

"900 DAYS, 900 NIGHTS"

A STORY

By: C. Larry Briggance

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Peter and Tamara's wedding was simple, elegant and intimate. Their families and close friends witnessed the ceremony and applauded when the smiling couple turned and faced them. Peter and Tamara Govoroz, the newly wed couple stood before witnesses, daring to dream of a future that had only recently become possible to them and all citizens of their beloved country.

By special permission, their wedding had taken place in the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul Fortress. This fortress had been built to defend St. Petersburg from the invasion of the Swedish Armies during the great Northern War. This beautiful cathedral was later constructed on the site of an earlier church.

Peter and Tamara stood surrounded by the same stone, mortar and glass that had witnessed nearly three hundred years of history. A history that chronicled the strength and determination of the Russian people. A three hundred year history of a city whose very name had gone through an evolution; St. Petersburg, Petrograd, Leningrad and now, once again, St. Petersburg.

Behind Peter and his bride were the graves of Peter the Great and many of his descendants. A harsh reminder of this country's difficult past. Above them, reaching high into the clear October sky, was a spire, the highest in all of St. Petersburg. Sitting atop the spire, an angel holding a golden cross, a sign of freedom, hope and promise.

The wedding had gone as planned. Peter and his bride had decided to visit several historic monuments and memorials throughout St. Petersburg. Most young couples married in St. Petersburg, accompanied by their wedding parties, visit these memorials and monuments to show respect and appreciation for all they symbolize to the Russian people and especially the citizens of St. Petersburg. The visits and the photographs taken, serve as reminders of this city's rich and troubled past and the sacrifices made by its people.

The wedding party accompanied the bride and groom to the first stop on the tour. Here at the Palace Square stands the Winter Palace. The Winter Palace is the earliest building on the square and is one of five interconnecting buildings which comprise the Hermitage. Behind the Hermitage, stands the Alexander Column erected in honor of the victorious end of the Patriotic War ending Napoleon's invasion into Russia. The tour continued on to St. Isaac's, Marinsky Palace, the equestrian statue of Nicolas I and then to the Bronze Horseman, the monument to Peter the Great, the symbol of this great city.

Alexander stood facing the Bronze Horseman. Looking to

the West, over the horseman's outstretched arm, he saw the sun slowly slide behind a mountain of clouds. It was getting colder and he began to feel the bite of the wind on his ears and fingers. He was so proud of his grandson. The events of this day pleased him greatly. Alexander was beginning to think of the next and final stop of the wedding tour. He was very satisfied to know that Peter and Tamara had chosen The Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad as the location to complete the tour. This will also be the place where the family portraits will be made, portraits that will connect generations of the past to those of today and to those to come.

After speaking briefly to his grandson, Alexander and several family members entered their taxi's and left for Victory Square located at the south of the city. The taxi shortly arrived at the square once called Srednia Rogatka. Alexander stepped from the car, raised his collar and walked slowly toward a giant obelisk that stood before him. As he turned and looked about he remembered coming here as a boy. He remembered the thousands of Leningraders with shovels, rakes and hoes. He remembered helping to dig the miles and miles of anti-tank ditches, barrage lines and artillery and machine-gun positions. This place which was once only a mere nine kilometers from front line of Nazi troops. Here at Srednia Rogatka he had worked as a young lad to convert these grounds into a powerful region of defense to protect the southern entrance to Leningrad.

Alexander walked beyond the obelisk, down the steps toward the center of the memorial. He stood there, statue like, as the cold wind blew and swirled about him. As he gazed upward, snowflakes fell softly and rested momentarily on his face and beard. Here in the center of The Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad, Alexander was encircled by the curved stone walls that rose above him. Surrounding him were 900 torches, each ablaze with an eternal flame, each representing one day and one night of the seige that made each day seem like an eternity. The large bronze letters attached to the polished granite appeared soldier like. Each in perfect formation, standing at attention. Alexander's eyes moved along the formation from one character to the next, and to the next. In his mind he heard the bronze soldiers shouting in unison, "900 Days, 900 Nights," "900 Days, 900 Nights."

