on each grave. ,..Suddenly I looked there was a familiar face... It was the commander of the reconnaissance company, who had declared his love to me. And his name...

"I felt so had and I was so frightened. And just then his comrades, the men of his company, were coming to visit the grave, They knew the whole story it was they who had brought me notes. None of them looked at me, as if I wasn't there. Later, whenever I met them, they

seemed to be thinking that I should have been killed. They couldn't boar to see me alive. That was what I felt...
"I returned from the war and fell seriously ill. I wandered from one hospital to another for a long time until I was seen by an old professor. He treated me. He said that if I had gone to the front when I was eighteen or nineteen years old, my organism would have been strengthened, but since I had gone when I was sixteen, which was very early, my health had been seriously undermined.
" "Of course, medicine is all right," he told me. "It can help you somewhat, but if you want to restore your health, if you want to live, my only word of advice to you is to marry and have as many children as possible. That alone can save you. With every child your organism will be reborn..."
"And how old wore you?"
"I was nineteen when I returned from the war. Or course, I didn't even think of marrying."
"Why?"
"I felt very tired and much older than other girls my age, even old. The girls I knew were dancing and having fun, but I couldn't, I saw life with different eyes. It wasn't there on the surface, and young chaps courted me, but I was weary. Not every man could endure what I had... There was a place in the tent that served as an operating theatre where arms and legs were thrown when they had been cut off. .. Once an officer went into the tent with me , he wanted to he bandaged. As soon as he entered and looked inside d-d-own he event on to the floor. A man couldn't take it.
"And the battles at Sevsk... I've told you how I carried sixty-seven wounded men back front the line. I still keep a front-line newspaper where that was written about. About me and our first company of the 118th Rifle Regiment of the 37th Guards Division. The fighting was so heavy and the strain so great that blood came out of ears. In the morning I woke as if after an illness..."
"Did you marry?"
"Yes, I did. I've brought up five sons. My grandchildren are already grown up, So I didn't turn out to be a bad mother or a bad grandmother. And yet, when I came hack front the war, I didn't think I had the strength.
"I remember it all now and I think that wasn't me, but some other girl..."
Different feeling struggled within me: admiration and perplexity, surprise and protest, pain and sympathy. They made me look even more closely at her face and listen even more keenly to her voice. And wonder: how can it be for them, living simultaneously in two times yesterday and today? They experienced what we can only know. And must know! Although, perhaps, we may not always want to know. But let us recall the great Tolstoy, who caught himself feeling like that and instantly condemned what he felt: "No sooner have you opened the door than the sight and smell of forty or fifty amputees and the most seriously wounded, some on cots, and the most pan on the floor, suddenly strike you. Place no faith in this feeling which holds you back at the threshold it is an evill feeling."
We pity ourselves rather than those who bear these heavy memories. In order truly to pity, we must not turn away from the cruel facts, but share them, take a part of the burden into our own hearts. This is a document which cannot be written again, for it was written in blood and in life on the white pages of 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945...

"I REMEMBER THOSE EYES EVEN NOW..."

The street on which I live in Minsk is named after Hero of the Soviet Union Vassily Zakharovich Korzh, who fought in the Civil War, was a hero of the battles in Spain and became a partisans' brigade commander in the Great Patriotic War. That day I walked along it with a new

feeling: the name, familiar from films and books, which I had written automatically so many tunes on envelopes and telegrams, had suddenly lost the remoteness of a symbol and taken on a human immediacy.
After a thirty-minute trolleybus ride to the other side of the city I was going to meet his daughters.
The door was opened by the younger daughter, Zinaida Vasilyevna. She had the same broad, dark eyebrows and the same obstinately frank gaze that I had seen in her father's photographs.
"Come in, we are expecting you... Olga arrived from Moscow this morning. And our mother is hero."
Olga Vasilyevna teaches at the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University. She admits to missing the places where she grew up, but does not come often: family and work all take much time and effort, especially in a big city. And recently a grandson was born, which means even more to do, for it is not easy to be a "working grandmother" .
Memories? It would be better not to remember, for returning to the real world then becomes difficult. The further removed the war is, the more terrible it becomes, not the reverse.
Both sisters, Olga and Zinaida, were medical orderlies in cavalry squadrons. Beneath a large photograph of their father, mounted in an old, heavy frame, I wrote down their story.
Their mother, Feodosiya Alexeyevna, sat by them, her eyes moving from the photograph to her daughters.
"We were being bombed and everything was burning. The order was given to evacuate,,, We travelled for a long time until we reached the Stalingrad region. Women and children were moving to the rear, while the men were going in the opposite direction. Combine operators, tractor drivers they were alt moving forward. There was one, I remember, their open truck was full, and he stood up and shouted: "Mothers and sisters of ours! Go to the rear and bring in the harvest so that we can defeat the enemy!" And then they all took off their caps and looked at us. But the only thing we had managed to take with us was our children. We held them, some in our arms, others by the hand. "Mothers and sisters of ours!" he said. "Go to the rear and bring in the harvest.,." Of her daughters Feodosiya Alexeyevna says: "I would I"ve feared more for them when they went to the front if we had been at home. But we had been evacuated and were among strangers. Everyone was suffering..."
She did not utter a word during our subsequent conversation, only weird her thin hands into an even tighter knot on her chest.
Zinaida Vasilyevna:
"We were living in Pinsk. I was fourteen and a half, Olga was sixteen and our brother Lyonya was thirteen. Just at that time wo had sent Olga off to a children's health home, while our father wanted to go with us into the country. But in fact he didn't spend that night at borne. He was working for the regional Party Committee and was called there that night. He came home only in the morning. He dashed into the kitchen, had a quick bite of something and said:
" "Children, wat has broken out. Don"t go anywhere. Wait for me...'"
"We left that night. Our father's most precious souvenir of Spain was a very splendid hunting rifle with a bandolier. It had been presented to him for bravery. He tossed the gun to our brother:
" "You"re in charge now, you are a man and must look after your mother and sister...'
"That rifle stayed in our possession throughout the war. Every valuable we had we sold or exchanged for bread, but we did not give up the rifle. We could not part with it. It was a keepsake of our father.
"He threw a big leather jacket, the warmest thing he had, into our truck as well.
"At the railway station we left the truck and got into a train. We came under heavy fire before reaching Gomel, and afterwards my mother

and brother managed to get back into the carriage, but I was left behind. I helped to bandage the wounded and tagged on to a woman she was a doctor with the rank of captain. I stayed with her medical unit when it moved on. They fed me, but it soon occured to them to ask:
" "How old are you?"
"I realized that if I told the truth I would be sent off to some children's home or other. But I wanted to fight. It had been impressed on us all the time and our father had told us that we would fight on foreign soil, that all this wouldn't last and that the war would soon end in victory. How could I lei that happen without me? Such were my childish thoughts. I said that I was sixteen and I was kept on and sent to medical courses. I studied for about four months. While I studied I was looking after the wounded all the time. I studied right there in the medical battalion, We were in retreat, taking our wounded with us.
"We didn't use the roads because they were bombed and strafed. We went through marshland and along the roadsides, different units moving disunitedly, They were grouping somewhere and that meant that somewhere battles were being fought. And so we moved on and on! We went through the fields. What a harvest there was! As we moved we trampled down the rye. The harvest was unprecedented that year, the rye standing so high. The grass was green and the sun shone brightly, but there were corpses lying there and blood...
"And so we reached Rostov. I was wounded there during the bombing. When I recovered consciousness in a train, I could hear an elderly Ukrainian soldier scolding a young one: "Your wifie did"na cry so much giving birth as you're crying now'. But when he saw that I had opened my eyes he said: "You have a cry, dear, have a cry. You"ll feel better. You're allowed to...' I remembered my mother and burst into tears.
"After coming out of hospital I was entitled to some leave and so I tried to find my mother. Mum was looking for me, too, and Olga was looking for us. We found each other through acquaintances in Moscow. We all wrote to them and found each other that way. Mum was living near Stalingrad on a collective farm and I went there. That was at the end of 1941. Lyonya was driving a tractor, although he was still a child, only thirteen years old. To begin with he had been a trailer-hand, but when all the tractor drivers were called to the front he became a tractor driver. He worked day and night. Mum walked behind the tractor or sat beside him. She was afraid that he would go to sleep and fall off.
"Mum and Lyonya were sleeping on someone's floor and people had to step over them. That was how they lived. Olga soon arrived and got a job as an accountant. But she kept writing to the local military registration and enlistment office asking to be sent to the front and being refused over and over again. So we decided-I had already become a real fire-eater-to go to Stalingrad, just the two of us, and find a unit there. We calmed our mother's fears by telling her that we were going to the Kuban area, where our father had friends.,.
"I had an old greatcoat, a field-shirt and two pairs of trousers. I gave one pair to Olga, who had nothing at all. We had only one pair of hoots between us, too. Mum had knitted us something warm that was a bit like socks and a bit like slippers. We walked sixty kilometres, all the way to Stalingrad: one of us would put on the boots, the other the slippers, then we would switch. It was February and the roads we walked over were icy. Wo froze and went hungry. What had Mum prepared for the journey? A sort of jelly from bones and a few flat cakes. We were so hungry...
"We reached Stalingrad, but no one there had any time for us. They didn't even want to listen to us. We decided to do what Mum had told us and go to the Kuban area, to the address our father had left us. We

got into a goods train and I sat there in the greatcoat while Olga hid under the sleeping shelves. Later we exchanged clothes and I got under the shelves while Olga sat on top. Soldiers travelled free and we didn't have a kopeck...

"When we arrived in the Kuban area we found our father's friends and heard that a volunteer Cossack corps was being formed. This was the 4th Cossack Cavalry Corps, which later became a guards corps. Only volunteers were being recruited. They included people of all ages, men who, in their time, had been tec! Into battle by Budyonny and Voroshilov, as well as young people. We were accepted and posted to the same squadron.

"Each of us was issued with a uniform and a horse. We were responsible for feeding, watering and looking after our horses. Fortunately we had had a horse when we were children; I had become used to it and had loved it. So when I was given a horse I got into the saddle without further ado. I didn't become an accomplished horsewoman overnight, but for some reason I wasn't afraid. I had a small horse with a tail that reached the ground, but it was fast and obedient and I learned to ride it straightaway. Later, I rode Hungarian and Rumanian horses, And I came to love horses so much and to know so much about them that even today I cannot go by a horse with indifference. We slept at their feet and they would move about gently, but they never trod on anyone. They never left a live person, either: if he was only wounded, they would never abandon him. They're very clover animals. For a cavalryman a horse is both a friend and salvation.

"Our first baptism of fire came when our corps was ordered to repel tanks near Kushchevskaya village. After the Kushchevskaya battle the famous cavalry attack by the Kuban Cossacks the corps was named a guards corps. The cattle was terrifying, most of all for Olga and me, since we were still very much afraid. Although I had already seen combat and knew what It was, nevertheless, when the cavalrymen streamed forward, long coats flying and sabres drawn, their horses snorting and a horse, when it's racing forward, has such strength when this entire flood surged towards tanks and artillery, against the Nazis, it was as if it was happening in a terrible dream. There were many of them, more than of us, and they had their sub-machine guns at the ready as they advanced beside the tanks, but they could not withstand this flood, you know, they could not stand against it. They abandoned their field guns and ran..."

Olga Vasilyevna, speaking about this battle:

"I was bandaging the wounded and there was a Nazi lying there. I thought he was dead and paid no attention to him, but he was only wounded and wanted to kill me. I somehow felt as if someone had nudged me and turned towards him. I managed to kick the submachine gun from his hands. I didn't kill him, but I didn't ban drive him I walked away. He was wounded in the stomach..."

Zinaida Vasilyevna continued:

"I was leading a wounded man and suddenly I saw two Germans climbing out of a small tank. The tank had been knocked out, but they had apparently managed to escape. Another second more and if I had not fired a burst at them they would have shot the wounded man and me. It all happened so unexpectedly. After the battle I went up to them. They were lying with their eyes open. One of them was such a handsome, young German, I remember. I was sorry, even throgh he was a fascist, hut it was frightening all the same. Somehow, that feeling did not leave me for a long time and after all, you don't want to kill, you know. You think and feel such hatred why did they come to our land, what for? But just try killing them you, yourself and it's frightening...

"The battle was over. The Cossack squadrons were leaving their positions, but there was no Olga. I rode back behind everyone else,

the last, looking behind me all the time. It was already evening. And no Olga... People said that she had stayed behind to pick up the wounded. I couldn't do anything at all, just waited for her. I would fall behind, wait a little and then catch everyone up again. I was crying: surely I hadn't lost my sister in the first battle. Where was she? What had happened to her? Perhaps she was dying somewhere, calling for me...

"Olga caught up with us at night. The Cossacks wept when they saw us together. We hung on each other's necks, unable to tear ourselves apart. We understood then that we could not stay together, it was impossible to bear. Better to part and not see each other. If one of us had been killed in sight of the other we could not have borne it. We decided that I should ask to be transferred."

"And were you?"

"Yes. We served separately, in different squadrons at first and later even in different divisions. We would send each other greetings when the opportunity presented itself and find out if the other was still alive, that's all..."

"Death lay in wait at every step. We were in the sands ... near Ararat. The Germans had taken Ararat. It was Christmas, the German Christmas, and they were celebrating. A squadron and a battery of 40-millimetre guns were picked and at about five o'clock we moved off and marched all night. At dawn we met our scouts-they had left before us.

"The village Itself lay below us. The Germans never thought that we could cross sand like that and the defence was poor. We slipped through their rear positions with no trouble at all. Down we came from the hill, taking the sentries immediately and rushing into the village. The Germans ran out completely naked, with just sub-machine guns in their hands, There were Christmas trees there... The Germans were all drunk... And there were at least two or three tanks in every courtyard. They had small tanks as well, and armoured troop-carriers,.. Every oil of hardware. We blew it up on the spot and there was so much firing, such a racket, such panic,,. They were rushing around so wildly that everyone was afraid of shooting his own men.

"I had eight wounded. I dragged them above the village, up the slope. But we had evidently blundered in not cutting communications, and the German artillery began to shell us with long-range guns and mortars. I hurried to help my wounded into a cart. I got them in and off they went... And then a shell hit the cart before my eyes and blew it up to pieces. When I looked there was only one man left alive and the Germans were already scaling the hill,.. "Leave me, nurse," the wounded man begged. "Leave me, nurse... I"m already dying, I'm done for...' He was wounded in the stomach and it was impossible to move him.

"I thought that my horse was covered in this man's blood, but when I looked I saw that it, too, was wounded, in the side. The wound was the size of an entire first-aid pack. I got a few pieces of sugar I had with me and gave them to the horse. Firing was already coming from every side and It was not possible to tell where the Germans were and where our forces. If you went ten metres you stumbled on wounded men... I must find a cart, I thought, and pick them all up. I rode until I came to a slope, at the foot of which were three roads: one led in one direction, the second in another and the third went straight ahead. Which way should I go? I was gripping the reins tightly and the horse went where I directed. But here I don't know, perhaps I was prompted by an instinct of some kind and I had heard somewhere that horses can sense the right road,-I dropped the reins before we reached the fork and the horse went in a completely different direction from that which I would have chosen. It went and went and went...

"By now I was sitting lifelessly in the saddle, quite indifferent to where the horse was going: what would be, would be. It went on and on and then became more and more excited, shaking its head, and now I lifted the reins and held them, I bent down and pressed my hand to its wound. It grew more and more lively and then it neighed, as if it had heard someone. I was apprehensive: may be the Germans were nearby. I decided first to release the horse, but already I, too, could see fresh tracks: horses' hoofprints and the wheel of a machine-gun cart at least fifty people had passed by. And after two or three hundred metres the horse bumped straight into a cart. There were wounded men in it and I saw the remnants of our squadron,

"But help was already on its way to us. Carts had been sent... The order had been given to pick up everyone. Under fire, we collected our own men amid the bullets, picking up every single one, wounded and dead alike. I went on the machine-gun cart, too. I found everyone there, including the man wounded in the stomach; I brought them all out. Only the shot horses remained. The sun was already well up, and as the cart moved I could see that an entire herd was lying there. Beautiful, strong horses..."

An entire wall in the lounge, where we were sitting, was covered with enlarged pre-war and front-line photographs of the sisters. There they were, still schoolgirls, wearing hats and holding hunches of flowers. The photograph had been taken two weeks before the outbreak of the war. Ordinary children's faces, a little over-awed by the importance of the moment. And there they were in 1942, already in long Cossack coats and cavalry felt cloaks. A year separates them, but the faces are different and the persons seem to be different, too. This photograph was sent by Zinaida to her mother from the front: her first medal For Valor is pinned to her field-shirt. In this one they are photographed on Victory Day.., What do I notice? I notice the change in the faces: from soft, childish features to a mature woman's gaze, perhaps even a little hard, a little harsh. It was hard to believe that this change had occured in a matter of a few months or years, In normal times half a lifetime would have been needed.

War changed them. War shaped them, because it came upon them at the age when a person's character and philosophy of life are formed. War made them see much that it is better for a person, and especially a woman, not to see. War made them think about many things. About good and evil, for example. About life and death. About the questions to which a person learns to answer to a certain degree when he has lived his life. But they had only begun to live. And already they had to answer these questions...

Olga Vasilyevna recollects:

"We occupied a village where a German field hospital had been abandoned. The first thing I saw was a large pit dug in the yard, in which some of the wounded lay shot-before leaving the Germans had shot their own wounded men. Only one ward was left: they had evidently not had time to get that far or perhaps the men had been left behind because they were all without legs.

"When we went into their ward they looked at us with hatred: they clearly thought we had come to kill them. The interpreter said that we did not kill wounded men, but treated them. Then one man even began to make demands: they had had nothing to eat for three days, he said, and their bandages had not been changed during this time,.. I had a look and It was true, It was awful. They hadn't been seen by a doctor for a long time. Their wounds festered and the bandages had grown into the flesh."

"And you felt pity for them?"

"I can't call it pity, pity means sympathy, after all, but at the same time I couldn't do them any harm. Once a soldier whose family had been tortured to death by the Nazis-they had turned his wife and children

alive-struck a prisoner of war. His nerves gave way. I couldn't permit that and I defended the prisoner."
"But you, after all, knew how cruelly they treated our people?"
"Of course, I knew. Thaw's putting it mildly: I experienced it for myself. A driver and I were in charge of an ambulance filled with wounded. The road was combed and although we were able to drag several men into the ditch, the aircraft began to circle and rake us with fire and we could do no more. There was a ploughed field with a heap of stones collected from the soil in one corner. I dashed away from the road and lay down by the stones. I thought that if I was killed they could cover me with them and it wouldn't be so terrible as lying in a ditch.
"There were about six aircraft. Five flew away, out one remained and circled us three times. I could see the pilot shaking as he fired his machine-gun. It seemed like that to me. He flew so low that I thought he was bound to crash, He could see that it was a girl lying there, too: I had long blond hair. Well, now, why did he do that? Or take another example, when they set up a row of coots in front of their trenches, coots belonging to our soldiers with their cut off logs still in them. They had been our comrades, killed earlier that day..."
"Yet when someone, perhaps that pilot or the soldier who had cut off boots with human legs, was struck, you defended him. Why?"
"That was the way we were brought up. Perhaps I reacted that way because, all through the war, we had been saving people. If I had soon him commit some brutality in front of me, I probably wouldn't have been able to control myself. But as a prisoner, defeated, then no.,, Although I remembered, remembered with all my mind and heart. Once, when we were advancing, a line of men went forward and was cut down, then another and they were cut down, too. Many men were blown up by mines. They were sailors and they lay for a long time; their corpses swelled up and because of their striped vests they looked like water-melons. In a big field... And they were such fine men, so handsome. (She wept.) I'm crying now, but I didn't cry once during the entire war it was as if I'd turned to stone."
Zinaida Vasilyevna:
"Fighting took place near Budapest in winter... Well, I was bringing back wounded sergeant, the commander of a machine-gun team. I was wearing trousers, a padded jacket and a cap with ear-flaps. As I pulled him along I saw a patch of black snow. I realized that it was a deep crater, which was just what I needed. I lowered myself into the crater and there was someone alive there I felt that he was alive and I heard the scrape of metal... I lined round and there was a Nazi wounded in the legs, lying there with his sub-machine gun pointed at me. As I had been pulling the wounded man along my hair had come out from under my cap and I had an orderly's bag with a red cross over my shoulder... When I turned, he saw my face, realized that I was a girl and said: "Ah-a-a!" The moment of tension passed and he threw his sub-machine gun aside, quite indifferent...
"So there the three of us were in the crater: the wounded sergeant, me and this German. The crater was small and our feet touched. The German had enormous eyes and he stated and stared at me lo see what I would do. He had thrown his sub-machine gun aside straightaway, you see? The sergeant didn't understand what had happened and snatched at his pistol, while the German did nothing and just looked at me. I remember those eyes even now... I bandages the sergeant, while the German was bleeding badly and lying in his own blood. One of his legs had been completely smashed, he was on the verge of dying. Before I finished bandaging the wounded sergeant, I tore open the clothes of this German, bandaged him and applied a tourniquet. Then I bandaged up the sergeant. "Gut... Gut... Danke," the German said. His strength was leaving him. "Gut... Gut,.." He just repeated that word. I bandaged

the sergeant and then I remembered that a cart would come soon and thought that I should pull these two out of the crater. When the cart came I put the German in it together with the wounded sergeant and carried them back."

Olga Vasilyevna:

"A woman in war... That's something there are no words yet to describe. If the men saw a woman at the front line their faces changed-even the sound of woman's voice transformed them. One night I happened to sit down by a dug-out and began singing quietly. I thought that everyone was asleep and no one would hear me, but in the morning the commander told me: "We were not asleep. We longed to heat a female voice so much..."

"I was bandaging a tankman... Fighting was going on and there was a tremendous roar.

" "What is your name?" he asked.

"It seemed so strange to say "Olga" amid that roar and horror.

"I always tried to keep myself neat and tidy and not to forgot that I was a woman. "Good heavens, surely she hasn"t been in a battle, she's spotless,' people often said to me. I remember being very afraid that I would look ugly if I were killed. I saw many killed girls... I didn't want to die like that. I would false cover from strafing and be thinking less about avoiding being killed than about protecting my face so that it wasn't disfigured. I believe that all our girls thought like that. The men laughed at us, they thought it was funny. They're not thinking about death, they said, but about God knows what..."

Zinaida Vasilyevna:

"It was impossible to get used to death and dying... We were withdrawing from the Germans into the mountains. Five men with bad stomach wounds remained. Their wounds were fatal and in a day or two they would die. They couldn't be moved because there was nothing to carry them on. Oksanochka, another medical orderly, and I were left with them in a barn. "We shall return for you in two days," we were told, bet we were picked up three days later. We spent three days with those wounded men. They were healthy and strong and they didn't want to die. All we had were some painkillers, nothing more,,. They asked for water all the time, but they could not be allowed to drink. They died before our eyes, one after the other, and there was nothing we could do to help,..

"My first decoration? I was recommended for the medal For Valour. But I didn't go to receive it. I was offended (laughter). Do you know why? My friend had received the medal For Combat Services, while I had been given the medal For Valour. And she had been in only one battle, while I had taken part in the battle at Kushchevskaya village and elsewhere, too. So I was offended: she had only been in one battle and she had already performed "combat services", a lot of them, while I, on the other hand, only had a medal For Valour, as if I had shown courage only once. The commander came and, well, he laughed when he heard what the matter was. He explained to me that the medal For Valour is the most Important medal there Is, almost the same as an Order.

"I was wounded near Makeyevka in the Donbas. A splinter of metal like a pebble penetrated my hip and lodged there. I could feel blood flowing, so I folded a first-aid pack, applied it to the wound and went on running about and bandaging the men. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone that a girl had been wounded... in the buttocks. You're shy of telling anyone that at sixteen, of admitting it... Well, and so I went on running about and bandaging the wounded until I passed out from loss of blood. It had seeped down until my boots were full...

"When our men saw this they thought that I had been killed. They assumed the orderlies would come and pick me up, so they continued fighting. A little longer and I would have died. But some tankmen came

out to reconnoitre and saw a girl lying on the battle-field. I was without my cap, which had taken off. They listened to my pulse, found that I was alive and carried me to the medical battalion.
"From there I was sent to a military hospital, first one, then another. After six months I was discharged on medical grounds. The war ended. I was eighteen years old and my health was already gone: three wounds and a severe shell-shock. But I was a girl and so, naturally, I concealed that: I taked about my wounds, but didn't say a word about my concussion. However, it didn't let me forget about it and I was taken to hospital and registered as an invalid. Well, and what did I do? I tore up the papers and threw them away and didn't even draw the benefit. You had to go periodically to another board for checkups.
"In hospital I was visited by our squadron commander and sergeant-major. I had been very fond of the squadron commander during the war, hut he hadn't noticed me then, He was a handsome man and looked good in a uniform. All men looked good in a uniform. But women? They wore trousers and had their hair cropped so that they were almost like boys plaits weren't permitted. It was only at the end of the war that we were sometimes allowed to style our hair or wear plaits. However, in the hospital my hair had grown and I had put on weight and both of them (she laughed heartily) immediately fell in love with me. We had gone through the entire war together and there had been nothing of that sort, hut now the two of them, the squadron commander and the sergeant-major, proposed to me.
"When the war was over I wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible. But not everyone could immediately adjust. Our father helper us. He was a wise man. He took our medals, Orders and commendations and hid them.
" "There was a war and you served in it", he said. "Now forget about it. Something else is needed now. Put on high heels. I have two pretty daughters... You must both study and you must marry.,."
"Somehow Olga did not find it easy to adapt to peaceful life, she was proud. I remember my father telling my mother: "It"s my fault the girls were so young when they went to fight. What if the war has broken them...'
"Because of my medals and Orders I was given some coupons that enabled me to go to the military shop and buy something. I bought myself a pair of rubber boots, which were most fashionable then, an overcoat, a dress and overshoes. I decided to sell my greatcoat and went to the market... I arrived there in a silk dress, And what did I see? Youngsters without arms or legs... Everyone there was a veteran... Some who still had arms were selling home-made spoons, others were sitting there, bathed in tears, I went away without selling my greatcoat.
"As long as I lived in Moscow, perhaps five years, I couldn't go to the market. I was afraid that one of the cripples would recognize me and say: "Why did you save me then?" There was one young lieutenant, I was within a hairbreadth of death myself, I remember, but I dragged him back, bandaged both his legs, stopped the haemorrhaging and saved him. He begged me not to, though: "Better to finish me off..." And now I was constantly afraid of meeting him,. .
"When I was in the military hospital one of my fellow-patients was a handsome young fellow. A tankman. Misha... I can't remember his surname now. His legs had been amputated and he had only his left arm, The amputations were high, the legs taken off at the hip joint, so that it was impossible for him to wear artificial limbs. He was carried about on a trolley. A high trolley had been made specially for him and everyone who came took him out. Many civilians came to the hospital and helped look after the patients, especially the badly wounded ones such as Misha. Women and children and school-pupils.

Gifts, good and friendly letters were sent to the wounded. Everyone helped then as best he or she could.

"Misha was carried about in people's arms. And he didn't lose heart. He wanted to live so much. He was only nineteen years old and he hadn't lived at all. I don't remember whether he had any relatives, but he knew that he wouldn't be abandoned in his misfortune, he was sure that he wouldn't be forgotten...

"Of course, the war left destruction everywhere as it passed through our land. When we liberated villages we always found them burnt to the ground. In one a woman emerged from somewhere underground to meet us. She was alone, I remember, and she carried a plate of eggs. There were five eggs... Poverty like that was everywhere... All that was left to the people was the land...

"Olga and I did not become doctors, although we had both dreamed of studying medicine before the war. We could have entered medical school without sitting any examinations as soldiers who had been on active service. But we had seen so much human suffering, so many deaths. It was impossible to accept the prospect of more of that to come... Even thirty years later I persuaded my daughter not to enter medical school, although she very much wanted to..."

Olga Vasilyevna:

"I remember that we were driving along during the last days of the war and suddenly we heard music coming from somewhere. A violin... That was the day the war ended for me, not on Victory Day, when everybody fired into the air, bugged and kissed, but when I heard the violin. Two weeks passed before it was announced that Germany had surrendered and victory had been won. It was such a miracle, suddenly hearing music. It was as if I had woken up...

"We all thought that after the war, after so much human suffering and so many tears, life would be beautiful. We thought that everyone would be very kind, would love one another... After all, everyone had experienced such enormous grief. It made us all brothers and sisters! How we waited for that day... Victory Day. And it really was beautiful. Even nature sensed what was happening in human hearts. But people? When I see evil people now, when I see selfish people who live only for themselves, I can't understand it: how did this come about, how did this happen?

"I remember that violin, its thin, feeble sound, like the sound of a child's voice, and how I felt then-as if I had wakened from a terrible dream. How beautiful the world was! How beautiful man!

It was then that I thought about the future for the first time. Suddenly we all began to talk about the future. We talked about love. We wanted to love. And although we had lived through a grim war, nevertheless we all managed to give birth to beautiful children... That's the most important thing."

I said goodbye to the Korzh sisters and left, taking "one more war" with me in my bag. The warm asphalt smelt of soft, slightly dried leaves, children were playing in a sandpit together with the fearless town sparrows, and a few old ladies, sty with the air of the village about them, yet already of the city, were sunning themselves. I registered every tiny detail of the familiar peace beneath the quiet, safe, autumnal sky with a feeling of relief.

Tomorrow, however, I knew that I would pick up the telephone again, listen attentively to an unfamiliar voice and arrange a fresh meeting. And again, as I arrived at the front door, I would catch myself thinking that my tape-recorder, tike an instrument of torture, was winding In wartime memories that were agonizingly painful to recall, metre after metre. But I could no longer press the "stop" button, excuse myself and turn away. Too much had been entrusted to my memory now.

"WE DIDN'T SHOOT..."
Wherever I went I always found voluntary and unselfish helpers. Former comrades-in-arms or neighbours and colleagues telephoned me, wrote or came to my office: "Tell everyone about this remarkable person", "You must meet this woman", "I heard about your search and I want to give you another address".
They were all united by the passionate conviction that the truth of those days is beyond recall, the property of witnesses and direct participants. Much, indeed, has been and will be written about the war, but the evidence of those who actually took part is unique. Their memories preserve dozens of episodes, details and feelings that could never be imagined or invented. Everything happened either to the narrator herself or before her eyes. Recollecting and singling out details is a talent in itself now I would say that it is characteristic of the feminine memory. Women saw things in a different way and remember them in a different way. Their war has both colour and sound.
Here, for example, are three brief accounts:
Private Irina Nikolayevna Zinina, cook:
"I had a happy life before the war with my mum and dad. My dad came back from the Finnish campaign without one finger and I asked him:
"Dad, why is there a war?"
"War soon came and I sty wasn't properly grown up. I was evacuated from Minsk to Saratov and worked there on a collective farm. The chairman of the village Soviet called me to see him.
" "I"m thinking about you all the time, my girl,' he said.
"I was surprised.
" "What are you thinking about, Uncle?"
" "If it wasn"t for this damned wooden leg! It's all this damned wooden leg...'
"I stood there, not understanding a thing.
" "I"ve been sent an official letter,' he said. "I"ve got to send two people to the front, but I don't have anyone to send. Were it not for this damned wooden block I would have gone myself; I can't send you: you're an evacuee, But perhaps you'll go anyway? I've got two girls: you and Maria Utkina.' "Maria was a very tall, healthy girl, but me? I was small...
" "Will you go?"
" "But will I be given some puttees?"
"We were in rags-we'd hardly managed to take a thing with us!
" "You"re so pretty, they'll give you boots.'
"I said yes.
"...We were unloaded from a train and a strapping fellow with moustaches came for us. No one went with him. I don't know why, I didn't ask: I wasn't the enterprising sort, never the first to do anything. We didn't like him. Then a handsome officer arrived. A real doll! He talked us round and we went. We arrived at the unit and there was the fellow with the moustaches. "Well, now, snub noses, so you wouldn"t go with me?'
"A major called us into his office one by one and asked: "What can you do?"
" "Milk cows," one girl answered. "I cooked potatoes at home and helped Mum," " another said.
"Then it was my turn.
" "What about you?"
" "I can do the laundry."
" "You"re a good girl, I can see that. If only you could cook.'
" "I can."
"All day I cooked, at night the soldiers' washing had to be done and then I stood on guard duty for two hours. "Sentry! Sentry!" people would shout, but I couldn't reply I didn't have the strength.

"All through the war I thought that I would return home and tell mum and dad how hard things had been. But when I came back from the war there was no one for me to tell: mum and dad had been shot by the Nazis. All my relatives were gone..."
Alexandra Iosifovna Mishutina, hospital attendant, recalls:
"We were sent on a six-month course for doctors' assistants and midwifes. There were a hundred of us girls... Cooks, medical attendants all sorts. When we finished the course we walked to the station, where we were to be assigned to hospital trains. We were wearing civilian clothes, headscarves, plaits tied with bows... A general who met us ordered his driver to stop and asked: "What sort of a powderpuff division is this?"
"I didn't get to the front line. I was sent to the 22nd Army's hospital, where I worked at a medical check-point me, who couldn't light a primus stove before the war. The wounded were brought in and we would sort them out, dress or undress them, shave and wash them. They were helpless, you see. We had to do all the dirty jobs. It all fell in our lap: the shame and the human suffering, all that dirt, the lice..."
Part of Svetlana nikolayevna Lyubich's story: a medical orderly during the war, she is now a lecturer at the Lenin State University of Byelorussia:
"I was on a hospital train and I remember crying for the entire first week: well, I was away from my mother, for one thing, and I was sleeping on the third shelf of the compartment, for another, where luggage is put now. That was where my "room" was."
"How old were you when you went to the front?"
"I was in the eighth class, hut I didn't wait to the end of the year. I ran away to the front. All the girls on the hospital train were my age."
"What sort of work did you do?"
"We looked after the wounded, fed them, gave them water, brought them bedpans that was all part of our job. An older girl was on duty with me and she was very kind and considerate to me. "If someone asks for a bedpan," she said, "call me". The men were seriously wounded, some with only one arm or leg. On my first day I called her, but then I was alone after all, she couldn't be with me day and night. And a wounded man called me: "Nurse, a bedpan!"
"I handed him a bedpan, but he didn't take it. When I looked I saw that he had no arms. Something flashed through my mind and I somehow grasper what had to be done, but I stood sty for several moments, not knowing how I would cope, Do you follow? I had to help... But I didn't know what that meant, I hadn't seen anything like this before. Even on the course we weren't taught about it..."
War is not just shooting, bombing, hand-to-hand fighting, digging trenches-clothes are washed, porridge is cooked and bread baked as well. "There's heaps of women's work," the medical attendant Alexandra Mishutina said. If a soldier is to fight well, he must be clothed, shod, fed, his clothes have to be washed, Otherwise he will be a bad soldier. There are many examples in military history of dirty and hungry soldiers who were defeated solely because they were dirty and hungry. As the army advanced it was followed by a "second front" laundresses, bakers, cooks. Without suspecting it, Alexandra Iosifovna Mishutina gave me the idea of looking for former service women in these trades, too.
Private Alexandra semyonovna Masakovskaya, cook. She greeted me with surprise and confusion:
"We did not shoot, I didn't, I cooked porridge for the soldiers, and I was given a medal for that. I don't even want to remember it: surely you can't say that I fought? I cooked porridge and the soldiers' soup and dragged cauldrons and mess-tins aeon. Heavens, they were heavy.,.

