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Interwoven Memories in the Piskarevskoe Memorial Cemetery

Located on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, Piskarevskoe Cemetery is far from the city's center because it is too large to be located anywhere else. There was nothing at the location before and for a time there was nothing around it. The story of this site's creation has been both heralded and banned by subsequent governments, yet it is undeniably essential to an understanding of the city and its citizens. In 1941, Piskarevka was a small town famous for a dairy farm (Piskarevskoe Memorial Cemetery 70). By the end of the Siege of Leningrad in 1945, it was home to more than 420,000 dead civilians and 50,000 soldiers (Piskaryovsky Memorial).

A city under siege

Hitler's armies had surrounded Leningrad by September 29, 1941, in what the city's residents would come to call the *blokada* (Piskaryovsky Memorial). Supply routes from both the Gulf of Finland and the Russian mainland had been cut off. Although the city sustained substantial damage from the bombs and shells of the German armies, it was this loss of supplies that proved the most deadly for the city's inhabitants (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). Over the 900-day siege, food shortages produced unimaginable famine and harsh winters with no fuel for heat left hundreds of thousands of Leningraders dead (Kirschenbaum 3). In 2009, Vadim Levental' used the experiences of his grandmothers, both of whom were children during the Siege, to write a short story about a young girl living in Leningrad. "The measure of horror of these blockade years is such that

we are unable to imagine, really, how it was, because we live in a far more prosperous time," he spoke with me over tea in the back room of a St. Petersburg publishing company. “In a sense,” he said, “all of our thinking about the blockade—assumptions, reflections, literature—exists on our side of a border” (Levental’). The goal of writing this kind of story is to breach that barrier in time and understand what separates us from true historical horror. For Levental’, writing this story was a kind of duty, the transmission of memory from one generation to the next. This sense of responsibility in the preservation of memory pervades this issue so thoroughly that it becomes difficult to view the events of the siege from a purely historical standpoint, yet still feel that the story is being told in its entirety.

By January 1942, Leningrad had run out of graves (Piskaryovsky). A few miles outside the city, near the town of Piskarevka, government workers used explosives to dig trenches in the frozen earth (Kirschenbaum 192). The lack of fuel and electricity had shut down all public transport in the city, including the new tram system, and walking was the only way to reach the new cemetery (Clapperton 57). Families would tow their loved ones for miles through the snow, transported on children’s sleds, or *sanochki*, in the hopes of receiving a proper burial (Clapperton 56). The odds of this were unfortunately slim. According to historian Lisa Kirschenbaum, the purchase of an individual grave in March 1942 cost the family “2 kilos of bread and 500 rubles” (Kirschenbaum 192). By comparison, burial in a “fraternal” grave would cost “only 40 rubles” (Kirschenbaum 192). Some families had the relative blessing of knowing approximately where their loved ones were buried in these mass graves, but many could only guess the location of those they lost (Kirschenbaum 192). For some *blokada* survivors, the weight of this uncertainty—

sometimes perceived as a personal failure in spite of the unimaginable odds—would remain with them forever (Kirschenbaum 192).

Finding a place for the dead

By the time the siege ended in 1945, more than one million Leningraders had been killed. One out of every three buildings in the city had been leveled as a result of "close to 150,000 [artillery] shells and over 107,000 incendiary and high-explosive bombs." (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). The initial post-war period was dedicated not to memorializing the war, but rather "to restoring essential services" in the city, such as electricity and running water (Kirschenbaum 133). City planners chose to devote what little funding was available towards the reconstruction of the city, seeing the act of "restoring and beautifying the city as the most appropriate form of commemoration" (Kirschenbaum 115). This approach would remain the primary directive of city works projects well into the 1950s, with the development of "victory parks"—large green spaces within the city limits, where Leningraders hoped that "the misery of war could be forgotten." Such projects were favored considerably over the construction of traditional monuments (137). These decisions, however, were not entirely innocuous, as post-war policies under Stalin forbade the discussion of any accounts of the war which did not feature Stalin's leadership as the central focus, thus eschewing any histories that were "local, personal, painful, or absurd" (143). A prominent victim of Stalin's suppression of the Leningrad narrative was the ill-fated *Museum of the Defense of Leningrad*, which commemorated the war through its assembly of wartime artifacts, including live shells collected from the Leningrad front. Visiting officials from Moscow claimed the museum was