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" "Where are you?" Alexander did not know how long he had stood there before Peter's voice brought him back from so long ago. Back from the time and events that he could not forget. Thoughts and feelings he had experienced more than fifty years ago. How could they seem so real today? "I'm here Peter, I'm over here!" Alexander suddenly noticed the tears that clung to his beard and wiped them away as he turned to his grandson. "Grandpa, what's

wrong? Are you alright?" "Yes, I'm fine Peter. Sometimes my memories take me back to places I don't choose to visit." "Places and times that are maybe best forgotten." "Like what Grandpa? What memories?" "Another time Peter, perhaps another time." "Is the photographer ready?" "He is Grandpa. We need to hurry."

Several weeks had passed since his grandson's wedding. Alexander sat at the front window of his apartment peering out through the frosted panes. The questions Peter had asked him still rang out in his memory. "What is wrong Grandpa? Are you alright?" For reasons that were not clear even to himself, Alexander rarely talked of the seige. It was a topic too painful to discuss yet so important, that its history and events should be passed on and preserved.

Alexander rose from his chair and walked slowly across the room and sat down at his desk. He picked up his pen, looked down at the empty pages before him and his heart began to speak.

My Dearest Peter,
On the day of your wedding, as I stood in the center of the Heroic Defenders monument, you asked if I was alright. You asked me what was wrong. I'm not sure I can answer those questions in a way you or anyone else could fully understand. I will tell you though, that I had an experience that day that one can hardly describe. It was, at the time, a dream and a nightmare, a celebration and also a terrible sense of sorrow.

I had visited the memorial only once since its dedication which took place more than twenty-five years ago. After your grandmother's funeral, you, your mother and father and I visited the memorial. It was a very special place to your grandmother and me. I'm sure you were too young to remember. We took turns holding you in our arms as we walked about Victory Square. It is a painful and troublesome place to me. For that reason, I had not been there until your wedding day. Perhaps this letter will help you understand why my emotions seem to fill me up when I visit that special place and feel my memories come to life once again.

I celebrated my fifteenth birthday in the early spring of 1941. Our armies were not doing well in the north against the Finns and the Germans were inflicting heavy casualties all along our western and southern borders. MY father, your great grandfather, had been drafted into the infantry and was assigned duty somewhere south and west of Moscow near Lithuania. By late August, warnings were broadcasted over the radio and posters were displayed all over Leningrad stating that "The enemy is at the gate!" We all feared that our city would soon be invaded. We Leningraders knew we were within the German's reach but vowed that we would never be within their grasp.

The news of the war throughout that summer had not been

good. The leaders of the People's Party and the generals hastened to secure our city and provide for its defense. Many of our famous buildings and monuments were camouflaged to protect them from aerial attacks from German bombers and fighters. Others were protected by encasing them in scaffolding and then covering them with mounds of earth and debris to protect them from fire and explosives.

Joseph Orbelin, the famous curator of the Hermitage, was faced with the task of evacuating all the museum's great treasures to a safer place. Three government officials came from Moscow to oversee the packing and shipping. They watched as Rembrandt's Holy Family and his massive Return of the Prodigal were secured for shipment. One by one, Madonnas by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, wonderful sculpture and crown jewels all disappeared under wraps. A thirty-one car train, equipped with an armored car and anti-aircraft batteries left our city with more than 500,000 of the finest works in the world. Another twenty-three car train carried 700,000 more objects from Leningrad a few weeks later. The treasures were transported somewhere to the east in the Ural mountains.

It was also known that Leningrad had been prewired with explosives to be detonated if the Germans ever entered our city. This plan was devised to destroy the enemy inside Leningrad. Factories, bridges and public buildings when exploded would fall upon the enemies' heads and stop their tanks.

It was about this time that my mother, my sister and I would each day board the workers' tram and travel to the south of the city near Srednia Rogatka. Here we joined tens of thousands of Leningraders to build defenses that would stop the enemy if he should ever approach the entrance to our city. People of all trades and professions, school children, housewives, scientists, teachers, artists, actors students. We all worked with our picks, and shovels. From morning to night we worked, often under enemy fire.