I remember our commander saying: "I"ll shoot holes through those mess-tins... How are you going to give birth to children after the war?' And once he took all the mess-tins and shot holes in them. We had to look for smaller mess-tins in some village.

"The soldiers would come back from the front line and be given a rest period. The poor things were dirty and exhausted, their arms and legs all frost-bitten. The Uzbeks and Tajiks especially feared the cold. After all, they're used to warmth and sunshine, but there It was -30*C or 40*C. If the men were so frozen that they couldn't even raise a spoon to their lips, I fed them."

It was in the Lyuban district, too, in the township of Urechye, that I sought out Maria Stepanovna Detko and Anna Zakharovna Gorlach. Both once worked on a collective farm, but now they were retired and bringing up their grandchildren. They told their stories in a few words, as if apologizing for having brought someone so far to see them when, after all, they had done nothing special. They tried hard to send me to the local celebrity: "Fyodorovich has loads of medals, he's got two Orders of Glory". Journalists were "always" going to see him. The clinching argument, however, was not that journalists were "always" visiting Fyodorovich, even from Minsk, but the fact that the chairman of the collective farm himself visits him on Victory Day to offer his congratulations.

I have not forgotten how strange it seemed to talk and hear of blood, death and horror in a garden on the sty fresh, spring grass amid blossom-ing cherry trees. The women wept more than told about themselves.

"I washed clothes. That was my job all through the war. The clothes were brought to us, badly worn, blackened and lousy. There were white camouflage cloaks. They were bloody, actually red not white. A field-shirt without a sleeve and a hole where the chest should be, trousers without a leg. You washed thorn with tears and rinsed them with tears, And there were mountains of those clothes, mountains. When I remember it all my arms ache even now. I often dream about what it was like. You can't describe it in words..." (Private Maria Stepanovna Detko, laundress.)

"We dressed the soldiers, washed for them, ironed for them-those were our heroic deeds. We travelled by horse-drawn cart, hardly ever by train-you could say that we walked all the way to Berlin. In fact, casting my mind back like this, I'd say we did everything there was to be done, from helping to carry the wounded to bringing up ammunition on the Dnieper: they couldn't be transported by road and had to be carried several kilometres by hand.,," (Private Anna Zakharovna Gorlach, laundress.)

We were already saying goodbye at the door when Anna Zakharovna burst out: I've told you very little, you know. So much happened to me, hut I've told you so little."

However much I asked them to begin with something else, each woman nevertheless started at the very beginning.

"The sergeant-major asked: "How old are you, my girl?" "Eighteen, why?" "Why?" he said, "because we don"t need anyone under age.' "I"ll do whatever you want, even bake bread.' I was accepted..." (Private N.A.Mukhametdinova, baker.)

Maria Semyonovna Kulakova wrote from the town of Mikhailovka in the Volgograd region:

"I had graduated from teacher training college and, since the war had begun, we were not assigned to teaching posts, but sent home. A few days later I was summoned to the local military registration and enlistment office. I was still very young, only eighteen years old, Mum didn't want to let me go, of course: "I"ll send you to your brother and say that you're not at home'. "But I"m a member of the Young Communist League,' I said. We assembled at the military

registration and enlistment office where we were told that women were needed to bake bread at the front.
"The work was very hard. We had eight cast-iron ovens which we set up when we arrived in a ruined village or town. After that was done we needed wood, twenty or thirty buckets of water and five sacks of flour. We were eighteen-year-old girls and we had to drag sacks of flour weighing seventy kilograms. Two of us would grab a sack and carry it. Or forty loaves would be piled on a stretcher

It was too heavy for me to lift. Day and night in front of the oven, day and night. No sooner had one tub of dough been kneaded than it was time for the next. Bombs were falling, but we baked bread..."
Unconscious of their exploits, they are firmly convinced that theirs were "not heroic" jobs. In wartime, too, they told me, they did what women have had to do since time immemorial: "wash, sew for men and feed them". But without them, those great war-time toilers, there would have been no Victory.
Zoya Lukyanovna Verzhbitskaya, section commander in a construction battalion:
"We built railways, pontoon bridges and dug-outs. The front line was nearby and we dug the earth at night to avoid being noticed.
"We felled trees. Most of the members of the section were girls, all of them very young, together with a few men-those who were unfit for combat. How did we carry out the trees? We'd get hold of a tree and carry it together. One tree, carried by the whole section. Wo got our share of bloody calluses that way..."
Private Maria Alexeyevna Remnyova, a postal worker carried letters to the front line. "A simple little job," she thinks. "You don't notice it in wartime." But when girls appeared in the trenches with full mail sacks, the commanders were delighted: "Splendid, girls, you've brought the longest-distance shells".
From Maria Alexeyevna Remnyova's story:
"I was nineteen when the war broke out, living in Murom, in the Vladimir region. In October 1941, I was sent to build the Murom-Gorky-Kulebaki motor road with other members of the Young Communist League. When we returned from the label front were mobilized.
"I was sent to communications school in Gorky on a postal workers' course. After finishing the course I went on active service with the 60th Rifle Division. I served as an officer in the regimental post office and saw with my own eyes how people at the front line wept and kissed the envelopes when they received letters. Many men had relatives who had been killed or who lived in the territory captured by the enemy and could not write. We would write letters to these men thorn an Unknown Girl: "Dear soldier, an Unknown Girl is writing to you. How are you fighting the enemy? When will you rerun with Victory?" At nights we sat and wrote. During the war I wrote hundreds of letters like that..."
"I spent the entire war on the move, following sign boards "Shchukin"s section', "Kozhuro"s section'," Private Yelena Nikiforovna Ievskaya recalled. "We would pick up tobacco, cigarettes and flints at our base everything that a soldier can't do without at the front and off we'd go. Sometimes by truck, sometimes by cart, but more often than not on foot with one or two soldiers. We carried it all on our own backs. You couldn't reach the trenches on horseback the Germans would have heard. All on our own backs, my dear. ."
In Kiev I met Valentina Kuztminichna Borshchevskaya. Her story seemed so interesting to me, linking everyone who "fought without firing", that I shall give it here in full without concern for the many repetitions. These are often necessary, both in this story and in others. It is not always possible to understand the feelings and the state of mind of someone in the middle of a war or at the end of it if you do not know who and what he or she was before the war. After all,

being seventeen or eighteen years old is not the same as being twenty or thirty ; going off to war as a girl is not the same as going when you are already a mature woman, leaving your child at home.
This, for example, was how Captain Nadezhda Mikhailovna Skobeleva, a doctor, recalled that side of war.
"Everything was burnt or blown up as we retreated fuel, ammunition and all. Nothing but flames was left. The people who saw us retreating-women and children-came out of their houses and stood there: "How can you leave us? Take us with you, too..." If I had been a mother I don't know how I could have borne it. It's easier for a younger person: I did not have those feelings, hadn't yet known motherhood and it was only because of that that I managed to hold out. Older people took it harder. I saw a man of forty walking along, weeping. He couldn't look up..."
That's why people begin at the very beginning, from the first day. The beginning is the foundation upon which the entire building of reminiscences is subsequently erected. Without it the building crumbles and falls apart.
When Valentina Kuzminichna Borshchevskaya went off to war she was twenty-four years old. "I already understood a lot," she repeated several times.
Lieutenant Valentina Kuzminichna Bratchikova-Borshchevskaya, a political officer of a field laundry detachment:
"Before the war I worked in a home for the Spanish children who had been brought to Kiev in 1937, I learned Spanish and worked as a teacher.
"On May I I got married and on June 22 war broke out. I remember the first raids by German aircraft. We didn't know what to do, but the Spanish children began to dig trenches in the yard. They already knew everything... They were sent to the rear and I went to the Penza region, where I had been given the task of organizing nursing courses. At the end of 1941 I supervised the course examinations myself, because the doctors were all at the front, and after presenting the certificates I requested to be sent to the front as well and was dispatched to a field hospital near Stalingrad. I was the oldest girl there. Sonia Udrugova, who is sty my friend, was then sixteen and had only completed the ninth class and then those nursing courses. We had already been at the front for three days and here Sonia was, sitting and crying in the woods. I went up to her:
" "Come on now, Sonia, dear, why are you crying?"
" "How is that you don"t understand? I haven't seen my mother for three days,' she replied.
"How she laughs when I remind her of that now!
"At the Kursk salient I was transferred from the hospital to become political officer of a field laundry detachment. The laundresses were civilians. We travelled about on carts carrying basins, tubs, samovars for heating water and the girls sitting on top, wearing red, green, blue or grey skirts. Well, everyone would laugh: "There goes the laundry brigade!.." I was called "the laundresses" commissar'. It was only later that my girls began to dress more appropriately, "kitted themselves out" as the expression has it.
"We worked very hard. We would arrive and be given a hut of some kind or a house or dug-out. The clothes were washed there and before drying them we would impregnate them with the "K" soap to get rid of lice. We had delousing powder, but it didn't help, so we used the "K" soap, which really stank-it had a terrible smell. We dried the clothes in the same place that we washed them and we slept there, too. Twenty or twenty-five grammes of soap were issued per soldier for washing clothes. It was black, like earth. Many girls suffered hernias as a result of the heavy loads and the strain, or developed eczema on their hands from the "K" soap. Their nails broke and they thought they would

never be able to grow them again. Nevertheless, after a couple of days' rest they had to wash clothes again.
"The girls did what I said. Once we arrived at a place where airmen were based, an entire unit. Imagine, they saw us in our dirty, worn clothes and those whipper-snappers said scornfully: "Laundresses, just fancy..." My girls were almost in tears:
" "Valentina Kuzminichna, look..."
" "Don"t worry, we'll have our revenge on them.'
"And we agreed among ourselves on what we would do. In the evening my girls put on the best clothes they had and walked to a lawn. One girl played the accordion and they danced. They had agreed not to dance with a single airman. The airmen came up to them, but they wouldn't dance with any of them. All evening they. danced with one another.
"One idiot shot his mouth off and you"re mad with everyone,' the airmen said imploringly.
"In principle, locking civilians up in the guardhouse was not permitted, but what can you do when you have a hundred girls together? Lights-out for our unit was at eleven o'clock and that was that. The girls tried to do a bunk well, girls will be girls and I would put them in the guardhouse. Once, some senior officers from a nearby unit arrived and two of my girls were under lock and key.
" "What"s this? Civilians in the guardhouse?' they asked.
" "Comrade Colonel, write a report to command headquarters," I said calmly. "That"s up to you. But I have to struggle for discipline. And discipline in my unit is first-class.'
"They left without a word.
"Discipline was strict. I happened to come out of my house when a captain was walking past. He was so surprised that he even stopped.
" "Good lord! Do you know who lives there?"
" "Yes."
" "Thaw"s the political officer's house. Do you know how fierce she is?'
"I said that I didn't know anything about that.
" "Good lord! She never smiles, she"s always so angry.'
" "Would you like to meet her?"
" "Heavens, no!"
"Well, at this point I owned up.
" "You already have," I said, "I"m the political officer!'
" "No, taht"s impossible! I've been told that she...'
"I looked after my girls. We had a very pretty girl called Valya. Once I was away for ten days and when I returned I was told that during all that time Valya had come back late and had been with some captain or other. Well, if that was the case there was nothing to be done about It.
"Two months went by and I learned that Valya was pregnant. I asked her to come and see me, "Valya, how could this happen? Where will you go? Your step-mother (she had a step-mother, not a mother) is living in a dug-out." She cried and said to me: "It"s your fault, if you hadn't gone away nothing would have happened.' They treated me like a mother or an elder sister.
"She had a light coat of some kind and the weather was already cold, so I gave her my greatcoat.
"My Valya left us...
"On March 8, 1945, we celebrated International Women's Day and my girls left their wash-tubs. Suddenly they saw two Germans coming out of the wood, trailing their submachine-guns behind them... Both men were wounded. My girls surrounded them and, well, as a political officer I wrote in my report, of course, that today, March 8, the laundresses took two Germans prisoner.
"The following day we had a commanders' conference. The head of the political department opened the meeting.

" "Comrades," he said, "I want to give you some good news: the war will soon co over. Yesterday the laundresses of the 21st Field Laundry Detachment took two Germans prisoner..."
"While the war went on we were not decorated, but when it was over I was told: "Decorate two people". I was indignant and took the floor. I said that I was the political officer of a laundry detachment and described how hard the laundresses' work was, how many of them had hernias or eczema on their hands and so on, that the girls worked more like tractors than people although they were very young.
" "Can you submit medal citations by tomorrow?" I was asked. "We shall decorate more of your detachment..."
"And the detachment commander and I sat over the lists that night. Many girls received medals For Valour or For Combat Services, while one laundress was decorated with the Order of the Red Star. The very best laundress, who never left her wash-tub: sometimes the others would be falling down tired and have no strength left, but she would continue washing. She was an elderly woman...
"When it was time to send the girls borne I wanted to give them something. They were all from Byelorussia and everything there was destroyed and in ruins. How could I let them go with empty hands? The German village we were stationed in had a dressmaker's shop. I went to have a look and found, to my good fortune, that the sewing machines were intact.
"And so a present was ready for each girl as she left. That was all I could do for my girls..."
Tall and straight, like an old, but still flourishing tree, a deep voice with a male rasp-such, evidently were those who became collective-farm "chairwomen" in wartime, when no fit and able-bodied men were left in the villages, only old men and adolescents. Valentina Kuzminichna spread out a pile of letters before me:
"From my girls... One needs help in getting a flat, another with obtaining a holiday voucher, a third web getting a telephone installed. We are often passed over: "Oh, yes," people say, "they had a real war, the laundresses!" Who bothered about papers during the wart No one thought about anything but defeating the enemy. Some of the commanders were wise enough to issue orders that laundresses were to be counted as private soldiers, but it didn't occur to everyone. And so women who were awarded medals and Orders and served right through the war are not regarded as veterans. I write to the authorities and ague their case. "I thought you were petitioning on behalf of a merited front-line soldier," one big-wig who didn't want to listen to me said. "If your wife didn"t wash for you or cook your meals for just one week, I'd like to see what you would look like,' I told him. He gave me a hearing after that..."
She remains "the laundresses' commissar", her thoughts, whatever we talked of, turning back to those years:
"After the war I didn't go visiting anyone for ten years, I couldn't enjoy sleeping my own bed enough. I couldn't go away or spend the night with friends. It's almost forty years since the war ended and yet I always go to sleep with the thought: thank heavens I can't hear sleeting! So much time has passed, but I sty have no greater joy than that. I've been a district paediatrician all this time, hut I've never wished anyone "good health" the way people do: I've always said "good health to you and your children and may there be no war..." "
Two more "non-shooting" occupations, two more lives.
From the notes of Yelena Ivanovna Babina:
"My father worked on a collective farm. He was one of the best workers and was praised at every meeting. His were skilful hands, indeed, and he could do anything: work as a carpenter, mend shoes, make clothes. Mum was chosen to be a team-leader. Her team was the best on the farm and she was proud and happy. but one night our house was burnt down

and we fled in what we had on. I was nine years old and I remember my mother clutching my baby brother and weeping: "The kulaks" sons have taken their revenge on us'.
"The collective farm helped us build a new house. Father had only just finished the porch when the war with the Finns began. He went off to fight and was wounded. He had been back in the new house a very short time when the Great Patriotic War began, He was eager to get to the front and volunteered together with the headmaster of our school. I completed the seventh class just then and got a job as an attendant in a military hospital, so there was no more schooling for me. I had never seen human blood before, and working in the hospital was very hard and frightening.
"In 1942 father wrote to us that he was being sent to Stalingrad. A few days later we received the news that he had been killed. In 1943 mum received a second official letter, this time telling her that her son had taken. She became seriously ill but continued to work on the collective farm: in the fields the women would weep together and laugh together and the work made things easier. Until then my mother had looked very young, She was thirty-six and I was seventeen, but when people who did not know us saw us together they would call: "Hey, girls! " Mum used to get angry, but I would laugh. I liked having such a young mother. But now she turned into an old lady in a few months.
"The Nazis were unable to take Voronezh for a long time. They bombed and bombed the city, flying over our village of Moskovka I hadn't seen the enemy yet, I had only seen his aircraft. But I soon saw what war means. Our hospital was informed that a train had been heavily bombed near Voronezh When we reached the place we saw a real slaughter-house... Our professor was the first to come to his senses.
"Stretchers!" he shouted loudly. I was the youngest, only sixteen, and everyone looked to see that I didn't faint.
"We went up and down the tracks and clambered over the carriages. They were burning and no groans or cries could be heard. There was no one to put on the stretchers: nobody was in one piece. I clutched at my heart and my eyes closed from fright. When we returned to the hospital the doctors could hardly stand on their feet and no one went home. We all literally dropped where we could, some resting their heads on the table, others, on chairs, and fell asleep like that.
"When I came off duty I went home. I arrived bathed in tears and wont to bed, but as soon as I closed my eyes I saw it all again: the carriages burning and what was left of the people. Mum came home from work and Uncle Mitya arrived, too, I heard mum's voice:
" "I don"t know what's going to happen to Lena, Just look at how she's changed since she started working at the hospital, She's not like herself at all, doesn't say anything, doesn't talk to anyone and cries out in her sleep. And where's her smile gone and her laughter? You know yourself how cheerful she was. But she never jokes now.'
"I listened to Mum, the tears flowing.
"...When Voronezh was liberated in 1943 I joined the guard. Motya Kolyagina, the sisters Anya and Zina Kiryanova, Nastya Chekunova and I joined from our village of Moskovka. The days and weeks of guard service passed and I came to know many fellow service women. All of them were young between eighteen and twenty years of age. And all of them were pretty I've never seen so many pretty girls. It was as if they had been specially chosen. I got to know Marusya Prokhorova first she was a friend of Tanya Fyodorova. They came from the same district. Tanya was a serious girl, who loved tidiness and order. But Marusya was fond of singing and dancing. She sang cheeky little ditties. Most of all, though, she loved to put on make-up. She would sit down in front of the mirror and stay there for hours. Tanya used to scold her: "Instead of putting on pretty face, you"d do better to iron your uniform and tidy up your bed'.

"Another girl in our group was Pasha Litavrina, a really reckless type. She was a friend of Shura Batishcheva. Shura was shy and modest, the quietest of all of us. Marusya Kadomskaya loved to sit in front of the mirror and make up. And Lusya Likhachova loved to curl her hair; she would curl it and then in a trice pick up her guitar. She went to bed with her guitar and got up with it. Polina Neverova was older than the rest of us. Her husband had been kited at the front and she was serious and sombre.
"We all wore military uniform. When Mum saw me in uniform for the first time she went white.
" "Have you decided to join the army?"
"I realized what had frightened her so much.
" "No, of course not, Mum. I"ve already told you that I'm guarding bridges.'
" "The war will soon be over," my mother replied. "And you"ll be out of uniform immediately then.'
"I thought so, too.
"Two days later, when we heard that the war had ended, we had a meeting. Comrade Naumov, the guard chief, spoke.
" "The war is over," he said. "However, yesterday I received an order that members of the guard are required for the Western railway."
" "But there all Bendera"s bands there!' someone shouted from the audience.
"Naumov was silent for a moment, then said:
" "Yes, girls, there are Bendera"s hands there. But an order is an order and must be carried out. Those willing to go should apply to the guard chief. Only volunteers will be sent,'
"We went back to the barracks and lay down on our beds. It became very, very quiet. No one wanted to leave her home far behind and say goodbye to her parents, And no one wanted to die after the war was over. We all knew what Bendera's bands wore like.
"The next day there was another meeting. I sat behind the presidium table at the front of the room, The table was covered with a red cloth. I thought that this was the last time I would sit there.
" "I knew that you would be the first to go, Babina," the guard chief said. "Well done, girls! None of you was afraid. The war has ended and you could go home, but you are going off to defend your country. I wouldn"t part with you, but guard members are needed on the Western Railway.'
"Two days later we left on a goods train. There was hay on the floor and the waggons smelt of grass.
"I had never heard of the town of Stryi before and now this was where we would serve. I didn't like the town. It was small and frightening. Every day a band played and someone was buried a militiaman or a Communist or a member of the Young Communist League. In Voronezh you weren't afraid when you went on guard, but here you had to look over your shoulder. We saw death again.
"I had a friend called Galya Korobkina. She was killed there, That was the most terrible thing of all to bury people when the war was over. And these were seventeen or twenty-year-olds... I completely forgot what it means to joke and smile there,
"...After demobilization I went to Leningrad. I got a job at the Kirov Works and was given a place in the girls' hostel. There were seven beds in my room already and mine was the eighth. Later we all got married, one by one, and brought our husbands to live in the hostel, although the room measured only 24 square metres. But we lived together very amicably and never quarrelled. In the evening we would all gather round the table, some having supper, some reading, some knitting, some embroidering. The children were put to bed early and we would curtain off our beds. It must have been funny to look at those Gypsy tents, but no one complained.

"We all worked at the Kirov Works, but in different shops. Some of us worked on one shift, some on another. I don't think the light was ever switched off in our room. We lived in the hostel for seven years; my son grew up there. He became a good, sweet-tempered boy. And then, after seven years, we were given not flats, but rooms in communal flats. We were all very glad. We helped each other to move, papering walls and washing floors, When we left we bugged and kissed each other like sisters. We took with us our children and our husbands there was nothing else, none of us had anything. All we did was to remove the curtains from our beds, That was the only property we possessed.
"For many years afterwards, when we met at the plant entrance gates, we would throw ourselves into each other's anna and hug each other. Later many of us had other children and we would go to their christenings. I had a second son, too. Time passed and we acquired our own flats and good furniture. Now I live alone in a two-room flat, but there isn't a night when I don't see the war before my eyes, or when I sleep peacefully. I even weep more often in that flat and no one sees my tears.
"I hate the very word "war". It took the joy of life away from me, even though I remained alive. My grandchildren ask me: "Granny, why do you smile so little?" I know that it isn't fun for them to be with me, but I can't help myself..."
Antonina Mironovna Lenkova, from the town of Berdyansk in the Zaporozhye region, recalls. Still only sixteen years old when she went to the front, she worked as a mechanic in a field armour repair-shop.
"In the second part of "And Quet Flows the Don"* Sholokhov describes the execution of Podtelkov, Krivoshlykov and their comrades. Among those shot was my uncle my mother's brother, Pyotr Ivanovich Lysikov. His mother that is, my grandmother was present at the execution and fainted when she saw her son fall. She was carried away unconscious...
"My father, Miron Pavlovich Lenkov, began life as an literate country boy and went on to become a platoon commander and a Communist, When lie died my mother and I remained in Leningrad, and I owe all that is best in me to that city. I was often ill as a child, weakened by a terrible burn when small. As I grew up books became my passion. I shed tears over the novels of Lydia Charskaya and "The True History of a Little Ragamuffin" by Greenwood and literally immersed myself in Turgenev, I loved poetry...
"In August 1941, we intended to pay my grandmother a visit. However, as early as the beginning of June I was gripped by a mysterious feeling of disquiet and began to persuade my mother to leave immediately. She was surprised, for her heydays were in August and no one would permit her to go before then. In any case, there was nothing to do at grandmother's in June: the fruit and vegetables ripen in August. But no words could shake my desire to leave at once. Something that I myself cannot understand was drawing me out of the city..."
Antonina Mironovna succeeded in persuading her mother to ret her take her small sister with her to their grandmother's. On the steppes of the Don by the Sviridov farm-stead she saw mounted couriers galloping at full speed in clouds of hoi dust, carrying call-up papers from the local military registration and enlistment office. She saw the Cossack women singing, drinking and sobbing as they saw their men off to war.
*The True History of a Little Ragamuffin (1928 1940) the world-famous novel by the great Soviet writer Mikhail Sholokhov (1905 1984). Ed.
"On June 23 I went to the district military registration and enlistment office in Bokovskaya village. There I was told bluntly:
" "We don"t need children at the front. You're a Young Communist League member? That's splendid: organize help for the collective farm.'

"We turned over piles of grain with spades so that it didn't overheat. Then we harvested vegetables. The calluses on our hands hardened, our lips cracked and our faces were burner by the sun of the steppes. If anything marked me out from the girls of the farmstead it was only that I knew a lot of poetry and could recite it by heart all the long way home from the fields.
"But the war was drawing closer. On October 17, the Nazis occupied Taganrog and I began to talk about evacuation, although I realized that this was beyond the strength of my grandmother or my mother's sisters with their small children. Yet it was impossible to remain and place my sister, for whom I was now responsible, at risk.
"The journey to Oblivskaya village took five days on foot. We had to throw our sandals away and entered the village bare-foot. When we reached the station together with other evacuees the station master said: "Don"t wait for covered carriages, get into the open waggons and we shall send you to Stalingrad there will be a locomotive soon'. We were lucky we climbed into a waggon carrying oats. We plunged our bate feet into the grain, covered ourselves with a shawl, snuggled up to each other and dozed off. We had long since eaten up all our bread and our honey as well. During the previous days the Cossack women had given us some food. We were ashamed to take the food, for which wo could not pay, but they persuaded us: "Eat, you poor things, it"s tough for everyone now, we've got to help each other', I swore to myself that I would never forget this human kindness...
"We left Stalingrad by steamer, then travelled by train again until, at two o'clock in the morning, we reached Medveditskoye station. We poured out on the platform hi a human wave. And since both of us had turned into icicles and could not move, we stood pressed together, supporting each other in order not to fall. Or to crumble to dust, as I had once seen a frog crumble when it was taken out of liquefied oxygen and thrown on the floor. Everything was frozen, even thought. I recalled with difficulty that someone had apparently come up to us, asked us about something and gone away. Then a cart filled with people drew up and we were tied lo the back. We were dressed in padded jackets and told: "Walk, otherwise you won"t get warm and you'll freeze. There can be no question of carrying you...' At first we fell, but we kept moving and then even ran. In this way we covered the sixteen kilometres to the district centre.
"We spent five more days sitting beside a roaring stove in the corridor of either the executive committee or the visage Soviet, getting warm after the cold journey. At last a lorry came for us from the village of Frank. The last twenty-five kilometres seemed very long, for it was bitterly cold and the lorry was open...
"It was warm and bright in the office of the chairman of the May I Collective Farm. But the person upon whose shoulders lay the heavy burden of organizing a collective farm from women, old men and children, town-dwellers to boot and without clothes or shoes, looked gloomy as he sat there. Unharvested fields of sunflowers were under snow, stocks of hay, unstacked, were covered by snow drifts, and hungry cattle bellowed day and night, hot who was there to send out to work? These two girls, perhaps?
" "How much education have you had?" the chairman asked me.
"He was delighted, even distrustful, when I said that I had completed the ninth class.
" "That"s good. You can help me here as book keeper.'
"For a moment I was even pleased. But then I saw the poster hanging behind the chairman. It read: "Take the Wheel, Girls!"
" "I won"t sit in an office,' I told the chairman. "I can drive a tractor if I"m taught how.'
"Tractor drivers were desperately needed by the collective farm. The tractors stood immobilized, covered by snow drifts, and had to be dug

out. We took them to pieces, burning our hands on the metal and leaving pieces of skin on it. The rusty bolts were so tight that they seemed to have been welded. When we were unable to budge thorn in an anti-clockwise direction we tried to twist them off in the opposite direction. As luck would have It, Ivan Ivanovich Nikitin, the only real tractor driver and our mentor, appeared just then, apparently from nowhere. He clutched at his head and could not hold back his curses. His swearing was like a groan, although that didn't make it any easier to listen to, and our cheeks flamed with shame.

"We assembled the tractors in a shed. It was a little easier to bear the cold there, but the work was made more difficult by the absence of spare parts. We were taught, you might say, according to the rule of contraries.

" "Do you see those bearing journals?" Ivan Ivanovich would ask. "If you fit it," he explained, "the tractor driver won"t work, he's just have endless trouble. It Isn't round, it's oval-shaped. The shaft ought to be ground, but the lathe is broken and there's nothing to grind it on. That means that in a day or two you'll have to tighten the connecting rod bearings, You'll find out what that means when you begin work...'

"That was the way we were taught and those were the tractors on which we would be working.

"I drove into the field in reverse: most of the gear wheels in the speed goat-box of my tractor were "toothless". I had made the simple calculation that one of the other tractors would stop working during the next twenty kilometres and then its speed gearbox would be taken out and fitted in my tractor. And that was what happened. Another tractor driver tike me, Sarochka Gozenbuk, failed to notice that her radiator was leaking and so the engine of her tractor went out of commission.

"The work was hard. We slept three or four hours a day. For a long time we wanned up the engines with naked flames-against all the rules. I found out what tightening the bearings meant, too. And how to crank a tractor afterwards. Lubricants and fuel were rationed. You answered with your head for every drop just as for every melted bearing.

"Once, before going into the fields, I opened the fuel cock of the crankcase to check the oil and a sort of whey came out. I shouted to the team-leader that new lubricating oil would have to be poured into the crankcase and he came up, smeared a drop of oil on his hands, sniffed it for some reason and said: "Don"t worry! You can do another day's work.' "That"s impossible,' I replied. "You yourself said..."

"Me and my big moth!" he interrupted. "You"ve read too many books. If I say go to work, that means go to work!' And he walked away. "I drove off. I was pulling a cultivator, a light implement, but it threw up a huge cloud of dust. The day was hot, the tractor smoked and It was impossible to breathe, but all that didn't matter much: what worried me was the condition of the bearings. I thought that they were knocking. When I stopped, everything seemed all right, but when I revved up the engine they knocked! I forced myself to think that it was all in my mind, stopped paying attention and moved off. Then, suddenly, there was a thump, thump, thump right under my scat!

"I switched off the engine, ran to the access ports, opened them and saw that on inner side there were two completely melted crank-pin hearings covered with a wet, oily metal sand!

"I sank to the ground, bugged the wheel of the tractor and burst into tears. It was my own fault: I had seen the state of the oil! I had let myself be frightened by bad language when I should have given the team-leader as good as I got but no, that was the rotten intelligentsia for you.

"I heard sounds and turned. Well, well! It was the chairman of the collective farm, the director of the machine-and-tractor station, the

head of the political department and, of course, Ivan Ivanovich in person. It had all been his fault!
"There he stood, unable to move. He had taken in everything that had happened, but he didn't say anything. I didn't, either-I was to blame, nevertheless!
"How many?" the director of the machine-and-tractor station asked.
"Two," I replied.
"The head of the political department turned to the team-leader:
" "Well, what am I supposed to do-hand this girl over to the court? It was your responsibility to check the oil..."
"And that was how it ended: in talk. But Ivan Ivanovich never swore in my presence again.
"My working day was totally dependent on the tractor: as long as it worked I didn't get off it. With the sort of crankshaft it had that usually meant twenty-four and sometimes up to thirty hours' operation. Then the crankpin bearings had to be re-adjusted. On those days you could have three or four hours' sleep...
"Then we had a piece of good luck: our mum turned up. Because of her exceptional honesty she had been appointed to the job of distributing food among the military hospitals of Leningrad, which was under siege. That was the job she was doing! But in February, 1942, she was brought out of the city on the frozen Road of Life, dying of hunger... I have remembered that all my life and so have my children.
"Mum found us through a childhood friend of mine in Samarkand, to whom I continued to write. She arrived and we were a family again. When the field work was over and we were back in the machine-and-tractor station again after bringing the tractors in for repair, mum suddenly said:
" "I think you should go to school."
"I didn't immediately grasp what I was supposed to do there. If it was a question of my little sister's progress, then I already knew that she was getting top marks. Mum explained:
" "It isn"t me who'll complete the final year for you, is it?'
"You can't imagine how strange it was, after everything I had been through, to find myself behind a school desk, solving mathematical problems, writing compositions and cramming German verbs instead of fighting the Nazis! And this at the time when the enemy had reached the Volga!
"I went to school. I knew there wasn't long to wait: in four months I would have my seventeenth birthday and then just let them try to keep me at borne! But I didn't have to wait until December 25, my birthday. The Stalingrad YCL Regional Committee (our village was in the Stalingrad region) called for young people to volunteer for the defence of Stalingrad.
"Everything went smoothly at the district committee, but I had to put up a struggle at the military registration and enlistment office, both because of my age and because of my eyesight. However, one obstacle helped me overcome the other. When the fact that I was under seventeen came up, I called the military commissar a bureaucrat and declared a hunger strike. I sat down beside him and didn't budge for two days, pushing the piece of bread and mug of hot water he offered me aside. I threatened to die of hunger, but not before writing a note naming the person guilty of my death. I don't think that he was frightened, but, all the same, he sent me to the medical commission. All this took place in the same room and when the doctor spread his hands apart after testing my sight the commissar burst out laughing and said that I had gone hungry for nothing. But I replied that it was because of the hunger strike that I couldn't see anything. I went across to the window, moving closer to that blasted chart, and started howling. And went on howling until I had memorized the bottom lines, Then I wiped

away my tears and said that I was ready to be examined again. And passed.
"On November 10, 1942, after drawing provisions for ten days in accordance with orders, we (about twenty-five girls) climbed into the back of a battered lorry, the same one, I think, that had brought us to the village, and struck up the popular song "The order has been given", substituting the words "to defend our country" for "to the civil war",
"From Kamyshin, where we took the oath of allegiance, we marched along the left bank of the Volga as far as Kapustin Yar. A reserve regiment was stationed there and, somehow, we even melted from sight among the thousands of men. At any rate, the "buyers" tried not to notice us.
"I had made friends en route with Annushka Rakshenko and Asya Basina. Neither of them had any trade and I considered my own to be a non-military one, so, whoever was called, we all took three steps forward together, assuming that we could quickly master any trade on the spot. But we were passed over.
"However, when we answered the command "Drivers, tractor drivers and mechanics, three steps forward!", the "buyer", a young senior lieutenant, couldn't walk past us since, instead of three, I took five steps forward. He stopped, his eyes fixed silently on me,
" "Why are you choosing men only? I"m a tractor driver, too!'
" "Impossible," he said, surprised. "Very well, what is the operating sequence of a tractor?"
" "One, three, four, two."
" "Have you ever melted the bearings of a tractor?"
"I admitted frankly that I had melted two connecting rods solid, adding that this had happened when I began driving, from inexperience.
" "Good. You are accepted for your honesty." And he nodded and walked away.
"Annushka and Asia, stubbornly gritting their teeth, went with me, The senior lieutenant pretended that nothing out of the ordinary was happening.
"When the commander of the unit noticed the extra recruits, he asked the senior lieutenant:
" "Why have you brought these girls here?"
"The senior lieutenant replied in confusion that he had been sorry for us: we might end up heaven knew where and be picked off like partridges.
"After a moment's silence the commander sighed.
" "Very well," he said. "One can work in the kitchen, another in the stores and the one with a bit more education can be a clerk at headquarters."
"The one with "a bit more education" was me, but I wasn't going to be a clerk! Forgetting everything, I went straight into the attack.
" "We are volunteers! We joined up to defend our country. We shall only go to fighting units..."
"I must have had a determined appearance, for the colonel gave in immediately:
" "If you want to join fighting units, so be it. Two of you can work as machine-tool operators in a mobile unit, the other one, the sharptongued one, can assemble engines. If she doesn"t learn how to do it with her eyes closed in a month and can't cope with our quotas she's go where I order her. I think she herself will beg to become a clerk...'
"That was how our service in the 44th Field Armor Repair-Shop began,
"I had never imagined that the army was such an enormous and complex enterprise. Endless treads stretched from the forward edge far into the rear and each link in this chain had to work unfailingly. The front needed vehicles like air. We are used to the sight of tanks and torpedo boats placed on pedestals, but as you drive out of Zaporozhye

towards Berdyansk you will see an ordinary lorry, standing frozen in the wind. A Driver First-class badge was introduced during the war years together with the Marksman First-class, Signaller First-class and other badges. Front-line drivers accomplished miracles in lorries that had experienced everything, They were brought to our workshop in a state that amazed the drivers themselves: how could they go on? It was a mystery.

