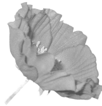
PAPER POPPIES

A Memoir



MARIANNA VEKHOVA

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Paper Poppies: A Memoir
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To my prematurely deceased parents:
my mother,
who died in exile when she was twenty-three
and my father,
who was in the People's Volunteer Corps
when he was reported missing in action
near Rzhev at the age of thirty.

Preface

This book is the story of a spiritual journey. Much of it comes to us through the acute observations of a crippled orphan during World War II. Here described are the myriad of beliefs that filled empty souls during the Communist years.

Marianna's search for light begins on a dark night in a Siberian hospital ward and continues into adulthood. What to believe? How to discern Truth in the midst of a multitude of conflicting, cajoling voices?

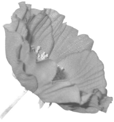
Marianna chose to follow the faith of the first person who witnessed personally to her. Oh, the power of that personal word!

Marianna is still on her journey as are millions of Russians today, many of them orphans like Marianna.

For those who love Russia and seek to understand the struggle of the Russian soul, this book will allow you to enter that experience as no other.

When you purchase this book, you are contributing to the work of OPORA, an organization which mobilizes Russian churches to mentor children who are without parental care.

~ Pamela Brunson, World Witness, May 2005



One

We think it is wrong to talk to children about death. We think it is necessary to protect their psyches. As if children haven't witnessed wars and crimes from ancient times! As if they've never been taken captive and made to be slaves. As if all they've ever done was to play, sing and be merry.

My seven-year-old daughter and I stand by my grandmother's coffin, reading the funeral prayer. The child looks at the face of the dead woman without fear and says with a sigh as we finish the prayer, "It's good we didn't let her be taken to a hospital. It's good that she died at home with her family close. Look, she's smiling!"

My daughter knows how much I feared that Granny would die in a hospital—an alien and strange place—alone and feeling forsaken by the ones she loved. Never in her life had she been in a hospital.

I remember asking God, "Lord, when my Grandmother Eugenia's life is to end, let me be near her to close her eyes myself. Let her feel Your love." The longings of my heart were answered. In her last minutes Granny wasn't looking at us; she was gazing at an icon, immersed in prayer.

Death stood by my side even from my birth. Before my first birthday I'd undergone my first serious operation, trephination of the skull, because of neglected ear infections. Years

of balancing between life and death followed. Something was dragging me into the darkness of non-existence. At the same time, something else was pushing me out of pain, oblivion and weakness into the colorful moving world full of joy.

There was no one to protect me from hard circumstances in my childhood. I could ponder death as much as I liked. I puzzled over its mystery.

At the age of five I first saw death close up. I was lying in a hospital in Sverdlovsk, Siberia. It was wartime. All hospitals and nursing homes were overcrowded, so the dying were no longer taken away to a separate ward as before, not even shielded with a folding screen from the others in the ward.

It sometimes happened that a dead woman would lie the whole night in her bed in the same ward with the living. Her body and head would simply be covered. Everyone would talk in a low hush. The ones who were allowed to get out of bed would walk noiselessly and would creep into the ward. Sometimes an especially brave one would come up to the dead, lift the sheet from her face and say, "Such a calm face, and peaceful. Must have been a good life she lived," meaning that she must have lived a praiseworthy and blameless life.

Others would turn away in fear. They were afraid of the spirit of the dead in that very room, complaining that now for sure she would haunt them at night. It was with great awe and wonder that I witnessed both fear and respect of death.

I wondered whether it was frightening to die. How would it be to see nothing at all, to hear nothing, to feel nothing? Why are a dead person's eyes often half open, as if they are peeping through their eyelashes? Why must one talk in whispers as if the dead can eavesdrop? Why are they treated differently from the living? The living are sworn at, shoved aside, and threatened. No one is afraid of hurting them but the dead

are always approached with a look of utmost respect.

An old woman, speaking in a low voice, told me that the soul left the body like a butterfly leaves a matchbox. Flapping its wings, the soul soars up and lands on the Lord's palm if the person was good. The soul of a villain drops like a stone into hell, straight into the devil's black apron. With a horrible laughter, the devil stirs his hot fire with a poker, and there he will throw evil souls like pieces of black coal.

I imagined God sitting motionless on top of fluffy clouds, surrounded by blue, yellow, and patterned butterflies that danced over him as if he were an apple tree in blossom.

I didn't avoid thinking of death. Children don't have that cowardice of mind. They don't seek salvation in evasion. Instead, they feel on the verge of guessing a secret. Well-educated patients laughed at the old woman's imaginings of the immortal soul and said that to die meant simply to be no more. To them, that said it all. But I failed to imagine what it was like "to be no more," and listened with trepidation to the uneducated, old women's and nurses' talk of ghosts, dead people, and adventures at cemeteries.

