

*My Life with Boris*

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Naina Yeltsina



ALMA BOOKS

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## Author's Note

I don't like publicity. I try to avoid doing interviews. I only began to agree to them after Boris died. Now it is my duty to my husband. In the years since his death, a generation has grown up that knows little about the first president of Russia and about 1990s politics. It has become fashionable to tell horror stories about that era, and not everyone can distinguish between truth and lies. I see quite young people at the Boris Yeltsin Museum in Yekaterinburg, and I can see that they are discovering the recent history of their country right before my eyes. This history turns out not to be as hopeless as they have been told. I have observed how they are simply glued to screens showing interviews taped for the museum with eyewitnesses and people who took part in the events of the 1990s.

When we speak honestly of the hope with which we lived in the 1990s and don't hide the problems and pains that accompanied it, we are believed. What I saw in the museum of Russia's first president became an important moment for me. Before, I was certain I was recording my memoirs only for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. My daughters tried to talk me into turning my stories into a book, but I didn't agree. Only after the opening of the museum did I understand – they were right. And although at the time I never felt like the wife of a president, I realize that for almost ten years I stood by the side of a person who was responsible for an enormous and very complex country at a defining moment in its history. I saw a lot that had huge significance for the new Russia from very close by, and that is how it turned out – my personal life became part of Russia's history.

This book is not a historical essay, and I do not claim to portray a full picture of events. These are not the memoirs of a

politician – I am not attempting to analyse societal problems. This is not literary prose – I wrote in the language I speak. To be honest, as an author, I have only two virtues: I cannot bear a lack of accuracy – I try to be precise in details – and I am unable to embellish facts.

– Naina Yeltsina

NAYA GIRINA

### Editor's Note

While Naina Iosifovna was preparing this manuscript for publication, we spoke at length, of course, and I could not stop myself asking questions. I recorded her answers on a tape recorder in the hope that we could transcribe them together later, but this turned out to be impossible. There are certain things about which, for various reasons, a person will not talk – unless they are asked about it specifically. I asked – and I really wanted our conversations to be part of the book. I'm glad that Naina Iosifovna agreed. This is how my "Questions on the Margins" have come to be in her memoirs.

– Ludmila Telen

## An Attempt at a Genealogy

My very first memory is from Titovka – a village with which our whole family history is associated:

I am in a cottage. I am probably about four years old; I am lying on a Russian stove and my ear aches badly. A pillow is being warmed for me so I can warm my ear. My grandfather is stroking my leg – he obviously feels very sorry for me. I think it was winter. This is my first memory of Titovka. After that trip, I only went there in the summer – but I went every year, throughout nearly my whole childhood. The last time I went was in 1946, when I was fourteen years old.

According to historical archives, Titovka (which is approximately 150 kilometres from Orenburg) was founded in 1928 by a citizen of the Ryazan and Voronezh Governorates. Peasants from Central Russia began to settle in the area during the time of Catherine II, but were considered state serfs. The neighbouring village was called Khokhly, and Ukrainians lived there. A little farther afield was the Tatar village of Mustafino. There were no mixed marriages between Russians and Tatars, but I don't recall any conflicts.

Both my mother and father had the same last name: Girin. They were probably very distant relatives – there were a lot of Girins in Titovka. There were also a lot of Zhdanovs, Podkovyrov and Samorukovs – people referred to one another by nicknames rather than their last names. Children, on the other hand, were known by their father's or mother's name. If the mother was Alexandra – or “Lyoksa”, as they would say in Titovka – her children were called Lyoksiny, or “Lyoka's”. If the father was called Konstantin, the children would be called “Kostiny”. There were Maksimkin, Anyutkin... The children of my grandmother Domashi were called “Domashkin”.

Apparently, the founder of our village was called Tit Podkovyrov. The maiden name of my great-grandmother, Vassa Nikitichna Girina, was Podkovyrova. Birth certificates state that her son, my grandfather Alyosha, was married in 1908 to Matryona Timofeyevna when he was twenty-two years old, and in 1910 their son Iosif, my papa, was born in Titovka. Later, they had two daughters: Vassa was born in 1917 and Yekaterina was born in 1923.

My mama's parents, Fyodor Fomich Girin and Domna Gavrilovna Samorukova, were married on 5th November 1899. In 1912 – there is a note on the birth certificate – my mama Mariya was born, and three years later her sister Anna was born.

#### *Questions on the Margins*

“Why did you begin searching for information about your family's past? Was it fashionable to do so?”

“My grandchildren began asking me questions, and I suddenly realized that I didn't know anything, really, about my grandparents. It's strange, but while they were alive it never occurred to me to ask them anything – the same with my parents: we never spoke of the past. It was somehow not right – or rather, we just weren't keen on it. I don't even know exactly where I was born...”

“According to the documents, it was in Titovka.”

“Yes, I know that – and soon after my parents married, they moved to Orenburg (known as ‘Chkalov’ back then). Did my mama return to Titovka when she was about to give birth? Or did they go to Orenburg only after I was brought into the world? While my parents were alive, I wasn't interested in this, and now there is no one to ask.”

