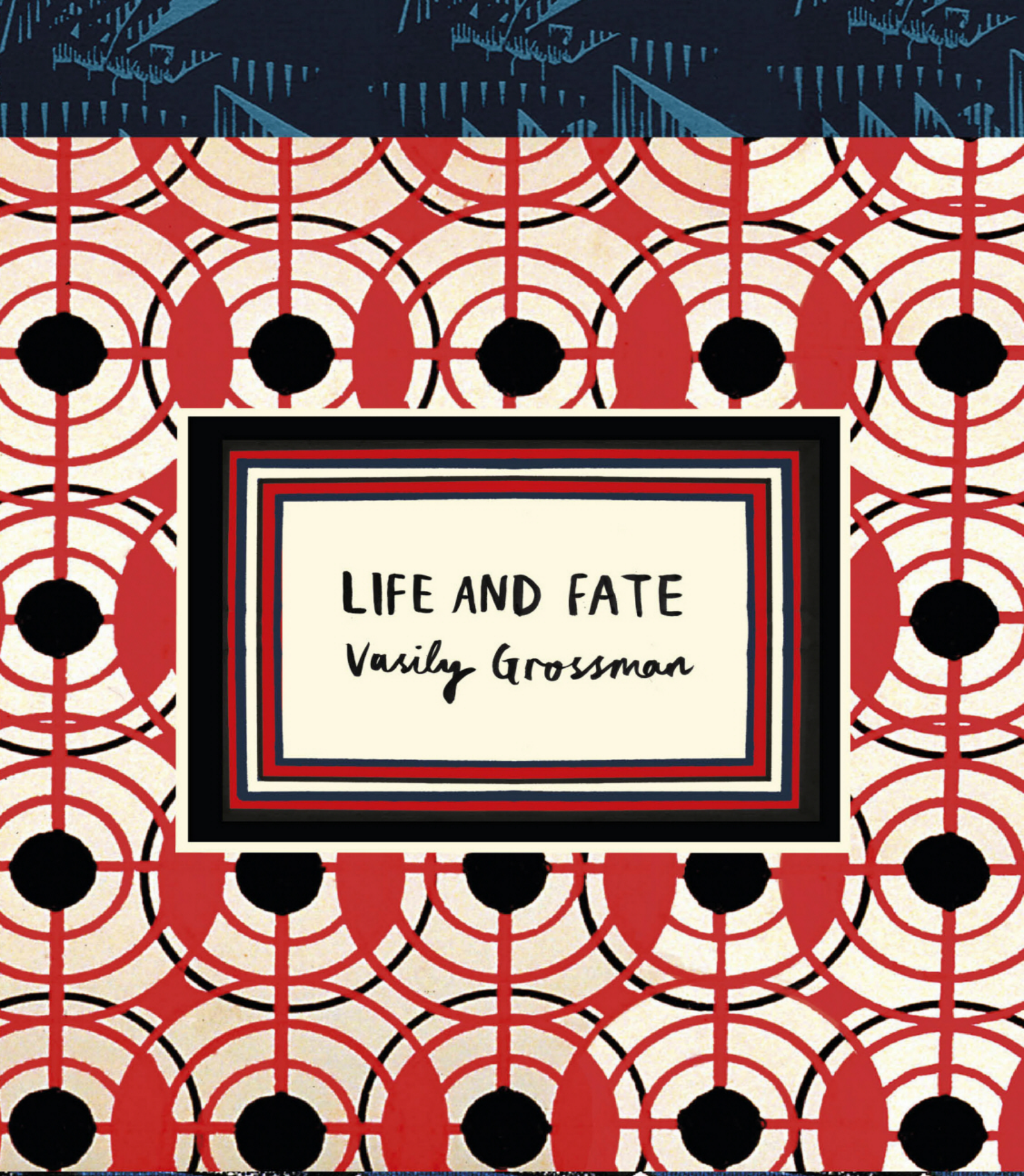

LIFE AND FATE
Vasily Grossman

VINTAGE

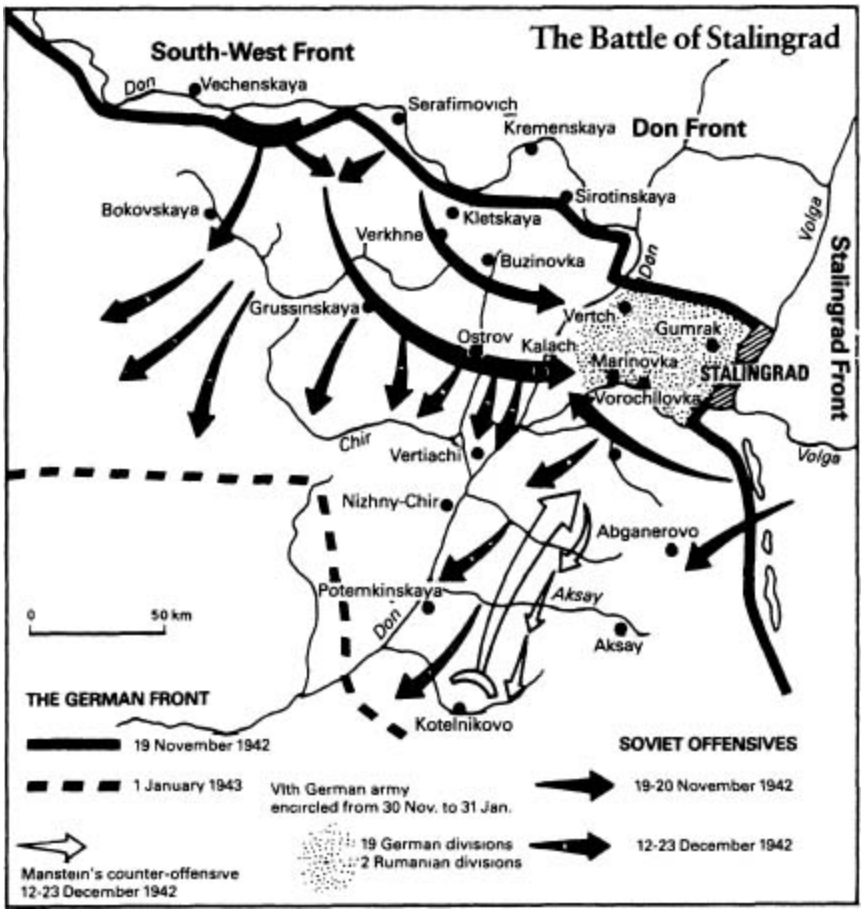
Contents

Vasily Grossman was born in 1905. In 1941 he became a correspondent for the Red Army newspaper, *Red Star*, reporting on the defence of Stalingrad, the fall of Berlin and the consequences of the Holocaust, work collected in *A Writer at War.* In 1960 Grossman completed his masterpiece *Life and Fate* and submitted it to an official literary journal. The KGB confiscated the novel and Grossman was told that there was no chance of it being published for another 200 years. Eventually, however, with the help of Andrey Sakharov, a copy of the manuscript was microfilmed and smuggled out to the west by a leading dissident writer, Vladimir Voinovich. Grossman began *Everything Flows* in 1955 and was still working on it during his last days in hospital in September 1964.

Linda Grant was born in Liverpool on 15 February 1951, the child of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants. She is the author of *Sexing the Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution*, *The Cast Iron Shore*, *Remind Me Who I am Again*, *Still Here*, *The People On The Street: A Writer's View of Israel*, *The Clothes On Their Backs*, *The Thoughtful Dresser* and *We Had It So Good*. Her second novel, *When I Lived in Modern Times*, set in Tel Aviv in the last years of the British Mandate, won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2000.

Also by Vasily Grossman

Everything Flows


The Battle of Stalingrad