"We were a factory on wheels. Lorries carried milling, boring and grinding machines and lathes, power generator sets and vulcanizing equipment. Each machine-tool was operated by two people and each person worked twelve hours without a moment's break. His companion took his place while he ate. If it was the turn of one of them to serve in a duty detail, that meant that the other worked twenty-four hours at a stretch. Assembly work was hardest of all. Shifts were unknown: it was one's duty as a soldier to assemble an engine in a day. Work did not cease even during bombing raids. Men died with their arms round an engine... We worked in snow and mud. But there was never a case of the slightest shoddiness.

"After a month the commander of the unit set me a real examination. The engine I assembled in twenty-three hours ran like clockwork on a test rig and I passed this examination with flying colours.

"An order was read out before the unit promoting me to the rank of junior sergeant.

" "Well, then?" I thought, glowing with pleasure. "Now who"s going to wash pots for whom? Reveille! Lyonka, run and get dinner! Private Vasilyev, do your ears need washing out?'

"Once, in Zimovniki, I think, I had just come to rest for a couple of hours when an air raid began. Thinking that it was better to be killed than to spoil the pleasure of two hours' sleep, I turned over and covered ray ears. But then, amid the thunder of bombs exploding nearby, I suddenly heard a thump very close to me. The next moment there should have been an explosion, but there wasn't: the bomb hadn't exploded and so I could sleep. And I fell into a deep slumber.

"I never experienced fear, whatever the circumstances. Only a tooth with a cavity in It gave me a twinge after the fiercest raids and not for long at that. I would still consider myself terribly crave if, five years after the war, I had not been forced by constant, intolerable and totally inexplicable pains in every part of my body to resort to specialists, After asking how old I was, a highly experienced neuropathologist said in amazement:

" "To destroy the whole of your vegetative nervous system by the age of twenty-four! How do you intend to live?"

"I replied that I intended to live well, since the difficult part of my life the war and studying were now behind me.

"All this came later, in my life after the war... It's true, I wasn't killed, but after only a few days of civilian life my joints swelled, my right hand became terribly painful and impossible to use, my eyesight grew even worse, I had a prolapsed kidney and a displaced liver and, as became clear later, my vegetative nervous system was completely ruined. But I had dreamed of studying throughout the war and for me university became a second Stalingrad. I graduated a year earlier otherwise I should not have had the strength to complete my studies. It was like during the war; four years in a greatcoat and a field-shirt faded white, living on just a grant... I tackled one profession hydrology with my first son and mastered another journalism with my second. The war took too much of my strength and my health had been undermined. Giving birth to my second boy cost me the sight of my left eye. But a hydrologist needs binocular vision and I had to begin life again from square one...

"Why am I talking about this? If the pre-war lives of each of us were very short, then the whole of our lives came after the war. And that

post-war life has to be recalled, because we received the key to it from the war. I brought from the war a belief in the boundless possibilities of the human spirit. After everything I went through I do not know If there is anything that is beyond man's capability That feeling, which is very strong, has remained with me..."
I remember being taught in a physics lesson that if a magnet is placed in a pile of iron filings a clear pattern immediately forms. How similarly war affected not just hundreds, but thousands of girls' lives. Selecting a few of them meant may the narrators forgive me- passing over dozens of other stories of how women "fought without firing" and how hard and terrible war is, even in its everyday aspects. A choice had to be made, although every human life is significant in itself, for this book could have been endless and would have to co called the people's book.

"A SOLDIER WAS NEEDED... BUT I WANTED TO BE PRETTY AS WELL..."
The reader may think that the subject of this chapter has already been dealt with, since, whatever the topic, the women I interviewed involuntarily recalled their innocent girlish tricks and their little secrets, how, even when involved in the "male" world and the "male" business of war, they tried not to betray their essential femininity. But hitherto they have talked about this in passing, often dismissing these aspects of their lives as unimportant, whereas in the present chapter they talk more openly and in greater detail. What is everyday life like in wartime? Call it rather existence, for non-existence was only too close. But people cannot live by war and the fear of death alone and that is oven more true of women. I have often noticed that, although almost forty yogs have passed, women retain in their memories many small details of wartime life which, as the husband of one of my heroines, himself a front-line veteran, admitted, he had forgotten the same day or the day after or, at any rate, had not canted in his head for dozens of years. Women do, however, evidently because for them, the givers of life, the fascination of being has value in itself, inescapable even in an inferno. Even there a woman wanted to remain a woman and had to remain a woman.
From the nicollections of Sergeant Maria Nikolayevna Shchelokova, commander of a signals section:
"We lived in the ground, like moles. But we had some of our knick-knacks and in spring you would break off a twig and put it in water. You would look at everything and think: maybe I won't be here tomorrow. And you would fix it in your memory, fix it firmly... One girl received a woollen dress from home. we envied her, oven though we weren't permitted to west our own clothes. Bat the sergeant-major, a man, that is, grumbled: "It would have been better to send you a sheet, that would be more useful." Wo didn't have sheets or pillows and slept on branches. But I had a pair of oar-rings hidden away.
"When I was shell-shocked the first time I couldn't heat and couldn't speak. I said to myself: If my voice doesn't come back I'll throw myself under a train... I loved singing and did It well and suddenly my voice was gone. But it did return.
"I was so delighted I put on my eat-rings. When I came on duty I called out in a loud voice for joy:
" "Comrade senior lieutenant, duty soldier so-and-so reporting..."
" "What"s this, then?'
" "What is?"
" "Get out!"
" "What"s the matter?'
" "Remove those ear-rings immediately! What sort of a soldier are you!..."
"The senior lieutenant was very handsome. All of us girls were a little in love with him. He told us that we were required to ho

soldiers and nothing more. A soldier was needed... But I wanted to be pretty as well... All through the war I was afraid of being hit in the legs and left a cripple. I had pretty legs. What would it have mattered to a man? It wasn't important to him even if ho was hit. But for a woman to be crippled would decide her fate."

Vera Vladimirovna Shevaldysheva, a surgeon:

"...Men were ennobled by the presence of women. Wherever you appeared their faces would brighten. For example, if they learned that a girl orderly was going to make a medical inspection they would try to clean up their clothes and tidy up their dug-outs. I kept a smile on my face all through the war: I thought that I should smile as much as possible, that a woman should shine. Before we were sent to the front an old professor told us: "You must tell each wounded man that you love him. Love is the most powerful medicine you can dispense. Love preserves, it gives the strength to survive." A wounded man would lie there, in such pain that he was weeping, and you would say to him: "Now, my dear, now, handsome". "Do you love me, nurse?" (They called all of us young medics nurse.) "Of course, I do. Only get better quickly." The men might take offence and swear, but wo doctors and nurses never could. A single rough word might be punished with the guardhouse.

"All the same, life is difficult for a woman in war, very difficult. Even getting Into a lorry in a skirt isn't easy, when there ate only men around, and lorries and ambulances ate high off the ground. You just try climbing on top!"

Private Nadezhda Vasilyevna Alexeyeva, telegraph operator:

"We travelled in railway waggons. There were twelve of us girls and all the rest were men. We would go twelve or fifteen kilometres and then the train would stop. Twelve or fifteen kilometres and again we were shunted into a siding... "The men would light a fire, shake out their lice and dry off. But where could we go? We would run behind whatever shelter there was and undress. I had a sweater and there were lice in every millimetre of it, in every stitch. One look made you feel sick. What was I to do? I wasn't going to roast the lice side by side with the men, I should have been ashamed. I threw the sweater away and was left in just my dress. At one station some woman brought me a blouse and an old pair of shoes.

"We travelled like that for a long time and then walked for a long time, too. It was bitterly cold. As I walked I held a looking glass in my hand all the time to see whether I had been frost-bitten. Towards evening I saw that my cheeks had been frost-bitten. How silly I was... I had heard that when your cheeks are frost-bitten they become white. But mine were as red as coup be. If that was the case, I thought, they can stay frost-bitten for ever. But the next day they turned black."

Junior Sergeant Anastasia Petrovna Sheleg, balloonist, recalls: "We were nineteen years old. Just girls! We wont to the bath-house and there was a hairdresser's there. Well, we all dyed our eyebrows. The commander really let us have it: "Have you come to fight or to dance?" we wept all night as we rubbed it off. One of the girls, I remember, decided to smoke. The commander noticed and put her in the guardhouse. He was very strict."

Things arc different in wartime. Different demands, a different scale of self-sacrifice and spiritual mobilization. How could these seventeen and eighteen-year-olds overcome the female in themselves and switch immediately from childish or adolescent impressions to a high, purely masculine understanding of duty?

I pat this question to Stanislava Petrovna Volkova at a meeting of graduates of a military engineering school. Doting the war her job was profoundly masculine-mining and clearing of mines roads, paths through mine fields and buildings. Moreover, she was not an ordinary sapper, but the commander of a field engineering platoon. There was only one

graduating class of female commanders of upper platoons in 1942. Eighty women were admitted and seventy-five finished the school. All requested to be sent to the front.

Lieutenant Stanislava Petrovna Volkova, commander of a field engineering platoon:

"When I entered the school I immediately felt military discipline in the class-room, in the ranks and in barracks. Everything was done according to the Regulations. No concessions were made to us girls. All we hoard was: "Stop talking!" or "No chattering!" In the evening you would be bursting to sit and embroider for a while ... well, to do something feminine... But it wasn't permitted under any circumstances. We were away from oar homes and deprived of our domestic concerns and somehow it didn't feel right...

"We had only one hour of relaxation, when we could write letters or stand at ease and chat. But neither laughter nor shooting was permitted."

"Could you sing?"

"No, you couldn't."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't permitted. You could sing in the ranks, if the order was given. We would receive the command: "Begin singing, soloist!" "

"But just singing wasn't allowed?"

"No. That wasn't according to the Regulations."

"Was it difficult to get used to that?"

"I don't think I ever did. You might just I've got to steep and then suddenly: "Reveille!" It was as if a gale swept us from our beds. You would begin to dress, but women have more clothes than men and first one thing, then another would fly from your hands. At last you would rush to the cloak-room, belt in hand, grab your greatcoat on the run and dash to the armoury. There you put a cover on your sapper's spade, shoved it through your belt, clipped on a cartridge pouch and somehow buttoned up year greatcoat. You grabbed a rifle, closed the breach on the run and literally slid down the stairs from the third floor, tiding yourself up already in formation. And all this had to be done in a matter of minutes.

"Now this happened when I was already at the front... My boots were three sizes too large, turned up at the toes and ingrained with dust. My landlady brought me two eggs, saying: "Take them when yea go, you"re so thin you'll soon break in two'. But secretly, so that she wouldn't see, I broke the two eggs they were little ones and polished my boots. I wanted to eat, of course, but the woman in me got the upper hand I also wanted to look good.

"Only one of us always comes to our get-togethers in uniform now. She Is the only person to have kept it, no one else has. You don't know how a greatcoat chafes, how heavy everything Is and how masculine, the belt and all the rest. I particularly disliked the way the greatcoat chafed your neck, and those boots, too. Your gate was changed, everything was changed."

There were amusing or cheerful moments, too, but all the same life was hard.

Major Maria Nikolayevna Stepanova, signals officer in a rifle corps battalion:

"After we had received our uniforms a sergeant drilled us:

" "Toe-caps level."

"We levelled them up. The toe-caps were level, bet we ourselves were not, we were behind, since our boots were size forty or forty- one.

" "Level, toe-caps level!" the sergeant shouted. Then:

" "Cadets, line up with the marker!"

"Of course, it didn't work with us and the sergeant shouted at the top of his voice:

" "What have you put In the pockets of your field-shirts?"

"We laughed. " "Stop laughing," the sergeant shouted.
"In order to teach us the art of saluting correctly and smartly, ho made us salute everything, from chairs, to posters. Oh, what a hard time he had with us.
"In one town we were marched to the bath-house. The men went to the men's section and we went to the women's section. The women covered their modesty with whatever came to hand and shouted: "The soldiers are coming!" You could not tell whether we were girls or boys: we had our halt cropped, too, and were military uniform. On another occasion the women called a militiaman when we went to a lavatory:
" "Where arc we supposed to go?" we said to trim.
" "They"re girls!' he began shouting at the women.
" "What do you mean, girls they"re soldiers...'
Bella Isaakovna Epstein is a typist in the office of a Byelorussian newspaper, bet during the war she was a sniper. Her story, too, was apparently comic, bet her eyes wen full of tears.
"When we arrived at the Second Byelorussian Front it was intented to keep as at divisional headquarters: you are women, they said, why should you go to the front line? "No, we are snipers," we all, "send us where we are supposed to go." Then we were told: "We"ll send you to one regiment, the colonel's a good man, he looks after girls'. The commanders were not all the same: that was made quite clear.
"The colonel met us with the words: "You have come to fight, girls; very well, then, but don"t do anything else. There are men all around, but no women. And you will have many suitors. Don't lower yourselves. The devil knows how to explain this to you. War, girls...' He realized that we were still innocent.
"In a German village we were billeted for a night in a castle. There were lots of rooms, real halls. What rooms they were! The wardrobes were full of pretty clothes. Each girl chose herself a dress. There was a yellow one I liked, and a dressing-gown, too, I can't describe to you how beautiful it was long and light... Feather-down. But we were terribly tired and It was time for bed... We put on the dresses we liked and immediately fell asleep. I went to bed in the dress, with the dressing-gown on top.
"In the morning we got up, took everything off and put on our field-shirts and trousers again. We didn't take anything with us. It was forbidden. You could take a spoon, that was all..."
On another occasion the girls chose hats for themselves in an abandoned hatter's shop and slept sitting up all night in order to west thorn at least for a little while. It is a pity that the front-line cameramen did not film us, instead of filming battles and the iron torrents of troops and equipment. Evidently, In those heroic days everyday life seemed something potty and insignificant and the fact that today we regret this Is a feature of human memory-as the years pass some events and details seem more important and others less so. And it Is the human, the intimate that becomes more important, that which might be called human life in inhuman conditions.
It is probably for this reason that Zinaida Prokofievna Gomoreva, a telegraphist, now recalls with such gratitude Colonel Ptitsyn, who was called "Dad" by all the girls in the regiment:
"He looked after us and understood our women's hearts. Near Moscow we were retreating then and it was a terrible time he nevertheless said to as:
" "Girls, Moscow Isn"t far away. I'll bring you a hairdresser. Have your eyebrows and lashes dyed and your hair curled. I want you to be pretty.'
"And he brought us a hairdresser and we had our hair curled and our eyebrows dyed. we were as pleased as punch..."

That feminine quality-your look"-was often stronger not only than feelings of hunger, tiredness or sleepiness, but also than the fear of death.

This is how Sofia Konstantinovna Dubnyakova, medical orderly, recalls that side of wartime experience:

"...We came under heavy fire on Lake Ladoga. There was water all around and if you were wounded you wont straight to the bottom. I crawled from man to man, bandaging them. I reached one man whoso legs were smashed and who was losing consciousness, but he pushed me away and shoved his hand into his rucksack. He was hungry and ho was puling out his emergency rations... We were given provisions when we wont into offensive across the ice. I wanted to bandage him, bet he was fumbling In his rucksack and wouldn't let me: somehow It was very hard for the men to bear hunger.

"But I had other things to think about. I was afraid of looking ugly as I lay dead. I only wished I shouldn't be torn to pieces by a shell... I saw that happen..."

"We ran through the mud and people were falling in it. Heavens, how awful to die In those conditions. Well, how could a young girl lie in mud like that? Bat another time, in the Orsha woods now, there were low bushes with bird-cherry and blue snowdrops an entire meadow of blue... Oh, to be killed among those flowers! I was still a little idiot, seventeen years old... That was how I inmagined death..."

(Private Lyubov Ivanovna Osmolovskaya, scout.)

We must imagine as well the conditions in which they lived, not for a month or two, bet for years, the heavy burden of physical and spiritual stress that lay upon them and the danger to which they were exposed every day in order to understand what it cost them to preserve those feminine feelings, these appealing eccentricities of youth. And add to this the quite different mood of those days, when every minute devoted to the personal seemed stolen.

Before this aspect is described by Alexandra Semyonovna Popova, the navigator of a Po-2 aeroplane, I want to quote the famous test pilot Hero of the Soviet Union, Mark Gallai:

"What is one flight?

"It means coming under fire from anti-aircraft weapons of every calibre, up to and including sub-machine guns (the Po-2 flow extremely low, sometimes at zero altitude), it means enemy night-fighters, blending searchlights and often bad weather, too: low cloud, fog, snow, ice and gales that throw a light aircraft from one wingtip to the other and wrench the controls from your hands...

"And all this in a Po-2, which Is small, slow and as easily set alight as a match...

"Was it accessary to let girls fight? I don't know...

"But I have infinite admiration for their deeds."

"Night witches" that was how the Nazi press wrote of Soviet women pilots, claiming that they were female bandits released from prison. This was what they were really like.

Everyone in Yessentuki knows Alexandra Semyonovna Popova. When I called at her home and found her out, her neighbours suggested I look for her at the museum of local history: "As soon as she retired you've never been able to find her anywhere else. We got lots of visitors and they all want to meet her and listen to her. She flew to Moscow once and was stopped at the check point: "What arc the metal objects in your suitcase?" All she had was a jacket, but it was entirely covered with gilded metal... Not every man has as many orders and medals as she has."

Indeed, Alexandra Semyonovna was sitting in one of the museum's small rooms, knitting something raspberry-coloured for a child. "I rest when there isn't a guided tour," she explained. "For me two or three guided tours a day means living through the war again two or three times. "If

you want to calm your nerves, pick up year knitting," a friend taught ma."
The knitting needles in her large, strong hands looked like toys.
Guards Lieutenant Alexandra Semyonovna Popova, navigator:
"We flew to the front in May 1942, and were assigned to a Po-2 aeroplane. Before the war it had been used by flying clubs for instruction and no one would have dreamed of using it for military purposes. The aircraft was wooden, made entirely of plywood covered with percale. One direct hit was enough to set it alight and it would burn to a cinder in the air before it reached the ground. The only substantial metal part was the engine.
"It was only towards the end of the war that we were given parachutes, and a machine-gun was installed in the navigator's cabin. Before that there were no weapons, just four bomb-racks under the wings.
"Everyone asks how we endured it. I'll tell you...
"Before I retired I became ill just from thinking about not working. The doctor came, a cardiogram was taken of my heart and I was asked:
" "When did you have a heart attack?"
" "What heart attack?"
" "Your heart is a mass of scars."
"Those scars were evidently the result of the war. When you flew over the target you shook all over. Your entire body trembled because of the firing below you fighter-planes and anti-aircraft fire...
Several girls were forced to leave the regiment, they could not endure it. We usually flow at night. For a abort while an attempt was made to send us on missions in daytime, but this was soon rejected. Our Po-2s were hit by rifle fire...
"We carried out as many as twelve flights a night. I saw Pokryshkin when he came back from a raid. He was a strong man and no twenty or twenty-three-year-old like us; while his plane was being refueled a mechanic would remove his shirt and wring it out. Water poured from it as if he had been standing in the rain. You can imagine the effect a raid had on us. we would come back unable even to climb out of the cockpit: we were pulled out. We couldn't even carry our mapcases, but trailed them along the ground.
"After a mission an aircraft stayed on the ground for a few minutes and then was back in the air. Imagine how our girl armourers worked! During those few minutes they had to load the bomb-bays with few bombs that is, four hundred kilograms by hand. The body to organized itself to the extent that we ceased to be women throughout the war... We had no female functions at all. Well, you know what I mean... After the war some of us could not have children...
"We all smoked. I smoked, too, It made you feel a little calmer. You came back, shaking all over, lit up and calmed down. We were leather jackets, trousers and field-shirts fur jackets, as well, in winter. Whether you wanted it or not, something masculine appeared in the way you walked and moved. When the war was over khaki dresses were made for us. We suddenly felt like young girls..."
Alexandra Semyonovna Popova carried out 365 missions over Kerch, Sevastopol, Brest, Warsaw and Berlin. After the war she worked as a geologist for thirty years before going back to college at the age of fifty and graduating. She became a historian. "I saw that as time passed I coup no longer be a good geologist. A good geologist is always in the field, but I no longer had the same strength. I'm a teacher now, among young people, and they keep you young. Zhenya Zhigulenko from our regiment entered the State Institute of Cinematography at the age of 54 and graduated from the faculty of directing. Now she's making a film about our regiment. Those were the sort of girls we served among..."
I met Sofia Adamovna Kuntsevich a few days after she had been awarded the Florence Nightingale International Gold Modal. She was in the

library of the Minsk Technological Institute, where she has worked for thirty years. "Everyone else will have gone borne long ago and I'm still here there's always work to be done. When I go home I'm on my own, but here I'm with books..." Gifts, her diploma and the Gold Medal Itself ate kept right there, in drawers with catalogue cards. There are war photographs, too, and copies of front-line newspapers she has kept. "To be frank, my entire life is here. Among people..." Sergeant Sofia Adamovna Kuntsevich, medical orderly in a rifle company: "When young people came to congratulate me they said with surprise: "How could you have brought back 147 wounded men? You look such a thin little thing in wartime photographs..." I brought maybe two hundred men back who counted then? It didn't even enter my head we didn't think like that. A battle was being fought, people were bleeding was I supposed to sit there and take notes? I never walled for an attack to end, I crawled forward doting the battle and picked up the wounded. If a man had a serious wound and I reached him an hour or two later, there would have been nothing for me to do, he would have had no blood left.

"I was wounded three times and shell-shocked three times. People dream of different things in wartime some about returning home, otters about reaching Berlin but all I wanted was to live at least until my birthday, so that I should be eighteen years old. For some reason I was afraid of dying earlier, without even reaching my eighteenth birthday. I wore trousers and a forage cap, my clothes always torn because I was always crawling on my knees and that under the weight of a wounded man. You didn't believe that one day it weald be possible to stand up and walk, not crawl I dreamed about that. Once the divisional commander came, saw me and asked: "Who"s this boy? Why do you keep urn here? You should send him to school...'

"There were not enough bandages, I remember... The bullet wounds were so terrible that you used a whole first-aid pack to dress just one wound. I tore up all my underwear and said to the lads: "Come on, take your underpants off and your vests, I"ve got people dying'. They took them off and tore them into strips. I didn't feel shy with them, It was like being among brothers, and I lived with them like a boy. We would match in threes, arms linked, and the one in the middle would sleep for an hour or two. Then we would change places.

"A year ago I was invited to Yugoslavs and saw so many familiar graves there... The faces in the photographs were so young... All of them in the ground... I went down on my knees before each grave..."

On one occasion four former servicewomen met in my office: Klara Semyonovna Tikhonovich, Maria Nesterovna Kuzmenko, Klara Vasilyevna Goncharova and Maria Semyonovna Kaliberda. They had come from Minsk, Borisov and Vitebsk. They reminisced about their experiences and at last the talk turned to the personal and the feminine. And suddenly these personal, minor memories illuminated loftier matters in so human a way that I have included them in the general narrative, convinced that here was something more than everyday details in a conversation among women.

Sergeant Klara Semyonovna Tikhonovich, anti-aircraft gunner:

"A young person recently told me that going off to fight was a masculine urge. No, it was a human urge. War had broken out, I was living my ordinary life, but then my neighbour received a letter her husband had been wounded and was in hospital. I thought: "He is wounded, but who will take his place?" One man came back without an arm who would take his place? Another came back without a log who would take his place? I wrote, asking, begging to be taken to the army. That was how we were brought up, to take part in everything. A war had begun and that meant that we must help in sonic way. If medical nurses were needed, then you should become a nurse. If anti-aircraft gunnors were needed, then you should become an anti-aircraft

gunner. What you felt and what you would have to endure were beside the point.
"Did those of us at the front want to be like men? At first we did, very much so; we cut our hair short and oven changed the way we walked. But later? hell, no! Later we so much wanted to dye our hair, we didn't eat sugar, but kept it to starch our fringes. We were happy to got a pannikin of water to wash our hair. If we had marched for a long time we weald look for soft grass, roar it oof and rub oar foot with it until they were green. We had oar own little ways, we girls. It was a good tiring if the sergeant-major was an elderly person who understood everything and didn't confiscate spare underwear, but if it was a young sergeant-major, anything extra was bound to be thrown out. What are "extra" clothes, though, when girls sometimes have to change twice a day? We tore the sleeves from our vests, but there were only two, after all. That only made four sleeves..."
Private Klara Vasilyevna Goncharova, anti-aircraft gunner:
"Before the war I loved everything military and wrote to flying school to find out how to be accepted. Military uniform suited me and I loved discipline, order, the cart words of command. The flying school wrote back: "Finish your secondary school first".
"Of course, fooling as I did, I couldn't stay at home when war broke out. But I wasn't accepted for active service: no way, not at sixteen. The military commissar asked me what the enemy would think about us if children like me were sent to the front, under-age girls, when the war had only just begun.
" "We must fight the enemy," I said.
" "We"ll smash the enemy without you.'
"I stood in his office, refusing to go away, trying to persuade him that no one would take me for sixteen since I was so tall. "Write eighteen, not sixteen." "That"s what you say now, bet what will you say later?...'
"Bat after the war I no longer wanted to follow any military calling. Somehow I couldn't. I wanted to take everything khaki-coloured off as soon as I could and put on something ordinary and feminine. I still have a feeling of revulsion towards trousers. I can't put them on, even to go mushrooming in the woods, I don't even want a whiff of them. I don't like groan or khaki. It was as if I made a clean break, as soon as the war was over..."
Klara Vasilyevna Goncharova remembered a tired military commissar, accusing himself in front of her, a young girl: "That's what you say now, but what will you sty later?" It was not easy for him to send naive girls into the crucible of war. They did not know what awaited them: he, a regular officer, did. Feelings of guilt towards women because they, too, were Involved in the fighting were shared by many men.
Senior Sergeant Maria Nesterovna Kuzmenko, armourer:
"We got some inkling of the war the day we completed military school and the "buyers", as recruiters from units being reformed were called, canto to see us. They were always men and we were keenly aware that they were sorry for us. we looked at each other with different eyes: we burned to join up as soon as possible, to have an opportunity to show our mottle, while they were tired and knew, as they looked at us, where we were going. .
"The regiment this was the 870th Long-Range Bomber Regiment was male and there were only twenty-two women. We collected two or three sets of underwear from home there wasn't much to take as we had been bombed and left with what we stood up in or had been able to flee in. The men wont to trans-shipment point and were kilted out there. But there was nothing for us. We made pants and bras from the foot-cloths we were issued with. The commander found cot and we were told off.

"But we were short of things to wear... Once we saw that the men had hung their shirts on the bushes, so we sneaked a couple... star they guessed what had happened and laughed: "Sergeant, give us some more things... The girls have taken ours..."
Sergeant Maria Semyonovna Kaliberda, signaller:
"We wanted to be equal we didn't want the men saying "Oh, those woman!" about us. And we tried harder than the men. Apart from everything else we had to prove that we were as good as them. For a long time we had to put up with a very patronizing, superior attitude: "They"ll have enough of fighting, those females...' Of course, a woman has more on her mind than a man; it's harder for her. Her psychology, her physiology they're all different.
"We were marching, two hundred or so girls. It was very hot, summer, and there were red spots after us on the sand... Well, how could you hide anything in those circumstances? The soldiers were marching behind us and pretended not to notice anything. I remember how long we matched to a crossing, forty kilometres or so. When we got there we came under bombardment. The bombing was terrible and everyone hid from it wherever he or she could. But I didn't hear the bombardment, I crawled under a boat and sat there until I was wet through. I wasn't oven afraid of the bombs any more. That was how it was with us... We all caught colds and none of us is well today. A woman's system is really delicate, you know. The war not only took our youth away, It robbed many of motherhood as well. It deprived girls of a woman's greatest joy...
"But we weren't killed, that was how fate reworded us. At first I would walk along the street and not believe that Victory had been won. I would sit down at a table and not believe that Victory had been won. I would switch on the radio and not believe that Victory had been won. I didn't leave the army, but served for almost forty years. It's only a year since I retired."
"But war is even more terrible now I'm frightened for my children and grandchildren."
For me these stories ate linked to another, which I heard in the village of Treskovshchina in Minsk district.
Guards Lieutenant Anna Nikolayevna Khrolovach, doctor's assistant:
"Latvia was already being liberated and we were near Daugavpils.
It was night and I was just preparing for a nap. I heard the sentry call out "Halt! Who goes there?" and literally ten minutes later I was summoned to the commander. I went into his dug-out, where some of our soldiers were sitting together with a man in civilian clothes. I have a cleat memory of that man. For years I had only seen men in uniform, in khaki, but this man was in a black overcoat web a plush collar.
" "Your help is needed," the man said to me. "Two kilometres from here my wife is giving birth. She is alone, there is no one else in the house."
" "That is in the neutral zone," the commander said. "Can you go? As you yourself know, it won"t be without danger.'
" "A woman is having a baby. I must help her."
"Five submachine-gunners were detailed to accompany me. I packed some bandages and also took some new flannel foot-cloths I I'd. Off we wont. We were constantly strafed, the bullets falling short or landing beyond us. The forest was so dark that we could not even see the moon.
"At last a strusture of some kind appeared in silhouette. It was a farm-stead. When we went inside I saw the woman lying on the floor, covered with old rags. Her husband immediately began to black out the windows. Two of the submachine-gunners stayed in the yard, two were by the doors and one shone a flash light for me. The woman could barely control her groans and was in great pain. I kept repeating to her:
" "Bear up a little longer, my dear. You mustn"t cry out. Beat up...'

