

# The Education of a Traitor

A Memoir of Growing Up in Cold War Russia

**Svetlana Grobman**

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Publisher's Note: This work is a literary memoir. The experiences and conversations recounted here are the result of the author's recollections. Therefore, they are a subjective account of events that occurred in her life. Her perceptions and opinions are entirely her own.

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For Alex and Amelia

*The distinction between the past, present, and future is  
only a stubbornly persistent illusion.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Svetlana Grobman is a Jewish immigrant from Russia who was born in Moscow in 1951. She moved to the United States in 1990. While living in Russia, Grobman was an engineer and an editor for the Soviet Encyclopedia. Now she is a librarian and freelance writer living in Columbia, Missouri. *The Education of a Traitor* is Grobman's first book, and she is currently working on her second.

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## PROLOGUE

I am running along the twisted streets of a strange town. It is late and the streets are dark and silent except for the sound of my shoes tapping desperate Morse code signals into the black world. A winding street climbs to a tower on top of a hill whose windows are as dark as everything else in this town. Where are the people? Are they all asleep? Or ... dead? No, no! I won't think about death! I carry a message for these people. An important message! I'll think of something nice instead, like flowers or, better yet, mountains—the way they appear in the night, dim silent giants propping up a sky encrusted with glimmering stars.

I reach the tower door and try to open it. The door is locked. I ring a bell. No answer. I ring again—twice, three times. I keep my finger pressed on the bell button and listen to the piercing sounds sinking into the depth of the house. I shout, “Is anybody there?”

Muffled footsteps sound behind me. I turn sharply. Nobody. I continue ringing. More footsteps. I turn again. Not a soul. My heart is about to jump out of my chest, and my voice is breaking, “Open, open, please!”

Suddenly, the door flies open and a tall silhouette appears in the dark hallway, “I've been waiting for you.” I recoil. “Yes, we've been waiting for you,” echoes behind me, too.

I spin around—two more silhouettes loom in the street. I freeze. How did they know I'd come at this hour? Nobody was supposed to know! Did they spy on me? Is this a trap?

I jerk and try to shrink away from the door, but several invisible hands grab my shoulders, pull my clothes, and push me back into the dark doorway. I fight them silently and vigorously—until I feel the barrel of a gun against my spine.

“Let me go!” I scream, but no sound comes out of my throat, not even a squeak. Something slippery and cold tightens its grip around my neck, blinds my eyes, and squeezes my chest. “Leave me alone!” I try again. “I know nothing! Let me go-o-o-o!”

With all my strength, I try to break away, only to wake up to the sounds of my own moaning.

Ever since I can remember, I have had nightmares. A week rarely goes by without me waking up at night screaming. Nightmares are as much a part of my life as the pop-up spring thunderstorms in my home country, Russia, or the vibrant fall colors of the American Midwest, where I live now.

For a long time, my nightmares were about wars. This is no surprise, since I was born in Moscow six years after the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) ended, and I grew up in the shadow of its grim memories. War stories were as common in my childhood as lullabies are for the American child. These stories were everywhere, in books, in movies, and on TV—about Russian soldiers and partisans, about the suffering of our civilians, about ill-fated lovers caught in the ravages of war, and whatever else war stories can be about.

The stories were heroic, moralizing, and sad, because the main characters always died. Some of them died in battle, struck by bullets or shrapnel. Others were crushed by tanks or torn apart by



bombs, and others were betrayed by traitors and died under torture. Even those who almost survived the war died on the last day—or the day after—while they were preparing to go back home. There was no escape for them. Heroes died because that was what made them heroes, and traitors died because that was what our justice demanded.

As for the millions of people displaced by chance and misfortune—POWs or civilians—they remained under a cloud of suspicion. How could they surrender alive? Why didn't they die the way heroes did? If they came back, they were sent to Siberian gulags. If they disappeared in the maze of the world, they were quickly forgotten, as if they had never been born. Everything was black and white, with no nuances and no half tones. History—in our judgment—had mercy for no one, since, clearly, there was no higher honor or a better destiny than to die for our country.