By the first of September 1941, the Germans were one hundred miles inside Russia to the west. One by one, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and East Prussia fell like dominoes. Our broken armies were retreating too rapidly and in too much disorder to stand at the fortifications they had built. The Luga line was a series of fortifications along the Luga River and was the last hope of defense to halt the invading Germans. What many do not know is that 45,000 Leningraders were mobilized to dig trenches, gun emplacements and tank traps. The work was directed by army officers but the brunt was borne by women, old men, and boys and girls from the universities. The volunteers did not return quickly. When they did come back, they were weary with exhaustion, clothes in rags. Their bodies ached and their hands and feet were raw and bruised. The government issued another call for

volunteers. The Luga line was in peril. Over 160,000 people volunteered including 32,000 women. Half the volunteers 18-50 years in age lacked any military training and most were without weapons. These volunteers carried picks, shovels, axes and hunting knives. They volunteered with empty hands and brave hearts.

How many thousands were wounded or killed no-one knows for sure. Many were buried along the roads and in the fields where they had been caught by strafing JU-88's and Heinke bombers. My sister, Yelizauta Govoroz was one who volunteered. She never returned, she was nineteen years old.

The winter of 1941-42 was the coldest in nearly fifty years. Our city had been beseiged since September 4. The bombing never stopped. Fires burned throughout the city and could hardly be fought because of the frozen waterlines. The increasing cold brought only forbidding thoughts.

By late November the deaths began, not only from hungar. The elderly slipped quietly away of many diseases. Younger people died of consumption. Of grippe. Any disease finished you quickly. Diarrhea was nearly always fatal. Yelena Skryabrina, a young friend of my family, wrote in her diary; "Today it is so simple to die. You just begin to lose interest, then you lie on the bed and you never again get up."

The latest rations cut in late November doomed thousands to their deaths. The first days of hungar were always the worst. If a man had only a slice of bread and nothing more, he suffered terrible pangs the first day. And the second. But gradually the pain faded into a quiet despondency and a weakness that advanced rapidly. What you did yesterday, you could not do today. The stairs were too steep to climb, the wood too hard to chop, the shelf too high to reach. Each day the weakness grew but awareness did not decline. You knew what was happening, but you knew you could not halt it. You saw your body change. Your legs wasting to toothpicks, your arms vanishing. Or the opposite happened. Sometimes you puffed up. You could no longer wear your shoes. Your cheeks looked like they were bursting. Your neck too thick for your collar. Half of Leningrad was wasting away; the other half swelled and swelled.

People began to stuff their stomachs with food substitutes. They tore off wallpaper and scraped off the paste. Some ate the paper. Some even ate plaster. There were fewer and fewer birds. Gulls and pigeons that once filled the sky were no longer seen. Dogs, cats and even rats disappeared from the streets.

Soon the Germans captured the town of Tikhvin, breaching the railroad line which brought supplies to Lake Ladoga for trans-shipment to Leningrad. The nearest depot now was a

tiny way station 220 miles away. There was not even a forest road that connected it with the lake. Shipments, as meager as they were, could not be brought to our city. A road would have to be built across the ice. Reconnaissance groups were sent out to check the thickness and safety of the ice. The men, wearing white camouflage were roped together and most wore life belts. They reported that the ice was thickening and the open areas were shrinking. The temperature had dropped to eight degrees above zero. Several days later the first convoys set out from Leningrad. The city was down to just two days supplies of rations. There were 350 drivers of the horse drawn sleighs and the convoy stretched out nearly five miles. The horses were so starved that some of the drivers shared their bread with the animals. This went on for several days eventually increasing to eleven hundred animals and sleighs. Soon the ice thickened significantly allowing trucks to replace the horses. Service facilities were built on the ice, first aid stations, traffic control points, repair depots, snow clearing detachments. More than 19,000 persons were enrolled in the ice-road effort. There were severe losses of equipment and lives. The road was often shelled and strafed by the Germans.

It was reported that more than 11,000 Leningraders died of starvation in November. For December the total was nearly 53,000. There were so many deaths from starvation and disease. So many people suffering unbelievable hardships.