South-West Front
Don
Vechenskaya
Serafimovich
Kremenskaya
Don Front
Sirotinskaya
Bokovskaya
Kletskaya
Verkhne
Buzinovka
Volga
Stalingrad Front
Grussinskaya
Vertch
Gumrak
Ostrov
Kalach
Marinovka
STALINGRAD
Vorochilovka
Chir
Vertiachi
Volga
Nizhny-Chir
Abganerovo
Potemkinskaya
Aksay
0
50 km
Aksay
THE GERMAN FRONT
Kotelnikovo
19 November 1942
SOVIET OFFENSIVES
1 January 1943
VIth German army
encircled from 30 Nov. to 31 Jan.
19-20 November 1942
19 German divisions
2 Rumanian divisions
12-23 December 1942
Manstein's counter-offensive
12-23 December 1942

LIST OF CHIEF CHARACTERS

The Shaposhnikov Family and their Circle

Shaposhnikova, Lyudmila Nikolaevna	
Shtrum, Viktor Pavlovich	*Lyudmila's husband, a physicist, member of the Academy of Sciences*
Nadya	*daughter of Viktor and Lyudmila*
Shaposhnikova, Alexandra Vladimirovna	*Lyudmila's mother*
Shaposhnikova, Yevgenia Nikolaevna ('Zhenya')	*Lyudmila's sister*
Abarchuk	*Lyudmila's first husband, arrested in 1937*
Shaposhnikov, Anatoly ('Tolya')	*Lyudmila's son by Abarchuk, a lieutenant in the army*
Spiridinova, Marusya	*sister of Lyudmila and Yevgenia, drowned in the Volga during the evacuation of Stalingrad*
Spiridinov, Stepan Fyodorovich	*Marusya's husband, director of the Stalingrad Power Station*
Spiridinova, Vera	*daughter of Marusya and Stepan Fyodorovich*
Shaposhnikov, Dmitry ('Mitya')	*brother to Lyudmila, Yevgenia and Marusya, now in a camp as a political prisoner*
Shaposhnikov, Seryozha	*Dmitry's son, a soldier at the front, in house 6/1*
Krymov, Nikolay Grigorevich	*Yevgenia's former husband, a*

