

OLGA: (RUSSIA)¹

I was born in 1953 in the town. My parents had a higher education. Dad taught at the university. My Mum was a chemist-analyst but she committed suicide when I was seven years old. Before that my Mum and Dad got divorced, but I do not think divorce was a reason for that, because for a long time they hid this from me. That is to say, I found out about it when I was probably in Year 9.

I was in Year 1 when my Mum was still alive and we lived with her grandma, but my Dad lived with his parents. I was about 13-14 years old when we started to live together - me, step-mother, father and granddad with grandma. But my step-mother is such a hard person; the more time passes the more I do not love her. All the girls try on dresses, you know? My [step]Mother's dresses. And I remember, that I tried some on, and she got so furious, and she said to me: "Don't you dare to touch my things, you are disgusting!" So many years passed by, but there are things which until now... I cannot even recollect calmly because when you rewind the film you start to understand a lot in life, you know?! I'm old now but it is still so painful. Isn't that strange? Though it shouldn't be like that by now. Painful.

You know, all this was simply accumulating in me ... I felt so bad at home. Though, probably from the outside everything seemed normal. Yes, they controlled me no end, and rummaged through my diaries. Yes I kept them. In Year 9, my first love turned up. We kissed on the staircase. Father was looking for me. I came home and received a slap in the face, although nobody ever touched me, for me this slap was well-deserved. I understand that they were worried sick over me there although at that time you do not realize that. Most likely it was a spur to run away from my step-mother. So I left. Then my father wired to my grandma and grandma brought me back. Mum's grandma. So they started then to control me so tightly. You know, the more they control, the more you want to do things.

School Years

I don't know why I wasn't interested in studies. That is to say I was only interested in maths; with maths everything was alright. And literature, but with literature what? If I managed to

¹ She has served 14 prison sentences for thefts (pick pocketing).

read something before we started to study it at school, then I've read it. All my life I still read avidly and very good literature too but I read nothing from the school syllabus. Then, everything had to be considered from the point of view of the proletariat's victory. Absurd! Nobody could push me to enter the Komsomol². Everybody was in Komsomol. I couldn't explain to myself "why I wasn't" it was just "no and that is that". I don't know why. I really enjoyed being a Pioneer. I liked to collect papers for recycling etc. But all children like things like this. The Komsomol was different. I felt it was something false. My father said to me: "You are crazy, you need to enter the university". You see you are put on the blacklist if you are not the member of the Komsomol. Afterwards, unpleasant things started to happen to me. You know the feeling when you are kind of at home but feel homeless? Do you feel the same? Yes?

Escapes

I was about 16 or 17 when I started to run away from home. Why was I expelled from school? Well I failed my PE, then I did something else – I cannot remember what. Finally, a couple of times I brought to my school a magazine CINEMODE. I took it from my father's library and there were topless photos in it – hard porn for those times. Boys took photos of them and started to sell them around – it was the beginnings of a small business. What else? The final straw was the questionnaire from Komsomol. There was such a question: "What do you like to watch on television and listen on radio?" I cannot remember what I said about the TV, but about radio - I wrote that "I like to listen to BBC and Voice of America" – I was just showing off, being blasé.

After Year 10, I went to evening school. The company was great! I started to drink there and to swear. Now I understand why I started to run away; why I had my first sexual experience. If you don't get enough love at home you look for some emotional substitutions. Something like that – but it was so complicated because, my God, what good you can find on the street?! But even against this background it seemed to me that the criminal world had more solidarity. Well I was 16 – the biggest fool. And my father started to send me into the lunatic asylums on a regular basis. Three times I was sent there. You know the psychiatric hospital is much more frightening than the prison. So you see what sort of brave tin soldier am I!

² Komosol was the Youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [Ed comment].

I'm homeless from 1972

I deliberately took the warrant to the doss-house, because I have a homeless status, can you imagine, from 1972!? It is understood that I don't live on the rubbish heaps but I do not have my own place and finally I wanted to confirm my status quo. I tried to find out how to do it from the solicitors but it is so confusing. That's why I took the warrant to the doss-house. What else can they give me?

Between prison terms I managed to gather some documents. You have to have one confirming your address. My last confirmed residence was in 1972 – my father's flat. In the past it used to be that if you got a prison sentence then you lost your right to live at your registered address. To restore all this is very difficult. And if your relatives do not support you on that then it is impossible. In 1995 there were a huge number of people in prisons due to sentence Number 209 – for being a tramp and sponging³.

