

Haya Dernovskaya, Mira Dernovskaya's Mother



This is a portrait of my mother Haya Dernovskaya, taken in 1943, after the blockade of Leningrad was over.

Before the war, in May 1941, Mum and I were on vacation as always in Maksatikha in Kaliningrad region. Mum was pregnant that year, and was expecting a baby.

When the war began, we thought that it would soon be over and moved to the district center Bezhetsk, and in August returned to Leningrad. On 9th December 1941 Mum gave birth to a girl. She gave birth in a hospital. It all happened in candlelight and the doctor who attended the delivery shouted: 'Come on! Make it faster, the candle's about to burn down! You'll have to do it in

darkness!'

The girl was called Lilya. She had nothing to eat. Neither did we. Daddy worked in a hospital as a tailor and spent all day there. Mum had an infant in her arms.

Sometime in January I was sent to a shop and I was robbed of our ration cards. It was a tragedy in those times, but fortunately they didn't steal all the cards. Those for bread remained, and as no other products were available anyway, we managed somehow.

Daddy died of exhaustion earlier than Lilya. Mum remained alone with two kids. When father's body was taken away, we heated the stove in our freezing room; and to keep the warmth, somebody might have closed the smoke pipe plug, and all three of us got poisoned by fumes.

We were unconscious, but I shouted or mumbled something. Our apartment belonged to some architect before the war and consisted of a suite of rooms. The door between our room and neighbors' room was closed up, but the audibility was good, besides our neighbor Lilya slept just beside that closed door.

She heard me 'squeal' (that's what she called it). The neighbors broke the hook on the door to our room and pulled us out into the open air. Lilya died 2 weeks after that.

We remained with Mum the two of us and we survived by a miracle. Mum was a quiet, restrained person, but very irresolute. It was very hard for her to be alone.

After father's death Mum sold his things and some of our belongings in order to survive. As Daddy had been a tailor, we had some cuts of material set aside for his suit or Mum's coat. Mum sold all that, including our piano, on which I learnt to play before the war. That's where my music studies finished.

There was a period, when Mum didn't rise from bed at all, and it seemed that she would never get up again. But she rose. It was a miracle. One of Daddy's fellow countrymen arrived with a food products caravan from Ladoga.

He had dropped in to us to find out whether Daddy was alive. He left his ration for us, mainly bread, and Mum had a chance to eat a little and recover.