Mama and Papa had known each other since childhood – you could almost say since birth. Their homes were near each other. They studied in the same school – there was no other in the village. Mama's mother told me that at first they didn't want Papa as

their son-in-law. They had in mind some other young man, from a more well-to-do family – who, as my grandmother said, “was very good with his hands”. But Mama loved Papa very much and insisted on having her way. Papa served his stint in the army, and in 1930 they were married. In 1932 I was born.

My name also has an interesting history. The name I was given at birth was Anastasiya, but for short I was always called Naya. This isn't just true of me, though – I have some acquaintances in Orenburg called Anastasiya whose names are shortened to “Naya” by their families to this day. So, at home, I was called Naya from birth. “Naya” turned into “Naina” when I was about ten years old.

Papa liked how I watched over younger children, and said that I should be a teacher. But it seemed to him that the children wouldn't be able to pronounce “Anastasiya Iosifovna” – “Naina Iosifovna” was easier. When my friends came over, they heard how my parents addressed me. Igor Bogdanov, a boy in our friendship group, would greet me at social gatherings with a paraphrase of Pushkin's line from *Ruslan and Lyudmila*: “O knight! Here comes Naina!” And that's how it was – to my family and friends I was Naya or Naina, and Anastasiya according to my documents. I liked both names. A school friend from the Institute told me only recently that Boris, when he heard my name, told his classmates, “Let's call her ‘Nastya’...” But it didn't work – I was already “Naya” to everyone.

Mix-ups with my name began at work. I would go on a business trip with ID saying “Anastasiya”, but my colleagues called me “Naina” – and the questions would begin. Or the chief engineer of the Institute would come into the office and address me as “Anastasiya Iosifovna” and I wouldn't react. Eventually, I grew so sick of this that one day, on my way home from a trip with a colleague, I went into the register office (which just so happens to be the very same one where Boris and I would register our marriage in 1956) and asked, “Can I change the name on my passport?” The CRO official said “Of course” – and then she asked why. “I've been called ‘Naina’ since childhood, and I can't get used to

‘Anastasiya’.” She was surprised. “Such a pretty name – everybody is called ‘Nastya’ nowadays...” Nevertheless, it turned out to be easy to change – I wrote a statement and brought in my documents. Boris was away on a business trip, and only when I received my new passport did I show it to my husband. He didn’t react at all, and didn’t say a word. But he called me “girl” for a rather long time after that – he didn’t call me “Naya” or “Naina”. If he had asked me then to put my name back to “Anastasiya”, I would have done so, without a doubt. But he didn’t ask.

### *Questions on the Margins*

“Did Boris Nikolayevich really like the name ‘Anastasiya’ better than ‘Naina’?”

“He didn’t say so at the time, but in later years he spoke with regret of my changing my name. He really did like the name ‘Anastasiya’ a lot. ‘Why did you stay quiet when I changed the name on my passport, then?’ I asked him. He replied: ‘That was how you decided it.’ That was, in general, his nature – he was a very tactful person. We returned to this topic a number of times. One day, out of the blue, Boris proposed to the children: ‘Let’s call Mama “Nastya”!’ Of course, everyone decided against it – the whole world already called me ‘Naina’... But for some reason the topic kept coming up again and again.

“Once, when we were holidaying in the South with the Chernomyrdins, Boris and Viktor Stepanovich (Chernomyrdin) called me ‘Nastya’ for an entire evening. Another time, Galina Pavlovna Vishnevskaya proposed calling me by a double-barrelled name. We laughed.”

“And you never regretted changing your name?”

“It’s not an issue that ever bothered me. Although I do remember I once said to Galina Pavlovna Vishnevskaya, ‘When I die, let them put “Naina-Anastasiya” on the headstone’... But even though my life has been lived with two names, both lived peacefully within me.”

## Childhood Memories

Papa worked in the militarized security at the Orenburg Railway. I think it was due to his service in the army that he ended up in the railway troops – after he completed his service, he decided to move to the city, and he found a job where his army experience came in handy. He almost always wore a railway uniform – a tunic and breeches. Papa only got as far as eighth grade at school – but completed the last two years as an adult in evening classes, and loved studying for the rest of his life. He joined the Party early. He graduated from the Party school – the evening university of Marxism-Leninism – and travelled to some course or other in Kharkiv. He wrote very correctly.

In 1934, he was transferred to the city of Chelkar in Kazakhstan – something to do with the running of the Orenburg Railway. My recollections of that time are rather fragmented. That is understandable: we went to Chelkar when I was seven years old. Even so, some memories of our life in that city are preserved clearly.

I remember endless sands stretching to the horizon, the heavy frost in the winter and the dry heat in the summer. The sand would get so hot that we children could poach eggs in it. We would sprinkle hot sand on a raw egg and, when the sand cooled, roll the egg to a new place and once again sprinkle hot sand on it. We would do that several times, and as a result the egg could be eaten, although the egg white was a little runny. Sometimes we would hide the eggs from one another, and then try to find them – so they were a food and a game at the same time.