"dangerously anti-party" in reinforcing the unique narrative of Leningrad. In fact, the displays of live ammunition and military vehicles were considered "the armory of the anti-party group" (145). The museum was subsequently closed and its extensive exhibits were "scattered or destroyed" by the Stalinist regime (145). The history of the blockade would not be recognized officially until well after Stalin's death in 1953, and only then as a result of Khrushchev's loosening of strict post-war policies (152). It was during this "Thaw" that work on the Piskarevskoe Memorial Project began in earnest.

Commemorating the memory of war

The transformation of Piskarevskoe from burial plot to reverential monument began as early as 1942, when local architects recognized the need to memorialize the site and began drafting plans (Kirschenbaum 193). In 1948, the project's future architect Evgenii Levinson visited the site, which he would later describe as "a sad picture" (Kirschenbaum 193). The following year city planners requested blueprints for improvements to the site and Levinson—a Leningrad architect who specialized in camouflaging buildings during the war—was joined on the project by co-architect Aleksandr Vasil'ev, himself a state propaganda artist and Leningrad native (Kirschenbaum 195; 199). By 1952, the first phase of planning was completed and six million rubles had been allotted to the project, but a report by "the Science and Culture department of the regional Communist Party organization" in September of 1953 described the memorial site as still in a state of disrepair (Kirschenbaum 195-96). Whether work on the project was indeed occurring remains unclear, but Evgeniia Miakisheva, a guide at the memorial, was able to shed some light on the true complexity of the project. With labor forces scarce in the

post-war period, the cost of procuring and transporting the vast quantities of granite used in the memorial made it prohibitively expensive, especially when preference for funding and labor resources was given to the ongoing effort to rebuild the city's primary infrastructure (Miakisheva). Other sources suggest that elements of political fear in the immediate post-Stalin era and competition for funds with the Leningrad Metro project may have also contributed to long delays in the project's beginnings (Kirschenbaum 196). These issues, however, paled in comparison with the logistical difficulties of building a stone memorial in a swamp, a problem that had plagued the site from the very beginning (Kirschenbaum 196). Despite the overwhelming challenges, the project's engineers persevered and the Piskarevskoe Memorial Complex was finally opened on the fifteenth anniversary of Victory Day, 9 May 1960 (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*).

At this point, it is perhaps worth noting that official memorials are only one part of the overall commemorative cityscape of St. Petersburg. The war occurred in locations that were a part of residents' everyday lives before, during, and after the war. Their nature as a constant backdrop has made memories of the blockade inescapable (Kirschenbaum 149). "An experienced eye and a trained mind will find easily the memories of *blokada* in St. Petersburg," Vadim Levental' explained. Throughout the city's many islands, Stalin-era façades stand out in rows of otherwise modernist buildings, telling silently the story of the bombings that mandated their construction, while seemingly minor buildings continue to hold the deepest of values for those who witnessed their finest moments. Where a modern developer sees a simple tram substation, a survivor of the blockade sees a living monument to the restoration of city transport in the chaos of 1942 (Levental'). Despite the best efforts of city planners to restore the façade of Leningrad and return a sense of normalcy, the

reconstructed streets and landmarks of St. Petersburg "offer survivors a narrative framework—a map—for memory" (Kirschenbaum 147). For Leningraders like Grigorii Brailovskii, "the surrounding world disappears, an astonishing merging of time occurs, and everything looks to us as it did so many years ago" (Kirschenbaum 149). The truth is that sites as openly tragic as the Piskarevskoe Cemetery simply cannot exist in the center of a living, thriving city (Levental'). Instead, common spaces become the conveyance and portage of a sea of deeply personal tragedies, hidden in the ongoing commerce of a Russian tourist capital.

