

Museum Berlin-Karlshorst commemorates World War II blockade of Leningrad

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On January 17, just days before the announcement that the German government would once again send battle tanks to wage war against Russia, the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum commemorated the World War II blockade by German forces of Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg, which resulted in some 1.2 million people starving to death. The blockade lasted from September 1941 until January 1944.

The brochure distributed at the January 17 event, *The Leningrad Blockade in the Testimonies of the Mojshes Family*, documents the diaries and memoirs of the Russian-Jewish Mojshes family and recalls this immense German war crime.

The Nazi war of extermination against the USSR claimed the lives of 27 million Soviet citizens, 14 million of them civilians, nearly half the death toll in World War II. The number of Leningrad blockade victims alone was roughly 2.5 times the number of US military deaths. Indeed, the US Military Academy in its *Atlas of the Second World War* estimated that Russian casualties during the siege were greater than combined US and British casualties during the entire conflict.

Leningrad, Moscow and Ukraine, along with the cities of Kiev and Odessa, were the first targets of the massive, bloody German invasion of June 22, 1941. When by late summer the expectation of a quick victory had proven a miscalculation, Hitler and the *Wehrmacht* leadership decided not to attack Leningrad but to seal it off. Leningrad's population of 3 million was to be annihilated by continuous shelling and starvation, in part, as murderous revenge on Bolshevism and the October Revolution, which had such powerful roots in and ties to that city.

Beginning on September 8, 1941, for two and a half years, 872 days, the inhabitants of the former Petrograd were trapped. On January 27, 1944 the Red Army managed to break through the encirclement.

In the winter of 1941-42 there was only one connection with the outside world. Vehicles followed a route across the frozen Lake Ladoga, called the "Road of Life" by Leningrad's inhabitants. Trucks, driving under continuous attack, often fell through the ice.

Many of those who were supposed to be evacuated by this route lost their lives, and urgently needed food supplies often never reached their destination. It was not until January 18, 1943, that a rail line was able to transport food along a narrow land corridor, likewise under constant fire.

The Leningrad blockade was judged at the Nuremberg trials in 1945 to be one of the most serious German war crimes and

deemed genocidal. The great quantity of evidence at the trial included what is probably the best known and most harrowing account, the diary in which 12-year-old Tatyana Savicheva recorded the deaths of her relatives with dates and times—the last of which read "Mama, May 13 at 7:30 in the morning, 1942."

The particular focus of the January 17 panel discussion at the former German-Russian Museum—also called the "Surrender Museum" because it was here that German generals Keitel, von Friedeburg and Stumpff signed the unconditional surrender of the *Wehrmacht* on the night of May 8-9, 1945—was on the diary of Lasar Mojshes and the memoirs of his daughter Anna.

The Mojshes family originally came from the Vitebsk region, where many Jews settled under tsarist rule. The family moved to Yelets in the Oryol region in 1913, later fleeing from the brutal pogroms of the White Guard troops during the post-revolutionary civil war to Petrograd, later named Leningrad.

Father Lasar, who worked in a factory for school materials, began his diary on September 9, 1941. The day before, the ring of the siege had closed around the city, and during the night German bombs fell on the Badayev warehouses, which burned almost completely to the ground, destroying a portion of the city's food supply.

"The events of the last days in Leningrad are so serious that I decided to keep a diary about them," Lasar Mojshes notes. He sees himself as a chronicler of the times and records everything soberly, but accurately and factually, with details about street names, house numbers, even times of the bombings and artillery blasts. He also lists the number of dead. In passing, one learns how many social and cultural institutions existed in the city of the October Revolution—food canteens, many clinics, the Mariinsky Theater, a youth theater, the "House of the Peasant," the Palace of Labor, communal laundries.

The Nazis, described by Lasar as bastards and scoundrels, deliberately bombed civilian targets, including Leningrad's largest department store, the Gostiny Dvor, bus and streetcar stops, and the hospital for evacuees on Nevsky Prospekt, producing many casualties. One also learns that a bomb killed Betty the elephant, who had lived in the city zoo since 1911.

At the same time, Lasar notes how the bread rations got smaller and smaller. He is one of the non-working people after his factory closes at the start of the war, and ultimately must make do with the smallest ration of 125 grams per day, which comes to about one thin slice of bread. The hunger becomes more and more desperate,

in the canteens there is only thin soup, without vegetables and certainly without meat. “You can’t even get horse meat, cats have almost all been eaten, even I dream of catching a cat and trying it,” Lasar writes.

“One is starving. Despite all this, we do not grumble. It is better than falling into the hands of the Hitlerites, who sharpen their teeth on us. We see our salvation only in the defeat of the bastards and bandits. Luck be with us.” Thus ends the diary of Lasar Mojshes on November 30, 1941.