Another recollection: one year, on 1st May, Mama and Papa went to visit someone. Mama wore a long chiffon scarf, which blew in the wind. The scarf was bright and semi-transparent – I had never seen it before. Mama would rarely dress up – there was never really an occasion for it. Another time, when my parents were getting

ready to go out, I asked Mama if I could have that scarf – but of course I couldn't tie it the way she had. I simply wrapped myself in it. I didn't wear it for long – it was so hot I had to take it off. Later, when I went to study in Sverdlovsk, Mama gave that scarf to me. I wore it for many years.

Here is an episode that has stuck in my memory – I understood its meaning only years later. One day Papa, returning home from work, took down a portrait from the wall that had apparently been cut out of a magazine. He folded it four times, took the photograph of his parents down from the wall and hid the portrait behind the backing. Mama asked what had happened. “Now Marshall Vasily Blyukher is an enemy of the people,” said Papa. And he added a phrase – I don't remember it word for word, but the sense of it was: “Time will tell.” For some reason, he didn't tear up the portrait of Blyukher – he didn't burn it, he didn't throw it away: he hid it. Decades later, I tried to find that portrait; I asked my brother to look through the old photographs. He found the picture of Papa's relatives in a frame, but nothing behind it.

\* \* \*

In 1939, Papa was transferred to the Emba Station – this was also in Kazakhstan, but closer to Orenburg. We moved into a three-storey building: there were several such buildings at the station. The railway workers' families lived in our building. We occupied two rooms of a three-room apartment. Our neighbour had also once worked at the railway, but when we moved to Emba she was already retired. To me, my sister Roza and my brother Lyonya, she was simply “babushka”, or “grandmother”. In fact, she took the place of our grandmother – she looked after us when Mama was out, she fed us... Her help was really needed when in 1944 a fourth child – Tolya – was born.

In Emba, I started school. In 1941 I was in second grade.

Papa wanted to go to the front, but he was left in the rearguard, “in defence”. The railway was a strategic component, and work

there equated to military service. Papa was often away on various trips, accompanying freight. He was usually only away for a day or two, but due to unforeseen complications or inspections he could often be delayed. Sometimes, when he returned, he would say: “They opened up a train carriage.” Although the culprits were severely punished, there were even robberies during the war years. I remember that Papa would often say, “How could they not be afraid?”

Of course, we did not understand the full horror of the war, but we saw the constant fear in the eyes of the adults. The words “once again a city surrendered” rang in our ears... Everyone was afraid that the Germans would take Moscow. In fifth grade, we began to learn the German language. Our teacher, I now realize, was a Volga German. We definitely didn't want to study German – why did we need to speak the language spoken by our enemy?

For some reason, I don't have detailed recollections of school, although I attended it from first to fifth grade. All I remember is the faces of almost all of my classmates – but I have forgotten their names, except for my first school friend, Ali Kulagina. Her parents had been evacuated from the Baltics. Amazingly, I remember the name of the place where they lived: Zaslauks. Many years later, I learnt that this was a suburb of Riga, but at that time I only knew that Alya had come to us from somewhere far away – from a territory occupied by the Germans.

I also remember Valya Korostylyov, who lived in the house across the street. Sometimes I saw him in the window, and I always hoped I would meet him when I went over to visit Alya. This was the first time I fell in love – from a distance.

During most of the war years, there was a shortage of regular notebooks, so instead we wrote on notebooks sewn together from cut-up newspapers. In order to see our writing more clearly, we made the ink thicker by chipping lead into it from a pencil.

Later, Boris told me about the terrible famine in the Urals, which his family endured during the war. A piece of half-baked bread mixed in part with bran was shared between everyone – and

then there was no more food for the entire day. We lived more comfortably, of course. We had our own kitchen garden during the war years, where we grew potatoes, watermelons, melons and pumpkins. Mama would bake the pumpkins in the winter. I can still remember their sweet taste – which was most probably made all the better because we were always hungry. Later, at our dacha near Moscow, I began to grow pumpkins myself. Of course, they were nothing like the ones I ate in my childhood. In Emba, the pumpkins grew huge – as big as a wheel – and were white on the outside, with juicy, yellow pulp inside – a special sort that I have never come across anywhere else.

What saved us from starving was not only our kitchen garden, but also help from our relatives from Titovka. Both Mama's and Papa's parents had their own farms – with cows, sheep and chickens. And, of course, kitchen gardens where they grew not only vegetables but wheat, rye and millet. In Titovka, on the whole, everyone lived fairly well. Although the farmers turned in a large portion of the produce to the State, something remained for their families. When we returned to Emba after the summer holidays, we were given grain and flour – just as much as we could carry.

