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ALEXANDER

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LONDON



Pushkinskaya and the Deribasovskaya. Nothing like it in Leningrad." "Come, come," I said. "I know, I know," he said, "it's a better-looking city, more cultured, and all that, it's got historic monuments—Peter the Great and Catherine, and Lenin—a more cultured city, one might say, a more historic city. But I don't like it. The climate is all wrong. There's no warmth here as there is in the south, it's kind of damp here all the time. But I'll grant you—Leningrad would be a very nice city—if you put it on the spot where Odessa stands. . . ."

Never mind about the air-raid shelter and the civil defence instructors' training centre. But what was interesting that day was our visit to the great Leningrad Public Library. This great library, at the corner of the Nevsky and the Sadovaya—one of the "danger corners" during the shelling—claims to be, with its nine million volumes, the largest library in the world, or at any rate in Europe, with the exception of the British Museum. In recent years, it is true, the Lenin Library in Moscow is believed by some to have surpassed the Leningrad Library, but nowhere in Leningrad did I find any support for that view. At any rate, for its immense collection of incunabula and first editions, Leningrad is certainly still miles ahead of Moscow. Even Moscow admits that.

It was a beautiful sunny day when we drove up to the public library, but as the Sadovaya street corner is a dangerous one, and shelling had been going on since morning, it was decided that we park the car in the Alexandrinka Square on the other side of the library. Here we were, standing outside the car, and looking at the beautiful building of the Alexandrinka, with its freshly repainted yellow stucco, and with the whole exquisite ensemble of Rossi's stucco buildings beyond, and to the left of us the little square in front of the Alexandrinka Theatre, with the bottle-shaped monument of Catherine, with Rumiantsev and Potemkin and other great men nestling below the sovereign's equally bottle-shaped skirt. It seemed almost miraculous how this beautiful corner of old St. Petersburg had escaped without a scratch. Although the streets were now very deserted—for the shelling was becoming heavier and heavier—this Alexandrinka

Square looked more beautiful than it had ever looked. And just then one shell, and then another, crashed into something quite near, perhaps five hundred yards away, on the other side of the Nevsky, somewhere behind the enormous granite pavilion with its plate-glass windows, which was once the most Gargantuan delicatessen shop in Europe—Eliseyev. Two clouds of what looked like brick dust shot up into the air. The tramcars in the Nevsky stopped and the few passengers came running out and dived into houses. A few other people could also be seen running for cover. We waited beside the car for a few minutes, not feeling too comfortable, but perhaps reassured by the extraordinary “luckiness” of the Alexandrinka Square. An ambulance dashed past, turning into the Nevsky. I uncomfortably recalled Major Lozak’s experience of the man who had staggered two steps down the Nevsky already without his head. The firing continued, but the shells were no longer exploding in this part, so we walked into the Nevsky—I had the feeling of slinking rather than walking—and round to the other “unlucky” side of the State Library at the corner of the Sadovaya where, according to Leningrad hearsay, the Germans had a special knack of landing their shells in the middle of the crowd at the tramstop. Actually it did happen once or twice—hence the legend.

But now there was no crowd at any tramstop, the Nevsky was still deserted except for an occasional army car, half a dozen people on the allegedly more sheltered side of the street, and a girl policeman who continued to stand on point duty. Then one of the tramcars with two passengers inside began to move. Clearly Leningrad had learned not to be too lighthearted about shelling.

We were taken up a narrow staircase into the office of the chief librarian, a pedantic-looking young woman with masculine manners, and wearing the Leningrad medal. Her name was Egorenkova. A sort of hard defiance was written on her face, as on so many other Leningrad faces. She showed neither pleasure nor displeasure at seeing us, and simply treated our visit as a small job that had come into her day’s programme. Like every other job, she would do it competently. Personally, I had the impression that she was a woman with whom personal

reactions no longer mattered; her whole existence had become public service and nothing else. Her one aim in life was to save the Leningrad State Library, and it was a sufficiently large task for any ordinary human being. She was defending 9,000,000 books against 80,000,000 Germans—against those creatures who, for the first time in many centuries in Europe, had made bonfires of books. Leningrad is, in many ways, a fanatical city—only a city with a touch of divine fanaticism could have done what Leningrad did—but in this rather frail, overworked young woman who was the chief librarian of the Leningrad State Library was this inner fanatical fire, a fire of devotion and a fire of hatred particularly noticeable. She said nothing to indicate it; her remark about a shell that had killed a lot of people in the Sadovaya, just outside the library, was made almost casually, with a complete air of “objectivity,” but I felt she would gladly make any German suffer all the torments of hell for what Germany had done to Leningrad and had tried to do to the State Library.