Nobody wants to give you work while you don't have a confirmed address, but how can you get a place to live if you do not work?! They used to give us warrants to some drunken villages where the city dweller of course would never go. You can shoot me dead but I would never go to the village. I know and understand nothing about it. I have never even been on an excursion to the countryside. I'm scared of the life in the village more than one in the prison. I think I would never survive there.

Leaving the prison all of us were qualified as electric sewing machine operators. By the way we all were quite skilled and this occupation was quite in demand in those days. Once I had such an opportunity. I received an assignment to the 'town', to the clothes factory. I was very pleased to go there with my child. Almost five years I managed to stay there. I've tried

³ To be homeless or of no fixed abode was a criminal offence resulting in the region of two years imprisonment. Long term unemployment was also outlawed yet the legal precondition for regular employment was propiska. Indeed, propiska was the precondition for access to most civil rights and social benefits such as employment, access to housing, medical insurance, education, unemployment benefit, ration card, voting rights and so on. Until 1995 Article 60 concerned non-voluntary absences caused by hospitalisation and criminal convictions. A person sentenced to six months or more was automatically considered to be of no fixed abode and if an individual owned their own property they were deprived of it. Formerly incarcerated persons who lived with their families had propiska cancelled and it was up to their family to decide whether or not to re-register the individual post sentence. Number 209 refers to begging or conducting other 'parasitic' way of living.

to get normal life back, and I arranged a marriage of convenience because I couldn't bear to raise my little boy in the constantly drunken women hostel. I had different ideas and plans. But there was a glitch and I got another sentence for four years. And then another glitch. Now I'm free again and got a warrant to the doss-house. So in 1972 they kicked me out of my flat and that's it. Only in 1995 the Constitutional Court decided that this was unlawful, that people who were sentenced to prison were losing their homes. It is quite ironical that nobody in 23 years gave a toss about it?! Naturally during all these years I turned into the declassified element. How could I find out about this court decision in 1995? Nobody came to me and told me about it. I was homeless from 1972.

The State

And how do I have to live now? I have to go to the doss-house, really from one prison to another one, although I still could work somewhere. I could live normally. I would love to slap their faces with this piece of paper.

This means that I will be homeless for another ten years. Do you get it? Try to loaf about, steal from time to time, create problems for other people and then we put you back in prison and you will be in the place you belong. Do you understand what they offer? Their offer is to put me on the waiting list together with the others seeking social security but to get this I have to live somehow for another ten years! Do you understand that this is just another countless piece of paper?! I had one already in 1980. I just got out of the prison, my baby was in the children's home and the director of this home saw how much the children love me because I love them a lot. As soon as I used to come in the whole group of them was shouting 'Mum, mum came' and every day I used to bring them something tasty. Anyway this director saw how good I am with the children and she offered me a job and a place to live. Well when I came the next day she was very sad, she couldn't get a permission to give me a residential status as it was prohibited due to the Olympic Games. Then all the homeless were kicked out of Moscow and nearby towns. Sometimes I lose all my spiritual strength but I never confuse the state with its people.

To respect the law?

I am always amazed and think how on earth it could be? From day one, as soon you are arrested, everything about you is violated, everything that is possible and impossible, and at the same time they want you to respect their law!

Work

Well I had a dream when I was in prison. I'm very good at making children's clothing. So you know what I would like to do?! To repair clothes, because it is always paid well and I really like to do it. To repair a zip or to shorten trousers would take me a maximum of 20 minutes but I could earn 150-200 roubles. And then slowly-slowly I could make the children's clothes, because I love it and I know how to do it. I don't mean just simply sewing new ones, but I could design them and make them from all the recycled material. I would take such a pleasure in this. But I cannot imagine how could I achieve this? At the same time I know there is a demand for such work.

My partner

I have a friend; she and I have been together for 22 years. She was really not a criminal person before. But at one moment she broke down and 'sat on the needle'⁴. I started to use drugs as well. I was freed in 1994 and got a shock because when I went to prison it was communism and when I was freed I got lost. Simply got lost. Drugs. Opiates.

Levelling of Personality

This green [prison] uniform is a levelling of personality. It is so simple. In order to change the person's life, to make him understand why he was put in prison, he is given all that time in prison to think about it. That's why I always used to tell to the girls to use the opportunity and learn how to sew. Why? Because the sewing machine is the only place where one can be left alone. When you know how to sew, nobody bothers you. You sit by the sewing machine, do your business and think. The wiser girls always listened to my advice. They used this time to think - why were they there, what went wrong, what could be changed and so on. But, in order to make people to start to think about it they need to realize that they have their own identity. But imagine how hard it is if from day one in prison everything is done to crush your personality.