In the summer of 1943, Grandfather Alyosha gave us money to buy a cow. The cow lived with us for a year, or perhaps a little longer – thanks to her, there was always milk at home for the children. But one day, as Mama told us, the cow was “led away”. We kept her in a dilapidated barn not far from our house, and it was not particularly hard to open the door. We don't know who “led her away”. There was talk of some exiled Chechens in the area – perhaps it was them who did it. There weren't many Chechens in Emba, so they stood out – they wore big fur hats called “Chechenki”. They were a sorry sight – thin, eternally hungry, living in temporary huts made out of any materials they had to hand. The locals would give them something to eat occasionally – especially when the watermelons, melons and pumpkins were ripe. I remember Papa was sorting through the potatoes near our cellar one day when a Chechen came up to him and asked

for help – Papa dumped some potatoes into a large cloth sack for him. People were afraid of the Chechens in Emba – even the children were afraid of them, but they pitied them more, and they didn't mistreat them. Of course, I didn't understand how they had ended up in Kazakhstan. Chechens were simply part of our lives. I learnt of their deportation in 1944 only later, when I was quite grown up.

Really the only delicacy for us in those years was dried milk, which came in a sort of large white pancake. The dried milk could be crumbled and chewed for a very long time, and it had a slightly sweet taste. Kazakh women sold it at the railway station. When we didn't have any money, they would break off a piece and give it to us for free. We ran every day to the railway station to get it; like all children, I loved sweets. To this day, I remember the taste of Mama's “rooster” candies and sugar boiled in milk. In those years, there was no granulated sugar: there was only a lump of sugar that Papa would very neatly cut with a knife to make exact little cubes. In my native Titovka there was only one type of candy sold in the local shop – colourful “little pillows”: there were no other sweets there.

No matter how hard everyday life was during the war years, there are also joyful scenes preserved in my memory. Tulips bloomed along the River Emba in the spring. The terrain there was rugged – hills interspersed with meadows – but the tulips covered them with colourful carpets: at first white, then yellow, and later red. They said there were black tulips growing somewhere, but I never saw them. It's strange – the colours never mixed. We gathered armfuls of these steppe flowers (for some reason we called them “field flowers”) and brought them home to give to our neighbours. We didn't have vases – we put them in jars, pots and cans.

They lasted a long time before wilting – perhaps because we changed the water often, and maybe because it was ice-cold: the water was from the pump. Once, I talked about these childhood memories at a meeting of the heads of the Commonwealth of Independent States which took place in our presidential residence.

After that, the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma would wish me a happy birthday by sending huge baskets of tulips.

In early 1945, Papa was transferred to Orenburg. My parents went with the younger children – Roza and Tolya – and left Lyonya and me in the care of our neighbour until the end of the school year. I remember, during the move, Mama wanted to take the house plants with her – two roses and a ficus plant. The roses were so huge that they had to be left in Emba, but they managed to squeeze the ficus into the freight carriage.

I lived with Lyonya, who was nine years old at the time, in two half-empty rooms without curtains, without Mama and Papa. Our neighbour, the “babushka”, made us meals and washed and ironed our clothes. She had long since become an honorary member of the family, and my parents left Lyonya and me with her with no qualms.

On 9th May 1945, Emba celebrated Victory Day – quite differently to how it was marked in Moscow: there were no fireworks, no evening festivities, but it still felt like a holiday. Not far from our home were several big reservoirs. In order to prevent the water from overheating in the summer or freezing in the winter, they were covered with earth, and they looked like little hills. During the Victory Day celebrations, boards were put over them, creating a podium for speakers. There were lots of people around, hugging each other, making noise and rejoicing. I think there were also loudspeakers, from which music could be heard. I remember well the feeling, which was like that of a festival.

The days went by, and the school year came to an end. Lyonya and I waited for the day when our parents would come to collect us. To this day, I get upset remembering what happened during those days in May, although it was more than seventy years ago.

The little boys in Emba collected animal bones – big ones – and drilled holes in them, into which they poured lead to make heavy balls called *asychki*. They used them to play a game that had its own rules. The lead could be melted only on hot coals; parents

didn’t give coal to their children, of course – the boys collected it at a railway siding, where engines were shunted off the main tracks.

One day Lyonya went along with his older friends to collect coal. As I understood later from the grown-ups’ stories, he saw some lumps of coal on the tracks behind a train, and made towards them. Just at that moment, the engine driver pulled the whistle – my brother probably thought the train was going to move forwards, and it seems he quickly lay down on the tracks, so he could be the first to reach the coal. But the engine driver, who hadn’t seen him, moved in the reverse direction... Lyonya was killed instantly.

I learnt about what had happened from our neighbours. This was a huge tragedy for everyone. The engine driver lived in a nearby house – our families were friends. Mama, who was summoned from Orenburg, was in a terrible state, of course. Papa came a little later, and tried to support her as much as he could. On the same hill where the victory had just been celebrated, they placed the little coffin on stools. Mama threw her arms around it and sobbed convulsively. For many years, Mama and Papa went to visit Lyonya’s grave in Emba. Sometimes Papa went on his own.