A month later he died of starvation at the age of 59. His death certificate, reproduced in the museum booklet, was issued on December 30, 1941—cause of death: dystrophy III degree. His wife Tatyana and his four children were evacuated in time and survived the blockade. Tatyana’s brother and his wife, who lived with them, also starved to death.

The memoirs of Lasar’s daughter Anna, a journalist who was involved in the evacuation of children from Leningrad, were tape recorded shortly before her 90th birthday, in 1999. She had taken charge of children, especially from families of journalists and other members of the intelligentsia, evacuated to Tatarstan in the late summer of 1941 and returned to Leningrad in 1944. Her son Volodya was also there.

The Bonn historian Katja Makhotina, herself born in Petersburg, explained in her introduction that the interesting thing about this document is that Anna Mojshes still represents the “communist narrative” 10 years after the end of the Soviet Union. Her language, with its “optimistic narrative,” sounded at many points “like a Pioneer newspaper” of the official Stalinist youth organization. One senses in it the “pride she feels in having succeeded in making ‘frontline workers’ out of the rather spoiled intelligentsia children. ... But they don’t just work: they are happy to be working, feeling great pride and enthusiasm.”

Makhotina explains this “communist language” as the survivors’ attempt to overcome their traumas. However, the enthusiasm and pride during the Leningrad Blockade were neither invented nor exaggerated, nor is the willingness of Soviet soldiers to fight and sacrifice on the fronts. The introductory remarks express the attitude of the academics of the post-German-reunification period, who assess the fighting spirit of the Soviet population as support for the Stalinist regime, which they equate with socialism.

However, despite the crimes of the Stalinists, the population was determined to defend to the bitter end the achievements of the October Revolution—the nationalized property, the planned economy and the social and cultural advances associated with it—against the Nazi invasion. There can be no doubt that this had an impact on children.

It was the criminal policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy that left the Soviet Union initially defenseless before the fascist onslaught. Stalin, in the Great Terror, not only murdered almost the entire leadership of the October Revolution and hundreds of thousands of Communists and intellectuals, but he also decapitated the Red Army. He disregarded the warnings about an imminent Nazi attack, trusting instead in the non-aggression pact with Hitler.

Anna does not hide the difficulties the villagers faced, where Stalin’s policy of forced collectivization led to hostile reactions. She talks about clashes between children and caregivers. But she is

animated by the desire to incorporate the best features of the revolution into her pedagogical duties to the children, to cheer them up and create a sense of security despite their separation from their starving parents in Leningrad, and so much sad news. “The children love it and appreciate being treated as equals,” Anna says, recounting how the educators organize plays, literary contests, songs and a wall newspaper with them.

Anna Mojshes, against bureaucratic opposition, ultimately brings the orphans back to Leningrad and helps them cope with the loss of their parents through mentoring and social cohesion.

At the end of the meeting, Russian-Jewish survivor Leonid Berezin, now 94 years old, took the microphone and thanked the museum with moving words: “This event is very rare. In Berlin, in Germany, everywhere in the world today they are against Russia.” The Leningrad hunger blockade was a genocide, he continued. But, “We are here!” he added, referring to the survivors. “This event is especially important to me,” he stressed, and then slowly, deeply, harshly, unmistakably once again the words, “Because we are here!”

Berezin, born in Siberia in 1929, survived the blockade of Leningrad by the Germans and the Holocaust during World War II. In 1941, as the Wehrmacht advanced on the Soviet city, he was evacuated with a children’s transport. But the train was attacked by German bombers, and as a 12-year-old he walked for three days, along with a few other surviving children, back to Leningrad. In February 1942, then 13 years old, he survived a children’s transport across frozen Lake Ladoga. Many of his relatives died in Leningrad or became victims of the Holocaust in Belarus.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he came to Germany as a so-called contingent refugee. Among contingent refugees were victims of the blockade, about 300 of whom are still alive today. In Leningrad, Berezin was a professor of radio technology. Today, like many other Jewish contingent refugees, he lives in poor conditions in a one-room apartment in Berlin, surviving on meager basic welfare benefits. He heads the Berlin association of blockade victims “Lebendige Erinnerung” (“Living Memory”), which celebrates the liberation of Leningrad from the siege on January 27 as “our Victory Day.”

On February 2, the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum, whose original name was changed primarily at the instigation of the German Green Party, will host a reading and discussion of Vasily Grossman’s book *Stalingrad* to mark the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad.

During the coronavirus pandemic of the past years, the museum’s website has integrated some helpful video guides on, among other things, the blockade of Leningrad and the Nazi starvation policy under the General Plan East. The museum booklet “The Blockade of Leningrad in the Testimonies of the Mojshes Family” can be ordered here.



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