"This was a neutral zone, you see. If the enemy had noticed anything, we would have been shelled. But when the soldiers heard that a child had been born they called out "Hurrah!" quietly, almost in a whisper. A child had been born on the front line!
"Water was brought. There was nowhere to boil it and I wiped the child's body all over with cold water. I wrapped it up in my foot-cloths. There was nothing in the house but the old rags on which the mother was lying.
"For several nights I came to the farm-stead like that. The last time was before an offensive and I said:
" "I can"t come to you any more, I'm going away.'
"The woman asked her husband something it Lettish. He translated for me:
" "My wife asks: what is your name?"
" "Anna."
"Again the woman said something and again her husband translated:
" "She says that that is a very beautiful name. We shall name our daughter Anna in your honour."
"The woman raised herself a little she still could not get up and held out a beautiful mother-of-pearl powder-case to me. It was evidently her most treasured possession.
"I opened the powder-case and the scent of the powder at night with firing all around and the shells exploding... It was something... Even now I want to cry... The scent of the power, the mother-of-pearl lid... The little child... A girl... It was something domestic, something from the real life of a woman..."
They had to retain their femininity and strove to do so, while at the same time they had to affirm their equality with men, to prove that they, too, could be soldiers: not be frightened, not cry, endure everything and be able to fight. It stems incredible today, but when, for example, a regiment of women aviators arrived at the front, it was not sent on a single mission for two whole weeks. I"he ground forces had insufficient alt support and now an entire regiment afterwards the 46th Taman Guards Regiment had arrived at the front and was left idle! Why?
Natalia Kravtsova, pilot, recalls her first days at the front in the following way:
"...The first days at the front were not easy. Difficulties occured just where we did not expect them. We were ready for anything: to sleep in damp dug-outs, to heat the constant ramble of cannon fire, to be cold and hungry in short, to experience every deprivation that our imagination could picture. But we never expected to be mot at the front with distrust."
Women commanders of field engineering platoons, women sailors and women tank soldiers met with the same distrust. Doctors and signallers still fitted existing Ideas, but women in other occupations had to overcome a psychological barrier: this, It would be said, was not a woman's job.
From Kiev I received a letter sent to me by Captain Taisia Petrovna Rudenko-Shevelyova, company commander in the Moscow naval depot and now a retired lieutenant-colonel:
"A woman in the navy is something forbidden, even abnormal. It was considered that she would bring bad lock on board. I was born neat Fastov and the village women teased my mother all her life, asking her whether she had given birth to a little girl or a young lad. I wrote to Voroshilov himself, asking to be admitted to the Leningrad Artillery Engineers' School. And it was only at his personal direction that I was accepted.
"After graduating I still found they wanted to keep me on dry land. So I stopped admitting that I was a woman my Ukrainian surname, which could be a man's or a woman's, helped. Nevertheless, I gave myself

away once. I was performing some routine task on deck when I suddenly heard a noise and turned to see a sailor chasing a cat. I don't know how it had got on board, since it has been believed, probably since the first navigators, that cats and women bring bad luck at sea. The eat did not want to leave the ship and displayed evasive tactics that would have been the envy of a world-class footballer. The crew was laughing, bet at the very moment the cat almost fell into the water I took fright and cried out. My voice evidently had such a feminine pitch that the men's laughter ceased instantly. Silence fell.
"I heard the captain's voice:
" "Sailor on watch, have you seen a woman on board?"
" "No, comrade captain."
"Then there was a second panic-there was a woman on board.
"..J was the first woman to become a regular naval officer. During the war I was responsible for fitting oat ships and equipping the marines. The British press wrote then that some kind of mysterious being, half man, half woman, was serving in the Russian navy. And, it was said, no one would marry this "lady with a dagger". No? Well, you were wrong, my dear sir, someone would, the handsomest officer...
"I was a happy wife and I am a happy mother and grandmother. It is not my fault that my husband was killed in the war. And I have loved the navy all my life and continue to love it..."
I should like to quote briefly from another letter which I received from Klavdia Vasilyevna Konovalova in the village of Tsinubani in Georgia:
"I was exactly twenty years old when war broke out. I was working as an unskilled labourer at the chain factory in our village of Mikhalchikovo in the Kstovo district of the Gorky region. As soon as the men began to be called up and sent to the front, I was put to man's work at a lathe.
"Among others of my age I was agile, hold and physically strong. Even come of those who were always getting into scraps would not take me on. I could stand up for myself and for my girl friends as well. That was probably why, at the end of 1941, I was taken off the lathe and made a blacksmith's striker. The ships' chains I made were every bit as good as those made by the men. Everyone's watchword then was: "Everything for the Front everything for Victory".
"I asked to be sent to the front, bet the management kept me at the factory on one pretext or another. Then I wrote to the district committee of the Young Communist League and in March 1942, I received my call-up papers from the district military registration and enlistment office ordering me to present myself at the recruiting centre in Kstovo. Several of us girls went, and the whole village came out to see us off. Those of us who were leaving and those seeing us off were all in tears, but our mothers cried most of all. The old men shook their heads in dissatisfaction, though, and repeated: "Things must be bad at the front if they"ve started to call up women'. As for us, although we cried, our strongest feeling was pride that we were going together with the men to defend our homeland against the enemy. we matched thirty kilometres to Corky, whore we were assigned to different units. I was sent to the 784th Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment.
"We were billeted in a separate, unfinished dug-out, our commanders were appointed among the men and we began training. Later we were shown the work of the battery as a whole and what each individual weapon did and asked where we wanted to serve in the crew. Ordnance made the greatest appeal to ma and I asked to join the gun crew. In less titan a month we had completely mastered our trade, and after passing our examinations we said goodbye to our instructors, as they left for the front, and took their places. The first days were very difficult, mainly because everything had to be done just right. Within

a few months we had become real anti-aircraft gunners and were confidently spelling individual and mass raids by enemy aircraft.
"I thoroughly learned every aspect of my duties and began to observe the work of other members of the crow: I wanted to take responsibility for aiming. By the end of the year I had been made first gunlayer. But even this was not enough for me: now I wanted to be a loader. It was true that this was considered purely masculine work, since you had to be able to handle sixteen-kilogram shells easily and maintain intensive fire at the rate of a salvo every five seconds. But I hadn't worked as a blacksmith's striker for nothing. A year later I was promoted to junior sergeant and appointed commander of the second gun, which was crowed by two girls and four men. This placed special obligations on me. First and foremost, I had to prove by my own example that our Soviet girls were capable of doing everything just as men. The barrels of the guns would even become red-hot as a result of intensive firing; it was dangerous to fire them and, against all the rules, we had to cool thorn with blankets soaked in water. The guns did not endure, but the people did. Our girls endured. That was the sort they were! we did not spate ourselves.
"When I heard on the radio that victory had been won I put the crew on alert and gave my last order:
" "Azimuth fifteen zero-zero. Elevation ten zero. Detonating fuse one-twenty, rate ten!"
"I went to the bolt myself and fired four shells to mark our victory after four years of war.
"Everyone at the battery position ran out when they heard the firing, including battalion commander Slatvinsky. In front of everyone he ordered me to be placed under arrest for indiscipline, but then countermanded this order. And all of us saluted victory together with our personal weapons and embraced and kissed each other. Bat then we wept all night and all day..."
From the account of Galina Yaroslavovna Dubovik, partisan in the 12th Stalin Cavalry Partisan Brigade:
"I carried a sub-machine gun. I never said that it was heavy how could I be number two in the unit then?' If a soldier Is not up to his job, ho has to be replaced. I would have been sent off to the kitchens and that would have been shameful. Heaven preserve me from spending the entire war in the kitchon. I should have wept..."
"Were women sent to carry out missions on a par with men?"
"They tried not to send us. You had to request to be sent or earn the right, distinguish yourself in some way."
"Did all the girls in your detachment want to be directly involved in military operations?"
"All of them may have, but not all of them could."
"They weren't all accepted?"
"Well, firstly, not all were accepted tend, secondly, the work required boldness and dating. However, not every girl had it in her. One girl in the kitchen her name was Valya was a mild, gentle creature whom you couldn't even imagine with a rifle. In the last resort she would have used a gun, of course, but she had no burning desire to go on missions. I wanted to take vengeaace, though, I longed to go..."
There were things, too, in wartime that only women could do.
From a letter written by Yelena Ivanovna Varyukhina, doctor:
"A few days before war broke out my husband was appointed to serve in the town of Kobrin near Brest. We said goodbye to each other and I stayed behind to wait for a permit to join him. Then, suddenly, the war began...
"Like many others, I rushed to the post-office, completely failing to understand the situation. I thought: "I"ll write a letter'. And then: "No, I"ll send a telegram'. And I sent the following telegram:

"Telegraph that all well with you". Today that makes you smile sending a telegram to the frontier on Jane 22 with a message like that. But the telegraph was accepted.
"From the post-office I ran to get my permit. "Are you in year right mind?" I was asked. "How can there be any permits for Brest?" It was then that understanding began to dawn. Two weeks later the war had reached our little town of Piryatin in the Poltava region, too, and it became filled with military hospitals and retreating units. I applied to be sent to the front, but the military registration and enlistment office placed me on the list of exempted persons, since radiologists were in short supply. And then o joys! my hasband was able to come to Piryatin. They were retreating to Gomel; we went to the military registration and enlistment office with him and I was removed from the exempted list. I was assigned to the 713th mobile field hospital.
"I remember arriving at the hospital wearing a black voile dress and sandals, with my husband's waterproof cape on top. I was issued web a military uniform, but I refused to put it on: everything was three or four sizes too large". The hospital chief was informed that I was breaking military discipline, but all he did was to say that I had no choice-in a few days I would put everything on of my own accord.
"Not long afterwards we moved to another site and were heavily bobbed. We hid in a potato field; rain had recently fallen and you can imagine what my voile dress turned Into and what my sandals became. The very next day saw me dressed in full uniform.
"So began my long, hard and terrible road from Gomel to Germany. in particular I remember Stalingrad and the Kursk Oryol salient. There were so many wounded that we worked round the clock, all sense of time lost: it was imposilble to recall whether two or three hours or half a day had passed.
"In the first days of January 1942, we entered the village of Afonovka in the Kursk region. It was bitterly cold. Two school buildings were jammed to capacity with wounded men lying on stretchers, on the floor or on straw. There were not enough vehicles or petrol to take them to the rear. The hospital chief decided to organize a horse-drawn train of sledges from Afonevka and the neighboring villages.
"In the morning the stodge train strived. The horses were driven entirely by women. On the sledges were homespun blankets, sheepskins, cushions there were even feather-beds co some. We let these women into the temporary wards where the wounded were lying...
"Even now I cannot remember what happened without roars. Each woman chose a wounded man and began to prepare him for the journey, softly wailing: "My dear little son!..", "Well, my dear!...", "Well, my handsome lad!..." Each woman had broaght with her a little food from home, including hot potatoes. They wrapped the wounded men up, like children, in the blankets and togs they had brought and carefully put them in the sledges. I can still hear those imploring voices, that quiet village-women's wall: "Well, my dear!...",
"Well, my handsome lad!.." "It's a pity, it's on my conscience, that we did not ask these women their names at the time. What they did was considered no more than the normal help to be expected of the population and not something in any way remarkable.
"I also remember how we advanced through liberated Byelorussia without seeing a single man in the villages. Only women met us. Even the old men and boys of cloven or twelve were few. Everywhere, It seemed, only women were left..."
The words of one commander were remembered affectionately by Valentina Yakovlevna Bugleyeva-Lushakova, air signaller who went from Orsha to Koenigsberg with the troops of the Ist Air Army:
" "Girls," be sald to us, "you can be replaced everywhere except in the medical and signal service, where you are indispensable. lmag-ine: a pilot is in the air, pounded by anti-aircraft fire, the enemy nearby

and then he hears a calm, homely woman"s voice: "Airmen, can you hear me?", "Ground to air, can you hear me?" and instantly he feels more confident and self-possessed. That is what your gentle woman's voices mean in such sitauation!...'

"What can I tell you about our work? In wartime the ether is a cacophony, a thousand noises and other kinds of interference, be-cause innumerable transmitters, ours and the enemy's are operating at the same time. But you must pick up the signal you need. It is barely audible and virtually indistinguishable from others. You single It out by a slight difference in its tone... Everyone turned grey at the very outset: I've had grey halt since I was twenty years old. What did we see? Near Orsha in 1943 everything looked as if it had been through a mincer people, earth, trees. We didn't have time to take leave of our senses. There was no time for tears either. No time to eat. We were on radio watch round the clock. When com-munications suddenly broke off we would be on tenterhooks. Somewhere people were dying...

"We gave everything to the front. We were supposed to receive a wage of some sort, but we didn't take it, not a kopeck. We handed it over to the army. Our Young Communist Ieague dues were deducted automatically by the paymaster's department. And after the war we contributed three months' salary to rehabilitation (I was a civilian by then). That was at a time when a loaf of bread cost three hundred rubles. And I wasn't the only one, every member of , my generation did the same. We cleared our ruined cities, brick by brick, with our own hands...'

Lieutenant Stanislava Petrovna Volkova, commander of a field engineering platoon, has similar memories: "When we arrived at the front we were mot with these words: "Well done, girls, it"s splendid that you have come, but we shall not send you anywhere, you will remain here at headquarters'. That was how we were greeted at the headquarters of the military engineers. So we turned round and went to look for Malinovsky, the commander of the Front. While we were looking for him word wont round the village that two girls were trying to find the commanding officer. An officer approached us.

" "Show me your papers," ho ordered.

"He had a look at them.

" "Why are you looking for the commander when you should go to the military engineers" headquarters?'

" "We were sent to command field engineering platoons, but they want to keep us at headquarters," we replied. "We want to be commanders of field engineering platoons and nothing else and at the front line only."

"Then this officer took us back to headquarters. The hat was packed and they talked and talked to us for a long time, ovary man giving advice and some laughing, too. But we stuck to our guns: we had been given a warrant and we must serve as field engineering platoon commanders and nothing else. Then one of the senior officers said:

" "But do you know how long the commander of a sapper platoon lives? Two months, that"s all'.

" "We know," we replied, "that"s why we want to go to the front line.'

"

"There was nothing left for thorn hut to issue us with the neces" sary papers.

" "Very well, we shall send you to the 5th Strike Army. You probably know what a strike army is, the name itself will tell you. It means a permanent front line, all the most important missions..."

""They couldn"t tell us enough about the horrors awaiting us. Bet we were pleased and agreed immediately.

"When we arrived at the headquarters of the 5th Strike Army we were met by a very well-mannered captain. He received us with the utmost politeness and talked to us for a while, but as coon as he heard that

we wanted to be field engineering platoon commanders he clutched at his head:
" "No, no! What arc you thinking of? That isn"t a woman's job, we shall find you work here, at headquarters. You must be joking-there ate only men there, It would be madness suddenly to appoint a woman commander! What are you thinking of, what arc you thinking" off!!'
"For two days they tried to talk us round. We held our ground: either we became commanders of field engineering platoons or nothing. But even that was not the end of it. We got our way and I was taken to my platoon... The soldiers looked at me, some maliciously, some with mockery, while others shrugged their shoulders in a way that immediately made everything clear. A storm seemed on the point of breaking. And when the battalion commander said that he wanted to introduce the new platoon commander, they instantly howled "Oo-oo-oo..." One man even spat.
"But a year later, when I was awarded the Order of the Red Star, the same lags, those of them who were still alive, carried me shoulder-high to my dug-out. That shows how I had won their res-pect."
Stanislava Petrovna Volkova's story is complemented by her friend at the front line, Appolina Nikonovna Litskevich-Bairak from Siberia. She told her story in detail, thoroughly and with profession-al meticulousness, dwelling on the details of the field engineering job.
Junior Lieutenant Appolina Niconovna Litskevich-Bairak, commander of a field engineering platoon:
"When I was a child my father used to cut my hair to the scalp. I recalled that, when our hair was cut and we were suddenly turned from girls into soldier boys. But I soon got used to it. It wasn't to nothing that my father used to say: "She"s growing up a boy, cot a little girl'. But it was only my passion for jumping In winter from a steep river bank into the snow-covered Ob that was to blame for everything. I caught it from my parents on more than one occasion. After school I would take my father's old padded trousers, pat thorn on and tie them round my felt boots. I used to stuff a padded jerkin into my trousers and draw a belt tight round it. On my head I had a fur hat with side-flaps, tied under the chin. I would go down to the river like that, waddling like a bear, run up to the brink as fast as I could and leap from the precipice.
"Ah! What a sensation you experienced as you flow into the chasm and disappeared into the snow over your head. It took your breath away. Other girls tried jumping with me, bet things didn't go so smoothly for them: one would twist her foot, another bloody her nose of the hard snow, a third suffer some other misfortune. But I was more agile than a boy.
"So much for my childhood-that was by the by... Anyway, to continue, we arrived In Moscow in September 1942. For a whole week we were taken along a loop lino, stopping at the stations Kuntsevo, Perovo, Ochakovo. At every point girls wew unloaded from the train. "Buyers", as they were called, came, the commanders of various units, trying to persuade us to become snipers, medical orderlies or radio operators... None of that appealed to ate. At last thirteen of us were left of the entire train. We were all accommodated in one heated goods van. There were only two In the siding ours and the headquarters carriage-and we were left alone for two days. we laughed and sang the song: "Forgotten, abandoned..." Towards evening on the second day we saw three officers coming towards the vans with the train chief.
"The "buyers" were tall and slim and had tightly-fitting waist-and shoulder-belts. Their greatcoats were spick and span, their boots thoroughly polished and they wow spurs. We hadn't soon specimens like that before! They wont into the headquarters carriage and we pressed ourselves against the wall to listen. The chief showed them our lists

and gave them brief character sketches: who was who, from which part of the country, what level of education. At last we heard: "They will all be suitable".

"The chief came out of the carriage aad ordered us to form up. "Do you want to learn the art of warfare?" we were asked. Well, how could we not want to, of course we did. Not one of us so much as asked where we would learn or what we would become. A major ordered: "Senior Lieutenant Mitropolsky, take the girls to tile school". We formed up in twos and followed the officer through the streets of Moscow. He walked quickly, taking long steps, and we could not kip up with him. It was only at a meeting in Moscow on the thirtieth anniversary of Victory that Sergei Fyodorovich Mitropolsky confessed to us former cadets of the Moscow Military Engineers' School how " ashamed he had been of leading us through Moscow. He had tried to keep as far ahead of us as possible in order not to attrast attention to himself. We did not know that and almost ran in the attempt to catch up. What a sight we most have been!

"At the very beginning of instruction I picked up two extra dories: either the cold lecture hall did not sort me or something else didn't. You know, schoolgirl tricks. Well, I received my just deserts-and soon I was receiving them again and again. When guards were posted outside the other cadets spotted me and started to laugh: there was the permanent orderly. Of coarse, it was funny for them, but I wasn't going to classes and wasn't sleeping at night. I used to spend the entire day standing on guard at the door, while at night I polished the barracks floor. How did you polish floors then? I'll toll you. It wasn't done the way it is now. Now thaw arc all sorts of brushes and floor-polishers and so on. But then... After lights out had been sounded you took off your boots so as not to get polish on them and wrapped pieces of old coat round your feet, something like bast sandals tied round with string. You slopped polish over the floor, spread it about with a brush, not a nylon one, mind, hut a bristle brush that left tufts of halt stuck to the floor, and flan you began to rub away at the floor with year feet. It had to be polished until it shone like a mirror. You had your fill of dancing that night! Your legs ached and became numb, you couldn't straighten your back and awear poured down your face and into your eyes. In the morning you didn't oven I've the strength to shout reveille to the company. But during the day you weren't allowed to alt down for five minutes, because a man on duty is supposed to stand on guard all the time. Yea just try to all down-you'd be landed with an extra doty just like that.

"I remember one incident. I was standing on guard; I'd only just finished cleaning out the barracks and I was so tired that I felt ready to drop. I leaned on a small table and dozed. Saddenly I heard someone opening the door, jumped up and sow the battalion duty offlcer in front of me. I saluted and reported: "Comrade senior lieutenant, the company is off duty". But he stated at me, enable to hide his laughter. Then I realized that In my haste, because I am left-banded, I had brought my left hand to my cap. I tried to bring my right hand up quickly, but it was too late and I was punished again...

"At first I didn't understand how serious my position was. I thought that for some reason everyone was picking on me. I was still wry green and regarded my new life as a game, like those we had often played at school However, I soon understood that this was no game, but a military school with strict discipline. An order from the commander was law to his subordinate, oven though they might be class-mates".

-

Appolina Nikonovna graduated from the school among the best in her class. She remembered the last question in her final examination: "

"How many times in his life does a sapper make a mistake?"

Her answer was crisp and soldierly.
" "A sapper makes one mistake in his life."
And for the first time in the entire course she heard:
"Quite right, my girl..."
And immediately afterwards the familiar words:
" "You may go, cadet Bairak."
What would happen next?
"I was taken to my platoon," Appolina Nikonovna continued. "The command was given: "Platoon, attention!" hot the platoon didn't even think of standing up. Some men were lying down, others sitting and smoking;one man stretched himself until his hones cracked: "A-ach!". In general they pretended not to see me. Those were experienced scouts and they took it hard that they had to accept orders from some twenty-year-old girl. I understood that well enough and was forced to give the command: "As you were!"
"What sort of reconnaissance did we carry out? In the course of the war hundreds of tons of sell were turned over by the sapper's spade. During the night the soldiers would dig a two-man fox-hole in no-man's-land and before dawn one of the section commanders and I would crawl out to this small trench and the men would camouflage us. We would lie like that the whole day, afraid to stir. Your hands and feet would begin to freeze, although you were felt boots and a sheepskin jacket. That was in winter; in summer you had to lie in the heat or the rain. All day we kept everything that happened under close observation and drew a map of the front line from these observations. We noted changes in the ground surface and if we discovered outcrops and lumps of earth, dirtied snow, flattened grass or places where the dew on the grass had been worn away we would guess that the German sappers had laid mine fields there. If they put up barbed wire we had to determine the length and width of the obstruction. And under the wire we had to find out whether the mines laid were anti-personnel, or anti-tank mines. Apart from that, we located enemy gun emplacements by intersection.
"During the day you rested, but at night, this time with the sappers, you crawled up to the front line. We would cleat a passage through our own mine field and crawl towards the German defences. There we began work, feeling out the ground centimetre by centimetre. The ground could explode under your fingers at any moment and, moreover, you had to work under the constant illumination of German rockets and sometimes under fire as wall. At last reconnaissance of the enemy mine field would ho finished and everything was put back In place, made harmless and carefully camouflaged. All work at the front line was done on your belly. I crawled from one unit to another like a shuttle: there were more of "my" mines. Once I jumped into a ditch to avoid splinters, but I was wearing a new greatcoat, so instead of lying flat in the mud I lay on my side in a patch of unmelted snow. That's what you are like when you arc young-a greatcoat's more important than your life. A girl is a little idiot!
"The officers invited me to breakfast once and I accepted the invitation. Sappers did not always get hot food; as a rule, the wits joked, we lived off grass. But everything there smelled so good. When everyone had taken his place at the kitchen table my eye was caught by a Russian stove, the oven of which was closed by a shutter. I went up and began to examine the shutter. The officers laughed: "She imagines there are mines in the chamber-pots". I said something in response mid then noticed that at the very bottom, on the left-hand side of the shutter, there was a tiny hole. I looked closely at it and saw a thin wire going into the stove. I turned round quickly to the men sitting down and said: "The house is mined, please go outside". The' officers became quiet, their eyes fixed on me disbelievingly. I repeated:
"Please evacuate the premises immediately..."

"The sappers and I set about our task. We began by removing the shatter and "biting" through the wire with scissors-there was no explosion. In the stove were several one-otto enamel mugs, fled together with string. They were a soldier's dream, better than messtins At the back of the stove, wrapped in black paper, were two large packages-some twenty kilograms of explosive. So much for chamber-pots...

"We marched though the Ukraine: the former Stanislav, or the Ivano-Frankovsk region as it Is called today. Once the platoon was given the tack of urgently clearing a sugar factory of mines. Every moment was precious, since we did not know how the factory had been mined and an explosion could have occured at any time if a clockwork mechanism had been activated. We sot off at quick march. The weather was warm and we were in light clothes. As we began to pass some long-range gun emplacements an artillery-man suddenly jumped out of a trench and shouted: "Look up! Spotter plane!" I raised my head and looked for the "spotter" in the sky. All around us was quiet and there wasn't a sound. Where was the "spotter", then? Then one of my sappers requested permission to leave the ranks. As I watched, he walked over to the artillery-man and slapped him in the face. Before I had time to think the artilleryman shouted: "Hey, boys, urn being attacked!" Other artillery-men swarmed out of the trench and surrounded our sapper. My platoon didn't take long to reflect, but threw aside their probing rods, mine detectors and knapsacks and rushed to the aid of the sapper. A fight started. I could not understand what had happened. Why had the platoon got into a fight? Every minute counted and now there was this to-do.

" "Platoon, fall in!" I ordered. No one paid any attention. Then I grabbed my pistol and fired into the air. Officers came running from a dug-cot. It took quite a time for tempers to cool. A captain state up to my platoon and asked: "Who is the senior man hero?" I reported. His eyes widened and I saw that he was even lo some confusion. Then he asked: "What happened?' I could not reply, since in fact I didn't know myself. Then my deputy platoon commander stepped forward and described what had happened. That was how I learned what a "spotter" is and how offensive that word is to women.

"When ad we have time to think and what about? I remember that we were first given evenings off In liberated Lvov. The battalion watched a film in the town cinema. The first time it somehow felt strange to sit on sot: scats and see the beautiful scenery, to enjoy the comfort and the quiet. Before the film began an orchestra played and singers sang. A dance was held in the foyer. we danced the polka, the Cracovienne, the pas d'Espagne and finally that constant favourite, the "Russkaya" (Russian dance. Ed.). For a few days we could forget about the war. It was hard to believe that firing was going on somewhere and that soon we would return to the front line.

"I can remember another incident. My platoon was ordered to comb the broken terrain between a small town and a railway line. Scouts sot off along the highway with mine-detectors. A cold drizzle was falling and everyone was wot through. Our boots swelled and became heavy, as if the heels I'd been made of rock. I thrust the skirts of my greatcoat through my belt to prevent it entangling my legs. To add to our woes, we were walking through tall grass, which was wot and thick and got in our way. My dog Nelka walked on a lead in front of me. When she found a shell or a mine she would alt down beside it and wait until it had been rendered harmless. Suddenly I heard the order passed from man to man: Lieutenant, report to the general'. I looked round: thole was a jeep on the road. I jumped over the ditch, pulling oat the skirts of my greatcoat and adjusting my belt and cap as I ran. All the same, I didn't look smart. I rushed up to the vehicle, opened the door and began:

" "Comrade general, Lieutenant Bairak..."
"I didn't have time to finish before I heard:
" "As you were..."
"I stopped and stood at attention. The general did not even turn towards me, bat looked at the road through the window of the jeep. I could see that he was beginning to fidget and oven glanced at his watch. I stood there. He turned to his orderly and asked:
" "What has happened to the sapper commander?"
"Again I tried to report:
" "Comrade general..."
"At last ho turned to me and said with irritation:
" "What the devil do you want?"
"I was in the picture now and almost burst out laughing. Then his orderly said:
" "Comrade general, perhaps this is the platoon commander?"
"The general fixed his eye on me.
" "Who are you?"
" "Sapper platoon commander, comrade general"
"You ate the platoon commander?' ho said indignantly.
" "Yes, comrade general!"
" "Are these sappers, who are working here, from your platoon?"
" "Yes, comrade general."
" "General this, General that..."
"He got out of the jeep and took a few steps forwatd before returning to me. He stood for a moment, looking me up and down, then said to this orderly:
" "Have you seen anything like it?" Then:
" "Jast how old are you, lieutenant?"
" "Twenty, comrade general."
" "Where are you from?"
" "Siberia."
"He wont on questioning me for a long time and invited me to transfer lo his tank unit. My scruffy appearance aroused his indignation: he would not have allowed that. He desperately needed sappers. Then he took me aside and pointed at the wood:
" "My tanks ate over there. I want to bring them along res railway line. The rails and sleepers have been removed, but the line may have been mined-do the tankmen a favour and check it. Here it"s more convenient to move up closer to the front line. Do you know what a surprise blow is?"
" "Yes, comrade general."
" "That"s fine, then. Well, good luck, lieutenant.'
"The line had, indeed, bean mined.
"In October 1944, together with the soldiers of the Fourth Ukrainian Front, our battalion entered Czechoslovakia as part of the 2l0th Independent Mine-Clearing Detachment. Everywhere we were met with joy. The fact that a girl was commanding a platoon of men and was herself a sapper created a sensation. My hair was cropped like a boy's, I were trousers and a tonic and had a fur hat on my head-in short, I looked like a teenage boy. Sometimes I rode into a village on horseback and then it really was difficult for people to tell who the rider was, but the women knew instinctively and stared at me. It was funny lo strive at a new billet and see how the hosts reacted when they realized that their guest was an officer, but not a man. Often they stood with their mouths open from sur- prise. I'm not exaggerating. But I most confess that I Irked It. I liked surprising people like that.
"The same thing happened in Poland. In one village, I remember, an old woman stroked my head. I guessed why and asked if she was feeling for my horns. She was embarrassed and said that she "simply felt sorry for me, "so young".

"There were mines at every step. Lots of mines. Once I went into a house and someone who had been the first to spot a pair of boxcalf boots standing in a prominent place was already stretch- ing out his hand when I shouted: "Don"t touch them!' I examined thorn and found that they were booby-trapper. There were booby- trapped armchairs, chests of drawers, sideboards, dolls, chandeliers, taps, even toilet bowls. The local people asked us to clear beds of tomatoes, potatoes and cabbages of mines, once in order to sample dumplings, the platoon had to clear a field of wheat; even the flail had to be made safe before the sheaves could be threshed.

"...I travelled through Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Germany, but I have few memories of thorn. For the most part I rememher only recording visually the terrain and the tall grass, which either really was tall or scorned like that to us because it was very difficult to move through and work in it with probing rods and mine detectors. I remember many, many brooks and ravines, too. Dense woods, unbroken barbed-wire entanglement with half-rotten spikes, overgrown mine fields...

"And I also remember that a landlady somewhere fed us on millet porridge, red and well stewed in the oven, Its aroma filling the whole hut. The porridge looked good and was so tasty that even now I still haven't learned how to cook it properly. It was only at such moments tint you remembered that you were a woman, and the pleasure, even the joy, cooking a tasty meal gives would come back.

"In the town of Dej, in Romania, I stayed at the home of a young Romanian woman who spoke good Russian. Her grandmother, it turned out, was Russian. The woman had three children. Her husband had been killed at the front, in a Romanian volunteer division, but she loved to laugh and have a good time. Once she invited me to go to a dance with her and gave me one of her dresses. It was an immense temptation: I longed to take my mind off things a little and feel myself a young girl. So I lot my orderly know where to look for me if anything happened and pot on trousers, a field-shirt and boxcalf boots. The Romanian women were boxcalf boots, too, and so no one would pay any attention to me. Over everything I put on Romanian national dress: a long, embroidered linen blouse and a narrow, woollen check skirt. I tied a black sash tightly rood my waist and threw a coloured head scarf with big tassels over my head. If I add that during the summer my skin had been burned black up in the mountains, leaving some bleached curls only at my temples, and that my nose had peeled, then you will realize how difficult it would have been to tell me from a real Romanian woman.

"The young people had no club room, and so they met at somebody's boose. When we arrived music was already playing and people were dancing. I saw almost all the officers from our battalion. At erst I was afraid that I would be recognised and unmasked and so I sat oat the dancing, keeping well to one side, not attracting attention to myself and even covering my face a little with my headscarf. Bet after I had been invited to dance several times by one of our officers, who completely failed to recognise me with my lips painted and my eyebrows pencilled, I began to see the funny side and enjoy myself. I enjoyed myself with all my heart, unrecognizable even to myself. I needed to relax, for among the men I was afraid even to smile too often. The constant danger, the explosions witnessed on a daily basis and the death of my comrades, too, had left their imprint on my character, changing it.

"The sun had long since set behind the Carpathians, but I went on dancing. Our officers invited me lo dance and all of them were surprised that I knew the steps of Russian dances. Many of them tried to talk to me, but I only laughed in response, pretending that I

didn't know Russian. The young Romanians also tried to invite me to dance, but I was so awkward that they all began to keep their " distance. Then my landlady whispered something In the oar of one young fellow and from then on he dldn"t leave my side. As soon as the music began, he smiled, bowed low, took my hand and led me into the circle. He taught me the Romanian dances.

"At last everyone decided to go for a boat ride on the Someshriver. We went on to the bank, where there were several boats by a jetty with soldiers from our battalion at the oars. Everyone began to take then seats. The same young Romanian continued to hold ate by the elbow. The long, narrow skirt prevented me from stepping into the boat and I had to raise the hem. Everyone in the boat burst out laughing. I looked up and saw that all the soldiers in the boat were looking at my trousers. I laughed, too, and put my finger to my lips, asking them to keep silent. But my mood was spoiled. I didn't want to enjoy myself any more in front of our soldiers, who had recognised me...

"The war was over, but for an entire year after its end we cleared mines from Colds, lakes and rivers... During the war everything had been thrown into lakes, rivers and marshes-the main thing had been to get through and roach the goal in time. Now if was necessary to think about how people would live: they could not live with a mined river, after all. I remember being afraid of water for a long time. I was always expecting an explosion...

"For New Year, 1946, I was given ton metres of red sateen. "Well," I laughed to myself, "what do I need it for? What shall I do with it? Perhaps I"ll make myself a rod dress after demobilisation'. If was like a prophecy. Soon I received my demobilization papers and, as was the custom, I was given a big send-off. At the party the officers gave me a large, finely stitched bloc shawl. I had to redeem it with a song about a bloc kerchief. And I sang to them all evening...

"But in the train my temperature rose. My face swelled and I could barely open my mouth. I had to open it a crack with a spoon before I could take medicine. My wisdom teeth were coming through... I was returning from the war..."

After the war Appolina Nikonovna graduated from the N.K.Krupskaya lnstitute of Librarianship in Leningrad. She was a librarian for more than thirty years. But she has a dream to put her reminiscences of the girl sappers down on paper.

"When I was working there was no time and I pat everything off. But now there is no time for putting anything off. I sent the first drafts to the lads in my platoon-we are in constant touch. They were very critical. "Why such liricism?" they wrote. "You ought to describe how yoo defused 800 mines in the course of the war instead. Describe every one..." "So what should I describe?" she asks. And immediately answers: "But that isn"t the only thing I remember, I remember everything. I want to describe everything. let it stay in, at least for my grandson...'

"JUST TO LOOK ONCE..."

This will be a story aboat love. About a feeling which, some think, should have no place amid the horror and asoeticism of war; which could not but have been felt, say others, since war, for all the grief and hardships it brought, is also years in the lives of men and women. And often the youngest years, predestined by nature for love and happiness. War could kill one of the lovers, but it could not kill love, the desire to love and be loved.

In the most tragic situations women chose life and that means love. The future!

This book would be incomplete, not fully truthful, if there were not a chapter abort love in it. For this is a book about Woman.

I was given the address of Yefrosinya Grigoryevna Breus, a resident of Minsk, by her front-line friends. They also told me of her life: her husband had been killed at the front and aha had brought him home for burial. The women talked of their love with that surprise that comes to all of us when we think of those moments that are loftiest in our lives. "She wasn't given permission... we were already in East Prussia and the coffin had to be taken to Minsk. Bat she went to the commander of the Front. At first he refused to give her a hearing, but when she managed to see him, he asked: "Why do you need to do this?" She replied that all those close to her had been killed; if she took her husband home he weald be with her for ever and she would have somewhere to return to. He kissed her hand and said that he bowed down before her for her love. She was given an aircraft for one night. She entered it and lost consciousness..."

...The door was open. A large portrait on the wall immediately caught the eye a smiling young woman and a man in military uniform.

"Take your coat off. Come in..." the voice came from an inner room. Exactly the same portrait was hanging in the room as well. Something in my face evidently gave me away.

"No, my girl, it isn't an old woman's eccentricity. I hung those three portraits in the entrance hall and the rooms when I was as old as you ate now. I swore to love him for ever. Perhaps it sounds oldfashioned, people don't talk like that now. But I am alone, you see. I couldn't love again. I mast apologise for speaking in a familiar way from the start, it's a front-line habit I still have. Come and sit closer to me... My old radiculitis, it really laid me down for a long while this time. The girls have only jest left (girls, they're pushing sixty, like me, but that's a front-line habit, too: "Let"s go, girls!', "Come on, girls!") This is how they left me, with tMs mountain of cushions. They've all dashed off."

Captain Yefrosinya Grigoryevna Breus, doctor:

"The town was being bombed and my sister Nina came to say a hurried goodbye. Already we thought that we would not see each other again. "I am going to become a medical orderly, only where am I to apply?" she said. I remomber looking at her. It was summer, she was wearing a llght dress, and I saw on her left shoulder, hero, near the neck, a birth mark. She was my own sister and yet I was seeing it for the first time. I looked and thought: "I would recognise you anywhere". We felt that perhaps we would not see each other again this side of the grave.

"Everyone was leaving Minsk. The roads were coming under fire and people moved through the forest. Somewhere a little girl was calling out: "Mummy, there"s war'. Our unit was retreating. we were driving across a broad field where the rye was ripening. A low peasant hut stood by the road-we had already reached the Smolensk region... A woman was standing near the road. She seemed taller than her little house and was dressed entirely in linen, embroidered in a Russian folk design. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was bowing low; the soldiers were matching and she was bowing tether and saying: "May God return you to your homes".

"And you know, she bowed to each man and repeated those words. Tears came into everyone's eyes.

"I remembered her all through the war. And something else, too, that happened in Germany, when we were driving the Germans back. Some village or other... Two German women were sitting outside, wearing their little caps and drinking coffee. You might have thought that there had never been a war. And I thought: "My goodness, in our country there arc ruins, our people are living In holes in the ground and eating grass, but you are sitting and drinking coffee". Our trucks were driving past and our soldiers were moving along the road, but they were drinking coffee...

"Later I had to travel through Byelorussia. And what did we see? Instead of a village, only a stove was loft. An old man was sitting there, with three grandsons standing behind him. It was clear that he had lost both his son and his daughter-in-law. An old woman was collecting charted pieces of wood to light the stove. She hung up a sheepskin jacket that meant they had come from the marshes. And there was nothing cooking in that stove...

"Yes, hatred, outrage everything was mixed up. But there was something else, too. This happened to me. Our train stopped either the track was being repaired or the locomotive was being changed, I can't remember. I was sitting with a medical nurse. Beside us two of our soldiers were cooking porridge. And from somewhere two German prisoners of war appeared and began to ask for food. We had bread, so we took a loaf, cut it and gave it to them. I heard the soldiers who were cooking porridge say:

" "Look at how much bread the doctors have given our enemy!" And they went on to say that surely we could know nothing about real war, since we had spent all our time in hospltals, how could we...