Perhaps I was just imagining it. For actually Egorenkova was completely businesslike from beginning to end; and yet, I am still sure of it.

“The outstanding fact about the library is,” she began, “that it never closed down. Not even in December 1941 or January and February 1942. By the time the blockade started, we had managed to evacuate only a very small part of our most valuable things. We had evacuated the most important incunabula and manuscripts, some unique Russian and foreign eighteenth and nineteenth century books, and our unique collection of newspapers published during the Civil War—360,000 items in all, out of a total of over 9,000,000. Our staff put in an enormous amount of work for the protection of this library. Our staff filled the attics of the building with sand—carrying there 2,200 cubic metres. To some extent we had to decentralise the library, and also to store away in our basements some of the most valuable items. Windows had to be bricked up and sandbagged; we secured water-tanks, pumps, fire-extinguishers, and large quantities of sand, and organised the whole fire-fighting system with the maximum thoroughness—allowing for the difficulties arising, for instance, from the absence of a

normal water supply. Our A.R.P. staff consisted of 102 people. We were lucky though. The only trouble we had from air raids was a few incendiaries in the autumn of 1941. Since then we have had three direct hits from shells; they damaged our roof, but no books suffered, and there were no casualties. A more serious problem was the lack of fuel and the effect of the cold and damp on our books. I shall come to this later.

“Before the war there were seven reading rooms in our main building; we had as many as 3,000 readers a day and as many as 9,000 books were issued in one day; moreover, we had to deal with some four hundred written queries a day.

“On June 22nd there was a sudden sharp drop in the library attendance. In August we closed down the main reading-room and opened a safer reading-room on the ground floor, with 150 seats. People who were very nervous could do their reading in the air-raid shelter. Not all people react the same way to bombing.

“Our real problems started with the coming of winter. We closed all the reading-rooms but opened two small ones—one used to be the newspaper room, the other was the staff dining-room. Both of these had little brick stoves. But in January 1941 we had to close down the first of these two rooms, and the former dining-room remained the only reading-room in this whole great library. There were days in January 1942 when only five readers came. But we continued to receive queries from soldiers and from various organisations, a lot of them on problems of nutrition, on the manufacture of matches, and the like.

“In March we managed to open another reading-room—a larger one, and the Lensoviet helped us to fit it with a more satisfactory stove, and we were also given some fuel.

“To-day we have about sixty readers a day; the number of readers is growing. We have ten or twelve new entries a day on the average. Now that the various technical and other colleges—such as the Polytechnic, the Pædagogic Institute, part of the University, are about to open again, the number of our readers is sure to grow in the coming months. But for the present, our principal readers now are engineers, army doctors, scientific workers—in short, specialists dealing with practical

present-day problems. We have no young students among our readers just now."

She was factual throughout, without any expression of approval, disapproval, hope or regret. What she said during our inspection of the library was also confined to statements of fact—without comment.

With its miles of book-shelves, the famous library looked almost normal. Here and there there were large gaps of empty bookcases—for instance a large set of bookcases labelled "Bibliothèque de Voltaire." The magazine room was open, with a somewhat scrappy collection of the latest numbers displayed on a large table—the Ministry of Information's *Britansky Soyuznik*, and copies of the *Lancet*, the *British Medical Journal* (about six months old) and (significantly) the American *Journal of Nutrition*, and other scientific magazines.

"These things come very irregularly," said Egorenkova. "Our great problem now will be to keep the books in good condition for another winter with little or no heating." And, pointing at the windows in one of the rooms, with no glass panes in them, she said: "We have had most of our windows blown out four times, but we are not putting in new glass or plywood just yet; the fresh air coming in is good for drying the books. We shall close the windows when the rainy weather starts."