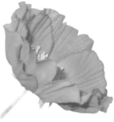
I listened to these conversations all through the endless winter evenings in a hospital in a Siberian city in the middle of the war. Even now they remain engraved on my memory.

I would lie quietly like a mouse, trying not to breathe loudly, not to squeak the bed, fearing they would remember my presence and stop talking half-audibly in the darkness. Because electricity was rationed, the lamps in the hospital burned but dimly or the lights went out completely. Once in a while someone would light a candle on a bedside table, and then the knitters and embroiderers would move close to the little flame. Their shadows would quietly move against the walls and ceiling; peaceful, kind, not at all frightening.

Someone's face would emerge out of the darkness and vanish again. The candle would be flickering about with its sharp tongue and a gray tail of smoke. Behind the group of stooped figures, the windows shone with a thick coat of frost. The moon lit the frost, making luminescent blue and green spangles.

When the lights went out at night and the windows were uncovered, we could watch the moonlit night through those dark rectangles and wonder if ghosts in their long white shrouds were really freezing in the snow and wind while we were talking of them. Or perhaps they only tramped the Earth in old times, and now there's no such thing. I desperately tried to keep awake to catch a glimpse of a ghost peeping into our window. As much as I watched, I never caught one. I resisted slumber as long as I could. But I always fell asleep without having heard the end of the latest horror story.

In the daytime though, during the rest hour—called the 'dead hour'—I could ponder whether I would become a ghost after my death, or a butterfly, or a black stone. The idea of frightening people at night didn't appeal to me, nor did I want to drop into the oil-cloth apron of the devil, who had horns, a beard like a horse's tail, and a scorching fire. I wanted to swing up into the sky, racing with the wisps of smoke and clouds.



Two

I had turned five by then, but all I saw day after day were the whitewashed walls of the hospital ward, a patch of sky in the window, the nurses, doctors and fellow patients. I had spinal tuberculosis. I lay in a plaster cast tied to the bed with straps of cloth. The things around me were always the same: a plate, an aluminum spoon, and a white drinking cup with a straw. I learned to eat lying in bed with a plate on my chest without dropping a single crumb.

There was no opportunity for schooling or education. There was nothing to do. I escaped from boredom and idleness into my fancies and meditations.

With my face turned to the unevenly whitewashed wall, I could lie quietly as if asleep. But in fact, I was making up a story about a cockroach family that lived in a crack in the wall. The crack was barely noticeable, but even in broad daylight it was very dark inside. There was a cockroach that lived with his family in that darkness. He talked to his babies by touching their baby heads with his feelers, and they petted his cheeks with their feelers in return. Though they feared the light, they were very curious to take a look at it. Their father explained to them that they would learn all about the light in due course when they grew up. But they were bursting with desire to see some of it now, so they were secretly peeping through the

crack and wondering. They had a lot of adventures. I made up sequel after sequel during dead hours, and these horrible hours passed away very quickly and were always alive for me.

This game ceased to entertain me when someone brought a book to one of the patients in my ward. It was Gogol's *Evenings On A Farm Near Dikanka*. Someone read the stories aloud, and every night as we listened to the prose, we shivered with horror and delight.

Surely our hospital dead were nothing compared to Gogol's ghostly characters. Ours looked like unimpressive shadows compared to his. On a dark night the spirits in Gogol's tales quietly flowed over tombs or empty roads, driving fear into the hearts of lone, night travelers. They appeared in dark cabins as quivering phantoms, or tapped at windows heralding someone's death. The worst thing was when they came in the form of a dead husband to his widow. But when the widow guessed the fraud and drew the sign of the cross, the dead (or the demon) disappeared with evil laughter.

Evil spirits of the lowest rank did petty mischief in cabins at night, just like naughty boys. They moved things about and stamped on the ceiling, leaving indelible footprints. They scratched, squeaked the doors, blew into peoples' faces, or howled, calling forth disaster. Sometimes demons would pour water over a frightened woman stiff with fear, alone in the darkness. Or they'd put a rake in front of a running man so he'd step on it, and it would suddenly hit him on the forehead. They'd drop a horse collar, that hung peacefully from a nail in the shed, on an old woman, who had crept out of the cabin in the middle of the night to answer the call of nature. But their main task was to frighten the poor traveler; to lead him astray in a blizzard, to lure him into a swamp or a pit—or worse, a forsaken tomb. Sometimes they entertained themselves by

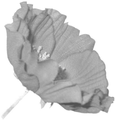
casting a spell over a maid or a newlywed woman.

Frightening, to be sure. But if you didn't give way to fear or depression, it was believed that you could draw the cross and drive away even the most cunning and evil demon. You could sprinkle him with holy water, invite a priest with a church crucifix, and have the house sanctified.

