

# Paullina Simons

## *Six Days in Leningrad*

*a memoir*



*For my darling Papa*

## THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

We had been planning our trip to Russia for a year. Ever since the summer of 1997 when I told my family that my fourth novel *The Bronze Horseman* was going to be a love story set in WWII Russia during the siege of Leningrad. I said I couldn't write a story so detailed and sprawling, if only in my mind, without seeing Russia with my own eyes.

My family had listened to me very carefully, and my 90-year-old grandfather said, "Plina, I hope I'm not going to be turning over in my grave reading the lies you're going to write in your book about Russia."

"I hope not, Dedushka," I said. "Though you're not dead."

Going to St. Petersburg was not an option before the summer of 1998. The logistics of the trip were too overwhelming. How would I get a non-Russian-speaking husband and three non-Russian-speaking kids, one of them barely walking, to Russia? And what would they do there? Either my husband would be watching the kids full-time in a foreign country — and not just any foreign country, but Russia! — or we would be watching them together, and I wouldn't be doing any research.

I didn't need to go all the way to Russia to take care of my kids. I could stay home in Texas and do it. Kevin and I considered

leaving them and going just the two of us, but in the end decided that was a bad idea. Leave the kids with a babysitter for ten days? Too much; for them, for us.

Still, thoughts of Russia would not go away. Also, there was no book. Eighteen months earlier there had been a nebulous vision of two young lovers walking in deserted Leningrad on the eve of a brutal war, but a vision does not an epic story make. How could I not go to Russia?

I finally said to Kevin that it looked like I would have to go on my own. He didn't love the idea, my going to a "place like Russia" by myself. He said I should bring my sister.

I ran the idea by my father. "Kevin thinks I should take Liza to Russia with me," I said.

My father was quiet on the phone for what seemed like an hour, smoking and thinking, and then said, "*I* could come with you to Russia."

I had not thought of that.

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A girlfriend of mine said, "Oh, that's neat! When was the last time you and your dad took a trip together?"

"Never."

That had been nine months ago. And little by little the trip took shape. My father told me, "Paullina, I'm retiring at the end of

May. We have to go before I retire.” My father is the director of Russian Services for Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. Working has defined and consumed him. Working is and has been his life. And with good reason. His team of writers translated western news, both political and cultural, into Russian and then broadcast it over short waves to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They broadcast to Russia 24/7 with 12 hours of original programming every day. For twenty-five years. I believe that four people were responsible for bringing down the Berlin Wall and Communism during 1989-91: Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Pope John Paul II, and my father.

We couldn't find a convenient time for both of us to go. Finally my father postponed his retirement a few months and we settled on July 1998. It was the perfect time to go, my father told me, because we would stand a chance of having some nice weather. Also the nights would be white. “That’s a sight to see. You do remember white nights, Plina?”

“Not much, Papa.”

What would be the shortest time I could go to Russia, and not traumatize my kids? I figured a day to travel there, a day to travel back, and then six days in St. Petersburg. But I vacillated, procrastinated, mulled.

Truth was, I didn't want to go.

## *In 1973 There Were Sharks*

I was born in St. Petersburg when it was still called Leningrad and came to America when I was ten. We left Leningrad one fall day and lived in Rome while we waited for our entry visa to the United States.

Those were blissful months. Every Thursday my mother gave me a few lire to go to the movies by myself *and* buy a bag of potato chips. That bag was worth three movies. I'd never eaten anything so delicious in Russia. The movies were all in Italian, of which I spoke exactly three phrases: *bella bambina*, *bruta bambina* and *mandjare per favore*. Cute baby, ugly baby, and food please. It was two more phrases than I spoke in English.

We spent my tenth birthday in Rome. My parents asked me what I wanted, and I said, gum. I got gum. Also some strawberry Italian gelato and then we went to the American movies. We saw *The Man for All Seasons*. I liked the gum better than the movie. I didn't understand a word of it, but at the end, a man had his head cut off.

We came to America two days before Thanksgiving 1973. Our first big American meal was turkey and mashed potatoes and something called cranberry jelly. We celebrated in Connecticut, in the home of a young man we met briefly in Vienna and who invited

us to his house for the holidays. We gave thanks for our amazing luck, for getting out of Russia, for coming to America. After all, America was every Russian's beckoning light. America seemed like heaven. True, first you had to die, but *then*, you had—America! The death was leaving Russia. Because once you had left you could never go back.

America was life after death.

That Thanksgiving when everyone else at the table was done with their meal, my father walked around the table and finished all the food that the Americans had left behind on their plates. People of a certain age born in Leningrad do not leave food on their plates.

