

Russia, 2003

Ljuba Kuznetzova, grass root, 49

The Soldier's Mother

Once upon a time in 1953, a little girl named Ljuba was born in a tenement house in Moscow, the year Josef Stalin died. But though that despot was gone by then, the prison camps in Siberia already cleared out and Beria the butcher executed, the newly ended world war still cast long, high-political shadows across the little girl's childhood.

The fact that the allied victors had drawn lines on a map, dividing Europe between them in a (wealthy) western block and a (poor) eastern block, meant that Ljuba grew up behind the so-called "iron-curtain", which effectively separated her world from the world on the other side. While the children in the west soon enjoyed presents from the wealthy American uncle and his generous shower of presents in the form of billions of Marshall-dollars, providing the ordinary family with everything from Volkswagens to Barbie dolls, Ljuba lived on the other side of the fence. Here the shirts stayed scratchy, the toys were made of wood and tin, and you couldn't even find a watered-down coca-cola copy. Surely, the war had traced its bloody paws across Western Europe, especially Germany was on its knees, but with 27 million Russian victims, both soldiers and civilians, a practically bombed-out country and a smashed economy, they were trailing hopelessly behind from the start.

Not that Ljuba was envious or felt second-class - she had nothing to compare herself to. Only, few distorted pieces of information penetrated this tightly closed iron curtain, so how was she to know that the people in the East were aboard an outdated, bumpy, slow-moving train that would inevitably stagnate, while the aerodynamic western welfare train rushed towards new growing grounds? The Soviet citizens were kept in the perpetual dark about the state of the world, for their own sakes, of course. And since only a few were allowed to travel outside the country and there was a law against socialising with foreigners, there was only the slightest possibility that the censured post-war reality to which one was presented could be corrected. Anything that in any way undermined this state-composed piece of fiction based upon propagandist *social-realism* was banned. There were no phonebooks (dangerous to give people the possibility of communicating), nor any cookbooks (because the women should not discover how many ingredients they couldn't obtain), and of course no imported (undermining!) pop-culture. That meant that you could probably find the works of Hans Christian Andersen inside the socialist bookstores, but not a Donald Duck cartoon, probably a recording of Mozart, but not a record of the Rolling Stones.

In retrospect, all of this was absurd. But even though Stalin's successor, *Nikita Khrustjov*, was a rural and jovial man who wished to give Communism his own humane face, the totalitarian brainwash continued. The military hawks in particular watched this alarmingly soft secretary general ready to tighten the rope when he slackened. So, while western observers and eastern- and central-European dissidents cautiously spoke about a

possible "thaw" and hoped for "reforms," the Soviets, unaffected, continued the armament that had begun even before the ink dried on the Potsdam peace treaty. The five-star generals of the Russian army had only one thing on their prominent minds. Never again would they allow the enemy to humiliate them. Never again would they fear the enemy. Never again Stalingrad.

So when the western powers drew together in NATO, spurred by the same motives in reverse, the East responded by forming the Warsaw Treaty. The two leading world powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, faced off like two football teams, each with their respective group of supporters. When one superpower produced nuclear warheads, the other would follow suit. When one superpower proved it possessed medium- or long-range missiles, the other one had to have it, too. If the one party had the means to eliminate the other a hundred times, the other side responded by creating technology that could eradicate the other a thousand times. They even fought about space. Who would be the first to send a manned spaceship in orbit around the Earth? The Soviet Union won that competition one spring day in 1961 when cosmonaut Jurij Gagarin broke through the technological sound barrier and was celebrated as a national hero when he humiliated the otherwise confident USA by being the first man in space— for a period of 108 minutes.

But the little girl, who like all other Russian girls, had bows of tulle in her hair and had started going to school, had no idea that the famous cosmonaut was, in fact, a hero of *war*. For she didn't know that the *cold war* was raging. She knew nothing about the Hungarian uprising, about the Berlin Wall or about fleeing residents of East Berlin who were shot during attempted escapes. The fact that the whole world held its breath from fear of an annihilating nuclear-war as the Soviet Union teased the US with tentative plans to set up missile bases on Cuba probably never occurred to a nine-year-old schoolgirl, who long ago was taught that what father does is always right. You don't ask questions. On the contrary, you learn to attend the May parade, to tie your red pioneer scarf, to sing the national anthem and to pay tribute to "grandfather Lenin." Unsuspecting, Ljuba swung on the rusty swings of the suburb, went skating at Gorky Park, smoked her first cigarette and learned to stand on line for anything from Cuban oranges to toilet paper from the DDR, growing up, just like all the other pale Russian kids, in complete ignorance of peace movements, anti-war demonstrations, anti-nuclear marches, youth rebellion, and "make love, not war" slogans. She didn't know the word "reduction of armaments," nor the concept of a "weapons race", and she had no opinion on nuclear power. Chernobyl was simply a small town in Ukraine and not yet synonymous with a radioactive environmental disaster, while democracy was light years away from being a town in Russia.