But none of us had ever heard of such monsters as Gogol's Basavrjuk or his sorcerer. What impressed me most of all was not dead men with claws growing down to the ground, with long hair and beards (Gogol's dead had hair that kept growing!). Of course it was horrifying to imagine corpses rising out of open tombs, their empty eye sockets peering at the moonlit river. But I was so terrified that I couldn't even breathe when we reached the chapter where a panic-stricken Katerina runs through the night forest, her hair catching in the branches, while souls of unbaptized babes laugh horribly and roll in stinging nettle. Oh, this stinging nettle! It spreads like a carpet, and a terrible squealing tangle of babes rolls over its pile.

And who was I? It turns out I was also a babe. One stops being a babe, they told me, when one turns seven, and I was only five. *Have I been baptized?* I questioned. *If I die, will I join the unbaptized babes? Why haven't I been baptized? Or perhaps Nanny did baptize me? No way do I want to roll and squeal in the nettles at night!*

When I was still able to walk, only one year before, I had seen trees and plants. And I had experienced stinging nettle. I'd been afraid my bare feet might be stung when we played hide and seek. I'd even eaten nettle soup. After a year in the hospital, though, my ideas of nettle and birches faded. The patients didn't have any nursery books with pictures. So the transparent blue soul of Katerina that came when called by the sorcerer was far more real to me than nettles.



THREE

The attitude toward life of the simple women in my ward was just like that of Gogol's. They believed that all kinds of beings existed in this world next to each other: people, mermaids, the spirit of the house (poltergeist), devils, and angels. For every human being—big, little, old, young, good or bad—there was a contest between angels and demons. Each person had a choice: to give into his passions and desires, thus falling under the power of the devil; or to resist his passions and desires and turn for help to his guardian angel, to the Lord himself, to a saint, or to an old and wise monk. Then rescue came immediately.

This worldview looked a lot richer and more interesting than did the cold, unpopulated world believed in by some of those in my ward. These were the people who kept arguing that neither God, angels, nor devils existed and that humans had no such thing as a soul. They had only a body with its liver, spleen, heart (its little engine), and brain (its head office). Anything that cannot be touched, weighed and scrutinized must be fiction!

I felt insulted, as if robbed, when the educated women won that argument. They said Gogol had imagined it all because he was a writer. Writers had nothing but fantasies in their heads and were not to be trusted. Death? It is when life

snaps, just like a bandage or a thread. That is the end; there's nothing afterwards. Nothing!

The world according to Gogol and the simple-hearted women around me made sense. Man doesn't live his life just to finish up as worm food or as fertilizer for herbs. Man must master many things and learn about the next life that begins when the soul is departed from the body.

So easy to understand! Man is born little and weak, and he needs the care and labor of others to survive. When he grows up, he begins to labor for his children and other people, and he learns to love them. After his death, all these labors do not lose their value; but thanks to them, the soul lives on. Whether his soul will live in joy or in pain depends on his efforts in this life. It looked to me as if I paved the way for my future existence myself. Would it be a dash towards the sky, racing with the clouds, or a drop into the oilcloth apron of the monster in a horrible evil hell? God radiates love, but in hell there burns eternal hatred. It was so interesting to ponder this, that I stopped inventing my cockroach stories.

Now, as I lay in the hospital in my plaster cast, my back pain was not as bad as when I had lain on the floor in the cabin. I no longer cried constantly from attacks of pain. Most of the time, my back merely ached, sometimes badly, sometimes mildly. Still, when the weather was about to change, pain would start to gnaw at me and I would weep.

"I can teach you to drive away the pain if you wish," one of the patients whispered to me secretly.

If I wished! I wished it enormously!

"I'll teach you the secret words," she said. "Repeat them when it aches very badly and you'll feel better. But it will only help if you never tell these words to anyone. If you tell even one person, the words will lose their healing power."

She knew what would happen to her, should I let it out that she had taught me to pray. But so great was her kindness that it overcame fear. I was overjoyed that from now on I was going to have a secret of my own!

"Memorize it!" she whispered into my ear. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name …" She taught me the entire prayer. "Memorize these words."

The words were so puzzling. Never had I heard words like that from anyone. I believed they were magical. Truly, they helped me survive the nights, when everyone was asleep in the ward, while horrible dreams wandered around the room, while the ache rose up and drove away sleep. One could discern groans and sighs of others tortured by their invisible pains. To me these pains had iron claws and huge teeth, red-hot from hell.