The Communist Youth were organized into groups throughout the city to go from building to building to assist the living and remove the dead. I was only fifteen but was asked to help because most older members had been assigned duty at the front. My close friend and I knocked on the door of an apartment. Hearing no response, we walked in. It was very cold and frost covered all the walls. On a chair was a corpse of a fourteen year old boy. In the cradle the corpse of a tiny child. On the bed the dead mistress. As we left the apartment to report what we had discovered, a neighbor was standing in her doorway looking about with no comprehension of the tragic scene before her. The newspapers reported that our city was dead. No water, no electricity, no trams. The only transport one could see, and it could be seen often, was sleds carrying corpses, thousands throughout the city, to locations for burial.

The winter was the coldest in modern times with an average temperature of nine degrees above zero in December and four below in January. The only sources of fuel were the small forests outside Leningrad, a small bit of peat that lay under the snow along the Neva and the wooden houses and buildings in the city. Leningrad Party Secretary Zhadnov authorized the demolition of almost any structure made of wood. Several of my friends and I even tore away some of the wooden planks that had been put around the Bronze Horseman. We carved the following message on some of the remaining planks: "He is

not cold, we will be warmed." My mother never knew of this mischief but I remember the stove feeling very warm that night.

Mr. Krasovitsky, our neighbor who was a factory director, one night shared with us something that he had seen as he walked home from work. "I remember the picture exactly" he recalled. "I heard the dynamite blasts and saw the steam shovels at work. I thought new fortifications were being built. No, my friend said. They are digging graves, don't you see the corpses? The bodies were frozen. They were hoisted onto trucks and transported several blocks down the street. My friend and I walked down the street and could see in the dim light, piled high like cords of wood, piles of bodies. There were thousands there, and all will be buried in the newly dug trenches."

After the war ended, it was reported that during the first winter of the ~~seige~~ ^{siege}, 660 common graves were dug with a total length of 20,000 yards. There were so many bodies that thousands more had to be buried in some of the city's open squares.

Thousands of Leningraders continued to starve. Many bodies remained unburied. As they weakened, fewer and fewer people had the strength to bury their dead. Often they simply moved the body to the coldest room in their apartment and laid it on the floor. Gradually the apartments of Leningrad filled up with the dead. Sometimes survivors laid bodies in the streets in hopes that a passing patrol would bury them. I read many years ago a story by the writer Nikolai Chukovsky. On Vasilevsky Island where he lived, the corpse of a young girl was dropped from an upper window. It landed in the snow outside an archway leading to the offices used by Chukovsky. Coming out of the courtyard, he and others in the building made a new path skirting the corpse. Then, after four days, the body disappeared. No longer did Chukovsky and others avoid the spot. It was not until spring, when the snow began to melt, that he saw to his horror a woman's hand emerging from the ice. No one had taken the corpse away, it had simply vanished beneath the snow.

Our streets became places of inconceivable horror. Citizens were shocked to see people sitting in doorways and resting on icy steps with heads in their hands. Only upon close inspection did they realize they were dead. Past them walked the living, almost unnoticing.

Chukovsky also wrote that on the frozen Neva, dozens of holes had been broken in the ice and hundreds of women, pails in hand, awaited their turn around them. All pipes in the city were frozen and water was taken largely from the river and canals. To Chukovsky's horror, he saw that the ice around the holes was strewn with corpses of those who had died while filling their pails.

Peter, forgive me please for sharing so much of he horror

endured by our people. What I am about to tell you is the worst human behavior one can imagine. As you know, the Haymarket occupies the heart of Leningrad. Today it is once again the flourishing market it was before the war. However, during the war it became a market of exchange where paper money had virtually no value. Bread had become the common currency, and vodka the second choice. Everything was for sale at the Haymarket. One could buy wood alcohol, said to be safe to drink if it had first been passed through six layers of linen, tooth powder which could be used to make pudding and library paste was sold in bars like chocolate. Bread was usually available too. Sometimes whole loaves. It was displayed warily or clutched tightly by the vendors. They had no fear of the police but feared being knocked on the head with a rock by hungry robbers.