Time went by, but Mama could not recover from the tragedy. She would cry quietly all the time. I noticed that she had tears streaming down her cheeks, no matter what she did – whether cooking dinner or washing or sewing. She only began to recover when Volodya was born, in 1947. She had to pull herself together – our younger brother was born, and Tolya hadn’t even turned three yet. Once again, we had four children in the family.

\* \* \*

1947 was the first year in which I didn’t go to Titovka for the summer. Mama didn’t let me go: my brothers were still quite small; she needed my help – I was already fifteen, after all.

Even before that, as I recall, Mama hadn’t joined me in spending the summer with our relatives – in 1945 and 1946, Mama brought

me to Titovka and then returned to the city. I remained there all summer. The village was very beautiful – it had a kind of soft beauty – and was rather large, divided into five kolkhoz brigades, or “collective farms”. My grandparents were in the second brigade.

I would wake up in the morning and the shutters would still be closed – it was dark, but through the cracks bright sunrays shone through. It was still early – I could hear the roosters crowing. I heard the voice of one of my grandmothers, Motya or Domasha, calling, “Have you woken up yet, Granddaughter?” I would take it in turns staying with my mother’s parents and my father’s parents – my grandmothers would be very cross if this routine was broken.

When they made blini for breakfast, I would run to the cellar, which was covered over with animal skins in order to preserve the ice collected earlier in the spring. Cellars were not locked in Titovka. Milk, cream and farmer’s cheese were kept on a block of ice; sometimes meat was kept there as well: all our relatives slaughtered their lambs in turn and shared them between several homes. In the cellar, I would stick my finger into every pot and take a taste of the cream. Then I would return home with a pot. We always had farmer’s cheese, sour cream and heavy cream on the table. All the food was cooked on a Russian stove, in what were called “skulls” – brown clay pots. If we didn’t eat all the blini, Grandmother would pour cream on them and leave them soaking on the stove. Then they would be cut up with a knife, like a pie. I still do this today – and my daughters, although they try not to eat fattening things, can’t turn down this delicious rustic food.

### Questions on the Margins

“Do you really still do your own cooking?”

“Yes, I often do. Boris and I had a tradition of family dinners on Sundays. After he passed away, I continued to gather everybody together; when the weather allows it, we eat by the large Russian stove near the house.”

“The stove is outside? Why?”

“The food cooked on a Russian stove always turns out very special. I always wanted such a stove, but there was no space for it in the house. I decided that we would put it outside, next to a big table, under an awning – when the children and grandchildren visit, we have dinner here, as a rule. If the weather is good, of course. The stove was installed in the traditional way – I even phoned people in Titovka to find out what size a Russian stove should be. No one remembers any more – they all have hobs and ovens nowadays. Then I found a heritage stove craftsman, who was from the Volga – he is a young man, but his great-grandfather and grandfather installed stoves. It was all done very professionally. My grandchildren love to climb up on the stove. In the summer, we dry apples from our garden on top of it.”

My grandmothers baked *chinyonki* – sweet pies with sorrel – which are a speciality in Titovka, and have a bittersweet taste. We also made them with wild strawberries, or sometimes with *poznika*, which is what we called nightshade. There were two types of nightshade in our garden: black and green. When Grandma took me to weed the garden, she’d let me eat the nightshade right from the bushes. Although it was wild, it was not weeded out – it was left between the rows of potatoes and millet.

We made *shchi* (cabbage soup) and *kulyosh* – a soup seasoned with millet. In the summer, very often we would have *okroshka*. A hard-boiled egg would be crumbled into kvas, a drink made from fermented rye bread. Chopped onion, dill and cucumbers would be added. I don’t think it even had potatoes in it. No meat. We made the kvas ourselves, of course, and it was – as they said in Titovka – “invigorating”. You definitely also had to add grated radish and sour cream.

For supper, we would have either potatoes with meat or *pelmeni*, a kind of dumpling, with potatoes, but in the summer we would not usually cook meat. We would chop the potato with a *sechka* – a short hatchet with a round blade – into a special wooden

trough (not so long ago I was given an almost identical *sechka* and trough, and I use them to this day). In Titovka, we made the *pelmeni* larger, like *vareniki*, another sort of stuffed dumpling, and not small, as they do in the Middle Urals, where Boris grew up.

We baked bread ourselves twice a week. It was wrapped in hand towels so it wouldn't get stale, and it was called "pie". My childhood pleasure was to cut off a piece and dip it into heavy cream or sour cream – to this day, nothing seems more tasty to me.

Even now I can see all the details of this village life – I can describe them quite precisely; I remember not only where the houses were, but also the flowers and their scents.

My paternal grandparents' *izba*, or cottage, was smaller than my maternal grandparents' home. The house was at the end of the street. The front door led through wooden vestibules to a long plank table and a rough-hewn bed, where Granddad loved to rest in the summer when it was hot. Beyond the vestibules was a room where a large iron-framed bed stood. Then there was a room with homespun rugs. In that room was Papa's sister Katya's bed. It had a coverlet, from under which peeped a crocheted lace runner. And from this room you could enter the kitchen with the Russian stove.