	commissar in the Red Army

Viktor's Colleagues

Sokolov, Pyotr Lavrentyevich	*mathematician in Viktor's laboratory*
Sokolova, Marya Ivanovna	*his wife*
Markov, Vyacheslav Ivanovich	*in charge of experimental work in Viktor's laboratory*
Savostyanov	*laboratory assistant*
Weisspapier, Anna Naumovna	*laboratory assistant*
Loshakova, Anna Stepanovna	*laboratory assistant*
Nozdrin, Stepan Stepanovich	*technician in Viktor's laboratory*
Perepelitsyn	*electrician in Viktor's laboratory*
Svechin	*head of the magnetic laboratory*
Postoev	*a doctor of physics*
Gavronov, Professor	*a specialist in the history of physics*
Gurevich, Natan Samsonovich	*a doctor of physics*
Chepyzhin, Dmitry Petrovich	*director of the Institute*
Pimenov	*administrative director of the Institute while it is in Kazan*
Shishakov, Aleksey Alekseyevich	*Academician, appointed administrative and scientific director on the Institute's return to Moscow*
Kovchenko, Kasyan Terentyevich	*appointed deputy director*
Dubyonkov	*head of the personnel department*
Ramskov	*secretary of the Institute Party Committee*

Badin	*head of the Scientific Section of the Central Committee*

Viktor's Circle in Kazan

Madyarov, Leonid Sergeyevich	*historian, Sokolov's brother-in-law*
Artelev, Vladimir Romanovich	*chemical engineer, the Sokolovs' landlord*
Karimov, Akhmet Usmanovich	*translator into Tartar*

In the German Concentration Camp

Mostovskoy, Mikhail Sidorovich	*an Old Bolshevik*
Gardi	*an Italian Priest*
Ikonnikov-Morzh	*a former Tolstoyan, called 'a holy fool' by his fellow prisoners*
Chernetsov	*a former Menshevik*
Yershov, Major	*a captured Russian officer*
Nikonov, Major	*a captured Russian officer*
Osipov, Brigade Commissar	*a captured Russian officer*
Zlatokrylets, Colonel	*a captured Russian officer*
Gudz, General	*a captured Russian officer*
Kirillov, Major	*a captured Russian officer*
Kotikov	*a captured Russian officer, a Party member*
Liss, Obersturmbannführer	*SS representative on the camp administration*

In the Russian Labour Camp

Abarchuk	*Lyudmila's former husband*
Nyeumolimov	*former commander of a cavalry*

	brigade during the Civil War
Monidze	*former member of the Presidium of the Communist Youth International*
Rubin, Abrasha	*a medical orderly*
Barkhatov	*a criminal, Abarchuk's assistant*
Tungusov	*an old guards officer*
Ugarov, Kolka	*a criminal*
Konashevich	*a former aircraft mechanic and boxing champion*
Magar	*an Old Bolshevik, Abarchuk's former teacher*
Zakorov	*a criminal, in charge of Abarchuk's hut*
Perekrest	*leader of the coal-team*
Dolgoruky, Prince	*a mystic*
Stepanov	*former professor at the Economics Institute*
Mishanin, Captain	*the operations officer*
Trufelev	*a medical orderly*

On the Journey to the Gas Chamber

Levinton, Sofya Osipovna	*an army doctor, friend of Yevgenia*
David	*a boy*
Borisovna, Musya	*a librarian*
Bukhman, Rebekka	*a relative of David's*
Rozenberg, Naum	*an accountant*
Karasik, Natasha	*a shy girl*
Yankevich, Lazar	*a machinist*
Deborah Samuelovna	*his wife*
Vinokur, Musya	*a pretty girl*

Khmelkov, Anton	*a member of the special unit*
Zhuchenko, Trofima	*a member of the special unit*
Kaltluft, Sturmbannführer	*the commander of a Sonderkommando*

In the Lubyanka Prison

Krymov, Nikolay Grigorevich	*Yevgenia's former husband, a commissar*
Dreling	*a Menshevik*
Bogoleev	*an art historian and poet*
Katsenelenbogen	*a former Chekist and Moscow compere*

In Kuibyshev

Shaposhnikova, Yevgenia Nikolaevna	*Lyudmila's sister*
Genrikhovna, Jenny	*former governess to the Shaposhnikov family*
Shargorodsky, Vladimir Andreyevich	*an aristocrat, in exile from 1926–33*
Limonov	*a man of letters from Moscow*
Rizin, Lieutenant-Colonel	*Yevgenia's boss*
Grishin	*head of the passport department*
Glafira Dmitrievna	*senior tenant in Yevgenia's lodgings*