In January, my mother's friend Dmitri and his wife Zhenya made their way to Haymarket to trade for a pair of valenki for Zhenya's mother. They had somehow been able to put aside one pound and a half of bread to trade for the boots. At first they could not find what they wanted but eventually saw a man who was well dressed wearing a sheepskin coat and a fine fur hat. He had an impressive beard and despite the starving times, he seemed filled with strength. In his hands he held a single woman's boot, exactly the kind Zhenya wished to buy. They bargained. The man asked two pounds of bread for the boots. Dmitri offered the one and one half pounds. The bread was examined and the man agreed to take it. The other boot was at his flat in the tangle of streets nearby. With some trepidation, Dmitri started off with the peddler. Zhenya warned him, "Better to be without valenki than without your head," she said half joking.

The two men entered a quiet lane and soon came to a building that had not been damaged by either German gunfire or bombing. Dmitri followed the man up the staircase. The man climbed easily, occasionally looking back. As they neared the top floor, an uneasy feeling seized Dmitri. His mind recalled the stories he had heard, the terrible tales. The tall man looked remarkably well fed. At the top floor, the man turned and said, "Wait for me here." He knocked at a door and someone inside asked, "Who is it?" "It's me," the man responded, "With a live one."

Dmitri froze at the words. Then the door opened, and he saw a hairy red hand and a muglike face. From the room came a strange, warm heavy smell. Suddenly a gust of wind in the hall caught the door and in the swaying candlelight Dmitri had a glimpse of several great hunks of white meat, swinging from hooks attached to the ceiling. From one hunk he saw dangling a human hand with long fingers and blue veins.

At that moment the two men lunged toward Dmitri. He leaped down the staircase and managed to reach the bottom ahead of his pursuers. To his good fortune, a military truck was

passing through the lane. "Cannibals!" Dmitri shouted. Two soldiers jumped from the truck and rushed into the building. Shots rang out, and in a few minutes the soldiers reappeared, one carrying a sheepskin coat and the other Dmitri's bread which they returned to him.

Dmitri thanked the soldiers. They then got back into their truck and were off to Lake Ladoga, where they were part of the ice-route team. Before leaving, they told Dmitri that they had found the hocks from five carcasses hanging in the flat. Five, all of them human.

After the war Peter, when I was studying at the University, it became well known that cannibalism for profit existed and the center of trade had been the Haymarket. Starving men and women did not inquire too closely as to the nature of the ground meat patties that were offered for sale. Also, the evidence of butchery of corpses was widespread. Many a Leningrad woman, pulling a child's sled behind them, bringing a body of a child or husband to the cemetery, was appalled to see that fleshy parts had been cut from the corpses which lay about the city like scattered cordwood. No laws forbade the butchery and disfigurement of corpses or prohibited the consumption of the flesh.

In late January, 1942, the Leningrad Party Secretary, Zhadavoz, made a major decision to evacuate at least one quarter of our remaining population, about 500,000 persons, over the ice road. Aleksai Kosygin, who later became premier of our country, was placed in charge of this task. Because so many evacuees were so feeble and weak, many did not survive the ordeal. They could not have survived in Leningrad either. From January to early April, over 500,000 persons were taken across Lake Ladoga, including more than 35,000 wounded Red Army soldiers. The movements never halted, despite Nazi planes, terrible blizzards and temperatures falling to forty below zero. The ice route, the Road of Life, had been brought into order. It was in constant flow; food and fuel pouring into Leningrad, people flowing out.

In spite of the hardships and suffering, there were events that took place throughout our city that planted seeds of hope in our minds and hearts. Events that were comforting even to those who suffered most. Radio transmissions became a great source of that comfort. We sat before our radios each evening like empty vessels waiting to be filled. Our bodies were starving on our diminished rations but our souls feasted on those broadcasts. The poetry of Olga Berggolts, Vladimir Valzhenin. Operas, symphonies. Hungry, swollen and hardly living, we listened to each word, to each note, somehow knowing, feeling, that we had the strength to face tomorrow.

