The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Maria Stepanova's 'In Memory of Memory'

Translated by Sasha Dugdale, shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize.

September 25, 2022

"In Memory of Memory" is by Maria Stepanova, an award-winning Russian poet, novelist and journalist. It was translated into English by Sasha Dugdale, an award-winning British poet, playwright and translator. Dugdale's English version of Stepanova's Russian book is a collaboration of two brilliant poets, who have the great good fortune of knowing each other, each other's works, and each other's language very well.

"In Memory of Memory" seems to be begin, for a moment, as the history of Stepanova's family that she has long wanted to write. But the book breaks out of the confines of family history and expands into a collection of essays, stories, memories, descriptions, scraps of letters, fragments of national histories, other people's memoirs, thoughts on memories and memoirs, digressions, and mis-remembered incidents — that is, into something of a reflection of the rich jumble of human memory.

We asked Sasha Dugdale to introduce the book for readers now, in the autumn of 2022.

"In Memory of Memory" appeared in English in 2021, in the middle of a global pandemic. Its qualities seemed to me to suit these conditions: the book was a journey through time, art and space, and its narrator, Maria herself, offered the reader a vital generous and very human companionship. Her voice had already accompanied me through many hours of solitude and silence, its erudition and virtuosity contrasting with its humor and sense of human fallibility: the fallibility of memory that is simultaneously cloud and castle. It was possible to sit with "In Memory of Memory" and fall into a lockdown reverie unthinkable in normal life. It was a book to be confined with — and even to relish the confinement.

The terrible and violent times we now live in have made me think about Stepanova's book in different ways. One of the major aims of "In Memory of Memory" was to re-establish the links between a Soviet family and the rest of the world, and to build back the cultural bloodlines and conjoined histories that had been so brutally severed by revolution, war and cold war. Russia's bloody invasion of Ukraine follows the opposing mindset: it is justified by a vision of a pre-eminent empire, unimpeded by common human morality, and it isolates Russia from the world. In such circumstances Stepanova's philosophy is much needed. I have found dipping into the book more recently a healing experience.

There's a wonderful and very serious passage later in the book in which the narrator recounts a dream in which souls bob to the surface of water and plead to be lifted out and redeemed through memory, saved in remembrance. This image, along with many others, will remain with me always in these days in which deaths and losses multiply and we are hardly able to cope with the magnitude of the disaster. I think of it when teams of investigators so very carefully exhume and document the dead found in mass graves in Bucha and Izium. Recalling everything maybe an impossibility, but the act of remembrance is a salve and a human right.

From Chapter 2: On Beginnings

I inherited one other thing that bears on the construction of this story, on how it was told and by whom. It's the sense of our family as a matriarchy, a tribe of strong, individual women standing like milestones spanning the century. Their fates loomed large in my life, here they are in the front row — holding on to each other, merging into each other — of the many-headed family photograph. Strange when you consider that they all had husbands. The men in this family are barely illuminated, as if history consisted only of heroines, and couldn't quite stretch to heroic men. There is truth to this, though it's hardly the men's fault. Women kept the family line going — one husband died young, another died even younger, a third was busy with other out-of-frame matters. In my head, and perhaps in my mother's too, the line of transmission (that part of the story left, once the cheerful bustle of life has been tidied neatly into prehistory) was a staircase leading steadily toward me, consisting entirely of women. Sarra begat Lyolya, Lyolya begat Natasha, and Natasha begat me. The matryoshka (nesting) doll insisted on the preeminence of single daughters, each emerging from the one before and inheriting, with everything else, the gift and the opportunity to be the single teller of the tale.

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What did I think I was up to all those years? I clearly wanted to build a monument to those people, making sure they didn't simply dissipate into the air, unremembered and unremarked

upon. But in fact it seemed I didn't even remember them myself. My family history was a confection of anecdotes, barely attached to names or faces, unrecognizable figures in photographs, questions I couldn't quite formulate because they had no starting point and, in any case, there was no one to ask. Despite all this, I had to write the book and here is why.

Jacques Rancière's essay *Figures of History* makes many arguments that seem urgent for our times. He says, for example, that the artist's duty is to show "what can't be seen, what lies beneath the visible." This pleases me, because the late Russian poet Grigory Dashevsky always saw this as the role of poetry, to bring the invisible to the point of visibility. Rancière's most important point is this: in his writing about history, he contrasts "document" and "monument." A "document," for him, is any record of an event that aims to be exhaustive, to tell history, to make "a memory official." A "monument" is the opposite of "document," in "the primary sense of the term":

that which preserves memory through its very being, that which speaks directly, through the fact that it was not intended to speak — the layout of a territory that testifies to the past activity of human beings better than any chronicle of their endeavors; a household object, a piece of fabric, a piece of pottery, a stele, a pattern painted on a chest or a contract between two people we know nothing about . . .