⁴ Started using drugs [Ed comment]

It is so strange that they all think that if you've been to prison then you do not care about your child, where you live, whether you need to wash or with whom you sleep. It really doesn't help ex-prisoners. Do you know what drives me mad? They ask me in the court: "Are you ashamed?" I say: "I'm not ashamed, because you do not give me any options". They say: "but there is a centre for social adaptation". I agree: "Great, it is for six months isn't it?! What will I do afterwards, how can I earn money if I'm a pensioner?!" They say: "Every person has to take care of himself" I say – it means, translating it to a normal human language – we can't be bothered about you, your place is in prison, go on commit something quickly and go to prison where you belong'. But I try to survive on a minimum, of course I could steal as much as I need and I'm not scared of the prison.

Now, you know, I just try not to break down again, my nerves are so weak. How many years can the state humiliate me? Just because I was a fool and I ran away from my bitchy step-mother when I was 17? I'm 55 now but they still peck me and dare to ask – if I'm ashamed, and they get surprised why I'm not ashamed but vexed.

Son

I feel quite comfortable around him, though he is a very complicated person. He had such a harsh life experience, my poor boy. He was also homeless until 29 years of age. Of course he didn't sleep on the rubbish heaps, but he had moments in his life when he slept even in internet coffee-shops. Do you understand? They ought to give him a flat but instead they just kicked him out of the children's home and that's it. So when he got tuberculosis he plucked up his courage and went to the city administration to demand a flat. You know everything depends on people working there – the secretary of the head of the administration was a first-class woman. My son briefly described to her his situation and she has done the rest. She took his life so close to her heart.

Drugs

I only took drugs with the girls I used to pickpocket with. I do not know the statistics, but in our colony most of the people are drug users. They are convicted for 'accidental' theft or the most common sentence nowadays is 'the distribution of drugs'. These people are not really

criminal. It is criminal when someone sells drugs for profit but does not use the drugs himself. But these people are drug users themselves so they just sell in order to get a dose for themselves – the more they sell the larger is their dose. Look I'm a drug user myself, when I'm drugged I cure myself – it is the same as when you are ill and they sell you medicine in the pharmacy to make you better. So I have no evil intention because I sell you a medicine. All these people are doing these terrible long term sentences – 8-10 years, is it normal?

After Release

Do you know how difficult is it? I got out with the desire to work, stay clean and so on. Then you go and count these kopecks, and, these bastards, sometimes even this minimum pension can't last for long. Do you know how difficult it is not to confuse this filthy apparatus and the people who give you grief? I can be very honest but do you know how much humiliation there is in hunger and wandering? If I didn't have that lawyer, which they hired for me, I would break down again and start to pickpocket. I wouldn't have had any other options because I would have no hope, no support.

About Sociologists

You know I have something to ask you. When you talk to us – what is it for you - exotic or something else?! Sometimes I think that you do harm to us by creating an illusion that someone cares about us; that there is hope. Then again we meet these bastards, representatives of the state, do you know how unbearable it is? I mean if I didn't meet you in the first place it wouldn't be so painful. I do not want to steal not because I do not know how but because I really do not want to do it. It is against my principles today. And if I have to start to steal again I have to crush myself over again.

I'm still standing. But I have felt so awful, I have been so close to suicide. I review my life like I would watch a movie; some events have become so vivid, so painful. Over time I started to recollect more and all this together is like a snow ball... Shit basically!

When I tell my story, everything is boiling in me. I carry on living and every time I try to manage the past. Every time in a new way. Shit. Remember I told you I've met a woman from human rights, first-class woman by the way, it is because she works in human rights.

About Motherland

I'm a marginal person, and of course it is a bitchy country. But can you imagine, even if sometimes I cannot stand the state, I love my Motherland. Honestly! It is unexplainable! Do you understand? Abramovich buys Chelsea, but my country cannot help me. How can one understand who is good who is evil in this country?

I am a Normal Person

I am really an absolutely normal person. At least I know when I do bad and when I do good. I can shout about my rights but all the same I know my life, everything about myself, when I was right or wrong. Do you understand? I cannot imagine how I might let down one person yet it takes so much will power to carry on and not to break down.