At Stalingrad Power Station

Spiridonov, Stepan Fyodorovich	*the director*
Spiridinova, Vera	*his daughter*
Andreyev, Pavel Andreyevich	*a guard*
Nikolayev	*the Party organizer*
Kamyshov	*the chief engineer*

Getmanov's Circle in Ufa

Getmanov, Dementiy Trifonovich	*secretary of an obkom, appointed commissar to Novikov's tank corps*
Getmanova, Galina Terentyevna	*his wife*
Nikolay Terentyevich	*Galina's brother*
Mashuk	*an official in the State security organs*
Sagaydak	*an executive in the propaganda department of the Ukrainian Central Committee*

Members of a Fighter Squadron of the Russian Air Force

Viktorov, Lieutenant	*a pilot, Vera Spiridinova's lover*
Zakabluka, Major	*the commander of the squadron*
Solomatin, Lieutenant	*a pilot*
Yeromin, Lieutenant	*a pilot*
Korol, Junior Lieutenant	*a pilot*
Martynov, Wing-Commander Vanya	*a pilot*
Golub, Political Instructor	*billeted with Viktorov*
Skotnoy, Lieutenant Vovka	*a pilot, billeted with Viktorov*
Berman	*the squadron commissar*
Velikanov, Lieutenant	*a pilot, the duty-officer*

Novikov's Tank Corps

Novikov, Colonel Pyotr Pavlovich	*the commanding officer, Yevgenia's lover*
Nyeudobnov, General Illarion Innokyentyevich	*Novikov's chief of staff*

Getmanov, Dementiy Trifonovich	*the commissar*
Karpov, Colonel	*the commander of the 1st Brigade*
Byelov	*the commander of the 2nd Brigade*
Makarov	*the commander of the 3rd Brigade*
Fatov	*a battalion commander*
Vershkov	*Novikov's orderly*
Kharitonov	*Novikov's driver*

Officers of the Soviet Army in Stalingrad

Yeremenko, Lieutenant-General*	*commander-in-chief of the Stalingrad Front*
Zakharov, Lieutenant-General*	*Yeremenko's chief of staff*
Chuykov, Lieutenant-General*	*commander of the 62nd Army*
Krylov, Major-General*	*Chuykov's chief of staff*
Gurov, Divisional Commissar*	
Pozharsky*	*artillery commander of the 62nd Army*
Batyuk, Lieutenant-Colonel*	*commander of 284th Rifle Division*
Guryev, Major-General*	*commander of 39th Guards Division*
Rodimtsev*	*commander of the 13th Guards Division*
Belsky	*Rodimtsev's chief of staff*
Vavilov	*commissar of Rodimtsev's division*

Borisov, Colonel	*Rodimtsev's second-in-command*
Byerozkin, Major	*in command of a regiment*
Glushkov	*Byerozkin's orderly*
Podchufarov, Captain	*in command of a battalion*
Movshovich	*in command of a battalion of sappers*
Pivovarov	*battalion commissar in Byerozkin's regiment*
Soshkin	*political instructor in Byerozkin's regiment*

Soldiers in House 6/1

Grekov, Captain	'*house-manager*'
Antsiferov, Sergeant-Major	*in command of sapper detachment*
Vengrova, Katya	*a radio-operator*
Kolomeitsev	*a gunner*
Batrakov, Lieutenant	*in command of artillery observation post*
Bunchuk	*an observer*
Lampasov	*a plotter*
Klimov	*a scout*
Chentsov	*a member of the mortar-crew*
Lyakhov	*a sapper*
Zubarev, Lieutenant	*in command of the infantry*
Shaposhnikov, Seryozha	*a soldier*
Perfilev	*a soldier*
Polyakov	*a soldier*

In the Kalmyk Steppe

Darensky, Lieutenant-Colonel	*a staff officer from Front Headquarters*
Alla Sergeyevna	*the wife of an Army commander*
Claudia	*the mistress of the Member of the Military Soviet*
Bova, Lieutenant-Colonel	*the chief of staff of an artillery regiment*

Officers of the German Army in Stalingrad

Paulus, General Friedrich*	*commander of the 6th Army*
Schmidt, General*	*Paulus' chief of staff*
Adam, Colonel*	*Paulus' adjutant*
Bach, Lieutenant Peter	*an infantry officer*
Krap	*an officer in charge of a detachment of scouts, in hospital with Bach*
Gerne, Lieutenant	*a staff officer in hospital with Bach*
Fresser, Lieutenant	*an officer in hospital with Bach*
Lenard	*an SS officer*
Chalb	*the commander of the military police*
Eisenaug, Sergeant	*an NCO in Bach's company*

* Historical characters.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER, YEKATERINA SAVELIEVNA GROSSMAN

LIFE AND FATE

Vasily Grossman

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY Linda Grant

TRANSLATED BY Robert Chandler

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction by Linda Grant

In the summer of 2003 I read Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate.* It took three weeks to read and three weeks to recover from the experience. Novels fade, your immersion in their world turns into a faint dream, and then is forgotten. Only great literature grows in the imagination. Grossman's book did more than grow, it seemed to replace everything I had previously thought and felt, filling me with what Grossman calls 'the furious joy of life itself' which I have never lost.