With this in mind, I began to see that the monument-memorial I'd hoped to raise was in fact built long ago. It seemed I even lived in its pyramid chambers, between the piano and the armchair, in a space marked out by photographs and objects, which were mine and not mine, which belonged simply to the continuing and disappearing thread of life. Those boxes of our domestic archive hardly spoke directly, but they were the silent witnesses, those piles of greetings cards and trade union cards were the epidermal cells of the lived and unspoken past, and, as storytellers, they were hardly worse than the documents that could speak for themselves. A list was all that was needed, a simple list of objects.

Perhaps I hoped to reassemble and reanimate from all these objects the corpse of Osiris, the collective family body, which had disappeared from the home. All these fragments of memory and pieces of the old world did create a whole, a unity of a particular sort. A whole vessel, but flawed and empty, consisting mostly of cracks and gaps, no better and no worse than any single person who has lived her term and survived — or, more accurately, that person's final and unmoving *corpus*.

And of this twisted body, no longer capable of connecting its memories into a sequence — would it want to be seen? Even supposing it wants nothing, am I right to make it the subject of my story, a museum exhibit, like the pink stocking of Empress Sisi, or the rusty file with traces of blood that brought her story to its end? Putting my family on general view, even if I do it with as much love as I can muster and with the best words in the best order, is, after all, something of a Ham's deed, exposing the vulnerable and naked body of the family, its dark armpits, its pale belly.

And most likely I would learn nothing new in writing it, and just knowing this made the act of writing even more fraught. Yes, free of scandalous revelation, far from the hell of Péter Esterházy, who found out that his beloved father had worked for the secret police, but also far from the bliss of having always known everything about your people, and bearing this

knowledge with pride. Neither of these outcomes were mine. This book about my family is not about my family at all, but something quite different: the way memory works, and what memory wants from me.

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In late spring 2011 a colleague visited me in Moscow to invite me to Saratov to give a talk about the internet journal where I was working. Our conversation very quickly turned to Saratov itself, a city I had never visited, and the birthplace of my great-grandfather. My colleague pulled out a tablet. He had a wondrous digital haul of scanned prerevolutionary postcards with views of Saratov: predominantly green-white vistas with trees and churches. As I flicked through, the lines faded into each other, and now I can only remember the wide expanse of river, dotted with ships. The tablet contained other wonders, a downloaded directory for 1908: gray lists of names and streets. "I've tried looking for my family," said the colleague. "Hopeless task, really. There are ten pages of my surname."

My great-grandfather was called Mikhail Davidovich Fridman, and this gave us a head start. We found him easily — he was the only one of that name in Saratov, and a hundred years before he had lived on Moscow Street, clearly an important street in the town back then. I asked if the street was still there, and it was.

So I set off for Saratov. The Volga river basin was as bare as an empty soup dish, and the narrow streets descended toward it like tourniquets. Where there were once just spaces of green and white, now shopping centers and Japanese restaurants vied for space. The steppe pressed in: mannequins stood outside the open doors of dress shops, wearing lavish wedding dresses with fluttering ruched skirts, soiled yellow by the dusty steppe wind. I went to Moscow Street the next morning, after checking the address again.

The house was unrecognizable, but then I'd never seen it before to recognize it. The wide gray facade had been smeared with a layer of cement and shop windows cut into its front. A shoe shop. But it was still possible to pass through an archway into the yard.

I spent a good while in the yard just running my hands over the rough Saratov brickwork. Everything was as I'd hoped, perhaps even more so than I'd hoped. I recognized my great-grandfather's yard unhesitatingly. There was no doubt in my mind, even though I'd never seen it or had it described to me. The wooden slatted palisade with the Rudbeckia growing up against it, the crooked walls with their bricks and wood, and a useless old chair with a broken frame standing by a fence — all of it was mine, all of it instantly part of my family. It seemed to speak to me, saying: here, you needed to come here. There was a strong smell of cat, but a stronger smell of plants and greenery, and there was absolutely nothing I could pick up to take with me. But I didn't need souvenirs, I remembered everything beneath the high windows with such a sense of heightened native precision that I seemed to know how it had all been, in this, our, place, how we had lived and why we had left. The yard put its arms around me in an embrace — that's what it was. I hung around another ten minutes or so, making huge efforts to commit it all to memory, to extract the picture, as you might a mirror from its frame, and fix it for once and for all in the memory's grooves. Then I left. And it worked. From the train window I saw long, bright drainage ditches running alongside the tracks, and once a little tornado of dust, twisting over a deserted crossroads.

About a week later my colleague from Saratov rang me sheepishly. He'd mixed up the address. That street all right, but a different house. God, I'm so sorry, Masha.

And that is just about everything I know about memory.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/25/in-memory-of-memory-a78869