Our second American meal was the lasagna our landlady brought up to our apartment in Woodside, Queens. Don't ask me how this is, but during our stay in Rome, *Italy*, I had not tasted tomato sauce once. I had not had lasagna. I had not had pizza. I did not know tomato sauce until our Italian landlady knocked on our door in Woodside.

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In America there was Juicy Fruit gum, and chocolate ice cream, which I had never had, and something called Coca Cola, which I also had never had. And television. I found a children's cartoon: *Looney Tunes*. I had never seen anything like it in Leningrad. In Russia, we had black and white war movies, black and white news. There was

some animated programming, but it looked like war movies, though less interesting.

War movies and news. The Olympics. Which was the single most exciting thing on Soviet television, but unfortunately the Olympics came only once every four years.

Suddenly, in my life there was *Looney Tunes!* Bugs Bunny! Elmer Fudd. Porky Pig! Our first TV set was black and white, but the cartoons were straight out of someone else's Technicolor dream. The bunny blew up a pig and a hunter, ran away, blew up a cave and fell off a cliff, all in eight minutes.

The war movies in Russia were set in gray tents and starred two gray men who talked non-stop until there was a battle, followed by more dialogue, all concluding in a blaze, more dialogue and eventual victory for Mother Russia. The movies lasted, it seemed to me, as long as the war itself.

In Queens, after eight minutes, the *Looney Tunes* bunny disappeared and was suddenly replaced by a lady selling towels made of paper. Towels made of *paper*? The cartoon was over, so I turned off the TV, utterly disappointed.

It took me many weeks and the force of inertia to discover that the cartoon did not end but was merely interrupted by the lady selling towels made of paper. Imagine my happiness!



I used to read in Russia, and who could blame me? What else was there to do? Now that I had Bugs Bunny, all reading vanished for a good four or five years.

In school I would occasionally be asked to talk to the other students about my experience of life in the Soviet Union. That's how it was put: "Your *experience* of life in the Soviet Union." I wanted to say even then that it wasn't my *experience* of life, it actually *was* my life, but I didn't. I did give my broken-English little talk: about the communal apartment, the small rooms, the cockroaches falling on my bed while I slept, about the bed bugs and the smell of decomposing skunk they made when I accidentally squished them, about the lack of food, the lack of stores, the lack of my father.

When I was asked, "How did it feel living with that kind of deprivation?" I would shrug and say, "I didn't know it was deprivation. I thought it was just life."

My American friends grew up with Coca Cola and Jesus Christ.

I grew up with hot black tea and the astronaut Yuri Gagarin—the first man in space.

Kevin watched *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Star Trek*.

I watched Gagarin's funeral, and a one-hundred-and-twenty part film called *Liberation* — burning tents and dark winter nights —

which they rebroadcast every December because Decembers near the Arctic circle just weren't bleak enough.

I'd never seen a palm tree, I'd never seen an ocean, I'd never heard a church service, and had never read *Charlotte's Web*. I read *The Three Musketeers*, *Les Misérables* and a Russian writer named Mikhail Zoschenko. By the time I was ten I had read all of Anton Chekhov and Jules Verne, but what I wanted, though I did not know it, was Nancy Drew and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

What was baseball? What was peanut butter? I didn't know. I knew what soccer was, what mushroom barley soup was, what perch was.

And who was this Jesus Christ?

I, who had not grown up with Christmas carols, pageants, cookies, decorations and a divine baby in a cave, had no idea what Jesus had to do with Christmas. My first Christmas Eve in New York my parents went out, leaving me, I thought, alone and joyfully watching *Bonanza*, except to my great consternation, Michael Landon on whom I had quite the crush, was replaced on Channel 11 by nothing but a log burning on the fire and instrumental music playing in the darkened background. My Pavlovian reaction to learning that the pre-emption of *Bonanza* was all about something called Christmas, was less than spiritually positive, as you can imagine.

While my husband was vacationing near Lake George, I was learning how to swim in the icy Black Sea.

Kevin knew Atlantic Ocean beaches? I knew the dirty sand on the Gulf of Finland. It was enough for me when I was a child. I spent ten summers of my life in a tiny Russian fishing village called Shepelevo near the Gulf of Finland, and it was all I needed. My childhood summers in that village is the treasure I carry with me through life.

But I didn't want to go back there.

I lived ten years of my life in a communal apartment, nine families sharing 13 rooms, two kitchens, two bathrooms.

Didn't want to go back there either.

My father was arrested when I was four and spent the next five years of his life—and mine—in a Soviet prison, in a Soviet labor camp, in exile.

I lived alone. With my silent mother.

Not interested in reliving any part of that.

There was no romanticizing our life in Russia. In leaving, we had all died and gone to heaven. If it weren't for my stupid book, why on earth would I want to go back?