Life and Fate is about the terrible years of the mid-twentieth century in the Soviet Union. Its vast canvas covers the Battle of Stalingrad, the Gulag, the coercion of a state which decides as diktat the nature of reality and of truth, however preposterously distant from actual reality and truth. Generals on the Front, common soldiers, mothers, wives, sons, daughters, sisters, ex-husbands, a boy about to advance on his first kiss, Nazi camp commandant, a prison interrogator, a holy fool, scientists in a Moscow laboratory – all of these characters swarm through the pages. Great ideas are discussed: the nature of totalitarianism, the betrayal of the Bolshevik revolution, the nature of anti-Semitism, military strategy, the question of freedom and how we can be free despite the external circumstances that chain us.

Life and Fate can be a daunting, monumental read. But its greatness is not the weight of those themes, for at the end of its 871 pages you are left with a message which, to the reader just starting the novel, might appear so banal that it could be inscribed on a greetings card. For Grossman, communism and fascism are ephemera. What matters, what endures, is the individual and the ordinary act of human kindness, indeed the often senseless act of kindness, as when an old Russian woman, about to hoist a brick in the

face of a captured German soldier, instead finds to her own incomprehension that she has reached into her pocket and given him a piece of bread. And in the years to come, will still never be able to understand why she did it.

Grossman was not opposing ideology with Christian forgiveness, far from it. He was a Soviet Jew whose Jewishness became more and more meaningful to him as he was caught between the vast threats of anti-Semitism both from Nazi Germany and at home in the form of the increasingly deranged conspiracy theories of Stalin. The passion of *Life and Fate* is not for ideas or history, but for the ordinary; for human life in all its perplexing, muddled, contradictory and infuriating variety. Grossman takes us into the minds of a group of soldiers waiting in the forest: one is full of dire forebodings, one is singing, one is chewing bread and sausage and thinking about the sausage, one is trying to identify a bird, one worries about whether he'd offended his friend, one is composing a farewell poem to autumn, one is remembering a girl's breasts, one is missing his dog. This passage leads to the substance of Grossman's central thought, which at the time he was writing could lead to the arrest of a Soviet citizen: 'The only true and lasting meaning of the struggle for life lies in the individual, in his modest peculiarities, and his right to these peculiarities.'

Such treasonous ideas can topple empires.

In the weeks after I first read *Life and Fate* I was desperate to talk about it, and found a tragic absence. No one I knew had read the novel. Almost no one had even heard of it. The early years of the last decade were the time when *Life and Fate* and its author were only just beginning to be discovered by English-language readers, following the Harvill Secker publication of Robert Chandler's translation. These early awakenings of interest were largely due to the publication of two best-selling books, *Stalingrad* and *Berlin: The Downfall* by the military historian Antony Beevor, who

drew heavily on Grossman's journalism as source material. Grossman spent the war as a correspondent, he was there at the Battle of Stalingrad and is believed to have been the first reporter of any nationality to enter the extermination camp of Treblinka and make speakable the horrors he found there.

It was ironic that a former British army officer should lead me directly to one of the greatest European Jewish writers of the century, in a field dominated by Proust, Kafka, Isaac Babel, Bruno Schulz and Joseph Roth.

Life and Fate affected me like no other novel. It affected me personally. The danger in describing this impact is that it will sound to new readers as if Grossman is a writer with a message, and messages tend to kill art stone-dead. Grossman did, of course, have something to say, but its purpose was against the whole notion of the Big Idea. Whatever Grossman was up to, he was not trying to recruit anyone; instead, he was telling us to leave each other alone, to stop harming each other with our insistence on telling others what to think and how to live.

Yet Grossman changed me. The compassion of Kafka for his commercial traveller trapped in the body of an insect, the historic scope of Joseph Roth and Isaac Babel's hard-headed understanding of war, were all elements of an impact that it is difficult to describe, even years later. I had written novels about idealists, all failed, but political idealism still seemed worth the effort. Idealism is a romantic pursuit, it speaks to the heart, it flatters our egos. Grossman, no reactionary, taught me that the right to our own modest peculiarities is the only right worth fighting for. In his novel there are no heroes, no saints and no supermen. This must have seemed an extraordinarily dangerous message in the Soviet Union of the early Sixties, despite the Khrushchev thaw.