"After a while some other prisoners came up to the same soldiers cooking porridge. And the very soldier who had condemned us not long before said to one of the Germans:

" "What Is It-you want some grub?"

"The German stood and waited. The other soldier gave his friend a loaf of bread:

" "All right, cut him off a piece."

"The soldier cut off a piece each. The Germans took the bread and stood there-they saw that porridge was cooking.

" "Well, all right", one soldier said, "give them some porridge."

" "It isn"t ready yet'.

"Do you hear?

"And the Germans, as if they know the language, too, stood there. The soldiers mixed fat with the porridge and poured some into tin cans for the Germans.

"That's the soul of the Russian soldier for you. They were sharply critical of us, but they themselves gave bread, and porridge as well, and only after they had added fat to it.

"...The war had ended long since and I was preparing to go on holiday. It was just at the time of the Caribbean crisis. Again the world was in turmoil. I packed my suitcase, took down my dresses, folded my blouses. Well, was that all? I found the bag with my papers and took out my military card. "If anything happens I shall go immediately to the local military registration and enlistment office," I thought.

"I was already by the sea, relaxing, and I started to tell someone at the table in the dining room that I had taken my military card with me when coming there. I said this without any thought or desire to cut a dash. But one of the men at our table became highly excited :

" "No, our people well never be defeated, because only a Soviet woman would take her military registration card with her when going on holiday and think that, if anything happened, she would immediately go to the military registration and enlistment office."

"Ho looked at me with such eyes... Men do not look like that even at the women they love..."

But Yefrosinya Grigoryevna could not talk about the most important thing of all her husband. The features of her delicate, beautiful face twisted as if from physical pain.

"I've forgotten what happened yesterday, hut I remember the war. How I brought him home... How I buried him... I remember it all. How I wanted to kiss him for the last time, but the coffin was made of zinc, so I kissed the place where his face would have been. I can't talk about It..."

But the three big photographs in her flat had told me everything.

Another love story. I heard It together with the small grandson of Lyubov Fominichna Fedosenko who, it later proved, was also the central figure of her own story.

Private Lyubov Fominichna Fedosenko, nurse:

"I was evacuated to Kharkov and then to latatia, whore I got a job. Once people came looking for me there (my maiden name was Lisovskaya). Everyone was calling out: "Sovskaya! Sovskaya!" I shouted: "That"s me!' I was told: "Go to the militia office and get a pass and go to Moscow." Why? No one said anything and I didn't know. It was wartime, after all... On the journey to Moscow I thought that perhaps my husband had been wounded, perhaps I had been called to see him. I hadn't heard anything from him for fear months. Already I intended to find trim, a cripple without anna or legs, and take trim home. That was the idea I arrived with.

"In Moscow I went to the address I had been given. I saw the letters TsK KPB (Central Coounittee of the Communist Party of Byelorussia-Ed.) and there were lots of other people like me there. "What"s going on?' we all wanted to know. "Why have we been brought together?" "You"ll be told everything,' they said. We went in and there was Ponomarenko, our Central Committee Secretary, and all oat loaders. I was asked: "Do yea want to go to where you came from?" Well, By"-lorussia was where I came from. Of course I wanted to. And I was sear to a special school.

"The very next day, after completing the course we were taken in trucks to the front line. From there we act off on foot. I didn't know what the front or no-man's land were, and I was frightened and curious at the same time. Flares were fired with a crash and I saw the snow, so white, and a line of people, lying one behind the other. There were lots of us moving forward. The flare faded, firing stopped, we were given the order: "Run!" and we ran. That was how we got through...

"Afterwards, when we had done our job, we were told an aircraft would come to take us to Moscow. Now, when I had been in the rear, I received a letter from my husband. That had been soch a joy and so unexpected: I had heard nothing of him for twe years. So I wrote a letter to the Central Committee to say that I was ready to do anything; my only request was that my husband and I should be together. I gave the letter to a pilot on the quiet, so that the commander of our detachment did not know. When the aircraft: came for us we were told that everyone must leave and that timt was an order as regards Fedosenko. We waited for the plane, bet the night was as dark as a coal cellar. A plane was circling overhead and then it let its bombs go on us. It was a Messerschmidt and we were spotted. It flew off in order to turn and at that moment our aircraft was about to land, just by the fir tree beside which I was standing. The plane barely touched the ground before taking off again, for the pilot knew that the German would turn and fire on us again. I clutched the wing and shouted: "I have to go to Moscow, I have permission". He swore, then said: "Cet in!" And so the two of us flow off, without the wounded or anyone else.

"In Moscow in May I walked about in felt boots. I went to the theatre in felt boots. And to me that was fine. I wrote to my husband to ask: how can we meet? I was in the reserve and could be sent anywhere. I began asking to be sent to where my husband was, if only for two days, just to lot me see him; than I would return and they could send me where they chose. My requests were met with shrugs. All the state, I found out from the post number where my husband was fighting and I went to see him. First I visited the regional Party committee, showed them my husband's address and papers proving that I was his wife and said that I wanted to see him. I was told that this was impossible: ho was right at the front line and I should go back. I was worn out, though, and so hungry what did they mean, go back? I went to the military commandant. He looked at me and ordered that I be given some

clothes. I was given a field-shirt and a belt to go over it. Then he tried to make me change my mind: " "Come now, you know it"s very dangerous where year husband is...'
"I sat there and cried and he took pity and gave me a pass.
" "Go to the highway," he said, "the traffic controller there will show you where to go."
"I found the highway and the traffic controller; ho put me in a vehicle and off I went. I arrived at the unit. Everyone was surprised, as all the others there were military men. "And who are you?" they asked. I couldn't say that I was a wife well, how could you when bombs were exploding around us... I said that I was a sister, I don't know why. "Wait," they told me, "you"ve still got another six kilometres to walk.' What did they mean, wait, when I had got so far?... Then some trucks arrived from]ust that area to collect food and with them was a red-haired, freckled sergeant.
" "Oh, I know Fedosenko", he said. "But-he"s right up in the trenches.'
"Well, I implored him and they put me in a cart and off we drove. There was nothing to be seen anywhere, which was something I hadn't known about. The front line and no one anywhere,]ust occasional firing. We arrived and the sergeant asked: "
" "Where"s Fodosenko, then?'
" "They went out on reconnaissance yesterday", he was told; "it got light before they could return and they are waiting for darkness."
"But they were in contact. And Fedosenko was informed that his sister had come. What sister? "She has rod halt." But his sister was dark. Well, if she was red-haired he could guess immediately what sort of sister she was. I don't know how ho managed to crawl out, but Fodosenko soon appeared and there we met. What a joyful occasion that was...
"I spent one day with him, then the next and said:
" "Go and report to headquarters. I"m staying here with you.'
"Ho went to see the senior officers, leaving me on tenterhooks: would they say that there should ho neither hide nor hair of me in twenty-four hours' time? After all, this was the front line-it would be understandable... Suddenly I saw the senior officers-a major and a colonel-walking into the dug-out. Everyone was shaking hands. Then, of course, we sat down in the dug-out, everyone had a drink and each man had his say. A wife had found her husband in the trenches, they said, a real wife with papers to prove it. What a woman she was: they should sec what such a woman looked like. They all said things like that and everyone wept. I have remembered that evening all my life.
"I stayed with them as a nurse, going out on reconnaissance with the men. Once a mortar was firing and I saw a man fall. Had he been killed or wounded, I thought? I ran towards him, but the mortar was firing and the commander shouted:
" "Where are you going, you damned female!"
"I crawled over to the man and found that he was alive.
"Near the Dnieper I was decorated by moonlight with the Order of the Red Banner. Then I was told that my name had been put forward for the Order of the Rod Slat, but I wasn't looking for it. My husband was wounded, badly wounded. We plodded across a terrible marsh, crawled over the ground together. There was a machine-gun to the right, say, and we crawled to the loft over the marsh, preesing ourselves so closely to the ground that if the machine-gun was on the right he was wounded in the left thigh. He was wounded by an explosive bullet you just try to apply a bandage, it was his buttock that was wounded, after all. Everything had exploded and the earth and mud had got into it. .
"But we were still surrounded. There was nowhere to carry the wounded and I had no medicines, either. The only hope was that we would break

out. When we did, I evacuated my husband to a military hospital. By the time I got him there blood-poisoning had already set in. It was New Year. He was dying... He had been decorated many times and I collected all his Orders and medals and placed them beside him. There was a doctor's round just then, bet he was asleep. The doctor approached and said to me:
" "You must leave. He is already dead,"
" "Quiet," I said, "he is still alive."
"My husband opened his eyes at that moment and said:
" "The ceiling seems to have turned blue."
"I looked.
" "No, it isn"t blue, Vasya, it's white,' But he thougt it was blue.
" "Well, Fedosenko," his neighbour said, "if you stay alive, you will have to carry your wife in your arms."
" "And I will," he agreed.
"I don't know why, probably he felt he was dying, but he kissed me. It was the way people kiss for the last time.
" "Lyubochka, it"s such a shame,' he said, "everyone"s celebrating New Year, and we're here... But don't be sad, we'll stir have time...'
"When there was only a few hours left for him to live he had an accident and his bedclothes had to be changed... I changed the sheets and rebandaged his leg, but I had to pull him on to the bolster and he was a man, after all, and heavy and as I pulled him I felt that it was all over and in a minute or two he would be gone...
"I wanted to die myself... But I was carrying our child under my heart and that was the only thing that held me back... I buried my husband on the 1st of January and thirty-eight days later Vasya was born, in 1944. He has children of his own now. My husband was called Vassily, my son is Vassily Vasilyevich and my grandson is Vasya..."
The women argue and answer one another: did they have the right to love, did they love, how did they love? Only listen, try to understand and don't be in a hurry to impose the experience of today's feelings on what you hear. They were another generation. They had their own experience of love and it is impossible to tell at once what prevailed in their feelings: love or pity, love or self-sacrifice and a woman's pride.
" There were so many wounded and you felt so sorry for them all. When you saw that you were helpless, that someone was dying... A young, handsome man was dying... You wanted at least to kiss him before it was too late. To do something feminine for him, if you could do nothing as a doctor." (V.V.Shevaldysheva, surgeon).
To emerge victorious one had to preserve this masculine element in oneself. And the feminine element. And this was added to all the other trials that had to be borne.
"Twenty-seven of us girls arrived at the First Byelorussian Front. The men looked at us with admiration: "They"re not laundresses or telephonists, they're girl snipers. It's the first time we've seen girls like that.' The sergeant wrote a poem in our honour to the offed that girls were as touching as roses and that war should not cripple their soots.
"When we left for the fighting front each of us had sworn that we would have no love affairs there. Everything would come later, if we survived, after the war...
"Before the war we hadn't even had time for kissing. We looked on things like that more strictly than young people do today. Kissing for us was the same as falling in love for the whole of your life. Bet now there's war!!." (Senior Sergeant S. M. Krigel, sniper.)
From a letter by Private Nonna Alexandrovna Smirnova, anti-aircraft gunner:
"We tried to make our uniforms fit well, often washing and ironing thorn: we wanted to look neat. For the most part we did that at night,

while doting the day we were taught to crawl on our stomachs, to dig ourselves in and so on. We dried our underwear at night only, we should have been embarrassed to hang things up during the day with the men about, and anyway the sergeant scolded us.
"We were young, of course, and we wanted to love and be loved. A woman can't do without being noticed. But love was, so to speak, forbidden (if command found out, one of the lovers was, as a rule, transferred to another unit) and we protected and preserved It as something sacred, elevated."
Yes, It was war. But it was also their youth-the happiest time of their lives. And if there had not been love, thaw would have been no children horn in the years 1941, 1942, 1943, l944 and l945...
Nonna Alexandrovna enclosed several of her own poems in her letter. She confessed that she had begun to write poetry during the war because "ordinary words were not sufficient for my feelings" and now wrote "so that the memory of those days remains for our children":
... And now as I walk our peaceful alley,
Remembering my youth,
I recognize
Girls, once shyly adolescent,
In the stately matrons of today
And I beg them:
"You must tell your children,
Putting modesty aside,
That without us, without women,
There would've been no spring
In nineteen forty-five."
And this is how the feelings of those days ate preserved by Yevgenia Viktorovna Klenovskaya, a partisan. We did not meet for long, but her portrait remained in my memory: a masculine haircut and strong, heavy hands. Her entire appearance seemed to be a denial, a renunciation of femininity in any form.
"I want to say that I brought with me from the war a great, noble, extremely beautiful feeling. Well, there are simply no words to convey the admiration with which men looked on us. I carried this feeling with gratitude and delight through the war and have carried it with me all my life. They treated us nobly, with rare respect; it was something special. I lived with them in the same dug-out, slept on the same boards, went on the same missions and when I was so cold that I could feel my insides freezing, the tongue in my mouth freezing and knew that before long I would lose consciousness, I would say: "Misha, undo your coat and warm me". He would ask: "Well, is that better?" Yes, that's better.'
"It was a splendid, marvellous feeling, you know! I have never encountered anything like It since. But it was impossible to think of anything personal when your homeland is in danger, when there is war."
"But there was love, after all?"
"Yes, there was love. I encountered it in others. But you must excuse me, perhaps I'm wrong and it isn't quite natural, but in my heart I condemned those people. I considered that it was not the time for personal matters. All around there was evil, death, fire. Every day we saw this, every hour. It was impossible to forget about it. Well, just impossible and that was that. I don't think that I was alone in thinking like that."
"What were you like before the war?"
"I loved singing, loved laughing. But do you know what we were like? We dreamed of catching up with boys our own age, overtaking them, mastering a "man"s' profession and winning public standing. There was no room for thoughts of a family! We used to speak with indignation of those who permitted themselves ear-rings or fancy hair-do.

"And those feelings grew stronger in wartime. The most important thing for us was the word "necessary". It's probably difficult for you to understand us. You belong to another generation..."
Yevgenia Viktorovna Klenovskaya was not alone in her uncompromising attitude. She is right in slating that many people thought like that then. And even if, today, one cannot accept her absolute single mindedness, one admires women like her even more. One admires the unshakable quality of the female spirit.
Medical nurse Maria Selivestrovna Bozhok:
"I left Kazan for the front as a nineteen-year-old girl. But six months later I wrote to my mother that people took me for twenty-five or twenty-seven. Every day was lived in fear and terror. A shell-splinter flew and you thought that your skin was being peeled off. And people were dying. They were dying every day, every hour-every minute, you felt. There weren't enough sheets to cover them, and they were laid out in their underwear. The wards were terribly silent. I can't remember a silence like it anywhere else.
"I told myself that I could not hear a single word of love in that hell. I could not believe in it. Because of that. The war lasted so many years, but I don't remember any songs. I don't remember the popular "Dug-out". None of them... I only remember that when I left home for the front the cherry trees were flowering in our garden. As I walked away, I looked back: "Perhaps this is the last time I shall see the cherry trees flower?.." I must have encountered other gardens by the roadside afterwards. After all, they flowered in wartime, too. But I don't remember... At school I was always laughing, but now I became serious. And I thought: "Will I never smile again?" If I saw one of the girls plucking her eyebrows or putting on lipstick I was indignant. I rejected that categorically: how was it possible, how could she want someone to like her at such a time?
"The older girls said that even if everything was in flames, there would nevertheless be love. But I didn't agree. All around there were wounded, people were groaning... The dead had such yellow-green faces. Well, how could you think about joy?, about your own happiness? Your heart was torn in two... It was so terrible that your hair turned grey. I didn't want to mix that with love. I thought that love would perish there in an instant. What sort of love can there be without celebration and without beauty? When the war was over life would be beautiful. And there would be love. That was my feeling.
"You could be killed at any moment, Not only during the day, but at night, too. The war did not stop for a minute. I might suddenly be killed and the man who had fallen in love with me would suffer. I felt so sorry.
"My husband courted me then. But I told him: "No, no, we can only talk about this when the war is over." I shall not forget how he came back once from a battle and asked: "Do you have a blouse of some kind? Put it on, please. Let me see what you look like in a blouse." But I didn't have anything except a field-shirt.
"I even said to a friend: "He hasn"t given you flowers, he hasn't courted you... And all of a sudden you're getting married. Is this really love?' I didn't understand her feelings...
"The war ended; we looked at each other and didn't believe the war was over, that we had remained alive and had met. And that we would love... We had already forgotten about all that, we couldn't think about it. I came home and my mother and I set about making a dress for me.
"Now it was my turn and I was asked:
" "What style will you have?"
" "I don"t know...'
" "How can you go to the dress-maker"s and not know what dress you want?'

" "I don"t know...'
"Well, I hadn't seen a single dress for five years. I had even forgotten how a dress is made. I bought high-heeled shoes, walked about the room and took them off. I put them in the corner and thought: "I"ll never learn to walk in them...' "
But there was love. People were saved by It. It saved them. Without it they could scarcely have held out during that terrible war.
Svetlana Nikolaevna Lyubich, medical orderly, recalls:
"The people in hospital were happy. Happy because they were still alive. A twenty-year-old lieutenant suffered because he had lost a leg. But at that time, amid the general grief, it seemed like good fortune: he had come back alive and, just imagine, he was only short of one leg. The most important thing was that he was alive. And he had love, a wife and everything before him. Losing a leg now is terrible, but then they jumped about on one leg, smoking and laughing. He was a hero, you see! Nothing to get upset about! Or perhaps we were too young to understand. No, all the same we thought that even when someone was without legs or arms, he would be dear to someone-he had sacrificed himself for all."
"Did you fall in love at the front?"
"Of course, we were very young, after all. As soon as more wounded arrived we would inevitably fall in love with one of them. A friend of mine fell in love with a lieutenant-he was just a mass of wounds. She showed him to me-there he is. But I, too, of course, decided to fall In love with him. When he was taken away he asked me for a photograph. And I had one-we had had our photographs taken somewhere on a railway station. I got the photograph to give to him, but then I thought: what if it isn't love and I give him the photograph? So, as he was being taken away, I gave him my hand with the photograph inside, but I couldn't make up my mind to open my fist. That was all that that "love" amounted to.
"Then, I remember, there was Pavlik, who was also a lieutenant. He was in great pain, so I put a piece of chocolate under his pillow. When we met again this was already after the war, twenty years later-he began to thank my friend Lilia Drozdova for that chocolate. "What chocolate?" Lilia asked. I confessed that It had been me... And he kissed me... He kissed me after twenty years..."
How sacred the word "kiss" is in these stories. And how clearly that masculine gesture in hell was remembered, remembered throughout a lifetime. While the men remembered how a woman brought a scrap of comfort with her into a hospital ward or a dug-out, if only in the shape of a transparent bunch of snowdrops in a tin can, a curtain made from a foot-cloth, clean linen, a freshly laundered collar or simply a woman's voice. They turned men's thoughts to home, to pre-war life.
"Once, after a performance at a military hospital," People's Artist of the Soviet Union Larissa Alexandrovskaya recalled, "the chief doctor approached me and said: "We have a badly wounded tankman in a separate ward. He reacts to almost nothing, perhaps your singing will help him..." I wont to the ward. For as long as I live I shall never forget that man. He had escaped from a burning tank by a miracle and was burnt from head to foot. He lay stretched out motionless on a bed, his face blackened and eyeless. My throat contracted and for several minutes I was unable to regain control of myself. Then I began to sing softly... And I saw that the face of the wounded man moved... -He whispered something. I bent forward and heard: "Sing sonic more..." I sang on and performed my entire repertoire until the chief doctor said: "He seems to have fallen asleep..." "
"At one of our recent meetings of front-line comrades a man confessed to me that he remembered my young smile in the way ho now remembered the smile of his small grandson. It was the dearest thing in his life. But for me he was just another wounded man and I didn't even remember

him. When he said that to me, I blushed like a girl. You must agree that people don't often speak to each other with such frankness. But when we reminisce about the war, we ate sincere as never..."
(V.V.Shevaldysheva, surgeon.)
The war held everything-death, fear, weakness, hard work. And the long-suffering qualities of women. The love, loyalty and tenderness of women.
Senior Sergeant Nina Vasilyevna Ilyinskaya (Chirva), medical nurse, recalls:
"A battalion commander got married to one of our nurses. What sort of wedding could there be in those circumstances? But they loved each other. She always insisted on following him when he went off to fight. She said that she would not forgive herself if he died alone, if she did not see his death. "Let us be killed together. We shall be killed by the same shell-burst." They intended to die together or to survive together. He was badly wounded and sent to the rear, while she was pregnant. He gave her a letter: "Go to my parents. Whatever happens to me, you are my wife. And there will be my son or my daughter..."
"That was what people remembered, the good things. I won't claim that there was nothing else. The war was a long one and there were many of us. But I remember the bright things, the pure things more. I remember that, just after I had applied to be sent to the front and was still working in a military hospital, an officer fell in love with a friend of mine. How we envied her! How we envied their love! He recovered from his wounds and returned to the front. She waited for him. And he came back to her after the war, came back without an arm...
"Of course, love there at the front was different. Everyone know that you could love someone and in a moment that person might no longer be there. When we fall in love in peacetime, we probably don't look at things from that standpoint. Our love had no today or tomorrow... If we loved, then we loved without half-measures. At any rate, there was no room for insincerity, for very often our love ended with a plywood star over a grave.
"Besides as a rule men showed women their best side. They were risking their lives, sacrificing themselves. And they saw not only our femininity, but also our capacity for self-sacrifice. Somehow I even think, I can even say this about myself, that, despite all the horrors it was in the war that many of us experienced our highest flights of spirit. And that is natural,too, for every day presented us with the choice: life or death. A person was tested every day. If he or she was good, everyone saw It, if he or she was a coward and a nonentity, that, too, was seen by everyone. Those who haven't experienced war find that hard to understand.
"When I came back from the war I had nothing: a field-shirt, a greatcoat on my back-nothing else. I had to begin life with that. It was like being back at the front again-all you had was your greatcoat; people used to say that it was your mattress and your blanket as well. Well, and there was talk of every kind... I'll soon be forty, but my cheeks stir burn...
"A man returned and there he was, a hero. An eligible young man! But if it was a girl, then immediately people looked askance: "We know what you did there!.." And the whole of the suitor's family would think: should he marry her? To tell the truth, we concealed the fact that we had been at the front, we did not want to tell people about it. We wanted to become ordinary girls again. Marriageable girls..."
A strange fate indeed! First to have the strength needed to become extraordinary. Heroines! And then to find the strength to become ordinary girls. Marriageable girls.
I always had the feeling of being about to touch something that should not he touched. And even if I did not ask, I will still be told. The sore spots are still there!

But we did not know those bitter mortifications.
Lilia Mikhailovna Budko, surgical nurse:
"We veterans get together every year now. One year I was coming out of the hotel when the other girls addressed me:
"Where were you, Lilia? We"ve been crying our eyes out.'
"They told me that a Kazakh man had approached them and asked:
" "Where are you from, girls? From which hospital?"
"They told him and said:
" But who are you looking for?'
" "I come here every year to look for one nurse. She saved my life and I fell In love with her. I want to find her."
"The girls laughed:
" "There"s no point in looking for a young nurse here, she'll be a grandmother already with grey hair and her youth long gone.'
""No..."
" "But you must be married yourself and have children?"
" "I have grandchildren, I have children and I have a wife. I have lost my soul... No soul..."
"The girls told me this and we began to cast our minds back: could he have been my Kazakh?
" ... A Kazakh boy was brought in, just a kid, really, and we operated on him. His intestine was ruptured in seven or eight places-a hopeless case. It was because he was lying so apathetically that I immediately noticed him. As soon as I had a spare minute I darted over: "Well, how are things?" I gave him an intravenous myself, measured his temperature and he began to mend. But we didn't keep the wounded for long at the front line, just patched them up and sent them on. So he had to go with the next group.
"He was lying on a stretcher when I was told that he was calling for me.
" "Nurse, come here."
" Wear's the matter? What do you want? Everything's fine with you. You are being sent to the rear and everything will be all right. You've been brought back to life.'
" "Please, please," he said. "I am an only son. You saved me. I know..," He gave me a present: a ring, such a little ring.
"But I didn't wear rings, I didn't like them for some reason. And I refused.
" "I don"t wear rings, I can't. Better take it to your mother.'
"He begged me. Some wounded men who came up helped him:
" "Go on, take it, it"s the gift from a pure heart.'
" "But this is my duty, don"t you see?'
"Well, they persuaded me. It's tree that I lost the ring later. It was too big for me and fell somewhere when I was asleep in a truck and the truck bounced. I was very sorry."
"Did you find the man later?"
"No, we never did meet. I don't know whether it was him. But the other girls and I looked for him the whole day.
"And I kept on remembering. I remembered the good things and the insults... Sometimes things were said about the women who took part in the war that were wounding to the point of being abusive. "Campaign wife", for example... The things men said at the front...
"But probably they were not the product of the front, they came from the rear...
"In 1946 I came home. I was asked: "Will you wear your uniform or civilian clothes?" My uniform, of course: I had no thought of taking it off. One evening I went to a dance at the officers' club. And now I shall tell you how girls in military uniform were treated.
"I put on shoes and a dress and banded my greatcoat and boots in at the cloakroom.
"An officer came up and invited me to dance. A captain.

" "You aren"t a local girl, I suppose,' he said. "You"re very cultured.'
"He didn't leave me alone all evening. When the dance was over he asked for my cloakroom ticket and went ahead. But at the cloakroom he was given boots and a greatcoat.
" "These aren"t mine...'
"I went up and said:
" "No, they"re mine.'
" "But you didn"t tell me that you had been at the front.'
""Did you ask?"
"And he stood there in confusion, unable to look me in the face. And yet he himself had only just returned from the war.
" "Why are you so surprised?"
"I would never have thought that you had been in the army, The girls at the front, you know..."
" "You were surprised that I am "alone"? Without a husband and not pregnant?'
"I didn't let him see me home.
"And I have always been proud that I was at the front and defended my country..."
So the cruel memory of war and the bright memory of youth live on in them inextricably intertwined.

"... ABOUT A BOWL OF TINY POTATOES"

Hitler followed Napoleon in complaining to his generals: "Russia fights against the rules". "Against the rules" that means that the wheat, ready for shipment to Germany, was burnt... It means the leaflets containing information from the Sovinformburo in the heart of an occupied town, the daring partisan raids on fortified garrisons, the blowing up at night of enemy trains heading for the front... It means hundreds of major and minor feats performed by the heroes, known and unknown, of the underground and the partisan movement. It means what Lev Tolstoy* called "the cudgel of people's war". But let us consider the realities of this struggle. What, for example, was the underground? Not in terms of attacks, but of the constant feeling of threat, the absence of personal security for year after year. "At first, after liberation, I used to look over my shoulder as I walked down the street: I just couldn't help it... I could not walk calmly down the street. As I walked I would count the vehicles... At the railway station I would count the trains..." (V.G.Sedova, underground fighter.)
What does it mean to leave the village, where everyone knows you, where your old parents still live and your younger brothers and sisters, too, to join the partisans? Imagine a soldier at the front, not alone, though, but surrounded by his family-wife, small children, elderly mother while at any moment the Nazi tanks may crawl forward or a line of submachine-gunners appear from behind a hillock... At the front everyone was risking his life. But in the enemy rear? There, risking your life was only the beginning of daily heroism and not the worst risk or the most terrible trial...
This is what women remember of that time.

*Tolstoy, Lev Nikolaevich (1828 1910), the great Russian writer, author of the novels "War and Peace", "Anna Karenina" and "Resurrection" Ed.

I met Antonina Alexeyevna Kondrashova in her office. She is chairman of the people's control committee of the Dyadkovo district, Bryansk region. It was already evening, voices and hurried steps were no longer heard and only a cleaning woman's bucket clattering in the corridor and the voice of an announcer from the radio standing on a fire-proof safe, an indispensable attribute of public offices,

connected us with the rest of the world in the stillness that follows the working day.

Antonina Alexeyevna, I immediately noticed, is one of those warm, cordial women to whom official formality and the imperious gesture of the male manager are completely foreign. She was more tike a village school teacher, loved by her pupils, than a Party worker with a 35 year record.

"They're silent at last," Antonina Alexeyevna said, looking at her three telephones: white, yellow and red.

The white telephone immediately began ringing loudly.

"My daughter... She's waiting for me, for supper. But we shall probably stay here for a while yet. It isn't often that I have visitors from Byelorussia. My dearest visitors. It was there, in your forests, that I was a partisan..."

Antonina Alexeyevna Kondrashova, scout in the Bytosh partisan brigade: "When, after carrying out a mission, I could no longer remain in the village and left to join my detachment, my mother was taken by the SD men. My brother managed to escape, but my mother was taken. She was tortured and interrogated about my whereabouts. She was held for two years. For two years she, together with other women, was made to lead the way whenever the Nazis set out on an operation: they were afraid of partisan mines and always drove the local population in front of them. If there were mines these people would be blown up while the soldiers would remain safe. For two years my mother, too, was made to walk in front...

"On more than one occasion we would be sitting in ambush and suddenly see women walking towards us and behind them the Nazis. They would come closer and you would see that your mother was there. The most terrible thing was to wait for the commander to give orders to open fire. We all awaited this order with fear, for one of us would whisper: "There"s my mother' and another "There"s my sister', while someone would have spotted his child... My mother always wore a white kerchief She was tall and was always the first person to be noticed. Even before I myself had time to see her someone would pass me the message: "Your mother"s there...'

"If the order to fire was given, you fired. You didn't know yourself where you wow firing and you had one thought in your head: to keep that white kerchief in sight and see if she was still alive, whether she had fallen. Everyone would scatter and fall down and you didn't know whether your mother had been killed or not. Then, for two days or more, you were beside yourself until messengers came from the village with the news that she was alive. You could live again. And so life continued until the next time. I don't think I could have stood it now, but then, perhaps, youth or the force of circumstances made me bear it. Circumstances, I think...

"I still have in my ears the cry of a child as it was thrown into a well. Have you ever heard that cry? You can't imagine it, you couldn't have stood it. The child fell down and down and yelled and yelled as if from under the ground, from the other world. It was not a child's cry and not a human cry, it was a cry from beyond the grave. After that, when you went on a mission, your whole spirit urged you to do only one thing: to kill them as soon as possible and as many as possible, destroy them in the cruellest way. When I saw German prisoners I wanted to grab any of them. I wouldn't just have killed him that would have been too easy a death. I wouldn't have done it with a gun, with a rifle...

"They did terrible, abnormal things to people. Perhaps you cannot understand this today . But you would have felt the same if a big bonfire had been lit in front of you in the middle of the village and an old school teacher who once taught you had been thrown on it. Or if a young man had been backed to pieces, sawn up with a saw. And these

were all your own people, people you knew. This person was the father of you friend, that person you went to school with. The hardest thing of all was to come hack to the detachment and say: Sasha, or Masha, your mother or your father has been shot or burnt or torn to pieces by dogs. That was the most terrible thing. Everything could be endured hut that. You even felt that it was easier to endure the death of those near and dear to you than to tell a comrade that his family had perished...

"After all, we were young and mothers and sisters meant a lot to us, wo wanted to see them. We used to think and say that when we came back, when we met, we would live differently, we would not distress our mothers...

"Just before they had retreated it was 1943 by then the Nazis shot my mother.., My mother was a wonderful person: she herself had blessed us:

" "Go, children, you must live. If you have to die, better nut to die for nothing..."

"She didn't say that we had lo kill the enemy, she said something else, her own, woman's words: they should go away and we could live peacefully and study, study above all.

"The women who were with her in the cell describe how, whenever she was taken out, she would ask:

" "There is one thing I beg of you: if I die, help my children!"

"When I returned, one of those women took me into her home, although she had two small children. Our house had been burnt down by the Nazis, my younger brother had been killed while serving with the partisans, mum had been shot and my father was at the front. He came hack a wounded and sick man. He had fought all the way to Berlin, but he did not live long afterwards and soon died... So I was the only one left of our family. This woman was poor in any case and she also had two small children to support. I decided to leave, to move to some other place. But she wept and would not let me go.

"There's something else I want to tell you. When I learned that my mother had been shot I could find no rest, I had to find her... They had been shot, hated in a large anti-tank ditch, and the ground had been flattened by trucks. I was shown approximately where she had stood and I ran there and dug, turning over corpses, I recognized my mother by the ring on her hand... When I saw her I cried out and lost consciousness. Some women pulled her out, washed her with water from a tin can and buried her. I keep that can...

"Sometimes at night I lie and think that my mother died because of me. No, it wasn't because of me... If I, fearing for those close to me, had not gone to fight, if someone else had done the same and then someone else and someone else, what we have now would not be. But I can no longer tell myself that those horrors did not happen to me, that I did not see them, did not go through all that. I cannot say that I did not see my mother being driven in front of Nazis or that I did not shoot in the direction from which she was coming. You cannot imagine how unbearable it is to live with this. And the longer one lives, the more unbearable it becomes. Sometimes, at night, you suddenly hear young laughter or a young voice under your window and you shudder: it seems to you that you have heard a child's cry. Or you suddenly wake up and feel that you cannot breathe. The smell of burning is choking you... You don't know what a burning human body smells like, especially in summer. Even today it's my work when there's a fire, I have to go there. But if I hear that a livestock farm somewhere has caught fire, then I never go, I can't because it reminds me of the smell of burning human flesh. There are times when you wake up at night and hurry for the eau de cologne, and even it seems to have that smell. You cannot drive it from your memory,..

"After the war I was afraid to get married for a long time. I was afraid to have children. War would break out suddenly, I thought, and I would go to the front. And what would happen to the children then?"
The underground and the partisan struggle were unusual, very specific forms of struggle. They demanded special qualities. "You had to get used to being two people, as it were: the external person, whom everyone knew, and someone about whom only a few people knew. That was the first law of the underground-to be known about by as few people as possible. We had no rear. Any mistake could be fatal at any time." (A.P.Derevyankina, underground fighter). This struggle demanded special, inconceivable sacrifices. Its laws affected those who were near and dear to us with a cruelty beyond compare. Women were subjected to particularly severe trials, for they were not just partisans or underground fighters, hut also wives, mothers, daughters. The most terrible trials awaited them. By comparison, dying was easier...
Yadviga Mikhailovna Savitskaya, a Minsk underground fighter, remembers:
"When we began to take part in the struggle we were warned that it was dangerous, that we might have to pay with our lives, that there was little chance of staying alive. But we didn't think about ourselves. We were opposed to this enemy not just with our hearts but with our whole being, everything. My first impression when I saw a German was of a blow: your entire body ached, every cell-how was it possible that they were here? It had to be felt, how alien all this was, how impossible to accept. In a couple of days the person I was before the war had ceased to be. There was another person now. Hatred overwhelmed us. It was stronger than feat for those close to us or of our own deaths. Of course, we thought about our relatives. But we had no choice. The Nazis must not remain in our land...
"When, for example, I learned that I was to be arrested, I joined a partisan detachment. I left my seventy-five-year-old mother behind, by herself. We agreed that she should pretend to be blind and deaf, then she would not be touched. Of course, that was how I comforted myself: my mother could he arrested. But my desire to continue the struggle, to take full vengeance on the enemy overcame my doubts.
"I've remembered something, maybe you'll find it interesting, too. Everything that happened before I joined the partisans I remember, I remember every day. But I remember less about the partisan detachment, there were many of us then and we wore together.
"The day after I left the Nazis broke into our house. Mum pretended to be blind and unable to hear, as we had agreed. They beat her terribly in an attempt to make her tell where her daughter was.
Mother was ill for a long time..."
Yadviga Mikhailovna's story is complemented by that of Yelizaveta Petrovna Malakhova, another underground fighter from Minsk:
"I was walking along one side of the street and two young Nazis were walking along the other: There was a low house ahead of us and a little child aged about three was sitting on the window-sill. One of the Nazis took out his pistol and fired at the child. What had that child done to him? It was sitting and waiting for its mummy. But the Nazi decided to show off, to demonstrate how well he could shoot. A pregnant woman was killed before my eyes. Her child did not even come etc the world, didn't live a single minute, a single second .
"Hatred for them choked me. I couldn't sleep at nights..."
Alexandra Ivanovna Khromova, Secretary of the Antopol Underground District Party Committee, tells her story:
"My friend Katya Simakova had two daughters. Both girls were small, well, about six or seven. She took those girls by the hand, walked around the town and saw where the Nazi units were. If a Nazi yelled at

her she would open her mouth and pretend to be an idiot. She risked her daughters...