Throughout that winter until mid-April, the ice road brought in supplies and carried out citizens that had been designated

for evacuation. Food rations were slowly increased and we continued to hold on to the hope that we would survive. The next winter, the ice road was used again to move supplies in and people out. Nearly 300,000 more were evacuated leaving only the minimum personnel to carry on the defense and provide essential services in the city.

As the second winter deepened, plans were made to break the ~~seige~~ siege for good. It would take nearly two more years before the Germans would relinquish their chokehold on our city. However, they did not release their grip without making us pay dearly. Late July and August of 1943 brought the worst shelling of the war. It was so heavy that the square in front of the Finland Station was named the Valley of Death. In street after street white and blue signs went up. The signs said: CITIZENS: IN CASE OF SHELLING, THIS SIDE OF THE STREET IS THE MOST DANGEROUS. In 1957 the same white and blue signs that had warned of the shellings reappeared on Nevsky Prospekt. Those same signs are cleaned and touched up each spring and have special meaning to Leningraders who hold them in their memories. The seige finally ended in late January of 1944 but the terrible war continued on for more than another year.

Peter, it seems that I have rambled on and on and am not sure I have answered the questions you asked. Perhaps hearing of these events from that early time in my life as I personally recall them, will help you better appreciate why they continue to be so important to me. It has been good for me to put my memories on these pages. As you read these words, please remember that I have lived a full and rich life. It is partly because of those terrible events so long ago, that every day continues to be a special gift to me. I am thankful to be alive. As I heard a poet read so long ago:

"They shall grow not old
As we that are left grow old
Age shall not weary them
Nor the years condemn
At the going down of the sun
And in the morning
We will remember them."

As I remember them, so do I hope you will remember me.

Special love,

Grandpa Alexander

Several years later, a young father walked toward the center of the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad. He stood there, statue like, as a cold wind blew and swirled about him. Here in the center of the memorial, Peter was encircled by the curved granite walls that rose high above him. The large bronze letters attached to the polished granite appeared soldier like. Each in perfect formation,

standing at attention. Peter's eyes moved along the formation from one character to the next, and to the next. In his mind he heard the bronze soldiers shouting in unison, "900 Days, 900 Nights," "900 Days, 900 Nights."

"Daddy! Daddy!" "Where are you?" Peter did not know how long he had stood there before Alexander's voice brought him back from so many years ago. "I'm here Alexander." "Daddy is over here." Peter noticing tears on his face wiped them away as he turned to Tamara and his son. "Daddy, what's wrong?" "Are you alright?" Peter took his small son's hand into his and hugged his wife saying, "Daddy is fine Alexander, Daddy is just fine."

IMPORTANT FACTS OF THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD

The seige lasted from September 4, 1941 to January 27, 1944.
The "900 Days" actually were 880 days.

Toll exacted by the Germans:

- a) 716,000 Leningraders deprived of their homes
- b) 526 schools and children institutions destroyed
- c) 21 scientific institutions destroyed
- d) 101 museums and civic buildings destroyed
- e) The Botanical and Zoological Institutes
- f) 840 factories destroyed
- g) 71 bridges
- h) and on and on.....

Total damages well over 45 billion rubles (about \$2 billion)

The government and military conservatively underestimated the loss of lives. Their figures indicated a loss of 632,253 dead. More accurate numbers indicate a loss of lives in Leningrad to be about 1,100,000. It is believed that 800,000 are buried in mass graves at Piskarevsky Cemetery and another 300,000 buried at Serafimov. It is generally accepted that between 1,300,000 and 1,500,000 civilian and military persons died during the seige.

What is the city's name? St. Petersburg has had its name changed three times during its brief history. With the outbreak of World War I, it became the more Russian sounding Petrograd. After Lenin's death in 1924, it was renamed Leningrad in the Soviet Leader's honor. Today, with the latest Russian revolution, its original name has been restored. A sign of the changing times is that, for the first time, the city's residents were given a choice in the matter. Many people opposed the change, primarily because memories of the seige of Leningrad and World Was II became and indelible part of the city's identity. But for all the controversy surrounding its name, many residents refer to the city simply, as Peter.