Life and Fate, unlike the work of the Soviet Union's other internationally-recognised dissident writers, Boris Pasternak

and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was virtually unknown in the West until the mid-Eighties because the year after its completion in 1960 the book was, in the author's words, 'arrested'. KGB men came to Grossman's flat, removed all copies, removed carbon paper and even the ribbon from his typewriter in case it had left a tell tale imprint. He was told that if his book were ever published, it would not be for another two hundred years. The Soviet Union was careful not to make a martyr of him and he continued to publish stories in important journals in the remaining few years of his life. But there were no Nobel Prizes or committees abroad campaigning for his safety, and part of the torment of his final years was the belief that his life's work would become, in the word he used to describe the prisoners in Stalin's camps, 'dust': a forgotten book about times everyone wanted to forget.

Grossman died in 1964, aged fifty-eight, in terrible pain from cancer. For another twenty years after his death, *Life and Fate* was in the black hole of Soviet censorship, until the 1980s, when an edition appeared in France. In 1984 one of the Soviet Union's leading dissident writers, Vladimir Voinovich, admitted that it was he, together with the help of the Nobel Prize winning physicist Andrei Sakharov, who had smuggled a microfilm out to the West.

One of Grossman's other regrets was that he had not been allowed to edit his novel. What you are about to read is a copy from an imperfect microfilm of an imperfect book. Its length is unwieldy, the cast of characters overwhelming, its structure anything but tight. Grossman often writes in the pedestrian, utilitarian prose known as socialist realism (there would have been no chance of publication on any subject had he tried a literary form not approved by the state). Still, there are many occasions of blunt beauty in the intensity of his observation, gained from his years as a reporter: 'Blinking their scorched eyelashes [the soldiers]

forced their way back to the bunkers through the thickets of red dog-rose.'

The impact of *Life and Fate* is not to be found in its style, but in the cumulative effect of the stories Grossman tells about his characters; the living are full of life, arguing, making love, crying and worrying. At its centre are the Shaposhnikova sisters, Lyudmila, married to Viktor Shtrum, a Jewish nuclear physicist working in a Moscow lab; Yevgenia, the divorced wife of Krymov, a commissar in the Red Army, fighting the Battle of Stalingrad; and Marusya, wife of the director of the Stalingrad power station.

Beyond this circle lie the radiating lives of all those they are connected to: Lyudmila's son Tolya, fighting at the Front; the sisters' brother Dmitry, a political prisoner, and his son Seryozha; another soldier; Viktor's mother, trapped behind enemy lines, and Sofya, one of the sisters' friends, who is on a train en route to the gas chamber. *Life and Fate*, like its nineteenth century counterpart *War and Peace*, to which it is frequently compared, encompasses the whole of Soviet life, from Stalin down to the luckless peasant in the line of fire. In hearing their stories, the reader is rubbed raw by life. Characters appear, we become immersed in their thoughts, their feelings, their conversations, their romantic dreams and jealousies, and in a sentence they are wiped out: by a bullet or the sinister knock at the door. How can life end in the middle of the story? Because life always does.

Writing the novel in the Fifties, a decade after the events he describes, Grossman was still consumed with grief for the death of his mother, murdered in the massacre at the Berdichev ghetto and the strains this had placed on his marriage. His own unhappiness is reflected in the story of Viktor and his mother. One of the best-known and most powerful chapters is the letter she sends him from the ghetto, describing the gradual deterioration of conditions for the Jews, and her knowledge that she will not survive. Yet,

like the whole book, even this chapter ends with an exhortation to live, indeed the hope that her son lives for ever.

Grossman was born in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town which at the turn of the twentieth century was then home to one of Europe's largest Jewish populations, at one time it had eighty synagogues. Both his parents were Jewish, assimilated, educated and well-off. The family were not dwellers in the shtetls of Isaac Bashevis Singer; if they had been they were more likely to have emigrated to America around the time of their son's birth. They are believed to have met in Switzerland where his father was active in the revolutionary movement, and both were political activists who believed that the road to Jewish emancipation lay in the struggle for universal equality. A tragic error, as it turned out, and a bad choice for them personally. The couple separated early on, and Grossman's mother would find work as a French teacher.

Grossman married twice. His second wife, like Viktor's, was divorced from a previous husband who had been arrested and shot during the Great Terror of 1937, when the revolution devoured its own founders. She and her mother-in-law did not get on; had they done, his mother would probably have been living with them in Moscow, instead of in Nazi-occupied Ukraine where she met her death.

The horror of the Holocaust, which Grossman had witnessed at first-hand at Treblinka, the fate of his mother and the terrifying period of the Doctors' Plot[1] in the years just before Stalin's death when, for the second time in the century, state-sponsored anti-Semitism was directed at the country's Jews, combined to increase Grossman's sense of his own Jewish identity – not religiously, but he seems to have become conscious that universal liberation, the Bolshevik ideal, would in practice continue to be suffused with persecution and prejudice.