"There was also a woman, Zazharskaya, with us and she had a daughter called Valeria. The girl was eight years old. A canteen had to be blown up and we decided to lay a mine in the stove, but it had to be carried there. And the mother said that her daughter would bring it. She put the mine in a basket with a couple of child's dresses on top, two dozen eggs and some butter. And that tittle girl brought the mine to the canteen. A mother's instinct is said to be stronger than anything, But there was nothing else that we could do then. Nothing else that wo could do..."

"The Chimuk brothers were in our detachment... A barn was set alight while they were in it. They resisted until the last, firing back, then came out, badly burned. They were taken away in a cart and shown to the people to find out who their relatives were.

"The entire village was there with their father and mother, but no one said a word. What a heart their mother had not to allow herself to cry out... She did not give herself away. Otherwise the whole village would have been put to flames. There are decorations for everything, but none would have been adequate, even the loftiest Hero's Star would not have been enough for that mother..." (P.A.Kasperovich, a partisan messenger.)

From the reminiscences of Valentina Mikhailovna Ilkevich, a partisan:

"My mother did the laundry and cooked for all the partisans. It has to be done and she did guard duty as well. She doesn't have any papers to show for it, nothing at all. She didn't ask for them even then and she didn't need them later, either: she helped, like every Soviet citizen. I went on a mission once and my mother was told that I had been hanged. When I returned a few days later and my mother saw me, she couldn't say a word. For several hours she lost the power of speech. All that had to be endured... And was my mother the only one to experience such grief?

"We picked up a woman who was lying almost senseless. She could not walk and had been crawling along the road. She said that she had thought she was already dead. She had felt blood running over her, but had decided she was feeling this in the other world. When she had come to herself a little, she told us that she had been taken out to be shot with her five children. While they were being led to a barn the children had been shot. The Nazis had amused themselves as they shot the children. The last child was left, a baby boy, and a Nazi had motioned to her that she should throw it into the air so that he could shoot it. She threw it, killing her own child herself so that the German would not have time to fire... She said that she did not want to live, that after everything that had happened she could not live in this world, only in the next.

"I did not want to kill, I wasn't born to kill. I wanted to become a teacher. But they came to our land to kill and burn. I saw them set fire to a village and could not cry out or weep loudly: we had approached this village on reconnaissance. I could only gnaw my hands I still have the scars. I remember the people crying out, and the cows and the hens with them. Everything seemed to cry out with human voices... Everything alive...

"After that I feel such love for everything that is native to me, for all my own people, that I am ready to give up everything for them."

The Nazi army had well-trained soldiers equipped with superb arms. Laws were applied in the occupied territories that, the enemy calculated, would leave people nothing but the biological imperative- to survive! Everything, It seemed, had been taken into account by the Nazi strategists and ideologies, except that a mother would prove capable of hiding a mine under the dress of her own daughter, that a father would sacrifice the life of his daughter, that a daughter, who

could have saved the life of her mother, would save the life of everyone and her native soil at the cost of the life of the person dearest to her. The power of the human spirit-that was what the enemy did not take into account: an idealist category but, as later became clear, ultra-material in such a coarse and cruel material world as war.

...At the Yasyukevich home In the village of Kabishche in the Gorodok district, Vitebsk Region, I received a quiet but joyful reception. "A visitor is tike the sun to a lonely person," said Iosif Georgievich, sitting me down beside the bed of his sick daughter. He bustled about in the way of old men, puzzled as to what else he could do to make me feel comfortable as a welcome guest. It was with difficulty that I persuaded him that there was no need for refreshments.

Unhurriedly, like everything in that house, memories began to take shape. If the daughter forgot something, her father would jog her memory.

Iosif Georgievich Yasyukevich and his daughter Maria, a partisan messenger in the Petrakov detachment of the Rokossovsky brigade during the war, tell their story:

"All my sons fought at the front," Iosif Georgievich said. "Two of my nephews were shot because they were in contact with the partisans. My sister, their mother, was burnt by the Nazis in her own borne... People said that until the smoke blotted her out she held an icon and stood as straight as a candle. After the war, I thought that something was burning whenever I saw the sun set..."

"I was thirteen years old then," Maria told me, I knew that my father was helping the partisans, I understood... Some people came at night, called him outside, left something and collected something. My father often took me with him; he would put me in the cart and say: "Sit there and don"t get up'. When we arrived at our destination he would take a gun or some leaflets out of the cart. An old man and a little girl driving, that doesn't attract so much attention.

"Then he began sending me to the railway station. He taught me what I had to remember. I would creep quietly towards the bushes and hide there until night fell, counting the trains that passed through. I would remember what was being carried, what could be seen: guns, tanks or soldiers. There were bushes near the railway line and the Germans would shoot through them two or three times a day."

"Weren't you afraid?"

"I was small and I always crept up so that no one noticed me. But I remember that day very well. My father tried to leave the farm-stead twice. He had to get to the woods, where the partisans were waiting for him. He drove off twice and twice the patrols sent him back. Darkness was falling and I could see him pacing the yard nervously... I remember that his heard had grown by evening and his face was black with stubble. He called me: "Maria..." My mother shouted: "I won"t let the child go!' She pulled me away from my father,..

"But I ran quietly off through the wood. I knew all the paths there, although I was afraid of the dark. I found the partisans waiting and told them everything that my father had said. It was already growing light as I returned. How could I evade the German patrols? I roamed through the wood and fell into a lake. My father's jacket and boots were lost; I don't remember how I myself climbed out of the hole in the ice...

"By morning I had a fever. I took to my bed and have never left it. My mother prepared herbal infusions: there was no other assistance, no doctors. I lost the use of my legs. I was operated on ten times after the war, treated in a sanatorium.,."

Iosif Georgievich :

"Two years ago my wife died. She was conscious as she lay dying and I saw that she forgave me everything... But I realized that she did not

forgive me for Maria. She did not forgive herself or me. And so she died..."
Iosif Georgievich accompanied me along a short cut to the bus stop. Wo walked through a spring garden in full flower "I planted it during the war. People were dying, but I planted a garden. Life scorned so precious,.." The garden was full of flowers. They formed a single white bouquet, almost the colour of sadness like the old man's head.
What is striking in almost all these stories is that grief was felt as something common, even though each person had his cross to bear and war did not demand of all its terrible toll at once. There was no family that the war would not bereave, hut at first many were spared. However, both those who were spared and those who were not felt themselves to be one, indivisible and whole. So this amazing human feeling of community became that which made it possible to endure all and to win.
Grief was Celt as something that concerned all in common, but responsibility for what would follow, how events would develop, was assumed by each: man or child, old man or woman. "Afterwards they said that my father had been left behind, that he had a task to carry out. No one left us behind. We made our own decision. I don't remember that there was a panic. There was great grief that's true. But there was no panic. Everyone believed in our victory," Valentina Pavlovna Kozhemyakina, a partisan, told me. "On the first eveningafter the Gerlnans cntcrcd our village lriy father played the "Internationale" on the violin. He wanted to do something like that. lo make some kind of protest,.."
The enemy knew only one way of settling accounts: for a train blown up, a wounded man hidden or a piece of bread given to the partisans, the price was death for you and those near and dear to you! The highest price was paid even for the smallest act. In enemy-occupied territory courage had a thousand faces. A bowl of tiny potatoes on the table was the ultimate yardstick, the last thing left in a peasant's hut, The last thing to be given up.
Anna Nikiforovna Zakharova, the only woman to become a partisan commissar, the commissar of the 225th regiment of the Gomel region: "I remember... I have remembered all my life... How the wounded ate salt by the spoonful. How, when a man's name was called out in formation, he would step forward and fall to the ground with his rifle from weakness.
"The people helped us If they hadn't, the partisan movement could not have existed. Sometimes help was given with tears, but all the same It was given.
" "Children , children, we shall share hardships and wait for victory together," they would say.
"They would give us their last tiny potatoes and bread. One would say: "I will give you so much", another "The same" "And what about you, Ivan?" "And what about you, Maria?" "the same as everyone else, but I have children." Often they wept, and we wept, too.
"What would wo have done without the local people? There was an entire anna in the forest, but without the people we would have perished: it was they who sowed and ploughed to feed themselves and their children and to feed and clothe us throughout the war. They ploughed at night, when there was no shooting. I remember arriving at a village where an old peasant was being buried. He had been killed at night. While sowing corn... He was clutching the seeds so tightly in his hand that it could not be opened. That was how he was put into the ground, with the seeds...
"We were armed, after all, and could defend ourselves. But what could they do" For giving a loaf of bread to a partisan they were shot. I might stay the night and go away, but if someone informed on them that I had spent the night in that hut they would all be shot. There was

one woman, alone, without a man, and she had three small children. But she didn't send us away when we came, she lit the stove and washed our clothes... She gave us her last morsel: "Eat, lads". In spring the potatoes were tiny, like peas. We ate, while the children sat on the stove and wept. There were no more potatoes left... For all women who fed and clothed us in the rear... For them I would have thought up some kind of medal. They were war veterans just as much as frontline soldiers and partisans. What would we have done without them during the war? And what would we have done after the war without the children they brought up alone, while their husbands were fighting? The husbands of many perished. I won't forget those women as long as I live...

"After the war I met Alexandra Kollontai. She was interested in how people could live in the forest, not for a day or two, but for years, and questioned me for hours. How did we treat one another? How did the war, with its battles and horrors, tell on people's relationships? On women's feelings, or the feelings of men towards women? She listened and was impressed by the people among us. People like that could not be conquered, she said."

From the reminiscences of Vera Grigoryevna Sedova, Minsk underground fighter:

"When leaflets were brought to me for the first time I sewed them into a pillow. Mum made the bed and felt them. She unpicked the pillow, saw the leaflets and began to cry. "You will kill yourself and me," she said. Later I wanted to send her to the partisan area, but she didn't want to go: "I won"t abandon Vera'. She helped me.

"Partisan messengers often cave to see me. They would unharness their horses and everyone saw them. People saw and they guessed what was going on. I used to say that the messengers came from my brother, from the country. But my neighbours knew perfectly well that I had no brother in the country. I am grateful to them I should bow low to all my neighbours. Just one word would have been enough to kill us, the whole family. All they had to do was to point a finger in our direction. But no one did. After the war they said that they knew who came to see me..."

Partisan Vera Safronovna Davydova recalls the following incident:

"We went into a hut and there was nothing there, just two bare plank benches and a table. I don't think there was even a mug to have a drink of water. Everything had boon taken front these people. There was only an icon in the corner with an embroidered towel hanging on it.

"An old man and an old woman were sitting there. One of our partisans took off his boots, but his foot-cloths were so torn that he could no longer wind them. It was raining, the ground was muddy, and his boots were torn. The old woman went up to the icon, took the towel from it and gave it to him. "My child, how will you go on?" And there was nothing else at all in that hut..."

Vera Mitrofanovna Tolkacheva, partisan messenger:

"During the first days I picked up two wounded men outside the village. One soldier was wounded in the head, the other had a splinter in the leg. I extracted the splinter myself and poured kerosene into the wound there was nothing else.

"I nursed them, put them on their feet. First one went off into the forest, then the other. When the second man was leaving he suddenly fell at my feet. He wanted to kiss my feet.

" "Dear sister! You have saved my life."

"We didn't use names or anything. Just sister and brother.

"In the evening the village women would gather in my hut:

" "The Germans say that they have taken Moscow."

" "Never!"

"Some had husbands or sons at the front, others with the partisans. All of them were at war.
"It was with those same village women, after liberation, that we got the collective farm on its feet, so to say. I was made chairman. We had four old men as well and five lads who were about thirteen years of age. They were my ploughmen. There were twenty horses, which were suffering from scab and had to be treated. That was all I had. There were neither wheels nor horses' collars,
"The women literally dug the ground with spades, and harrowed the land with cows. The boys would harrow all day and in the evening they would unwrap the food parcels they had brought. Everyone had the same prasnaki. You don't even know what that is. Sorrel seeds, oborotnichek ... you don't know what that is, either? It's a kind of grass. They plucked clover, too, and it was crushed in a mortar. And baked these prasnaki.
"In the autumn an order came from the local authorities: 580 cubic metres of timber were to be felled. By whom? I took my twelve-year-old lad and my daughter she was ten. The other village women did the same. And we delivered the timber..."
I visited Ratyntsy village in the Volozhin district to fulfil quite another journalistic assignment. The task was soon accomplished and by evening I was standing at the cross-roads, waiting for the bus back to Minsk. Some women were sitting there on a bench, waiting for their children townspeople now to arrive for a day off. No sooner had I jogged their memories than they began talking loudly, as if wailing. I managed to note down a few names: Yelena Adamovna Velichko, Yustina Lukyanovna Grigirivich, Maria Fyodorovna Mazuro ...
No, they hadn't fought, these women, nor had they been with the partisans. Their lot had been to send their husbands and sons to the front, to receive briefly-worded notifications of their deaths, to turn over the soil in spring by themselves without the men and to sow grain, to save their children. Preserving four or five children in wartime, preserving your family that is a feat, too.
I have included their stories in this book because, although they were not combatants, the women I spoke to describe themselves as soldiers' wives. That is how great our army was!
"Everyone helped the partisans as best as he or she could. What were we women capable of with a house full of children? We could give people something to eat and wash their clothes for them. The Germans burnt our homes and stripped us hare. When people came out of the forest there was nothing. Only the tomcats stayed around. What did we eat? In summer I used to gather berries and mushrooms. I had a house full of children, after all...
"When the war was over we went into the collective farm. I reaped and scythed and threshed. My mother used to say that when she died, she didn't know what would happen to her soul, but her hands would surely have a good rest. We worked terribly hard. My daughter was ten years old and she reaped with me. The team leader came to see how such a little thing could fulfil her quota before the end of the day. We would reap and reap and the sun would go down behind the trees, but we wanted it to rise. The days weren't long enough for us to cope with all the work by ourselves, without the men the work on the farm and at home, We were producing twice the quota on the collective farm. Even now, when the learn leader asks, I go and help.
"After the war all that was left in my hut were children and an embroidered towel on the icon. We were stripped quite bare. It was only when my daughter went to school that I bought her her first pair of shoes. She used to go to bed in them, she was so reluctant to take them off. That was how we lived!"
One woman burst into tears; another said:

"There was a rumour that Soviet prisoners of war had been taken to the local town and if you recognized one of your own you could collect him. The women rushed off! In the evening they came back, some with relatives, some with strangers, and they told stories you wouldn't credit: people were rotting alive,they said, dying of hunger. I hurried off, too, the next day. I didn't find a relative so, I thought, I'll save someone's son. I chose one dark-hatred fellow, Sashko his name was, like my little grandson now. He was about eighteen years old. I gave a German some pork fat and swore that he was my brother. When we got home he couldn't even eat an egg, he was so weak. They hadn't been with us a month when a louse came up, He was someone like the rest of us, married with two children... He went to the commandant's and declared that we had taken strangers into our houses. The next day the Germans came on motorcycles. We wept and went clown on our knees, hut they deceived us, saying that they would take the men back to their homes. I gave Sashko grandfather's suit and three of my dresses... I thought that he would live, that he would reach his home.

"But they were taken out of the village and all of them were mown down by sub-machine guns. If we had known that they would be shot we would have hidden them in the forest, maybe we and our children would have been killed, but wo would have saved them. They were so young, after all, and nice! We decided, the nine of us they had been staying with, to bury them. Five of us pulled them out of the pit while the other four were looking around to see that the Germans didn't come tin us. You couldn't use your hands: it was very hot and they had been lying there four days ... we were afraid of cutting them with spades too... We put them on planks and dragged them... We took water with us and covered our noses... So as not to fall down unconscious ourselves... We dug a single grave in the forest and placed them in a row and covered their heads and feet with sheets.

"We were so upset and sty wept for them for a whole year. And each of us thought: where is my husband or my son?"

They remember their husbands as young fellows sty, for all that has been left them is their youthful photographs. And the children who look like them.

"My husband was good and kind. We had only a year arid a half together. When he went away I was with a baby coming. But he couldn't wait for his daughter to be born. I gave birth without him. He went away in summer and I was expecting her in autumn.

"I still had her at my breast: she was not a year old yet. I was sitting on the bed, feeding her... There was a tap at the window: "Lena, a letter"s come... About your husband...' (The village women did not let the postman deliver the tragic letter; they brought the news themselves.) And as soon as I stood up, holding my daughter at my breast, the milk rushed out of me, right on to the ground. My daughter was frightened and started howling, It was on Palm Saturday that they told me. In April, the sun was already bright. The letter said that my Ivan had been killed in Poland. His grave was near Gdansk... He was killed on March 17, 1945. I shall not forget that day until my death. We were already looking forward to victory, our men should start coming home soon.

"My daughter fell sick after being frightened and was like that until she went to school. She was ill if the door banged, she was ill if you left her alone while you went to feed the cow. I had so much trouble with her. I didn't see the sun for seven years, perhaps, it didn't shine on me.

"Victory, they said! The men started to come home. But more of them stayed there than came home. My brother Yuzik was the first to return it's true, he was crippled. He had a little girl, just like mine. Four years old, then five... My daughter used to visit them, but once she

came home and cried: "I won"t go to see their: any more.' "What are you crying for?" I asked. "Olechka"s daddy (their daughter's name was Olechka) takes her on his knee and is sorry for her. But I don't have a daddy. I only have a mummy.' By then the two of us were crying... She came running inside and said to me: "Shall I play at home? Otherwise daddy will come and I"ll be with the other children outside and he won't recognize me. After all, he hasn't seen me...' I couldn't get her to go outside with the other children. She sat at borne for days on end. Waiting for her daddy. But her daddy did not return..."
Each woman told of her own experiences, yet each story was similar.
"My man cried terribly when he left for the war, he was so sorry to leave his little children. They were so small that they didn't even know that they had a daddy. And all of them were hoys. I was sty carrying the smallest in my arms. My husband picked hint up. I ran along behind him and they were already shouting: "Form up in l-i-ine!" But he couldn't let him go. He lined up, still with hint ... A military man shouted at him, but he couldn't let the child out of his arms. The children and I ran after him even when he had left the village behind, ran on for five kilometres or so. And the other village women along with us. My children had no strength left and I could barely carry the little one. Volodya, that's my husband, turned round arid I ran and ran... Perhaps I was the very last woman still there... I had left the children somewhere on the road... I was running with just the little one...
"A year later a paper came saying that my husband, Vladimir Grigorovich, had been killed in Germany, on the approaches to Berlin itself. I didn't even see his grave. A neighbour came back in one piece, another without a leg. I was seized by such regret: if only my man had returned, too, even without legs, but alive. I would have carried him in my arms...
"It isn't just my heart is heavy, but my arms are heavy, too, when I remember. I was left with three sons, small boys too young to look after each other. I carried sheaves of corn on my back and wood from the forest, potatoes and hay... All by myself... I pulled the plough myself and drew the harrow, too. Well, what of its! Our village suffered a lot in the war. In every other hut or so there was a widow or a soldier's wife. We were left without men. Without horses they were taken for the army, too. And after the war, to tell you the truth, the village women took the place of men and horses. Everything was on her back. I was even among the front-rank workers. I was given two certificates for good work and once I was given ten metres of calico, That was a real windfall! I made shirts for all three of my boys.
"Those three sons were all I had, all that was left of him. My sons are grown up now, already bringing up their own children my grandchildren. One grandson is serving in the army. I thank the state for the fact that I remained alive and was able to save my children. Had it not been for other people and the state, I wouldn't have been able to save them, would I ? We would have had in beg. Instead . thanks to God and our government, they are all well and all have fine jobs. The only thing I want is for there to be no war. I've lost my health, out I still keep a cow. And if they said to me: "Hand over your cow and there will be no war," I'd hand it over to make sure that my children didn't have to go through what I did!"
How much woman's pain and woman's grief, remains unexpressed. Sometimes there seems to be inure of this in the world than joy. But when women can sit and wait for their grandchildren to visit thorn I know that is not true.
"I look through the window and I seem to see him sitting there... My dear son... Those sons who came back have children of their own now. But to me Vladychek, even though he was older than them, seems a lad

even now. The way he was when I sent him off. I grieve for him most..."
"How is a woman supposed to live by herself? A man comes and maybe he'll help and maybe he won't, it's all the same. You're a widow, after all. Everyone will talk about it.,."
"May 9, Victory Day. My neighbour Vasil came with his medals and other decorations. People were greeting him and the chairman of the collective farm seated hint beside himself on the podium. But my Ivan and my son one of them was lying in Romania, the other near Voronezh. So wasn't it my day as well?
"I wouldn't say ..., it's true, We get some attention, too, now an anniversary postcard and invitations to buy goods at the shop..."
"Well, we brought up our children anyway, even without men to help us. Good children. Workers. And lived to see our grandchildren. If Ivan could have seen his five grandchildren. Sometimes I'll stand by his portrait and show hint photographs of them. I'll talk to him. Tell him about things,..
And none of the women forgot to say at the end: "In our village there's a soldier's wife in every second or third house. There were many of us after the war..."
The next two stories those of Fekla Fyodorovna Strui and Sofia Mironovna Vereshchak are always linked in my memory, although I recorded them at different times, and Fekla Fyodorovna lives in Disna in the Vitebsk region, while Sofia Mironovna lives in Kiev. But when I recall one woman, the face of the other immediately comes to mind, too. Two lives that seem like one.
...I went to Disna to see Fekla Fyodorovna Strui, a partisan in the Vileika district, with an introductory letter from the poetess Eda Semyonovna Ognetsvet. "Alexei Meresyev's fate... Except that it befell a woman and is therefore more dramatic," she said as she gave me the letter.
The village boys, as usual better informed than anyone else, led me through Disna's maze of streets, in a hurry to tell me everything they knew and each interrupting the others:
"Auntie Fekla has a medal."
"No, an Order. Daddy said so."
"My Mum has had a quarrel with them. Their chickens pecked our cucumbers..."
"That's their house. Tote tallest one.,."
I already knew that guests were not met at the door in this house. You had to open the door yourself, put your bag down, take off your coat and go inside. The Strut sisters, Fekla Fyodorovna and Olga Fyodorovna, live alone and both are in very poor health.
I opened the door, put down my bag and took off my coat, Inside, both old ladies were wearing their best jackets: "We already knew that a journalist had come. A neighbour's boy told us..."
But just how had ho had tinted
Fekla Fyodorovna Strui, partisan:
"I was wounded in the legs and lost consciousness. It was intensely cold and when I came to, my hands had been frost-bitten. I've good, healthy hands now, but then they were black, because I had been crawling and they were wet. My legs were frost-bitten, too, of course. If it hadn't been so cold my legs might have been saved, but they were covered with blood and I lay unconscious for a long time. I was put with the other wounded. Many of us were taken to the same gathering place and then the Germans surrounded us again. A blockade.., We were piled on sledges like logs. There was no time for more gentle treatment, we had to be taken deeper into the forest. We were carried farther and farther like that, and then they informed Moscow that I had been wounded. I was a deputy of the Supreme Soviet, you see."
"Both your legs were wounded?"

"Yes, both. I've artificial ones now. My legs were taken off right there in the forest. The operation took place in the most primitive conditions. I was put on a table to be operated on, there wasn't even any iodine and my legs were sawn off with an ordinary saw, both legs... When I was put on the table there was no iodine... They sent to another detachment, six kilometres away, for iodine while I lay on the table There was no anaesthetic. The operation was performed without anaesthetic, without anything.
"Moscow was requested by radio to send an aircraft. A plane came three times and circled overhead, but could not land. It was fired on from all sides. The fourth time It landed, but both my legs had already been amputated. Then reamputations were performed four times in Ivanovo and Tashkent and gangrene set in again four times. Both legs were cut off piece by piece, very high up. I cried until I wore myself out as I imagined myself crawling. I wouldn't be able to walk, just crawl. I don't know myself what helped me, how I endured those first years. Of course, kind people helped. I met many good people. There was a surgeon who didn't have any legs cither. The other doctors told me that he used to say: "I take my hat off to her. I have operated on so many men, but I have never seen anyone like her..."
"Then I came home to Disna. Just imagine, I didn't even have a month's recuperation before I started work."
"But what about your legs?"
"I came home with artificial legs. I walk badly now, because I've grown old, but I used to run about the town then, on foot everywhere. I drove to the collective farms. I was deputy chairman of the district executive committee. Who would have needed me if I had sat in an office?"
"How did you do your work?"
" If people made allowances for me I even got offended. Chairmen of collective farms weren't so well educated then as they are now, and If some important campaign was to be carried out people were sent from the district centre. We were called to the district committee on Mondays and sent off here, there and everywhere, I would sit looking through the window in the morning and sec everyone trooping past to the district Party committee, but I hadn't been telephoned. And it would be painful somehow, for I wanted to he like everyone else.
"Then the telephone would ring and it would be the First Secretary: "Fekla Fyodorovna, come to the office". How pleased I was then, although it was very, very difficult to drive round the villages. I would be sent as far as twenty or thirty kilometres away to places to which you sometimes had to walk to. I would be walking somewhere in the forest and fall down and not be able to get up. I would put down my bag to have something to lean on or catch hold of a tree, get up and go on. I was getting a pension and could have lived for myself alone. But I couldn't sit at home, I wanted to be useful. I wanted to be like everyone else. My sister and I live together... The house was built for us. .."
"It's a fine house. Spacious and tall. I haven't seen houses with such high ceilings before,.."
"No." Fekla Fyodorovna took me by the hand. "It seems so tall to you because there are no children in it..."
I left that large house with a feeling of guilt: here was a person about whom books should be written and songs sung, yet we have heard nothing of her. And such people are legion. How much history there is beside us, not yet felt or realized as History.
...Ukrainian as well as Byelorussian blood flows in my veins. Perhaps that is why I feel an ache in my heart when I smell Kiev chestnuts. It was just such a young chestnut that my mother brought home and planted one day by our house in Polesye. Now, when Sofia Mironovna Vereshchak writes to me, she calls me "my dear daughter".

It is memory which links our lives.
"I cannot tell you about the war and nothing else," Sofia Mironovna warned me at once. "I cannot talk about my war experiences without talking about my childhood and youth, my family and school, too. The whole of my life..."
Sofia Mironovna Vereshchak fought in the heroic Zhitomir underground and survived SD dungeons by a miracle. Here is her own story of her life:
"I think that the very air we breathed before the war made us what we later proved ourselves to ho. At my final interrogation by the SD, after which I was listed for the third time among those to he shot, lire third investigator in succession, who said that he had been educated as an historian, made me explain why we are what we are and why our ideas are so important to us. Life is above any idea, he said. I didn't agree with him, of course, and ho shouted and beat me. "What is it? What makes you like this? Makes you die? Why do Communists think that communism must triumph throughout the world?" he asked. He spoke excellent Russian.
"I decided to tell hint everything. I knew that they would kill me anyway, so at least it would not be in vain: let him know that we were strong. He questioned me for about four hours and I replied as best I could, with the knowledge of social science and economics I had been able to acquire before then at school and university. Oh, how he reacted to this! He grabbed at his head, ran around the room, stopped like a man transfixed and stared and stared at me, but for the first time he did not beat me..."
One can imagine that moral duel: the prisoner, beaten "half my hair had been torn out before that I had had two thick plaits" and half-starved "at first I wanted at least a tiny piece of bread, then, well, a crust, at least, then at least crumbs", and the strong, well-fed man, a convinced Nazi. Yet something, nevertheless, made him ask: well, who are you, then? No, he had riot become frightened yet, it was still only 1943. But already he felt something, some kind of danger. He wanted to know what it was. She told him, He listened and even stopped beating her. But when she wont out of the room he added her name to the list of those to be shot.,.
"The happiest day in my life was when my father and mother, having left our home several dozen kilometres behind, decided to return. I knew that we would fight. We thought that victory would come so soon. The first thing that we did was to find the wounded and save them. They were in the fields, on the street, in the gutters, or they would crawl into someone's cow-shed.
"I think that I was never so happy as I was during those days. I found my parents. Previously I had thought that dad was far removed from politics. In fact he was a Bolshevik by conviction, although he was not a member of the Party. Mum was a peasant woman with little education, who believed in God and prayed all through the war. But how? She would fall on her knees in front of the icon and say: "Save the people, save the Communist Party from that Herod Hitler". Every day during my interrogation by the SO I expected the door to open and my parents to come in. Mum and dad... I knew where I was and I was happy that I had betrayed no one. We feared betraying others more than death. It was only when I was arrested and taken away that I understood what that meant and became frightened for the first time during the entire occupation: would I be able to hold out? I realised that the horror was upon me, the time of torment.
"Unfortunately, I remember too little of my first interrogation. I did not lose consciousness. I passed out only once, when my arms were twisted with a kind of wheel. I don't think that I cried out, although I had been shown how others did. During the interrogations that followed I lost the feeling of pain as my body turned to wood. Only

when it was all over and I was hack in my cell did I feel that I had become one great wound. But I had to endure. Endure! So that mum should know that I had died a human being, without betraying anyone. Mum!

"They undressed me, beat me, hung me up. Photographed me. I was conscious of pain when they photographed me. It was strange, I felt physical pain, Yet before that, I might have been made of wood. You can only cover your breasts with your hands... I saw how people went out of their minds. How little Kolya, who was not a year old we had been teaching him to say "mummy" understood when he was taken away from his mother that he was losing her and shouted for the first time in his life "Mummy!" That wasn't just a word, only a child could have made a sound like that.

"I cannot talk about this, I'm always ill afterwards. People say to me: "Stay at home. Why do you go to the schools, then? Take care of yourself . Who gave me the right to spare myself when those I knew are gone? Little Kolya is gone and his young mother. Oh, what people I met there! They wore dying in the cellars of the SD and often only the wails knew of their courage. Now, forty years later, I go down on my knees before them in my mind. "Dying is the easiest thing of all," they said. But living... If, before that, someone had told me that I would bear everything I did, I would not have believed him.

"Young people today are afraid of emotion and high-flown words. We weren't afraid. I had strength of will, people say, that was why I endured. No! I had the strength of my convictions! We believed, believed firmly that victory over the enemy would come and doubted only one thing would we live to see that great day?

"There was a little window in our cell, or rather a hole; someone had to give you a boost for you to be able to see and not even a little piece of the sky at that, but a little piece of roof. We were all so weak that we could not push each other up. But here was a girl called Anya in the cell, a parachutist. She had been captured after jumping from an aeroplane. And she suddenly asked, all bloody after a beating: "Push me up, I"ll look out... I want to be out there, that's all'.

"When we had all lifted her up, she said: "Girls, there"s a flower there...' Then everyone wanted her turn: "Me, too..." "And me..." And somehow we found the strength to help each other. The flower was a dandelion, how it had been carried to that roof and how it had survived there, I don't know. We began watching it every morning. And each of us made a wish. I now think that each of us was wishing that she would come out of that hell alive.

"When Anna was taken away for the last time, early in the morning, when there wore no interrogations and everyone knew that it was the end, the firing squad, all she asked was: "Get some water, girls. Water the flower..."

It is difficult for Sofia Mironovna to talk for long. "Perhaps I could snake it shorter?" she asks. It isn't possible. And she herself cannot make it shorter. I am conscious of how the thought that only the tiniest, least significant part of what she has experienced can be conveyed is causing tier pain. She even seems to be no longer with me but there, in the past, to be speaking to herself, to her own memory.

"I think it is important to tell you about the natural background against which all this took place. For some reason I have remembered that very well. Throughout the occupation the sky was different, heavy, leaden, lowering over the land. You wanted to do something to make the sun break through, at least in one place, to make the sky lighter, I loved spring so much. I loved it when the cherry trees flowered and there was the scent of lilacs perfume around the lilacs bushes... Don't be surprised by my way of speaking. I used to write

poetry. But I don't like spring now. The war came between us, between me and nature. When the cherry trees flowered I saw the Nazis in my borne town of Zhitomir...

"I remained alive by a miracle, saved by people who respected my father. He was a doctor and in those times that meant a great deal. I was brought home covered in wounds and immediately broke out in a nervous eczema I could not bear my parents' voices. I shouted all the time and was silent only when I lay in hot water. I wouldn't let mum leave me for a moment. She would beg: "But, daughter, I must see to the stove, I must go to the vegetable garden..." I didn't let her go. As soon as she left me, everything came flooding back. Everything that had happened to me. She brought me flowers in order somehow to distract me. It didn't make any difference... Mum kept the dress I were when I was in the hands of the SO with her. She didn't trust anyone with it. When she was dying she kept it under her pillow. To the moment of her death...

"I got up for the first time when I saw our soldiers. Suddenly, after more than a year in bed, I was up and ran outside: "My dear boys! My darlings..." The soldiers carried me into our house in their arms. The next day and the day after I ran to the military registration and enlistment office overflowing with enthusiasm: "Give me a job!" My father was told and he came for me: "Child, how did you get here? Who helped you?" My strength lasted for a few days. Then the pains began again. I shouted for days on end. "Lord, either take her soul or end her torment..." people passing by would ask.

"I was saved by the medicinal muds of Tshkhaltubo. And by the desire lo live. To live, live and nothing else. I was still alive and I lived like everyone else... For fourteen years I worked in the central library of the Academy of Sciences. They were very happy years, the happiest in my life. Now life has turned into an unremitting battle with illness. Say what you like, old age is a miserable thing. Not to mention illness. And loneliness. The long sleepless nights... So many years have passed, but the most terrible dream I have, which makes me wake up in a cold sweat, is that I can't remember Anna's surname... I can't remember whether she came from the Bryansk or Smolensk region. How she didn't want to die! She would put her plump white hands behind her head and shout through the bars over the window: "I want to live!" And I cannot find her parents and tell them her last words. It seems to me that I have an eternal debt to pay."