Mama's sister Anna also crocheted lace, and there was a lot of it in the house. I can still remember a crocheted tablecloth, throws on a hill of pillows with a *dumka*, or little cushion, on top and lace stitching on the pillowcases. The lace and the bedlinen were light, and the blankets were bright. They were sewn from multicoloured scraps, which were usually square in shape, but sometimes a square was sewn from four different triangles – the finished thing was very pretty.

The bedlinen was made from hemp, which everyone grew in their kitchen garden (the grandmothers had looms, but I never saw them working on them, for some reason). After washing the sheets, in order to make them softer, they were beaten with a rolling pin, village-style: they would be wrapped around the rolling pin and then beaten with a *valyok* – a long wooden stick – or a *rubel* – a board which was corrugated on one side. There were

also irons, which were heated with coal – they were only used to iron blouses and skirts.

My maternal grandparents' large, bright house stretched out along the street. There was a front garden where mallow and white roses grew – this is probably why, to this day, I love to plant them wherever I live; I even planted them at the presidential residence in Barvikha – where, of course, these village flowers were not grown before I arrived. I remember how we once drove up to the residence and I saw from the car window mallow bushes on the side of the road. A day or two later, I returned there on the commuter train with one of my grandsons. We dug up the bush and returned to the residence and planted it there. The guards reprimanded me later for travelling without an escort. Those mallow bushes took very well. Later I replanted them – now they are growing around the gazebo at my house. As well as the mallow, there were lilacs in my grandmother's front garden, although I never saw them bloom – the summer holidays began when the lilacs were already past blooming.

For fuel, people in Titovka used *kizyak*, or pressed dung, which was made during the summer. I happily took part in this. The process was very simple. We collected dung, mixed with straw, from the stables. The straw served as bedding for the cattle, which were kept in a cold building. The straw was changed every day, so a lot of dried dung accumulated over the winter. In the summer, we added water to it. A horse was made to walk around in a circle to crush this mass of straw. Then, with the help of a special wooden mould (called a *stanok*), we would put the crushed straw on the grass. The mould made two *kizyaks*. I was given a lighter *stanok* to hold, and made just one *kizyak*. The *kizyaks* were shaped like bricks, although they were about one and a half times larger. They were dried in the sun – first on one side, then on the other. All the smells were thus aired out. We didn't know of any other type of fuel in Titovka. What firewood could you get when all that was around was the steppe? The *kizyaks* were stacked up, sometimes under the roof and sometimes simply under the open

sky, covered over with straw to protect them from the rain. You could get a lot of heat from a *kizyak* – and in the winter, I was told, it was warm in the cottages.

A nameless creek – now called Klyuch – ran through the village. Each home on that side of the road had little kitchen gardens out front, where cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and dill were grown – these gardens ran down towards the river. And the “big kitchen gardens”, as they were called, were at the back, where the livestock was kept. Potatoes, carrots and peas were planted there, as well as wheat, rye and millet. Many people had barns in front of their vegetable gardens, where they kept the grain – although by the summer they were already empty. In order not to disturb those in the house, young people would often spend the night in the barn. Sometimes they would party all night, dancing to an accordion or singing folk songs to a Gypsy balalaika. Sometimes they played cards until dawn. Even so, I never saw the young people in the village drink alcohol.

In front of the barns grew a soft grass which we called *murokb*. I learnt the correct name only recently: *sporysh*. In the morning, you would walk barefoot over the grass, and it would be covered with dew. The water in the creek at that time of day was pure and cold. Then – before carts went across the river or the livestock was driven over it – people got their drinking water from this river, too.

Several years ago a film was made about me, in which I was surprised to discover a sequence claiming that my parents were Old Believers. The film toured an abandoned village where they supposedly lived. I don't know where the journalists got that idea from. The village did not look at all like Titovka, and there were never any Old Believers in our village. There weren't any in Boris's family either – although, for some reason, there was a rumour there were. My grandparents were religious, but as far as I remember they did not go to church, which closed in Titovka in the 1920s. Icons hung in the front room of both sets of grandparents' houses. From an early age I knew that you had to be careful with icons, which were kept under glass. I would very carefully wipe

this glass with a dry cloth – not a homespun towel, but a waffle towel bought in a shop.

Both of my grandmothers always prayed before they went to bed. Thanks to them, I learnt the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary very early on. Now I myself go up to the icon to pray before bed. In our village, no one prevented you from praying; children were baptized and funeral services were held for relatives. I was baptized, of course – just like everyone else in Titovka.

The so-called feast days were always celebrated widely. Obviously, I could only witness one of them first hand: Holy Trinity Day, or Pentecost, was celebrated in June. The day before, children and adults alike went into the steppe to collect thyme. In the village, it was called *chubur*. The grass was collected in the hems of long skirts or in aprons – whatever people could manage. They returned home and covered the floor and the window sills with thyme. The fragrance in the air was so strong that it made you dizzy.

#### *Questions on the Margins*

“Are you a believer?”