Time and again, I would turn over the last page of a book and ask myself, could I run forward into heavy fire? Could I endure torture, knowing that in the end I'd be hanged by the Germans, like the eighteen-year-old partisan, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, died on a freezing November day in 1941, with her head held high, shouting, "I am happy to die for my people!?" Would I have the courage to intercept machine-gun fire with my own body, like another young hero, Alexander Matrosov, who threw himself onto a German pill-box in February 1943 to allow his unit to advance?

That was what true patriots did, and I longed to be a true patriot. I just did not want to be a *dead* patriot. There must be a way of proving my worth to my country while staying alive, I thought to myself, like being a good student, following the precepts of Grandfather Lenin, which we studied in school, and of course, loving my homeland and never, ever, under any circumstances, leaving it.

Yet leave it I eventually did. By the time of my departure, I no longer felt patriotic toward the country of my birth, and I did not care about being called a traitor for abandoning it. I learned that the land I loved so much never cared for me. In fact, it did not care for anybody, only for its pompous marches in Red Square, its false pretenses, and its power to imprison us.

It didn't take me too long to acquire this knowledge—most of my education would be complete by the age of fifteen. After that, all I could do was wait and hope—wait to grow up, and hope that the Soviet regime would release its grip on me, and others like me, to finally let us go.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# BIRCH TREES

To celebrate my birth in 1951, my parents planted two birch trees beside our apartment house in Moscow. I cannot actually remember this, but my parents have told me about it so often that, eventually, I began to feel as though I were there with them, watching my father dig two holes in the thawed ground and lower two spindly saplings into their depths. I do remember growing up with these trees and being proud of the fact that my arrival in this world was marked by something alive and symbolic, for birches are symbols of my mother country Russia, as bald eagles are symbols of the United States. This is why, to this day, birch trees remain an anchor for my early memories.

My entire body quivers from coughing. Coughs fill my lungs, my throat, my head, and our whole apartment. There is so much coughing that my grandmother opens our second floor kitchen window to dilute the cough-filled atmosphere with fall air. She holds me by the window on her large warm bosom. Her arms are strong and soft.

“Inhale deeply. Now exhale. Inhale again. Good girl. Everything is going to be all right. Just breathe.”

Wet needles cool my face. I am still coughing, but my breathing eases, and I can look around. Dark-gray clouds move slowly above me. Below me, the same color is repeated in the wet pavement of the street and the wooden rectangle of a fence in front of our house, inside of which two slim birches stretch their bare branches toward me in a gesture of sympathy. I am getting cold and Grandma closes the window, muttering under her breath, “I’m too old for this ...”

I spend a lot of time with Grandma. Mom is mostly “at work” and Dad is “on a business trip,” although I do not know what that means. All I know is that Mom comes home every night and Dad does not. Mom often arrives tired—it must be because she carries a heavy bag. I have peeked into her bag a couple of times, so I know its contents: several shiny metal containers, bundles of tiny pointed bottles filled with transparent liquid, boxes of pills, cupping-glasses, and a long rubber tube with a large black disk at one end and a forking metal part with small ear pieces on the other.

The rubber tube thing looks like fun, and I would love to use it on my blue-eyed doll, Masha—to push the ear pieces into my ears, place the cool disk onto Masha’s cloth body, and command, the way Mom does, “Breathe, don’t breathe...”

Dad, when he comes home, does not bring anything interesting except heavy thick books. His books are boring, though—no colors or pictures, just a tangled mass of letters, lines, and numbers. I do not like them—they distract Dad from reading to me. Grandma does not like them either. “A family man,” she sneers when Dad is not around, “should be thinking about making *parnose* (a living, Yiddish), not reading books.”

I miss having other kids around. Once, I overheard Mom telling somebody that when they tried to put me in day care, I got sick and they almost “lost” me, so now they have to keep me at home. I do not remember being lost. I am not sure that is even possible in our small apartment, where the grandparents occupy one room and my parents and I occupy half the kitchen.