Remembrance projects today

Though the oral history of this period has often been passed down through similarly unofficial means, modern efforts are targeted at broadening the narrative by expanding access to official histories. State programs bring students from rural Russia to visit St. Petersburg, and even the Piskarevskoe Cemetery itself. The memorial's curators also maintain a web page, which hosts both historical photos and recent event photos, as well as diary readings, orchestral memorial pieces, historical writings, and videos from the time of the siege (Piskaryovsky). Photo books, such as two published by Levental's company, provide a visual context for memories, which is both deeply immersive and deeply troubling. Fictional and non-fictional literature also plays a large role in the transmission of Siege memories. Recent books such as Kirschenbaum's *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad* demonstrate the prominence of written works in cross-cultural transmission of *blokada* memories, while Levental's own short story provides an effective emotional context for those who may otherwise forget.

Films on the subject vary from period movies, such as *Once There Was A Girl* (*Zhila-byla devochka*), a movie about the Siege filmed in Leningrad during the blokade, to more recent documentaries like one produced by the city government of St. Petersburg. Aleksei Ravin, a government official and member of the United Russia party, discussed the documentary, which aims to shed light on conditions during the Siege and examines multinational conflicts in comparison with the united defenders of Leningrad. These multimedia accounts of the Siege, which are increasing in number, are united in the philosophy that every resident should not only understand that this was a period in their city's history, but also be moved on a personal level to pass down this knowledge to the next generation (Ravin). It is in this final clause that the similarity to the case of the informal memorial is drawn: despite immense effort on the part of both the state and various other formal entities, the highest goal of these memorials and works is to facilitate the conversation from one generation to the next. "[Passing these memories down] is first the job of the family," Ravin stated in an interview. "But the state also, on a high level, needs to show that it understands about this." In a display of exactly this understanding, the Russian government actively supports the memorial projects and protects important holidays by allowing families to take time off work and to share and remember the events that are commemorated (Ravin). The fact that official historians would sincerely promote such personal anecdotes attests to an understanding of Russian memory that transcends ideas of authority and focuses instead on the richness of human experience. On viewing the memorial, Ravin spoke with unaffected gravity: "It's a part of my history, my own history. I feel it very personally," he said. "It's not 'somewhere.' It was my city, my family, and also my war. Even if I was born in '79."

The memorial park

The Piskarevskoe memorial complex is located about three kilometers east of the *Ploschad' muzhestvo* metro station, in the Kalininskii District of St. Petersburg, on an area covering 27 hectares (Piskarevskoe 69). The Piskarevskoe memorial is in a neighborhood interspersed with greenery and is much less densely developed than the busy and highly populated downtown area found along St. Petersburg's embankments. The buildings in this region are all fairly recent, and their height and décor betray their origins in the late Soviet era. Immediately surrounding the park, fields of tall grass stand as reminders of how this place must have looked in the years before the war. Nestled in the corner of the park is a small cluster of family graves, now overgrown, but handmade and fenced into small, individual plots. They are dated only a few years before the war began and mark the beginnings of the burial site at Piskarevskoe. A few steps away the first mass graves spread to the north under the shadows of birch trees, which populate the western half of the park. From here, the main promenade is a long and solemn walk to the east.

As evident from Levinson's initial impressions in 1948, the vastness of the park was always a key element in planning the memorial (Kirshenbaum 193). Even with the number and variety of early designs for the park's central monument (Miakisheva), the final design is one that unites the space in appreciation and respect for the sacrifices of those who gave their lives. The main gate opens onto a 300-meter promenade, beginning with a raised entryway that reigns over the rest of the park. At the end of this entryway stands an eternal flame, which burns as a commitment to the undying memory of those who died during the Siege. The stairs from the entrance lead down to the main granite walkway, flanked symmetrically on either side—first by flower beds and then by grass-covered burial

mounds reverently elevated from ground level and marked on the ends by a single granite block. Birch trees widely frame this central space and direct the eye to the memorial's vertical focal point, a sculpture known as *Mat'-rodina*, the "Mother Motherland" (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). The tall bronze statue depicts a woman in a gown holding her hands outspread, an oak-leaf garland draped over her upturned palms (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). The choice to portray the grieving nation in such a personal way was a source of great debate during the planning stages, but Vera Isaeva's finished work is an extremely powerful and emotional piece that "shows not only sorrow, but great civil courage and pride for her children" (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). The sculpture is backed by a stone wall adorned with reliefs and the words of Leningrad poet Ol'ga Berggol'ts. In the years since it was written, the final lines of Berggol'ts's poem have become a universal symbol of respect and remembrance: "No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten" (Ravin).