“Yes, I am a believer, but not a churchgoer. I have lived my whole life with God in my soul. And I go on living like this. I remember that I, along with the local children, would climb into the kitchen gardens at night and dig up carrots, cucumbers and peas – then we would go down to the creek and wash and eat them. Not because we were hungry – it was just an adventure. Once we got into our garden. Grandmother noticed the mess and asked me if it was our doing. “No,” I replied. Grandmother kept silent, and then, after a little while, she said, “You know, we have an icon in the corner, and God is on it. He sees everything, and always punishes people for lying, for betraying and for being mean. If not you, then your family.” These words had a great effect on me, and have remained impressed on my mind ever since – especially the part about our family. I can't stand lying. If I realize that someone is lying, I feel something churning

inside me. I tried to imbue my daughters with the same attitude towards lying.”

“How did belief coexist with a Soviet atheistic upbringing?”

“It coexisted quite well. At Easter, we always had an atheists’ evening, in which we all took part, and then we all went to church to bless the Easter bread, *kulich*. At home, we celebrated both Easter and Christmas. I always knew that we were atheists. And that God existed.”

“Were you married in church?”

“No. In later years we intended to do that. Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow encouraged us to do so – but it was too late.”

After Holy Trinity Day, the harvest of hay began. The haymaking and harvesting, I soon realized, were the most important events of the summer in the village. My parents’ sisters always took me along to the harvest. We dressed for the fields in the same way as for evening festivities, except that we put on bast shoes – other than that, we wore the same clothes: long skirts, blouses with peplums and kerchiefs tied behind “*chik*-style”, as we said in Titovka.

The way people spoke in Titovka was different than in the city, and not just in terms of local idioms and expressions – it was a proper dialect. During the first days of my summer holiday, I would become accustomed to speaking like one of the villagers so I wouldn’t stick out. It was enough that I dressed like a city girl: my knee-length dresses by village standards were short and very different to those of my Titovka peers. Their clothes were very similar to those worn by the adults – the same long skirts and kerchiefs. I looked like a peewit next to them in my short dresses. My mother sewed dresses for me, usually adorned with small flowers – she loved such a pattern. They were in short supply, so any dress seemed elegant to me.

On our way to the fields, we would all sing together. We would go by cart, standing up, leaning on the high sides where the scythes, rakes and pitchforks were stowed. We would leave very early in the morning and returned at sunset. The work was very hard,

but I had the lightest load – I raked the bevelled and dried rows. Then the rows of hay were gathered into mounds and dragged to the place where haystacks were made. A stack was about four metres high – no less. We worked all day, with a short break for lunch – everyone brought food with them from home. We got very tired. On the way back, we didn’t sing.

Harvesting the wheat was even more difficult – the wheat had to be cut by hand and tied into bundles; harvesters turned up only later. Then about ten bundles were combined into stacks to dry, with the ears upwards. Only after this was the wheat taken to the *tok* – a special platform under the roof of a barn – where it was threshed with a flail. During the harvest, all I was allowed to do was turn the milled grain so that it would dry better. The dried grain was poured into sacks and hauled away to the grain silo.

During harvest time, we sometimes worked at night – in Titovka, in the moonlight, nights were amazingly bright. Unlike during the hay harvest, we didn’t bring food with us to the wheat harvest, as there were camps in the field where food was prepared.

War, of course, changed life in Titovka, but my mama still came with us every summer – she missed her parents a lot. To be sure, getting to the village and back to Emba became more and more difficult.

Once we were returning home from Titovka. We travelled to Orenburg in a pickup truck loaded with grain. Grandfather Alyosha stopped the car on the Big Road (that’s what they called the highway to the city in Titovka). The driver didn’t want to take us: he refused to put children on the flatbed with grain sacks – it was dangerous.

But there were no other options: there were no empty trucks going from Titovka to the city, and only one other person could sit in the cabin. Grandfather practically begged the driver, promising to give him a bag of grain. The road was hard, and we were jerked from side to side – we had to hang on either to each other or to the sacks. Then, when we reached a hill, something happened to the truck. The pickup rolled downhill, gathering speed. Grabbing

us, Mama shouted: “Hang on tight!” It was very frightening. The driver tried to control the vehicle with the steering wheel. When the speed fell a little, he turned the wheel and brought the truck to sit across the road – it rocked and came to a stop, and by a miracle it didn’t turn over. Ever since, I’ve been afraid of any form of transport except trams.

### *Questions on the Margins*

“Are you also afraid of planes?”

“Of course.”

“And yet you flew so many times in the years of Boris Nikolayevich’s presidency. How did you cope?”

“What could I do? But I was very afraid. Boris would say, ‘Why are you shaking? You’re with me.’ ‘And how will that help?’ I’d ask him. ‘If we crash, we’ll be together,’ he said. He never even fastened his seat belt.”

“And you’re afraid even now?”

“Not so much for myself. But I’m always worried about my children and grandchildren.”

When the truck came to a halt, the driver jumped out of the cabin and came straight over to us and said: “Are you alive?”