He, like everyone else who survived the period of the 1937 show trials which liquidated the revolutionaries of 1917, came to understand that guilt and innocence are meaningless when the state decides the nature of reality. For those of us living comfortably in the democratic West, it is difficult to understand the mental contortions that a person must make in order to survive both physically and with any form of inner moral code intact. Grossman takes us into the interrogation rooms and shows how an innocent man will confess to crimes he has not committed. Like Grossman, in the years of the Doctors' Plot when he was repeatedly and hysterically attacked as a Jew and a reactionary and had to write a 'letter of repentance', Viktor Shtrum finds himself out of favour. The nuclear physics in which he's carrying out his research is deemed to be 'Jewish' (because of the connection with Einstein) and hence unpatriotic. Viktor is made *persona non grata*, and then, with a single phone call, rehabilitated. In the months afterwards he feels that his rehabilitation is the normal state, until a moral dilemma forces him to confront the terrible nature of life in a system based on denunciation in the name of a higher good, where the Party is more important than the individual, where ideas are granted higher status than human life.

Life and Fate contains some of the most tragic scenes ever written in world literature. A fifty-year-old unmarried doctor, who has never felt a hand on her own body since childhood, finds an unaccompanied boy in the cattle car leading to the gas chamber. When she has the chance to avoid her death, she chooses instead to hold the child's hand as they are herded in to be murdered. Her final thought before the gas fills her lungs is that at last she is a mother. Individual acts of often senseless tender kindness light up the darkness of Grossman's world. A soldier leaning forward to kiss a girl

radio operator first tactfully brushes away a louse from the collar of her uniform.

Nothing human is off-limits to Grossman. We see Hitler go for a walk in the forest on his own and, despite the presence of thousands of armed guards at the perimeter, he still falls pray to the atavistic, fairytale fears of unseen presences in the woods. Leaving the cattle cars to enter the extermination camp, a ‘curly-headed man on all fours [drinks] from a puddle’ and a ‘hunch-backed woman [lifts] up her skirt to adjust the torn elastic of her knickers’. And in one of the most finely observed passages in literature, falling snow settles into the ears of dead German soldiers, lying on their sides waiting to be buried.

By the end of *Life and Fate*, the Battle of Stalingrad has been won, Nazi Germany is retreating. The defeated German army, the pride of the Reich, looks, to one of its officers, like a scene from the Stone Age, unshaven man reduced to hacking frozen horsemeat from the sides of a dead horse. In Stalingrad, a building that had started out as a tailor’s and dry-cleaner’s had been taken over as a German machine gun emplacement, and now the holes for their weapons are used to hand out the liberated town’s bread rations to queuing women.

The triumph over fascism for Grossman is partly that of armed men (he was no pacifist) but the novel’s insurrectionary observation was that the Soviet system, as totalitarian as fascism, had the same impulse to collectivise and dominate the individual. He sees all human groupings as bound by the same desire to win or defend the individual’s right ‘to be special, to think, feel and live in his or her own way’. But we fall prey to the belief that the race, the God or the party are the purpose of life, and not a means to an end. Those of us who grew up in the West in times of unparalleled peace and prosperity would do well to remember that Grossman’s lesson is as relevant now as in the black years of Stalinism and Nazism. The right to be

oneself, however modestly ordinary that self is, is not granted to millions in the world today, whether it is because of repressive political systems or religious ideology. Grossman's plea, to be left alone, continues to resonate, whether it is a man building a cathedral from matchsticks or a teenager choosing a mobile phone ringtone. Without these modest peculiarities, we are ciphers.

In the seven years since I first read *Life and Fate* I have urged all my friends to read it. In part this is from a sense of obligation to a great writer, to rescue his masterpiece from state-sponsored obscurity. But it is also because I want others to feel as I have done – that they are entering the heart of the twentieth century, touching its pulse. When *Life and Fate* was 'arrested', Grossman said that 'they strangled me in a doorway'. The novel should be as famous as *Doctor Zhivago* or *The Gulag Archipelago.* It will become so when it finds a critical mass of readers who understand that all that matters is the individual and the furious joy of being alive, to live as human beings and to die as human beings, not the mouthpieces of unreality.

Linda Grant, 2011

Footnotes

[1] The Doctors' Plot: In 1952, the increasingly paranoid Stalin believed there was a plot by Jewish doctors to assassinate him. Scores of Soviet Jews were dismissed from their jobs, arrested, sent to the Gulag or executed, accompanied by anti-Semitic propaganda in the state-run mass media.