Beyond the edges of the central promenade, the park extends to either side, with row after row of mass graves, totaling 186 (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). The granite stones that mark each grave are carved with the year of burial, an oak leaf, and a hammer and sickle for civilians and a Soviet star for soldiers (*Piskarevskii Memorial'nyi Kompleks*). Following the southern edge of the park back to the west, 140 individual graves containing ashes of military officers line the walkway in rows, with each burial site denoted by a small granite headstone containing the only individual names on display throughout the memorial grounds (Piskarevskoe Memorial Cemetery 71). It is here, under the shade of a small birch forest, that the official memorial gives way to small, personal tributes and the personal losses that resulted from the war. In this back section of the park, plastic photos of

smiling, youthful men are stuck to the granite stones that remember their ashes. Family members, posed and happy in black and white, are stuck to the trees that grow from their mass graves. With this honest glimpse of heartbreak, the memorial's dynamic changes and suddenly the sense of loss becomes very, very real. The unequivocal gravity of the memorial complex is fundamentally complemented by the empathy of a remarkably human moment and the notions of official and unofficial memories cease to exist. In this moment, the breadth and depth of absolute tragedy become briefly comprehensible, and there is no choice but to understand.

The duality that arises between personal and official memories is one that seems at first to be obvious, but in the case of Piskarevskoe this is not the case at all. It would be easy to say that personal memories of wartime hardships are what connect the modern Russian so strongly to the history of the Siege. In turn, the state can only serve to facilitate the transmission of those memories, but this simple statement fails to capture the underlying codependence of their true relationship. It is absolutely true that state holidays permit the transmission of personal memory, but state memorials definitively serve to broaden the concept of what one considers personal. By establishing a site of intersecting narratives it becomes impossible to separate official from unofficial memory without either one losing a portion of itself. The consideration of an official history of the Siege without its most personal elements is purely academic and bereft of an understanding of its hardships. By contrast, a view of the Siege from an individual standpoint fails to capture the communal nature of a shared event in history. The people of Leningrad suffered together, died together, mourned together, and rebuilt together, and an adequate exploration of one person's experience without the prior context of the whole is impossible.

From this conclusion it is easy to draw parallels between the duality of collective and individual memories and the duality of the St. Petersburg myth. Individual memory is both affected and given context by the collective history surrounding it, much as the "little man" is powerless against the surroundings that produced him. Likewise, we see that collective history cannot be defined or fully understood without the example of the individual. In the same way, the myth of St. Petersburg requires the little man to demonstrate the nature of the city. If the memory of the Siege cannot be defined solely in terms of individual or collective narratives since it is simultaneously both and neither, it seems the only answer is to define it like Ravin: "I don't know. It's very, very, very, very personal."

The Piskarevskoe Memorial Cemetery continues to host official functions on annual holidays, such as the anniversary of the first day of the siege, the anniversary of the lifting of the siege, and Victory Day, as well as commemoration events for visits by various foreign delegations. St. Petersburg residents and tourists continue to visit the park. Two identical stone buildings flank the park's entrance—one is an office for the keepers of the park and the other houses a museum of the Siege. The exhibits in this small museum are informative and extremely interesting, ranging from handwritten documents from the time of the siege to photographic exhibits juxtaposing modern sites of interest with photographs of the same sites during the war. Evgeniia Miakisheva is still an active tour guide at the park, regularly escorting curious visitors and student groups. When asked about the future of the memorial complex, Miakisheva indicated that there were no changes planned for the site, only reconstruction and restoration. For a site that lives on after such a tragedy, it seems this may always be the case.

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