Yes, my pain feared the 'magic' words I kept repeating to myself through clenched teeth: "Our father who art in heaven …"

My faith repeated the words while my mind pondered and wondered. *Why 'Our father' and not 'Papa?' And who is he? And why is he 'Ours?' Who is 'us?' Why 'thy' name and not 'your' name? And what is 'heaven'?*

In my imagination heaven looked like multi-tiered shelves of blue glass. Our Father sat on the top glass tier, cross-legged under a long garment, looking just like a Chinese figurine I had once seen on somebody's dresser. Our Father kept nodding his head and squinting his narrow, wise eyes. In his hands he was holding 'our daily bread'—a big loaf, white and crusty, with fried nuts on top. 'We' were a huge queue of adults and children who came up to the glass shelves and stretched out our palms towards him. Nodding and friendly, 'Our Father' would break off a large piece of bread for each one and put it into our palms. But the loaf of bread didn't get any

smaller! The loaf remained complete and intact every time!

The woman who taught these secret words to me used to say that Our Father gave 'our daily bread' only to the good and turned his head away from the bad natured.

But if a bad-natured one is hungry, and he doesn't receive bread, he'll get angrier still and will take it away from the good, I thought. *And if he does receive bread, he'll eat it and will go on being wicked because there's no more bread left, and nothing is left over for tomorrow.*

I tried to find a solution to the problem of how to treat the wicked. I fell asleep quite confused, but pain tore me out of my slumber. So, once again I clutched the finger of Our Father, who tenderly nodded his head in the darkness. Strangely, when I was thinking of him, I was not at all afraid to be the only one awake among the sleeping; and I didn't feel lonely.

So, in our quiet ward we read Gogol's books, chatted together, and received our treatments. We hoped that one day we'd be released from the hospital and regain freedom.

Outside the hospital walls there continued a hungry, wartime winter. Everyone tried to feed us well and fatten us up, for we were TB patients, who were thought to need extra nutritious food. I remember one time when I turned down some kind of porridge. It was very likely the usual gruel that we had everyday. (The TB sick, especially bed patients, do not have much appetite.) The nurse was standing by my bed with a plate in her hands, trying to persuade me to eat.

"Do you hear?" the nurse warned. "A hungry woman is wailing over the radio, 'I want bread! I want porridge!' You hear? So, finish it up quickly, or she'll come and take it away from you!"

But I'd have gladly given my porridge to the woman wailing on the radio. … The radio was always on in the ward. We eternally waited for any kind of news. A lot of patients felt oppressed by the quiet, and the radio distracted them and didn't let them concentrate on their misfortunes. I got used to the radio and came to love classical music, the arias from operas and musical comedies, and the folk songs. When the nurse frightened me with that hungry woman, the famous singer Ruslanova was singing over the radio. Her powerful voice drove depression into my soul. I felt as if I were about to suffocate from it and that my heart would stop.

Depression, worry, hopelessness and fatigue overwhelmed the sick women in my ward. They loved Ruslanova with a grateful love; they stopped talking as soon as they heard her start singing, and they listened with heads bowed. I liked what they liked. I trusted these women completely.

That mournful, emotional Russian music became associated in my imagination with endless stretches of snow. It always took me back to twilight over the snowy field, not a single light ahead, no hope to get warm or have something to eat. I had crossed a field like that somewhere in Siberia when the train with the sad whistle left me standing in a group of several women and children holding suitcases on the untrodden snow. The train disappeared into the gloaming. We huddled there together, and in every direction as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but endless, soft waves of white snow turning blue in the waning twilight.

When the train stopped to let us off, we were given directions to a village. But when we arrived at the village, the poor and hungry people there didn't welcome more mouths

to feed. The grown-ups of our group felt confused, had a cry, and started to walk over a narrow path through the fields, exhausted under the weight of the heavy burden of suitcases and babes wrapped in blankets. We all were tiny, helpless beings alone in the silence of a huge, snowy world. There was no more rhythmic clatter of train wheels, no more snapping and crackling of the fire, no more talk, no more tears, no more walls that would protect us from the penetrating wind and the vast, endless emptiness that surrounded us.

I tried to walk in the deep tracks of the adults. Unfortunately the snow dropped into my boots from the walls of the footprints, and soon my feet were wet. It was hard to pull my legs out of the crumbling snowy impressions; my feet sank again and again. The night was falling fast, its invisible walls closing upon us. I wanted to drop to the ground and sleep, but it was too frightening to remain alone there where the wind wrestled with dry snow.

There was no more home—gone was my home, with its stone staircase leading to the first floor, and a high window overlooking the yard. The window opened right on the sandbox where I dug and built houses of wet sand. There was no more home with my cot, covered with a green blanket. No more one-eyed bear that always awaited me on my pillow. No more box of toys under the sofa. Now I wouldn't be afraid of the darkness under there. I'd pull out the box myself. I'd sit on the floor and play all alone. How was it that I used to fear the quiet in my room, the shadow in the corner, and someone's steps behind the door? I longed for even those things that once frightened me.

Nothing was left for me now. All I had was the squeak of snow under the heavy feet of the women and their loud labored breathing. Even the babies fell silent, and they whined