On the main staircase was a display of various charts and diagrams, including several depicting the Allies' war effort. On another wall was a display of photographs and various documents on the occasion of the eighty-fifth birthday of Bychkov, the director of the manuscripts department of the library. "He isn't feeling very well, so he is not here to-day," said Egorenkova. "From the start he has refused to leave Leningrad." Again no comment.

We then went through the immense main reading-room almost as large as that of the British Museum. Everything seemed in order, but there were no readers. There were ten or fifteen readers in a smaller reading-room nearby.

Then we went down a long corridor which seemed almost interminable; it was lined with card indexes. "This catalogue was down in the basement at first, and there it got damp," said Egorenkova. "We brought it upstairs and dried it; no serious

damage was done, all the cards are legible and in good condition now. It was important to save the card index, which is our only absolutely complete catalogue. There's a handful that aren't quite dry yet," she added, pointing to a number of index cards spread out on a window sill. "They are the last ones."

On the second floor were still 3,500,000 foreign books—mostly French, German and English. "The most important incunabula, both Russian and foreign, we have evacuated," Egorenkova said. "We still have here, among other things, the archives of the Bastille—they were bought up for this library by a Tsarist diplomat in Paris."

Up till now there had been few signs of human life in the enormous building. But now we came into a large room which was buzzing with activity. Fifteen elderly women were here, filling in index cards, writing notes, sorting out piles of material—posters, manuscripts, newspaper cuttings, cartoons, ration cards and what not. "This is quite a new and special department," said Egorenkova, "here we are building up a complete record of the life of Leningrad and the Leningrad front in war-time. Meet Vera Alexandrovna Karatygina, a specialist in the history of Leningrad, Petrograd and St. Petersburg." No one could be more different than these two women. Karatygina was a handsome elderly woman with white hair, rouge and lipstick, a loud exuberant voice, and the shrill delivery of an enthusiastic school teacher.

"We disdain nothing," she said. "Everything that seems of the slightest historical value for the full reconstruction of the history of our defence of Leningrad, we keep and catalogue, and classify. Brochures, and invitation tickets of every kind, pamphlets, leaflets, membership cards—everything is important. Theatre tickets, concert tickets, programmes, concert bills—for instance the bills announcing the first performance in Leningrad of Shostakovich's Seventh—documents relating to our industrial, scientific and literary life; ration cards of the different periods of the blockade and after, a list of all the houses of Leningrad with, as far as possible, details of the number of people living there, damage through shelling, etc., A.R.P. instructions—some printed, other simply manuscript, photographs, copies of front newspapers and other publications, how-

ever ephemeral—all these we are collecting and classifying. We are also compiling large files of newspaper cuttings on every conceivable subject concerning the defence of Leningrad. And just now," she said, "several of us are here compiling an album of the rupture of the Leningrad blockade—with letters from soldiers who actually took part in it, and masses of other printed, written and photographic material."

The old ladies—most of whom looked like rather decrepit old gentlewomen who had seen better times—were up to their ears in cuttings and posters and bills and were so absorbed in their work that they scarcely seemed aware of our existence—any more than of the shelling that was continuing outside. As we went out I remarked to Egorenkova, "It must give these old ladies great satisfaction to take part in such a highly valuable enterprise." "Why do you call them old ladies?" she said, a little acidly. "They are not 'old ladies,' they are fully qualified librarians who have been for years on the staff of the library."

The Anichkov Bridge across the Fontanka, half-way down the Nevsky Prospect, and the Anichkov Palace, built by Rastrelli and Rossi, on one side of the river, and a beautiful baroque palace in red and white stucco—the name of which I forget—on the other, constitute another of the architectural beauties of Leningrad. The main feature of the bridge itself was now, however, missing—I mean its four famous bronze horses which Klodt made about 1850 and which are as much a part of Leningrad as the Chevaux de Marly—which they vaguely resemble—are part of Paris. There are many stories current about the removal to safety of the Klodt horses in the dark days of October or November. It was an arduous job, but it was completed in one night except that one of the horses was left standing in the middle of the Nevsky, waiting for its turn to be removed. People further down the Nevsky rubbed their eyes in the morning when they saw one of the Klodt horses apparently galloping down the street. To the literary-minded, the horse had clearly borrowed the idea of leaping off its pedestal from the *Bronze Horseman*. It is said that an old woman made the sign of the cross at so supernatural a phenomenon, and that another one burst into tears. She was con-