I heard the same words in the Polotsk region. The feeling of one person being indebted to another and to memory.

Private Klara Vasilyevna Goncharova, anti-aircraft gunner:

"After the war I wont to a village to sign up subscribers to the state loan. People were living in dug-outs. You arrived and there was no village there, everyone was living in the ground... A woman canoe out and it was terrible to see how she was dressed. I went into a dug-out and three children were sitting there, all of them hungry. She was crushing something for them in a mortar, grass of seine kind.

" "Have you come to sign up subscribers to the loan?" she asked.

" "Yes," I said.

" "I have no money, but I have a chicken. Alt go and see my neighbour she asked about it yesterday, if she buys it I"ll give you the money.'

"I'm telling you about this today and still I have a lump in my throat. Her husband had been killed at the front, she had been left with three children and she had nothing at all, just that one chicken, and she was going to sell it in order to give the money to me. We were collecting cash then. She was ready to give it all just so that there should ho peace and that her children should remain alive, I cannot talk about this. .. I was at the front, but I felt myself indebted to that woman, I remember her face. And those of all her children..."

Great are our human debts for those tiny potatoes and that last chicken.

"MUM, WHAT IS DAD?"

A separate story is needed for mothers, although to call what I have heard and recorded "stories" is, no doubt, wrong. They are not stories: at least, they are more than just stories and reminiscences. They are a living feeling, living pain and living memory, especially when told by a mother herself or when a mother is recalled.

Was the story I heard in her small flat from Lyubov Igorevna Rudkovskaya, a partisan in the Second Minsk Brigade of the Kutuzov detachment, not a wound that was still open and throbbing?

"I ran, there were several of us running. The machineguns were already aimed at my mother. But she could see us running... I heard her voice shouting. Afterwards people told me what she had shouted. "It"s good that you put on a white dress and white shoes,' she cried. "There will he no one to dress you later..." She was sure that I would be killed and was happy that I would lie all in white... It was so quiet; for some reason no one was firing. All you could hear was mum shouting. But perhaps there was shooting? I don't remember... I only remember mum's voice...

"During the war our entire faintly was killed. When the war ended I had no one to wait for."

On another occasion a calm, smiling woman with a short, youthful haircut came into my office "till the notes she had made during the war. Having no idea how dramatic her story would be, I wanted to begin our conversation right there.

"No," she requested, "let's go somewhere we can talk in private."

We went to the park.

"I haven't written about this, but I would like to describe it."

"What have you written about then?"

"The military actions of our partisan detachment."

"And what do you want to talk about?"

"How I lived during the war with two small children..."

Here, then, is the story of Raisa Grigoryevna Khasenevich, partisan in the V.T.Yoronyansky People's Avengers Brigade.

"The bombing of Minsk began. I ran to the kindergarten to collect my son; my daughter was in the country. She was just two and in a creche and the creche had been moved to the country. I decided to collect my son and take him home and then go for her. I wanted to collect them both as quickly as possible, so that the children would be with me.

"As I approached the kindergarten aircraft were over the city and bombs were falling somewhere, I could hear my son's voice; he wasn't quite four. "Don"t be afraid, mum said that they will be gnashed..."

"I looked in at the gate. There were about five children and he was trying to calm them. But when he saw me he began to tremble and cry and I could see that he was terribly afraid.

"I brought him home and asked my mother-in-law to keep an eye on him while I went for my daughter. When I arrived at the place where the creche was supposed to be, no one was there. One of the villagers told me that the children had been taken away. Where to? Who had taken them? Probably to the town, the people said. There had been two teachers with them, but they had had no transport and had left on foot . They were not far out of town fifteen or twenty kilometres. On the other hand, the children were very small one or two years of age... I searched for two weeks.., When I went into a house and was told that this was the creche I was looking for and these the children I did not believe it. They were lying excuse me in their excrement, with high temperatures. They looked like the dead. The head of the creche, a very young woman, had turned grey. Apparently they had made the

entire journey from the country on foot, children had become lost on the way and many had died....
"I walked among them, unable to recognize my daughter. The head of the creache calmed me:
" "Don"t despair, look for her, She must be here. I remember her...'
"I recognized my Elochka by her bootee alone ... otherwise I should never have found her...
"Then our house turned down... We were left on the street, with what we stood up in. By then German units had already entered the city. We had nowhere to go and for several days the children and I walked about the streets until I met Tamara Sergeyevna Sinitsa, whom I had known slightly before the war. She listened to my story and said:
" "Come to my house."
" "My children have whooping cough. How can I do that?"
"She had small children, too, and they could stave been infected. And those were days when there were neither doctors nor medicines. Nothing.,. Nothing...
" "Never mind, come along."
"Is it possible to forget something like that? They shared their last scraps with us. I made my son some trousers from an old skirt in order to have something to give him for his birthday..."
One might think that all of mother's energies would he devoted to her small children four-year-old Lenya and two-year-old Elochka in the conditions of an occupied city. And who would have blamed her had saving them been her only thought? Only she herself had any right to pass judgement. But as soon as contacts had been established and the opportunity presented itself, Raisa Grigoryevna began to take part in underground work. Because her son was at least a little older and easier to look after, she left him with her mother-in-law, who set one condition: "I shall take my grandson, but you must never come to the house again. Because of you we shall be killed, too..." For three years the mother did not see her son. When the SD (security police) picked up her trail, she took her daughter with her to the partisans:
"I carried her in my arms for fifty kilometres..."
"Was your daughter with you all the time in the partisans?" I asked Raisa Grigoryevna.
"She was with me more than a year. I often wonder how we survived it. How did I, a woman, bear it? I don't know... If you ask me I shan't be able to tell you. My dear, it is impossible to endure something like that. Even today my teeth chatter when I hear the words "partisan blockade".
"What it took to survive just May and June 1943? I was sent then to the Borisov partisan area with a typewriter. They had a typewriter with a Cyrillic keyboard, but they needed one with a German keyboard and we had the only one. I had brought this typewriter with me from occupied Minsk at the instructions of the underground committee. A few days after I reached Lake Palik the blockade began. That has what I had got myself into...
"I hadn't come alone, either, I had brought my daughter. When I went away on a mission for a day or two I used to leave her with strangers, but there was no one I could leave her with for longer periods. So, of course, I took her with me. And the two of us were caught in the blockade... The men took nothing more than a rifle with them, but I carried a rifle, a typewriter and Elochka, As we marched I would stumble and she would fly over my shoulders into a swamp. A little further and she was flying through the air again... That went on for two months! I swore to myself that if I survived I would live a thousand kilometres from the swamp I couldn't bear to see it any more.
" "I know why you don"t lie down when there is shooting. You want my head to be blown off together with yours,..'

"A four-year-old said that to me. But I didn't have the strength to lie down, and if I had, I wouldn't have got up again.
"Sometimes the partisans took pity on one. "That"s enough,.. Let us carry your daughter.'
"But I wouldn't trust anyone. There might be a sudden burst of fire and she could be killed without my seeing what had happened. Or she might he lost in the blinking of an eye.
"I was met once by Lopatin, the Brigade Commander.
" "Well, here"s a woman for you!' he said, staggered. "To carry a child with her in these conditions and not to abandon her typewriter! Not every man could have done that."
"He took Elochka in his arms, bugged and kissed her, then turned out all his prickets and gave her the crumbs. She washed them down with swamp water. The other partisans followed his example, turning out their pockets and giving her the crumbs they found.
"When we broke out of the blockade I was very ill. I was covered in boils, my skin was pooling off and I had a child in my arms... An aircraft was expected from behind Soviet lines and I had been told that, if it came, the most seriously wounded would be sent back and my Elochka could go. I can remember the moment I sent her away. The wounded, those who had arms left, reached out for her: "Elochka, come to me... Come to me... There"s room...' They all knew her. In the hospital she had sung to them: "Oh, if only I live to the day of my wedding"...
" "Who are you with, my girl?" the pilot asked.
" "With mummy. She"s over there, on the ground...'
" "Call mummy so that she can come with us."
" "No, mummy can"t come. She has to fight the fascists.'
"That was what our children were like. I looked at her little face and my throat tightened would I ever see her again?'
"I'd like to tell you, too, how my son and I were reunited. It was after the liberation. As I walked to the house where my husband's parents lived my legs were like cotton wool... Other women in the detachment who were a little older than me had warned:
" "When you see him, don"t let him know straightaway that you're his mother whatever you do. Can you imagine what he has gone through?'
"A neighbour's little girl came running up:
" "Oh, it"s Lenya's mummy. Lenya's alive...'
"My legs would carry me no further: my son was alive. She told me that my husband's parents had died of typhus and Lenya had been taken in by a neighbour.
"I went into the yard of their house. What was I wearing? A German field-shirt, a darned black skirt and an old pair of boots, My neighbour recognized me immediately, but kept silent, My son was sitting there, barefoot and ragged.
" "What is your name, my boy?" I asked.
" "Lenya..."
" "And who do you live with?"
" "I used to live with granny and grandpa. When they died I buried them. I used to visit them every day and ask them to take me into the grave. It was cold at home and there was nothing to cat. I was afraid of sleeping alone..."
" "But where are your daddy and mummy?"
" "My daddy is alive, he"s at the front. But mummy was killed by the fascists. That was what granny said...'
"There were two partisans with me, men who had buried their own comrades. As they listened they wept.
"At this point I could hear it no longer.
" "Why don"t you recognize your own mother?'
" "Mummy!!!"

"He uttered such a cry. Dissolved in such a flood of tears... For a month he would not let me go anywhere, even to work. I took him with me. It was not enough for him to see me, to know that I was nearby, he had to hold on to me. When we sat down to eat, he would hold on to me with one hand and eat with the other.

"My mother was no longer alive: she had been boned alive by the Germans. She didn't even have a grave. There are many flowers by my house now, but one corner is enclosed by bushes lilacs, hawthorn, small white roses. In memory of my mother... She must have her piece of land somewhere, after all.

"When my husband and I were reunited a week wasn't long enough for me to tell him everything. I kept telling him day and night..."

The great heart of a mother! Sometimes we think we know everything about your courage and your love, your patience and your tenderness, your sorrow and your faith, your tears and your joys. No, we know nothing about you, for you are infinite.

From the story of Larissa Leontyevna Korotkaya, a partisan:

"...There were often partisan burials. A group would be ambushed or people would be killed in battle... I shall tell you about one funeral...

"A very hard-fought battle had taken place. We had suffered heavy losses and I, too, had been wounded. Then, after the battle, came the funeral. Speeches by the graveside were usually short. The commanders spoke first. But a local boy was among the dead and his mother had come to the funeral. She began to wail:

" "Oh, my son! We built you a house!.. And you said you would bring us a bride! But now your bride is the earth..."

"The unit stood there, everyone remained silent and no one tried to stop her. Then she raised her head and saw that it was not only her son who had been killed, that many other young men were lying there, and she began to weep for them, the sons of others:

" "You are all my beloved sons! Your mothers do not see you, they do not know that you are being laid to earth! So I shall lament for you all..."

"And as soon as she said: "I shall lament for you all", the men burst into tears. All of us lost control... The unit wept... Then the commander shouted: "Honour guard! Fire!" And the shots drowned everything out.

"What struck me I still think about it even now was the greatness of heart of a mother. While she was suffering such great grief, at the moment when her son was being buried, her heart was big enough to mourn the sons of others, too.. "

From the story of Vera Iosifovna Vitushka, secretary of the Zaslavsk underground Party district committee:

"...There were many tears in that war mothers' tears more than any others..."

And this must not be forgotten in view of what our people was fighting for, against whom and how terrible that war was twenty million human lives long. What statistics can calculate the number of souls wounded by the war? Or reveal how the war robbed women of maternal happiness, everyday maternal joys and feelings? Mothers went to the front or to partisan units and their children grew up with their grandmothers or among strangers.

Mothers have their own account with the war. A special account.

Maria Vasilyevna Pavlovets, professor of neuropathology at the 9 Minsk hospital and a partisan doctor during the war, reminisces:

"I arrived at the village. Children were playing by our house and I looked at them and thought: "But which of them is mine?" They all looked the same, their heads shorn, as sheep used to co, in strips. I didn't recognize my own daughter and asked which of the children was Lusya. As I looked at them one of the tots, who was wearing a long

shirt, picked herself up and ran to the house. It was difficult to distinguish between boys and girls, since they were all dressed like that. I asked again:
" "Which of you is Lusya, then?"
"They pointed at the one who had run off. And I realized that she was my daughter.
"After a minute or so granny my mother's mother, that is led her towards me.
" "Come on, come on... We"ll give this mummy a telling-off now for leaving us...'
"I was wearing man's uniform and a forage cap and was sitting on horseback. Of course, she had imagined her mother to be like granny and the other women. And now a soldier had come.
"For a long time she was afraid to let me hug her. It was painful, out there was no getting round it: I hadn't brought her up-she had grown up with others.
"I had brought soap with me and when I began to wash her she bit it with her teeth; she wanted to eat it. That was how they lived. I remembered my mother as a young woman, but I was met by an old lady. She was told that her daughter had come and dashed out of the kitchen garden into the road. When she saw me, she stretched out her arms and ran. And I recognized her and ran towards her. When she was a few steps short of me she fell, all strength spent. I fell beside her, kissing my mother and kissing the ground. I felt such hatred towards the fascists for everything ... and for this, too. I remembered how a wounded German lay, his hands scrabbling at the ground with pain, and one of our soldiers went up to him: "Don't touch it, that's my land! Yours is there, where you came from...'
Guards Lieutenant Antonina Grigoryevna Bondareva, senior pilot:
"Before the war I married and had a daughter. The war broke out. My husband was a pilot; he was killed near Moscow. As soon as I was notified of his death I began requesting to be sent lo the front. Now that he was dead I felt that it was up to me to defend my daughter that was the way I thought. Somehow, I remember, I was quickly enlisted. I was enlisted in the 125th Borisov Bomber Regiment.
"I left my daughter with my mother-in-law, but she soon died. My husband had a sister and she took the little girl. However, after the war, when I was demobilized, she didn't want lo give my daughter back. She said something about its being impossible that I should have a daughter since I had abandoned the child to go and fight. How could a mother abandon her chid and such a little one at that? When I returned from the war my daughter was already seven years old; she had been three when I left her. A grown-up girl met me. She was small: she hadn't had enough to eat and hadn't slept enough. There had coon a military hospital nearby and she had gone there to sing and dance and had been given bread. She told me about this later... They hadn't had an easy time."
"And you felt that you were to blame?"
"No, I didn't... I often remembered my daughter at the front, I didn't forget her for a moment, I dreamed about her. I missed her a lot, But I didn't resent my sister-in-law's action. I tried to understand her. She had loved her brother very much; he was a strong, handsome than and It was impossible to believe that a person like that could be killed. She did not want to give up what remained of him. And she was one of those women for whom children and the family are most important in life. Bombs fell and bullets flew, but her only thought was that the child had not been barbed. I can't condemn her..."
"Did she try to understand you? How hard it had been for you?"
"No. She said that I was cruel, that I wasn't even a woman. I cried a lot. I even looked into my own heart perhaps I really was the iron woman she accused me of being. But I couldn't find anything like that

in myself. After all, we had suffered a great deal during the war, deprived of home, family, children. Many women, not just me, had left their children at home. We used to sit under a parachute, watting for the next mission. The men smoked and played dominoes, but we would sit and embroider handkerchiefs while we waited for the signal to take off. We remained women. Take my navigator, for example. She wanted to send a photograph home, so one of us who had a scarf tied it so that her shoulder straps were hidden, while we concealed her field shirt with a blanket, She looked as if she was in a dress... And that was how she had her photograph taken. It was her favourite photograph . . .

"We wanted so much to be feminine, to be good mothers..."

Another meeting and another story...

...Autumn rain was pouring down so heavily on the narrow streets of the district centre of Berezino that it took, not the fifteen minutes I had been told I would need to reach my destination, but more than an hour. I had to skirt a lake which had overflowed its banks, a factory that was small, but noisily puffed out clouds of black smoke, and the gleaning helmets of two brand new forage silos.

Lyubov Zakharovna Novik's house was large and divided, as people do in the country, into two parts. We sat in the parlour on a divan under family photographs and a little white cushion to which military medals were pinned : "Before May 9 I take them off and rub them so that they shine."

A cat climbed into my hostess' lap and snuggled up. The family cow butted its horns against the closed gates and my host went to let it in. The dog rattled its chain...

But we were there to talk about the war. Lyubov Zakharovna had not expected me and was not prepared, but she remembered everything, "held everything in her heart"

Lyubov Zakharovna Novik, medical orderly:

"We were on the offensive. A wounded man was losing blood from an artery. The blood spouted like a fountain I had never seen anything like it before so I rushed for a doctor. But the man himself shouted: "Hey, you! Where are you going? Make a tourniquet with a belt!" It was only then that I came to my senses..."

"Lyubov Zakharovna, what, of the entire war, do you remember best?"

"What is the most terrible thing I remember best? An eight-year-old lad losing his mummy. She was killed. It was terrible when soldiers died, but when mothers were killed, when they died in front of their children... The child sitting on the road beside his dead mother... He hadn't realized that she was no longer alive; he was waiting for her to wake up and was asking for food. I leave never seen anything more terrible than that.

"Our commander did not let that boy go, but took him under his wing. So he stayed with us, like a son of the regiment."

Her most intimate secret she told me almost in a whisper:

"When you go, my husband will have something to say. tie doesn't like me talking like this. He didn't serve in the war, he was too young, younger than me. We have no children. I remember that lad all the time. Ho could have been my son,..

"After the war I felt pity for everyone. A cockerel's neck was wrung and I pitied it. A wild hoar was stuck and squealing and I pitied it. I pity lame dogs and cats and pick them all up... Somehow I couldn't bear some other man's pain. I worked in a hospital and the patients loved me because I was so kind."

Lyubov Zakharovna showered me with apples to take home.

"I never sell them. I haven't sold a single apple era single berry. I just give them away-give them to people..,"

In many homes I record two stories simultaneously those of a mother and of her daughter, grown-up now, but who was then, in wartime, a

little girl. Often the child's memory has illuminated events in a completely unexpected way. Here is one of those stories, told me by Lyudmila Mikhailovna Kashichkina, member of the Minsk underground and later a participant in the French Resistance, and her daughter Natasha, now Natalia Konstantinovna.

Lyudmila Mikhailovna:

"Before the war I was a paediatrician. Children and more children... I was always with children... Then the war began and underground work. I was only 23 years old.

"Comrades would be seized and then there would be several days of agonizing waiting: would they hold out against torture or not? After a while we would learn that they were to be executed. You might be given the mission of going to see who was to be hanged today. When you walked along the street you saw the gallows already being prepared... It was impossible to weep or linger a moment more than necessary, for there were informers everywhere. Yet you had worked with this comrade, you had been friends... How much courage, how much spiritual strength was needed then to endure. And you knew that next day the same thing could await you.

"I knew what lay in store for me, but I became fully conscious of its implications when I was taken to SD (the security service). I was kicked and beaten with whips. I learned what a fascist "manicure" is. Your hands are put on a table and a device of some kind pushes needles under your nails... All your nails at the same time. The pain is indescribable. You lose consciousness immediately. I don't oven remember what happened next, I know that the pain was terrible, but I don't remember. I was stretched on beams. Perhaps that isn't quite correct, perhaps it's wrong. But I do remember that there was a beam here and another there and you were put between them... And there was some kind of machine, You heard your bones crunching and dislocating... Did it go on for long? I don't remember that, either... I was tortured in an electric chair... That was when I spat in the face of one of my torturers.... Young, old-I don't remember anything. They stripped me naked and this one approached and took hold of my breast... I was powerless... I could only spit... And I spat in his face. They put me in an electric chair...

"Since then I have been very sensitive to electricity. It begins to jerk you about like this, I remember... Now I can't even iron clothes... I've been like it all my life afterwards. When I begin to iron I feel the current over my whole body. I can't do anything that's connected with electricity... Perhaps I needed some kind of psychiotherapy after the war? I don't know. But I've lived the whole of my life like this (weeps).

"I don't know why I'm bursting into tears. I didn't cry then, If someone had said: cry, so that tears flowed, I wouldn't have been able to. Everything had dried up, it was as if ! was entirely made of wood. I would have never believed it if I hadn't endured it myself. There wasn't a single tear. And yet I had been beaten until my skin was in ribbons and I couldn't sit down until it had grown back. And not a single tear...

"I was sentenced to death by hanging and put in the death cell. There were two other women there. We didn't cry, you know, or panic: after all, we had known when we went Into the underground what lay in store for us and so we remained calm. We talked abeut poetry, remembered our favourite operas... We talked a lot about Anna Karenina*... We didn't so much as mention our children, we were afraid to do that. We even smiled and encouraged each other. In that way we spent two and a half days...

"On the morning of the third day I was summoned. We said goodbye and kissed each other without tears. There was no fear: evidently I was so used to the fought of death that I no longer felt afraid. And no

tears. Just a kind of emptiness. I was no longer thinking about anyone at all...
"We drove for a long time, I don't even remember how long: you see, I had already said goodbye to life... But when we stopped there were about twenty of us in the lorry we were in a camp. We couldn't climb down, we had been so badly tortured. We were thrown out on to the ground, like dead dogs, and the commandant ordered us to crawl to the barracks. We crawled and he beat us with a whip, so that we left bloody trails. The camp was about three hundred metres away. What else was left to us? But that wasn't the most terrible thing...
*Anna Karenina: central character of the eponymous novel by Lev Tolstoy.
"We saw that the prisoners had been divided into two groups. Those on the left were not touched, out those on the right were forced to strip naked. They threw their clothes into boxes, while those who had false gold teeth took them out and threw them into another box, and then they were being pushed into a gas wagon. And all this was happening before our eyes. Beside one barrack a woman was standing and feeding her child. And somehow, you know... The dogs and the guards, all of them froze and stood there without seizing her. She was the last ocrson left... The commandant saw this picture, saw that no one was touching her. He ran over, grabbed the child and right there, you know, against a tap... (weeps). I'm sorry, I'll finish in a moment... The blood and brains of this child were over the wall and he threw what was left of it into the gas wagon. He went up to the woman, began to tear her clothers off and suddenly noticed gold teeth in her mouth. He seized something hard and gave her such a blow ... and pulled out thc teeth as her blood flowed...
"Of course, you have read about this in books, but we saw it. Experienced it. Even now I cannot understand how people did not go out of their minds from what they saw, from what happened. The fascist commandant... From the psychiatrist's point of view he was probably a normal person, not a madman.
"...We were being taken to work once and had just started to get down when suddenly I heard a voice: "Mummy, Mummey" I saw Aunt pasha standing there and my daughter running from the pavement. By chance they had been walking along the street and had seen me. My daughter darted towards me and flung her arms round my neck. Imagine, the dogs there were trained specially to throw themselves on people, but not one moved. If you approached it would tear you to pieces, yet now not a single dog moved. My daughter threw herself at me, but I did not weep, only kept saying: "Daughter! Natashenka, don"t cry. I'll soon be home...' The guards stood there, and the dogs. And no one touched her...
"We were not taken to work after that, but were brought back to the camp. And that was the day an escape was to have been organized for me at work. So the plan failed..."
Natasha:
"When I was five years old I didn't know any poems. Aunt Dasha taught me prayers and I prayed that mummy and daddy would stay alive. I still have a fear of losing my mother. I have to ring her in the morning, I must say a couple of words to her: "How arc you feeling? Well?" And that's ail right... I put down the receiver and begin my day."
"And you do that every day?"
"If I don't ring or mum has gone somewhere I feel anxious inside all day, so anxious that I'm unable to concentrate on anything. In the evening, before going to bed, I ring her again, even though I'm over forty. I have to hear a word at least from her lips."
"Do you visit your mother often?"
"Every day, if I'm not on duty at the hospital. I'm a child psychiatrist a doctor, like my mother. My husband can't understand

this inner disquiet of mine and he used to be offended and jealous. He's reconciled himself to it now. He sees that it isn't a quirk, that it's the only way I can be.

"I dreamed of becoming a doctor while I was still a child. But I couldn't be a surgeon. I'm not afraid of blood, but cutting a living person for me that is associated with what I saw in the war: the wounds, the people torn to ribbons by dogs... Practicals at the institute cost me enormous effort..."

In 1944, on February 13, Lyudmila Mikhailovna Kashichkina was sent in a convoy of prisoners to the Nazi concentration camp Croisette beside the English Channel. On March 18, the anniversary of the Paris Commune, the French organized an escape and she joined the Maquis.

"I have a spinal injury and a Croix de Guerre in memory of those days," Lyudmila Mikhailovna continues. "But I went through so much that, after the war, I didn't want to remember anything. That is why I have forgotten many details. For decades I repeated to myself over and over again: "Forget! Forget!..."

"There is only one thing I do not want to forget: returning from France, the first stop on my native soil.. We all jumped out of the carriages, kissed the ground, embraced each other... I remember that I was In a white smock and I fell to the ground, kissed it and pressed handfuls of it to my heart. Is it possible, I thought, that I small ever again part with this, with something so dear?..."

A few days later Lyudmila Mikhailovna unexpectedly telephoned me:

"I've just come back. I found that place... What place? The place where the camp to which we were transported from prison was. I've been afraid oven to glance that way for so many years, I used to give it a wide berth if I had to go to that district for some reason... But after our conversation, when you asked what was there now, I thought to myself: "What really is there now?" I walked there as if in a state of intoxication and remembered everything, everything. Where the barracks were, where the bath-house was. Where the posts were on which people were hanged... If you like, we can go there together. It isn't far from the town centre. Trolleybuses and trams run there..."

And we did go to the former Shirokaya. I saw new apartment houses and a long, cox-like design institute of some kind. Everything seemed ordinary and customary and in no way remarkable, But Lyudmila Mikhailovna stood and wept.

"Everything here is built on human bones. Thousands of people lie here. I even remember the faces of some..."

As I was to learn later, former inmates of the camp have appealed to the Minsk city council to commemorate the site where it stood with a plaque. If the land on which we live has no memory, who will grow up on It? That is something we should think about.

"A memorial to the Unknown Underground Fighter should be erected in Minsk. The underground rarely revealed names. People often perished without a name, but they must not be left without a place in our memories."

So long as this woman wounded by war lives, her memory will be a bridge between war and peace. But she is interested in what will happen tomorrow.

Another member of the Minsk underground, Nadezhda Vikentyevna Khatchenko, has an account to square with the war, held firmly in her memory:

"I was walking along the street with my son and there were dead bodies lying on both sides of the street. I was telling him about Little Red Riding Hood and all around us there were dead bodies. That happened when we were returning after being refugees. We came to my mother's and I could see that there was something wrong with him: he would crawl under the bed and sit there for days on end. He was five years old, but you couldn't get him to go outside...

"I had trouble with him for a year. I simply couldn't find out what the problem was. We were living in a cellar and when someone walked along the street you could only see his boots. Once my son came out from under the bed, saw someone's boots at the window and screamed and screamed.., Then I remembered that a Nazi had kicked him...
"Well, somehow he got over that. He would play in the yard with the other children and in the evening he would come home and ask:
""Mum, What is dad?"
"He is fair and handsome and he's in the army at the front," I would explain.
"When Minsk was liberated, tanks were the first to enter the city. And my son came running home in tears:
" "Daddy isn"t there! They're all dark, none of them is fair!'
"It was July and the tankmen were all young and sunburned.
"My husband refined home an invalid, an old man, not a young one. That was a cause of heartbreak to me, for my son thought of his father as fair and handsome: now he was confronted by an old, sick man. For a long time he would not recognize him as his father. I had to break down the barriers between them.
"When my husband came home late from work I would say to him :
" "Why are you so late? Dima was worried and asking where his daddy was."
"After all, during the six years of war (he fought against the Japanese as well) he, too, had become a stranger to his son.
"When I bought something for our son I would say:
" "Daddy bought that for you, he cares about you..."
"In time they became friends. His father had a lot to tell him about..."
A woman had to find the spiritual and physical strength for this, too: the strength to return a father to his son and a son to his father. She had to ho the first to think of how to put her family on a postwar footing and help her husband and son forget the war. The first because the creation of life is the basis of her nature.
"I saw so many killed that I thought while still at the front: if I survive and I meet a good man, I shall have many children." (Guards Junior Sergeant Sofia Ivanovna Sherevera, telegraphist.)
Maria Alexandrovna Arestova, a woman with a legendary life, told me her story. She was the first woman engine-driver in the Soviet Union.
"...I had worked as an engine-driver's mate since 1929. There wasn't a woman engine-driver anywhere in the Soviet Union at that time. The head of the locomotive depot was surprised: "There"s a girl, now, she's got to have a man's job' But I wanted to become an engine-driver and nothing else.
"In 1931 I became the country's first woman engine-driver. At that time Nadezhda Krupskaya was writing a lot about equal rights, about women doing men's jobs. When I drove a locomotive people would gather at the stations: "A girl"s driving the locomotive.'
"...Our locomotive was being repaired, My husband and I worked alternate shifts, because we had a child by then and we had organized things so that when he went to work I stayed with the child and when I went to work he would sit at home. That day my husband came home and I had to go to work. When I woke up in the morning I heard that something strange was happening outside, that it was noisy. I switched on the radio: "War!" I rushed to my husband:
" "Lenya, get up, it"s war... Get up, war... Get up, war's broken out:
"He ran to the depot and came back in tears:
" "War! War! ... Do you know what war means?"
" "What was to be done? What would we do with our child?
"I was evacuated with our son to the rear, to Ulyanovsk. We were given a two-room flat, a good flat I haven't got suet) a good one even now. My son went to kindergarten. Everything was fine. I was treated

splendidly. Well, a woman engine-driver and the first one at that... But I wasn't there for long, less than six months. I couldn't stay any longer everyone else was defending our country and there I was, sitting at home!
" "Well, Marusya, will you stay here, in the rear?" my husband asked when he came to Ulyanovsk.
" "No, I said, "I"ll go with you.'
"A special reserve column for the needs of the front was being formed then and my husband and I applied He was appointed senior driver and I was a driver. For four years we moved from place to place in a heated goods van, together with our son. Throughout the entire war he didn't see so much as a cat. When he caught one near Kiev our train was under heavy bombardment by five aircraft. He bugged the cat: "Dear little kitty, how glad I ant Ilia(I saw you. I don"t see anyone, so sit with me. Let me give you a kiss.' Just a kid. And with a child everything has to be on a child's level. .
"How many trains did I drive to the front? Well, count for yourself: one train a day is 365 trains a year on average. And over four years? Four times 365 works out at I,500. My husband and I transported the Czechoslovak Corps of Colonel Svoboda. We canoe under constant bombing and machine-gun fire. And it was the locomotive that was fired at the most important thing to the enemy was to kill the driver and destroy the locomotive. The aircraft flew low and fired at the locomotive and the heated goods van and my son was sitting there. I feared most of all for him when we were bombed and used to take hint into the locomotive cab with me. I would grab him and press him to my heart : "Let us be killed with tire same shell-splinter." Is it really possible to be killed tike that? Evidently, that's why I stayed alive.
"My son is a doctor now, head of a department. I worried about hint for a long time. When we came back from the front he was tec years old and he went into the first class. I was afraid that he would he defective, because we had been bombed all the time, but he's a splendid chap and I have a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren.
"Locomotives are my life, my youth. the very best part of my life. I would like to drive trains even now, but they won't let me - I'm too old... (laughs).
"You don't know how terrible it is to have one child in wartime. Take the way we live now. My home is with my son and his family. I never go away, never take a holiday anywhere... You won't believe this, but I don't want to be separated from my son or my grandchildren. It's terrible for me to be parted from them even for one day. And my son doesn't go anywhere from me. Soon he will have been working for twenty-five years, but he has never once gone away on holiday. people at work are extremely surprised that he has never asked for a place at a holiday hotel. "Mum, I"d rather be with you' that's what he says. And my daughter-in-law is the same. We don't oven have a cottage in the country because we can't co separated from each other even for a few days. It may seem strange to you, perhaps, but I can't live without them for a minute."
"You can't be away from them even for a few days?"
"No, it's impossible to spend a whole day without seeing them. If you had been in the war, you would know what that means to be parted for a day. Just a day..."
Where is there living a mother who wants war? Wishes it for her children or her grandchildren?

"I CAN'T SEE CHILDREN PLAYING AT "WAR"
"...Many prisoners were taken In that battle and among them were wounded. We bandaged them. It was extremely hot and we found a kettle and gave them something to drink. Wo were on open ground and under

fire. The order came: trenches were to be dug urgently and camouflage erected.

"We began to dig trenches. The Germans watched. We explained that they should help us: we should work together. When they understood what we wanted of thorn, they looked round at us in horror: they thought that when they had dug the pits, we would line them up and shoot thorn. They expected us to treat them the way they treated our prisoners. You should have seen the terror with which they dug the pits.

"But when they saw that we bandaged them, that we gave thorn water to drink, that we told them to conceal themselves in the pits they had dug, they could not regain control of themselves, they lost their heads..." (Part of the story of N.V. Ilyinskaya, nurse.)

In one of his wartime articles Ilya Ehrenburg wrote that war without hate Is immoral and shameless, like cohabitation without love. There is no justification for it. Our soldiers gained that sanctified hatred through suffering; they felt it. But there were many incidents like those described by the nurse Nina Vasilyevna Ilyinskaya. Only it could not be an all-embracing forgiveness or an abstract humanism when the killed, the tortured and the wounded lay nearby, when the corpses of children were pulled out of deep village wells.

"When our division liberated the camp near Azarichi we began to treat wounded children. They were so emaciated that we could not find their veins to transfuse blood, they were nothing but skin and bone. As for assisting at the amputation of children's arms or legs... I already knew that the heart can ache, but now our eyes ached, wo hadn't the strength to see the sufferings of those children. My eyes felt like my heart..," (Z. F. Girich, nurse.)

There was another aspect, too: people did not want to forget the human element in themselves. This moral victory was our greatest triumph in that terrible war, which seemed to have left no other feelings than hatred for those who were Nazi uniform.

Women's memories brought me back again and again to the world of charity.

Emilia Alexeyevna Nikolayeva joined the army as a medical orderly, was captured and escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp to join a partisan detachment of the Voroshilov Brigade.

"I thought after everything I had been through, after the camp, after the torture and humiliation, I would have no feelings of mercy when we took prisoners. Once a whole group of prisoners was driven in... My friend and I she had also been through their camps and had been left without an arm - said: "Well, to hell with them, now we shall make fun of them the way they did of us." But no, our people aren't raised like that, You can't hit a prisoner, especially if he is elderly, you can't even bring yourself to insult him..."

Vera Iosifovna Khoreva, a doctor at the Minsk republican hospital and a surgeon during the war, recalls:

"The political officer summoned me and said:

" "Vera Iosifovna, you will have to work with wounded German prisoners."