Somehow the truck was repaired and we safely reached the city. As for the sack of grain that had been promised to him by Grandfather, the driver would have none of it. That was very generous of him – to refuse grain during a time of hunger was not easy.

During the war years, there were almost no men left in Titovka – there was just the chairman of the kolkhoz, who had returned home from the front wounded. There were also old men (in my view, of course) – above fifty years of age. There were teenagers – boys who were not yet old enough to be drafted. The old men, the teenagers and the women worked in the fields. That constituted the entire work force. And in the evenings, when the work in the fields was done, the women knitted socks and mittens for their men at the front.

Whenever the postman brought a death notice, half the village would gather around the home in question. There was desperate wailing. The bereaved would cry for a while – and then go back to work.

Even so, in comparison to our life in Emba, life in the village seemed to me to be calmer and more comfortable. Therefore, even during the war years, the trips there were a joy to me. It so happened that, after 1946, I stopped going to Titovka. I returned there only five decades later, in 1996.

I had, for a long time, wanted to return to my native village, but for some reason it never worked out. But one day I was in Orenburg – I was visiting my papa’s grave. All the relatives had gathered, and someone had come from Titovka, so Papa’s sister Katya said, “Naya, come to Titovka right now and have a look around!” To be honest, I hadn’t intended to go there – Boris was already President, and I was travelling with security; if I had been alone, I would have agreed without hesitation. But after wavering for a bit I decided: “I’ll go.” I spoke with my security guards, and asked them to organize the trip, although there was very little time – we would have to return within a day. We travelled for a fairly long time. Finally, the van stopped in front of a club that had recently opened. And there was a crowd. The entire village had turned out.

“Why all this?” I asked. I became completely flustered. The priest came out to meet me, with an icon he gave to me as a present. The head of the district came. So I asked: “And are all the lads and lasses here?” In Titovka, they didn’t say “boys and girls”, but rather “lads and lasses”. They thought I wouldn’t recognize anyone – so many years had passed... they were no longer lads and lasses, but granddads and grannies. I myself was already nearly sixty-five. I began to look closer, and I realized that I recognized almost all of them, and called each one of them by name. Each one! They were amazed. Then we all went to the school. Suddenly, I smelt chicken noodles. It turned out that lunch had been prepared in the school cafeteria – “Just like when I was a girl!” I said. Chickens

and lambs had been slaughtered for my arrival by the family of Papa's sister Katya, I learnt. The chickens went into noodle soup, and the lambs became shish kebab – something they didn't use to make in Titovka. I looked at the tables: there was every sort of thing you could imagine laid out. But most astonishing of all were the soaked pancakes from the Russian stove. We forgot our age and joined together in remembering our childhood – how we had cut the hay, what we had used to thresh it, the location of a rye field, of a wheat field, the place where the potatoes grew – and I don't think anyone was left feeling awkward.

All of my grandparents had died by this time, but it turned out that our neighbour and distant relative Aunt Fekla was still alive. Of course, I wanted to visit her! But suddenly it started raining, which it had not done in Titovka since the spring. Everyone was happy – except me: I was wearing white shoes. At least I was wearing low heels! I was told, “You can't get through the mud there.” But they couldn't talk me out of it. Of course, my feet got very muddy. But even so, I felt such peace of mind talking to the old woman who remembered both me and my grandmother so well. It was just a shame that we couldn't reach the cemetery where my relatives were buried, as the rain got in the way.

When our van was about to drive off, one of my childhood friends came running up with a jar of wild-strawberry jam and knocked on the window. “Naya, take this... Take this – I always loved you,” he said.

## One of Five

When we moved back to Orenburg in 1945, we didn't have our own home. At first we lived with a distant relative of ours, who worked in the Party Executive Committee from morning until night – during the day there were only her two children in the large three-bedroom apartment. We occupied one of the rooms – it was quite cramped, of course. After a while, we moved in with other relatives, who had built a large house. They didn't have any children and could give us two rooms. Life became more comfortable, but Mama and Papa were very aware that we were crowding other people's houses, and they tried to find other accommodation.

My parents, following someone's recommendation, found a place on Komsomolskaya Street. The owner of the house, Vasily Isayevich, was single and, as it seemed to me at the time, an old man.

We had the whole house to ourselves, except for one small room. Vasily Isayevich worked a lot and returned home late. He came in quietly, poured himself some tea and went straight to his room by the front door. We didn't get in each other's way. We had a common room, which also acted as my parents' bedroom, and two smaller rooms, where the children slept. In this house, my brother Vova was born.

In January 1947, Grandfather Alyosha came to visit, and he said firmly: “It is time for you to have your own house.” It turned out that he had kept some extra calves and lambs, which he sold in order to raise money for our home. He found us a log house, and a year later we moved in. Later, Papa bought some used railway sleepers and added a large kitchen extension, in which he placed a Dutch stove – Mama loved to bake pies on it.

Around the house was a small plot of land, and Mama used every inch of it as a kitchen garden. There she grew cucumbers,