The apartment is crammed with bulky furniture and there is so little open space that even I have a hard time hiding here when my older cousins—Mom’s niece and nephew—condescend to play hide-and-seek with me during their visits.

A big chunk of the room is taken up by a round wooden table covered with a dark-maroon tablecloth and encircled with straight-back heavy chairs. Behind the table sits an aluminum-frame bed with a headboard that is decorated with dull metal balls. A large wardrobe is propped up against the wall on the right—its key sticks tantalizingly from a keyhole well above my head; and a sideboard on the left displays plates and glasses that Grandma uses for special occasions.

In the kitchen are a little sofa for me, a couch for my parents, a counter with two *kerosinki* (one-burner oil-stoves), and an iron wash-stand with a wash basin—the house has no running water.

When I am bored, I wander to the landing, but I never stay there long. The light on the landing is low, and a steep staircase to the first floor seems to teem with shadowy dangers. Also, as soon as I step outside our door, a smell of cats envelops me like a dense cloud. The odor comes from the next-door apartment occupied by a sick old woman. Her husband died a long time ago, and her only son was killed in the Second World War ten years ago.

I rarely see that woman. Like many invalids and cripples living in the victorious city, she is almost invisible. No facilities exist to

accommodate people like her or help them get around, so they just rot in their smelly little rooms, unnoticed by the rest of us.

When Grandma goes grocery shopping, she leaves me outside. Together, we negotiate the dark staircase—Grandma walks and I half-slide my way down sitting on my rear and pushing with my hands against the cool surface of the steep stone stairs. Grandma opens a squeaky front door and we find ourselves next to a weathered wooden gate that leads to a small garden with my birch trees. Grandma lets me in and closes the gate. “Stay put and don’t cry,” she says. “Be brave, *bubala* (Yiddish term of endearment).” Then she adjusts the dark triangle of her headscarf, firmly places a small purse under her armpit, and leaves.

I watch her softly rounded figure blend into the dim air of the street and swallow my rising tears. “Grandma will come back soon,” I console the birches, and they nod agreeably in the wind.

I am used to talking to these trees. They are my age, although they grow much faster than I do, and I have to look up to see their fuzzy crowns against the cold-blue sky. Often, I hug their flaky trunks in hopes that this closeness will spark a magical power of growth, and I will shoot up as fast as they do.

I will return to these trees numerous times throughout my life in Moscow. The last time I come, I will be thirty-nine years old and about to leave Russia for good. I will desperately wander around my grandparents’ old neighborhood, trying to find the patch of earth where the little girl I used to be talked to the trees, but I will not find it. The house will be demolished by then, and clusters of gray concrete-block clones will have mushroomed in its place. The little garden of my childhood with its trees and flowers will be gone, leaving me forever uprooted.

Yet that is still in the future. For now, I pick a daisy and start tormenting it, tearing off its bright petals, one by one, while monotonously lamenting—the way I have heard Mom do, “He loves me, he loves me not ...”



I'm three years old

By the time Grandma comes back—two large string-bags in her arms and her headscarf crooked—I am in tears. I've been alone forever, and I'm scared that she might not come back for me. What am I going to do then? Grandma looks at me and sighs. We both know that taking me along does not make things better. We are shoved by ageless-looking women whose whole lives are spent waiting and who, even as they talk, eye each other suspiciously. Together but utterly separate, they are united only by righteous indignation against anyone who tries to jump ahead in line.

Grandma rarely talks to strangers. When she does, people near us exchange glances—her Russian is tainted with a distinct Yiddish accent, although I am too young to understand that. Grandma does not talk much to me either, just holds my hand in hers.

“Stand still,” she says—her face a mask of tired resignation. But I have a sensation of something running up and down my legs, and my hand—the one that she holds in hers—grows heavy and numb. I pull it from Grandma’s grip and shake it, while Grandma mutters to herself, “I’m too old for this ...”