"By that time I had already lost two brothers and I refused. He insisted.

" "I can"t, psychologically: I've lost two brothers,' I said. "I can"t bear to see them I'd rather murder them than treat them. Please understand...'

" "This Is an order."

" "Very well, if it"s an order...'

"I treated those wounded men, doing all that was necessary, but suffered a lot. It was then that I discovered my first grey hair. At that very time. I did everything for them, operated on them, fed them, anaesthetized them everything one is supposed to do. The only thing I could not do was evening rounds. In the morning you bandage the

wounded, listen to their pulses-in short, you do something-but during the evening round you have to talk to the patients, ask how they are. That was what I just couldn't do. I could bandage them and operate on them, but talk to them no. I let the political officer know that straight away, without beating about the bush:
" "I won"t do evening round...' "
From the town of Zolotonosh in the Cherkassy region I received a letter from Yekaterina Petrovna Shalygina:
"I was a nurse during the war. I remember my first wounded Get-man. Gangrene had set in and his leg had been amputated. Now he was lying in my ward.
"In the evening I was told:
" "Katya, go and have a look at your German."
"I went. Perhaps he had a haemorrhage or something. He had woken up and was lying there. Ho didn't have a temperature, there was nothing wrong.
"He stared and stared, then pulled out a tiny pistol:
"" Take..."
"He spoke in German : I didn't remember it any more, but I understood him, as far as my schoolgirl German avowed me.
" "Take," he said, "I wanted to conquer you, now you must conquer us.
"He seemed to be saying that we had saved him. At the end of the war we had an entire German hospital, there were many wounded Germans. I shan't forget how the men who were not badly wounded dragged corpses down from the fourth floor. They pulled them out by the legs, then pushed them down the stairs. And they had been previously lying side by side, they were Germans, too. You would sec one man drag another to the stairs and push him unceremoniously down with his foot. That made an awful impression on us, even though they were our enemies..."
When it was possible to look the enemy "in the face", they would ask: Who really is he, how could lie do trial when, after all, he, too, was born a human being? It was a difficult and tormenting question, but each woman asked herself it over and over again.
And as we learn what they experienced, suffered, felt and preserved we acquire a new understanding of goodness, heroism, hatred, cruelty, and love.
From a letter written by Senior Lieutenant Marina Anatolyevna Flerovskaya, political worker, who lives in Moscow:
"When I was at school and a Young Pioneer, some German school-children came on a visit. We went to the theatre with them and sang with them. I remember one German boy. He sang so beautifully. And all through the war I thought: what shall I do if I meet him and recognize him? Surely he cannot he with them, too? I am an emotional person, and since childhood I have been very impressionable. I was walking across a field once, a battle had just ended, and I thought that he was lying among the dead. Lett, there was a young fellow who was so like him... He was lying in young wheat,.. Looking at the sky... I stood for a long time over him... And it was hard to believe all the same..."
The tape recorder spins and spins. Story after story... And all of them seem to come together to form a single human life.
Sergeant-Major Lilia Mikhailovna Budko, surgical nurse:
"A wounded German was brought In. I think he was an airman. He had a broken thigh and gangrene had set in. I felt some sort of pity for him. He didn't ask for anything and didn't move.
"I knew a little German and asked:
" "Would like some water?"
" "No."
"The wounded knew that there was a German in the ward. He was lying separately from the others and as I walked past they asked indignantly:
" "So you"re taking water to the enemy?'

" "You must not talk like that. There, you kill each other, but here... A man"s last minutes at least should be eased.'
"His leg was entirely blue and there was nothing more that could be done. A man is instantly consumed by infection, he burns up in twenty-four hours.
"When I gave him some water he looked at me and said:
" "Hitler kaput!"
"And this was 1942. We were near Kharkov and surrounded.
" "Why? I asked.
" "Hitler kaput!"
"Then I said to him:
" You think like that and talk like that now, because you are lying here. Bet when you were there, you killed...'
" "I didn"t shoot, I didn't kill', he said. "I was forced to. But I didn"t shoot...'
" "You all talk like that when you are taken prisoner."
"Suddenly he asked:
" "Please... I beg you... I beg you, frau..." And he gave me a pile of photographs.
"He showed me who his mother was, himself, his brothers and sisters... It was such a nice photograph. On the back he wrote an address.
" "You will be there. You will! .." And that was said by a German in 1942 near Kharkov. So, please post this.'
"He wrote the address on one photograph, but he had an entire envelope of them. I kept the photographs for a long time and was very upset when they were lost in an raid..."
From the words of Lieutenant Nina Petrovna Sakova, doctor's assistant
"I was senior doctor's assistant in a tank regiment. We had T-34s and they turned fiercely. It was terrifying. I hadn't even heard a rifle shot before. Bombs were dropping somewhere far off once as we were being driven to the front and I thought the entire ground was shaking. I was seventeen years old and had only just completed technical school, It happened that we went into battle as soon as I arrived.
"I climbed out of a tank... Fire... The sky was burning... The earth was burning... Iron was burning... Near me there were corpses, but further away men were crying: "Save us", "Help".,. I was overcome with horror! I don't know what stopped me running, what kept me from taking to my heels and fleeing the battle-field. It was so terrible that no words are adequate, only feelings. I used not to be able to watch films about the war, but I can now, although I still cry.
"..I reached Germany. I remember everything... The first thing I saw on German soil was a hand-written poster right by the road:
"Here it is damned Germany!"
"We entered a village, where one old woman was left. The people had abandoned everything and fled... They had been convinced that "the Russians will come and chop you into pieces..."
"I said to her, that old woman:
" "We have won."
"She burst into tears. "I have two sons who were killed in Russia."
" "But who is to blame? How many of our people have been killed! Who wanted war: us or you?"
" "Hitler..." she said.
" "Hitler didn"t make the decision himself. It was your children, your husbands...'
"She was silent then. Perhaps she didn't even believe me, She hadn't seen for herself. But my mother had died of hunger during the war; people had had no salt, nothing at all. My brother was in hospital, seriously wounded. Only sister remained at home. She wrote that when our troops entered Orel, she had caught at the greatcoats of all the women soldiers. She. thought that I must certainly be among them. There were almost no men left in our family..."

Did anyone write down or collect the evidence of the German officers and men picked up on the battle-field by our medical orderlies and treated by our doctors in our hospitals while battles were still being fought? Or the evidence of German children who were fed in 1945 at our mobile field kitchens? What do they remember? Do they remember the piece of sugar held out by a Soviet soldier whose home had been boned by their fathers and elder brothers, whose child had been killed and whose wife had been humiliated? If those who took do not remember or do not want to, those who gave do. They remember for those who will not and for themselves.

From the reminiscences of Sofia Adamovna Kuntsevich, medical orderly:

"We crossed the border: the Motherland was liberated. I didn't recognize our soldiers-they were completely different people. Everyone was smiling. The men had put on clean shirts and were holding flowers picked somewhere. I have never since seen such happy people. I thought that when we entered Germany I would feel no mercy for anyone. So much hatred had built up inside me! Why should I feel sorry for a man's child if he had killed mine? Why should I feel sorry for his mother if he had hanged mine? Why should I spare his house if he had burned mine? Why? I wanted to see their wives and their mothers who had given birth to such sons. How would they look us in the face?

"It all came back to me and I thought: what shall I do? What will our soldiers do? We remember everything... We arrived at a village and children came running-hungry and unhappy. And I, who had sworn that I hated them all, collected everything the lads had, everything left from their rations, every piece of sugar, and gave it to the German children. Of course, I had not forgotten, I remembered everything, but I couldn't look into the eyes of hungry children with indifference.

"There was already a queue of German children by our kitchens early in the morning. They were given soup and a main course. Each child had a bag over its shoulder for bread, a canister on its belt tot soup and something for the main course-porridge or peas. We felt no hatred for the population. I tell you, we fed the children, and even stroked their heads..."

The feminine quality of this word "stroked" runs through me like an electric current. For stroking is something quite different from feeding: it signifies pity. And they were strong enough even for that

Junior Sergeant Vera Pavlovna Borodina, telegraph operator, recalls:

"The Germans were told that we were beasts to frighten them They drowned themselves or cut their veins, whole families at a time We nursed them back to health... Once we stopped in an empty house We found the owners a mother and daughter in the attic. They had hanged themselves, because they were convinced that, as soon as the Russians came, rape, pillage and murder would begin, that they would be sent to camps in Siberia.

"And then nothing of the kind happened! But they knew what Stalingrad had been fined into, what the whole of Russia had been turned into, they had been shown it in the cinema. And, of course, they imagined that the same thing would happen now on German soil. Our refusal to take revenge amazed them.

"On one occasion we looked into a house and wanted a cup of tea. Many houses were standing empty-the people had abandoned everything and fled. We began looking for cups, found a tea service and saw a familiar design-ears of wheat. The trade-mark read "Odessa, USSR". So we didn't have a cup of tea, after all..."

Lance Corporal Anastasia Vasilyevna Voropaeva, search-light operator:

"Everyone had seen what they had done in our country and we wanted to have a look at their mothers, their wives, their children. What sort of mothers, wives and children did they have? What were they like?

Although we knew that they were people, we wanted to have a look at them after all that had happened.

"We had reached Germany at last. A friend and I were cycling. A woman was walking along-I think she had there children with her, two In a perambulator and one holding on to her skirt-looking utterly worn out. And then, you know, when she drew level with us, she fell to her knees and bowed down to us just like that. We didn't understand what she was saying. She pointed to her heart and then to the children. Something to the effect that she was weeping, bowing and thanking us for the fact that her children had remained alive... She was someone's wife, after all. Someone's mother...

"You cannot imagine the roads of Victory! Poles, Frenchmen, Czekhs and Bulgarians were moving along them... All the liberated prisoners. Carts, bundles with national flags... Everyone was mixed up together, each going his own way. Everyone embraced us..."

Kseniya Klimentyevna Belko wrote to me from the town of Minsk:

"I turned nineteen and received my call-up papers: present yourself at the district executive committee with provisions for three days, a change of underwear, a mug and a spoon. That was called mobilization to the labour front.

"We were taken to the town of Novotroitsk in the Orenburg region and began work there at a factory. It was so cold that an overcoat hanging in a room froze: when you took it down it was heavy like a log. We worked for four years without holidays or days off.

"...How we looked forward to the end of the war! At throe o'clock in the morning there was a noise in the hostel and the director of the factory and the other managers appeared: "Victory!" But I couldn't get up; the others lifted me, but I fell back on to my bed. For a whole day they could not get me up. It was something to do with the feeling of joy. When I went out the next day I wanted to hug and kiss everyone. My heart was overflowing with goodwill towards others."

That was how they emerged from the war into postwar life. Lidia Vasilyevna Ananenko, doctor's assistant, was not speaking for herself alone when she said: "The war had ended and suddenly we realized that we had to study, that we had to marry and have children. War is not yet the whole of life. And our life as women was only just beginning. But we were very tired, inwardly tired..."

How do we reckon the course of our lives? Usually we divide them into the period before we first fall in love, before our first child is born, before college and after it, but for these women the word "war" is always added to these milestones of human life, with an inevitable "before" or "after": what each woman experienced before the war, during the war and after the war.

Nina Pavlovna Shalova lives in Moscow. During the war she was the Young Communist League organizer of a rifle battalion.

"The war ended and my friends asked: "What will you do?" We had had enough of going hungry during the war. We used to say that we would eat our fill at least once. My dream was to receive my first postwar wages and buy a big box of biscuits. What would I do after the war? Become a cook, of course. And I sty work in a public catering enterprise..."

From a letter sent me by Natalia Arsentyevna Melnichenko, radio operator and scout:

"Even now, when I travel by train, the buffers thump and I imagine that my parachute is opening. I am jumping...

"During the first years after the war I parachuted every night and every night I cried out. I remember I don't know whether anyone has told you about this how I was tormented for a long time by a longing to see the people with whom I went through the war. It was as if I had broken away from my family, abandoned those near to me. I would go so far as to state that those who went through the war are different from

other people. They understand life, understand others. They fear losing a friend; that feeling is especially strong in scouts, who know what it Is to lose a friend.

"You may be somewhere and immediately feel that someone there was at the front. I recognize them instantly..."

Tamara Ustinovna Vorobeikova, member of the underground, remembers the first postwar years:

"...At the institute I realized once again what heman goodness is. At night I was pursued by nightmares: SS men, barking dogs, the last cries of the dying. The doctors did not allow me to study. But the girls I shared a room with told me to forget about the doctors and tacitly took me in hand. Every evening they would take it in turn to drag me off to the cinema to see a comedy. They took me whether I wanted to go or not. There weren't many comedies and I saw each one a hundred times.

"The nightmares left me and I was able to study..."

Tamara Ustinovna became a lawyer and obtained the degree of a Candidate of Science. She now lives in Kiev.

Vera Iosifovna Odinets, partisan, could not bear to see ploughed land for a long time. To her it seemed that the furrows were the traces of recent bombing or shelling.

"I knew In my mind that the war was over, but my whole body, my whole being remembered. The body forgot more slowly... You can't even describe it... It's impossible to convey. I couldn't forget the feeling of hunger, for example, or the feeling of fear for years...

"Our generation will forget the war only when it dies."

And from almost every woman I heard the same refrain:

"I remember how everyone wept on Victory Day and cried: "No! No! No more war ever, ever again"."

(Antonina Antonovna Lychanaya, Technician Sergeant, meteorologist.)

What, then, is memory? Oat wrote in his dictionary that it is the ability to remember the past without forgetting, but immediately added that it is not simply the ability to remember, but the spiritual property of preserving awareness of the past. Preserving that fine thread that goes from person to person...

From a letter sent me by Tamara Ivanovna Kuraeva, who lives in the Crimean township of Frunzenskoye:

"When I begin talking about the war I immediately want to stop, I immediately want to forget. We learned things that it would have been hotter for us never to have known; it would have been easier to have children and believe in their happiness without this knowledge. What a pang I feel now when I read a newspaper or watch the television news...

"Even when I'm watching a film, I still can't remain indifferent to the whistle of bombs and shells, because I have seen how people die. And when I read now that a war is going on somewhere, that again people are being killed somewhere, I want to shout at the top of my voice to the whole world: "No! No! This must not be..." What did we suffer so much for then? Why did people who were so young die in the spring? I remember that It was hardest of all to lose people in spring, especially when gardens were in bloom...

"I was at the front for two and a half years as a medical nose in second-echelon hospital. I bandages thousands of men with my own hands, gave blood, wept when men died. I shall give you just one example of how tired we became. I went out once to retie my headscarf, leaned against a window frame and began to doze. When I came to I felt refreshed, but a doctor who saw me began scolding me, I didn't understand; it was only when he had gone away, having given me three extra spells on duty, that a fellow nurse explained what the matter was: I had been absent for more than an hour. It appeared I had fallen asleep.

"It's no coincidence that my health is poor now and my nerves in had condition. But when people ask: "What decorations did you receive?" I am embarrassed to admit that I haven't any, that they had no time for that, perhaps because there were so many of us in the wat and everyone conscientiously did the work the war had demanded of him or her. Not everyone could have been decorated, surely? We have our reward May 9...

"War took everything from me. I cannot listen without emotion when Valentina Tolkunova sings: "My dear one, if there had been no war..." My dear one was killed in the war, a 26-year-old artillery major. It will soon be forty years since he died. But there isn't a day when I don't remember him; a thousand times I have fallen asleep on a soaked pillow... A thousand times...

"I don't remember a single wartime holiday... I don't even remember New Year 1941, 1942, 1943 or 1944... I only remember 1945..."

Lieutenant of the medical service, Vera Maximovna Berestova:

"I was at the front from the first day to the last. In 1941 I broke out of encirclement, in 1942 I took part in the Izyum-Barvenkovo operation, then I ferried across the Volga the wounded out of Stalingrad during the shelling and bombing in barges and launches or over thin ice on dog sledges throughout the entire fighting. My war ended in Koenigsberg. I was wounded and once I fell into half-frozen Volga. I swam to the shore and pulled a wounded man out as well. But I couldn't have children after that, after being under the ice.

"The war ended and life had to be rebuilt, the country had to be rebuilt. I went to Siberia and near Irkutsk helped to build the wonderful city of Angarsk on the barren land. Now its population is approaching 300.000, but when I came there were two tents. My husband and I brought up our stepson and after him two little girls, postwar orphans, whom I brought from a children's home. They're grown up now and have completed their education. We have five grandchildren. I'm mother and grandmother to them all..."

Can a person really have one heart for hatred and another for love? The woman had only one heart.

Tamara Stepanovna Umnyagina of Minsk remembers this, too. She remembers a great deal more besides. Small, thoroughly homely and at the same time less a person than an exposed nerve. Things were harder for her, with her poetic, ultra-sensitive nature, than for others. Perhaps because of this she has no feeling of remoteness from the past, from her memories, and she constantly repeats: "Even today that picture could make you go out of your mind". After two or three years of war many women were no longer surprised by terrible things, b@ she could not accustom herself and still cannot. I already knew and had heard much from them, both poetic and terrible, but the way she told her story is unforgettable. She was a story-teller in a thousand.

Guards Junior Sergeant Tamara Stepanovna Umnyagina, medical orderly .

"I remember running to the military registration and enlistment office in a coarse cotton skirt and white plimsolls, buckled-like shoes they were the very last word. So there I was in that skirt and those shoes, asking to be sent to the front. I arrived at my unit it was a rifle division, based near Minsk-to be told that there was no need for seventeen-year-old girls to fight; the men would feel ashamed, they said. The enemy would soon be crushed and I should go home to mummy. I was upset at not being avowed to fight, of course. What did I do? I managed to see the chief of staff. Sitting with him was the same colonel who had rejected me. "Comrade Commander who Is more senior," I said, "permit me not to obey Comrade Colonel. I shan"t go home in any case, I shall retreat with you. Where should I go the Germans ate already close.' That was what everyone called me after that 'Comrade Commander who is more senior'. It was the seventh day of the war. We began to retreat...

"Soon we were barbed in blood. There were very many wounded, but they were so quiet, so patient, they wanted to live so much. No one believed that the war would last so long, we expected It to end at any moment. I remember that everything I had was soaked in blood through to the skin... My shoes were torn and I went about barefoot. What did I see? Near Mogilev a station was bombed. A train-load of children was in the station. The adults began to throw them out of the carriage windows, little children three or four years old. There was a wood nearby and they ran towards it. Immediately tanks began to advance and ran over the children. There was nothing left of them... Even today that picture could make you go out of your mind.

"Later, our unit was surrounded. I was responsible for so many wounded, but not a single vehicle wanted to stop. Then a wounded lieutenant gave me his pistol: "Do you know how to shoot?" How could I have known? I had only seen others shoot. But I took the pistol and went on the road to stop a vehicle. I swore there for the first time we couldn't carry the wounded men in our arms, after all. "Finish us off, lads," they begged. "Don"t leave us like this.'

"But the most terrible experience of all was sty to come: Stalingrad, that was most terrible... There was no battle-field at Stalingrad, the entire city was the battle-field streets, houses, cedars. You just try to carry a wounded man out of there! My body was one big bruise, my trousers were covered with blood, The sergeant-major told us: "Girls, there are no more trousers, so don"t ask for them'. But our trousers were covered with blood; when they dried they stood up, stiffer from blood than they would have been from starch you could cut yourself. There wasn't a clean centimetre anywhere and in spring there was nothing to exchange for summer uniforms. Everything was on fire: on the Volga, for example, even the water was on fire. The water did not freeze even in winter, but burned. Everything turned... In Stalingrad there wasn't a granite of earth that wasn't soaked in human blood.

"Reinforcements would arrive. Such young, handsome fellows they were. And in a day or two they would all be dead, not one of them left. I was beginning to be afraid of new people. Afraid of remembering them, their faces, their talk. Because no sooner had they arrived than they were gone. This was 1942, you see -the hardest, most difficult period. On one occasion ten of us were left out of three hundred at the end of the day. And when we were down to ten and the battle subsided, we began to kiss each other and weep because we had happened to survive.

"Someone dies before your eyes,,. And you know, you see, that there is nothing you can do to help him, that he has minutes left. You kiss him, stroke him, say some consoling words to bun. Say goodbye to him. And there's nothing else you can do to help him... Those faces remain in my memory even today. I see them all those lads, all of them. Somehow the years have passed and you might think that I would forget someone at least, one face at least. But I haven't forgotten anyone, I remember their) all, I see them all... (Weeps.) We wanted to dig their graves ourselves, with our own hands, but that wasn't always possible, either. We left, and they remained there. It would happen that you bandaged a person's entire head and he would die there under the bandages. And he bated with handaged head. If a man was killed on the battle-field he looked at the sky, at least. Or asked when dying: "Close my eyes, nurse, only neatly". But this man would be put in his grave all bandages up, like a mummy... The city was destroyed, the houses it was so dreadful. But when people were lying there, young men... You seemed to have no more strength, to be unable to carry on for more than five minutes. It was March and the thaw had begun. You could no longer wear felt boots, but I pulled mine on and went out. I crawled about in them the whole day and by evening they were so wet

that I couldn't take them off. They had to be cut off. And I didn't fall sick...

"When everything was over in Stalingrad we were given the task of evacuating the most seriously wounded in ships and barges to Kazan and Gorky. It was already spring -March and April. But we found so many more wounded, in the ground, in trenches, in dug-outs, in cellars there were so many of them, it's impossible to tell you, It was horrible! We had always thought as we carried the wounded out of tire battle-fields that no more of them were leaf, that they had all been sent away and there were none in Stalingrad itself, but when the fighting ended there were so many of them that it could be hardly believed... In the ship I sailed on there were people without legs or arms and hundreds who were suffering from tuberculosis, Not only had they lost themselves physically, but they suffered mentally, they ago-nisei inwardly. We had to treat them, persuade them with gentle words, calm them with smiles.

"When we were sent with them we were told that it would be a rest from the fighting for us, that it was even a token of gratitude, as it were, a reward. But it turned out to be more terrible even than the Stalingrad battles. There you pulled a man from the battle-field, gave him aid of some sort and sent him on you were confident that everything was now all right, that he had been taken care of. You went back, crawling after the next wounded man. But here they were before you all the time... There they wanted to live, they strove to live: "Hurry up, nurse! Hurry up, dear!.." But here they refused to eat, they wanted to die. They used to throw themselves overboard. We stood guard over them... I even sat beside one captain at night - he had lost both arms and wanted to kill himself. And once I didn't warn another nurse, went away for a few minutes and he threw himself overboard . . .

"We brought them to Usolye, near Perm. New neat houses had already been built there, all specially for them. Like a Young Pioneers camp.., We carried them and they ground their teeth. Well, I think I would have taken any of them as a husband. I would have carried him in my arms. We sailed back empty, we could relax, but we didn't sleep. The girls would be lying there and then they would begin to howl and howl Every day we sat and wrote the men letters. We decided among ourselves who would write to whom, So that things would be at least a little easier for them...

"And just this trifle. After that trip I began to cover my legs and face on the battle-field. I had pretty legs and I was so afraid that they would be disfigured. And my face... Just this trifle...

"After the war I could not escape from the smell of blood. It pursued me for a long time. I would begin to do the laundry and become aware of the smew, I would begin to cook a meal and again become aware of it... Someone gave me a red blouse, something so hard to come by then, there wasn't the material, but I couldn't wear it. Because it was red... That was a colour I couldn't bear. I couldn't go to butcher's shops.,. My husband used to buy the meat. And in summer I couldn't bear to stay in the city, I tried to go away somewhere. As soon as summer came I thought that war was about to break out. When the sun warmed everything trees, houses, asphalt it had a smell, for me everything smelled of blood. Whatever I ate, whatever I drank, I could not escape from that smell! I would make up the bed with clean linen and to me even that would smell of blood..."

And now my memory fills with other stories that show that the war did not end with the war years, that it continued to live for a long time In the human soul.

Guards Lieutenant Maria Yakovlevna Yezhova, commander of a medical platoon:

"I asked to be sent to the front line immediately, as soon as I arrived. A unit was marching and I joined it. At that time I had the idea that I would be home sooner from the front than from the rear, if only by a day. I had left my mother at home. Even now the other girls recall: "She didn"t want to stay at the medical company'. And it is true that I would go to the medical company, wash, get some clean clothes and be off back to my trench. I didn't think about myself. I crawled, ran,.. Only that smell of blood.., I couldn't get used to the smell of blood...

"After the war I worked in a maternity department as a midwife -but I couldn't do that for long. I have an allergy to blood, my body simply rejected it. I'd seen so much blood in the war that I could bear it no more. My body would not tolerate it... I left the maternity ward and began working with the ambulance service. I had had a rash, I couldn't breathe...

Junior Sergeant Bella Isaakovna Epstein, sniper:

"After the war the first tram ran in Minsk and I was on it. Suddenly the tram stopped, everyone shouted and the women wept: "Someone"s been killed! Someone's been killed!' I was the only one in the tram who couldn't understand why people were crying. I didn't have the feeling that something terrible had happened, I had seen so many corpses not long before. I didn't react.

"But then the feeling came hack and seeing a dead person became terrible again. That was about a year later. I became normal..."

But let us return to Tamara Stepanovna Umnyagina's story, which is far from over, although she was already speaking of May 1945:

"May 1945... I remember that we were photographed a lot. We were very happy... May 9 and everyone cried: "Victory! Victory!" You could hardly believe it. But what were we to do now? Was it really over? But what were we to do now?

"There was shooting... Everyone who had a gun fired it.

" "Stop shooting immediately!" the commander ordered.

" "There"ll he cartridges left over in any case. What do we need them for?' we said uncomprehendingly.

"Whatever anyone said, I heard only one word "Victory ! " Suddenly we desperately wanted to live! How splendidly we would begin to live now! I put on all my decorations and asked to be photographed. For some reason I wanted to be surrounded by flowers. I was photographed in a flower bed...

"June 7 was a happy day for me my wedding. The unit threw a party for us. I had known my husband for a long time: he was a captain and the company commander. We had sworn that, if we weren't killed, we would get married after the war. We were given a month's leave...

"We went to Kineshma, Ivanovo Region, to his parents. I went there as a heroine, never thinking that a girl from the front line could he received the way I was. We had gone through so much, after all, had saved so many children for their mothers and so many husbands for their wives. And suddenly... I came to know insults, I heard offensive words. Before this I had never heard anything but "dear nurse", "darling nurse". And I wasn't a plain girl, I was pretty and well turned-out.

"In the evening, when we sat down for a cup of tea, his mother look my husband into the kitchen and burst into tears: "Who have you got married to? An army girl... Why, you have two younger sisters. Who will marry them now?" When I remember this even now I want to cry. Imagine, I had brought a gramophone record with me which I was very fond of. There were the words "you have the right to walk in the most fashionable shoes..." It was about a girl from the front, I put it on the gramophone and my husband's eldest sister smashed it before my eyes: I had no rights whatsoever, she said. They destroyed all my wartime photographs...

"We bought food with ration cards then. My husband and I pooled of ration cards and went to receive foodstuffs. We arrived it was a special storehouse joined the queue that was already there and waited. My turn came and suddenly the man behind the counter jumped over it and bugged and kissed me, shouting: "Boys! Boys! I"ve found her. I've seen her. I wanted to meet her, to find her so much. Boys, she was the one who saved me!' And my husband was standing there beside me. That man was a wounded whom I had pulled out of the battle-field. He remembered me, but did I remember him? I could scarcely remember everyone, there were so many! On another occasion I encountered an invalid at a railway station. "Nurse!" He recognized me and wept, "I thought that when I met you I would go down on my knees..." But he had only one leg...

"We had enough of it, the girls who served at the front. And we had enough of it after the war, too. Somehow we were abandoned. No one defended us. It had been different at the front. You would he crawling over the ground and a piece of shrapnel or a bullet would have your number... The lads would shield you. "Lie down, nurse!.." And a soldier would fall on you himself, covering you. And take the bullet himself... He would be killed or wounded... I was saved three times like that.

"...From Kineshma we returned to our unit. When we arrived we learned that it was not being disbanded, but that we would be clearing the fields of mines. The collective farms needed land. The war was over for everyone, yet for the sappers it still went on. But their mothers already knew that Victory had been gamed... The grass was over your head, grown rank during the war, while everywhere there were bombs and mines... But land was needed and we worked fast. And every day your comrades were being killed. Every day after the war had ended people had to he buried. We left so many people there, in the fields...

"It happened, too, that land would already have been banded over to a collective farm, a tractor would drive on it; somewhere there would still be a mine, anti-tank mines as well, and the tractor would be blown up and the tractor driver with it. And there weren't so many tractors, you know. Seeing those tears in a village after the war was over... The women cried. The men cried. I remember one of our soldiers... It was near Staraya Russa, I have forgotten the name of the village, but he came from there... He went to clear his collective farm of mines, his own fields, and was killed there. And there the village buried him. He had fought from the first day, gone through the entire war and then, after it was over, had been killed in his own home district, his home fields...

"As soon as I begin to talk about these things I become physically ill. I'm telling you about this and my stomach is full of ice, everything's shaking. I can see it all again, it's before my eyes: how the dead lay, their mouths wide open, their intestines torn out. I've seen more corpses than logs of wood...

"Young people invite me to address them. I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't do it and I don't go. I went to a medical school once. As soon as I entered and saw the white coats, I felt sick, On another occasion they came in a car to pick me up. But when we had gone part of the way I said: "Turn back, I don"t feel well'. I had begun to think of what I was going to say. And I remembered everything. During the war the lads used to say. "If you die, die with Tamara, you"ll be smiling in the next world as well'. I say that to show that I was a dare-devil and strong. But when the war ended that all seethed to desert me. I can't... Films, books all the same, they don't contain what we saw. I have never read anywhere how terrible it is to be in a war. So terrible, especially in hand-to-hand combat, that you begin to stammer and for several days you cannot get a word out correctly. Can someone who wasn't there really understand that?

"Somehow, others can talk about it. It needs to be talked about. And that is an heroic feat, too. But I can't, I become sick immediately. Victory Day.,, I look forward to that day and fear it. For several months I collect linen specially so that there would be a lot and I do the laundry all day. I have to be busy with something, have to be doing something all day. And when we meet, we're short of handkerchiefs that's what a meeting of front-line comrades is like. If you ask me, I'll tell you that I cannot see children playing at "war". That turns me upside down.,. I have never given children military toys, neither my own, nor other children, My whole being was against it."
"Do you tell your daughter and your granddaughter about the war?"
"We spared our children. They grew up knowing little about the horrors we had to go through. But I do want to say that we, my generation, that is, were not people who had been pampered or spoiled or overfed or given an easy ride by life, And it was precisely that that helped us achieve victory."
"Why didn't you tell your family about the watt"
"We try to protect children from everything, and that is bad. It used to be our children, now it's our grandchildren we shield. And then we are surprised... Once, here in Minsk, I saw a bride and groom in their wedding clothes walking to the Victory memorial with their friends. And they were all laughing. They were laughing so loudly.. I don't know, perhaps it wasn't right, but I said to them: "You must not laugh here. You won"t he happy if you laugh here'. Perhaps that was harsh? May they forgive me...
"Do you know the thought that lived in all of us during the war? We used to say: "Well, lads, let"s hope we survive... After the war what happy people there will be! What a happy, wonderful life there will be. People who have gone through so much will be kind to each other, there will be so much goodness, They have gone through this terrible plague together...'
"It's painful to talk about this... But there are many selfish people today, materialists, especially among the young. Who is to blame? We are, probably. Whatever is good in our children comes from us and whatever is bad comes from us, too. We wanted to make our children happy, but happy in a Philistine way. We gave them the best piece of food, tried to dress them well everyone tried to see that his children lived as well as the others. We didn't make them work. I don't know how it happens sometimes that people who are not themselves Philistines unexpectedly manage to raise children who are. For some reason we have forgotten that life must also be lived in relation to the past, that we cannot consign the past to oblivion. Of course, young people have a different life youthful, happy, If you tell them about blood and horror their eyes fill with boredom. They would rather not know about that. But it did happen. It did happen to us, to their mothers. And they are our children. They should know."
"I cannot see children playing at "wat"," Tamara Stepanovna said. People want to forget the war, for it is hard to live with a memory so cruelly charged, with a heart so tormented. But what will become of us if they forget and do not pass on their memories to us? What shall we become in our great and troubled world without those memories?
No, their memories are alive in us, kept in the human heart by a multitude of ways. That is what links past and future.
"You want to forget the war, but what do you want to remember?" I asked Tamara Stepanovna.
"I shall never forget, nor do I want to forget, what happened to me at Stalingrad. No, I haven't told you about this. It was at the very height of the fighting. I was dragging two wounded men, first one, then the other, a few metres at a time... I dragged them in turn like that because they were very badly wounded and couldn't be left; both

of them-how can I explain it to you in simple terms, after all, you aren't a doctor-were wounded in the thigh and bleeding badly.
"Suddenly, when I had crawled a little way off from the battle, the smoke grew thinner and I discovered that I was dragging one of our tankmen and a German... I was horrified: our men were dying there and here I was, dragging out a German. I hadn't been able to feu the difference in the smoke: their clothes were partly burned, both were groaning they weren't talking, after all. There was no way of telling. But now I saw that the overalls of one were different, everything was different. What was I to do? I dragged our wounded soldier forward and thought: "Should I go back for the German or not?" There was not much further to go. I knew that, if I left him, he would be dead in a few hours. He would bleed to death... And I crawled back for him. I went on dragging them both..,
"When I recall that event now, I never cease to be amazed at myself. We were In the midst of the most terrible battles. When I saw dead Nazis, I was glad; I was happy that we had killed so many of them. But then? I am a doctor, I am a woman.,. And I was saving life. Human life was very precious to us. I was saving the world.
"After the war it was a long time before I could get used to no longer needing to be afraid of the sky. When my husband and I were demobilized and were travelling home, I couldn't look out of the window. There was so much destruction, so many ruins... Empty, black chimneys stood up. For some reason they seemed very tall. I remember that, in one place, a white stove with a chimney stood in the middle of a field. Just one stove in the middle of a large, level field...
"I want nothing for myself. I don't need anything, any luxuries. Let there be nothing at all, as long as there is peace. Let there even he no bread. Peace. Only peace. Peace, you understand! We fought for this peace, you see... Young people died for this life. What did they regret? That they would die and not a single child of theirs would remain anywhere. There were four years of war-four children could have been born. I was afraid of dying, too, before I had had time to bear a child. Let me have a little girl, I thought, so that she may have a different life. It was a little girl that I wanted. And after the war a daughter came... Then I wanted a granddaughter. And after the war a granddaughter came."
Could a people be conquered whose women dragged the enemy wounded as well as their own from the battle-field at the worst hour, when the scales of History swung so terribly? Is it possible to believe that a people whose woman wanted to give birth to a girl and believed that her life would be different from her own, that this people wants war? Can it be in the name of that that Woman saved life, struggled for peace, was mother, daughter, wife, sister and Soldier?
Let us bow down to her, bow down to the very ground. Bow down before her great mercy, her infinite compassion.