Introduction by the Translator Robert Chandler

‘*Speaking for Those Who Lie in the Earth’: The Life and Work of Vasily Grossman*

Vasily Semyonovich Grossman was born on December 12, 1905 in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town that was home to one of Europe’s largest Jewish communities. His parents were Jews and they originally named their son Iosif. Being highly Russified, however, they usually called him Vasily or Vasya – and this is how he has always been known. At some point in his early childhood his parents appear to have separated. Vasily was brought up by his mother; a wealthy uncle helped financially. From 1910 to 1912 Vasily and his mother lived in Switzerland, probably in Geneva. His mother, Yekaterina Savelievna, was later to work as a French teacher, and Vasily would retain a good knowledge of French throughout his life. From 1914 to 1919 he attended secondary school in Kiev and from 1924 to 1929 he studied chemistry at Moscow State University.[1] There he soon realized that his true vocation was literature. He never, however, lost interest in science; it is not for nothing that Viktor Shtrum, the central figure of *Life and Fate* and in many respects a self-portrait, is a nuclear physicist.

After graduating, Grossman moved to the industrial region known as the Donbass, working as a safety inspector in a mine and as a chemistry teacher in a medical institute. In 1932 he was able to return to Moscow, and in 1934 he published both ‘In the Town of Berdichev’ – a short story that won the admiration of such different writers as Maksim Gorky, Boris Pilnyak and Isaak Babel – and a novel,

Glyukauf,[2] about the life of the Donbass miners. In 1937 Grossman was admitted to the prestigious Union of Soviet Writers. His novel, *Stepan Kol'chugin* (published 1937–40) was nominated for a Stalin Prize.

Critics have often divided Grossman's life into two parts. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, claims that 'Grossman is the only example, or at least the most significant, of an established and leading Soviet writer changing his spots completely. The slave in him died, and a free man arose.'[3] This sounds impressive, but it is wrong to draw so absolute a distinction between the 'conformist' writer of the 1930s and 1940s and the 'dissident' who went on to write *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows. Glyukauf* may seem dull today, but it must once have had some power to shock; in 1932 Gorky criticized a draft for 'naturalism' – a Soviet code word for presenting too much unpalatable reality. At the end of his report Gorky suggested that the author should ask himself: 'Why am I writing? Which truth am I confirming? Which truth do I wish to triumph?'[4] Even then such a cynical attitude to truth would almost certainly have been anathema to Grossman. It is hard, however, not to be impressed by Gorky's intuition; it is as if he sensed where Grossman's love of truth might lead him. In 'Four Days', a story written a few years later, Grossman quoted the maxim 'Absolute truth is the most beautiful thing of all'; and in 1961, after the manuscripts of *Life and Fate* had been confiscated, Grossman would write to Khrushchev, 'I have written in my book what I believed, and continue to believe, to be the truth. I have written only what I have thought through, felt through and suffered through.'[5]

Something about Grossman – his love of truth, or perhaps his critical intelligence – seems to have alarmed not only Gorky, but also Stalin. Like *Glyukauf*, Stepan Kol'chugin may seem orthodox enough today, but Stalin deleted it from the list of Stalin Prize nominees, apparently saying that this novel about a young revolutionary was 'Menshevik in

sympathy'.[6] Grossman was, in reality, neither a Menshevik nor a martyr; nevertheless, he showed considerable courage during the years of the Great Terror. In 1938, when his second wife, Olga Mikhailovna, was arrested, Grossman adopted her two sons by her previous husband, Boris Guber, who had himself been arrested the previous year; but for Grossman's prompt action, the boys might have been sent to one of the camps for children of 'enemies of the people'. Grossman then wrote to Yezhov, the head of the NKVD,[7] pointing out that Olga Mikhailovna was now *his* wife, not Guber's, and that she should not be held responsible for her former husband, with whom she had broken completely; later that year Olga Mikhailovna was released.[8] Grossman's friend, Semyon Lipkin, commented, 'All this may seem normal enough, but (. . .) only a very brave man would have dared to write a letter like this to the State's chief executioner.'[9] It was around this time that Grossman began work on several stories about arrests and denunciations; these were first published only in the 1960s.

Grossman's move towards dissidence was a gradual one; no single event should be seen as uniquely important. Like most people, he acted inconsistently. Throughout the war years he appeared to feel no fear of either the Germans or the NKVD; in 1952, however, as Stalin's anti-Jewish campaign gathered momentum, Grossman agreed to sign an official letter calling for the harshest punishment of the Jewish doctors allegedly involved in a plot against Stalin's life.[10]

Grossman's weakness at this moment may seem surprising. It is possible that it was a momentary aberration; just before being asked to sign, Grossman had quarrelled with the poet and editor, Aleksandr Tvardovsky and he was, no doubt, feeling confused.[11] *Life and Fate*, however, is almost an encyclopaedia of the complexities of life under totalitarianism, and no one has articulated better than Grossman how hard it is for an individual to withstand its