Inside the cramped studio apartment, twelve square meters big with a communal kitchen, bath and toilet, where Ljuba grew up with her brother, her railway worker father, and her cashier mother, they had no opinion on "society." First of all, they were busy enough simply surviving. Secondly, "society" equalled the Soviet Union, which equalled the Communist Party, and none of those topics were up for discussion. Politics was not a subject that concerned the common Soviet citizen. Sure you could complain about the

lack of available groceries and cold radiators. Sure you could tell bitter jokes about the absurdities of the system and in a certain way defy it by buying primitive and worn-out Beatles tapes on the black market. But when push came to shove you were, deep down, a proper patriot who supported the decrees of the Central Committee and truly believed that *Pravda* published the truth. The truth about the nasty concept of capitalism as it was expressed in the cliché about the American *Uncle Sam* who cleverly controlled his western marionettes with his one hand while with the other he oppressed the Blacks and fought an imperial war in Vietnam. America was a virtual Sodom and Gomorra that you should count yourself lucky to have avoided. In the Soviet Union, however, everything was much better. For example, there were no traffic accidents, no plane crashes, no earthquakes. Here there was no alcoholism, no drugs, no prostitution. Here there wasn't any corruption, bribery or nepotism, no racism, no flashy cars. And there was no crime, not like in the west where people killed and raped, pillaged and robbed. At any rate, events like that were never mentioned in the only available media, namely the party publications and the state-controlled TV, where each day powerful men appeared to confirm the illusion that the Soviet Union was the closest thing to heaven on earth. Here the citizens were taken care of. No one became unemployed or had to go panhandling in the streets. You had to defend such a country, both against inner and outer enemies. For that reason, it was imperative to have a strong military and a (very) big budget for defense, in order to ensure *Mir i Drusjba!* —peace and friendship— they said in the official speeches.

And that's why Ljuba and her family, like the vast majority of Soviet citizens, never complained about being subjected to the state power, whether that power manifested itself in the visible shape of public uniform-clad figures of authority, like the omnipresent traffic-police, or in the shape of the secret KGB with its network of informants and snitches. You were accustomed to looking over your shoulder and watching what you said because no one knew whether the neighbour or the schoolteacher would report you for being an enemy of the state. And as for the army, it was simply always there. Like the iron fist inside the velvet glove, solidly present, it was ready to move. Always a reminder in the street— from the elderly armchair officers with the withdrawn faces on the subway, wearing long coats and carrying stiff briefcases, to the young crew cut recruits sitting closely together in the back of a truck, hooting "M" and waiving at little boys who, one day, would also do the two-year compulsory military service that no one would even consider disputing.

Not Ljuba either, of course, who was by now a young straight girl who dreamt about becoming a teacher, maybe even a college professor. Her ambitions were no bigger than that, really. She neither felt chosen nor called upon to accomplish anything extraordinary. Rather, she felt like a drop in the vast Soviet sea, where the first priority was to stay afloat. In order to get by in a tough barter economy, where the shelves are mostly empty and where (western) brand names and services could only be obtained under the table or through "good connections," you needed to be both sly and ingenious. Besides, like any other teenager she was more concerned about herself and about members of the opposite sex than about taking a political stand towards a colossus system so unshakeable that it seemed futile to even think about an *alternative*. Instead, Ljuba

thought a lot about a boy in her class, so much so that there were consequences. To her exasperation she became pregnant - a mother at seventeen, in 1970. Five months pregnant, she married her classmate. And while the 18-year-old groom and the wedding guests celebrated and toasted in Armenian cognac and sweet Georgian champagne, Ljuba sat alone in a corner mourning the end of her childhood. The dream of becoming a teacher had to be given up, as there was nothing else for her to do than to become a good mother. Intending to be just that, she moved in with her in-laws, but it was no success. The young father, who was now a factory worker, already suffered from a serious alcohol problem. His wages were spent primarily on vodka instead of his family, and it only got worse when he was called to serve in the army, leaving Ljuba and seven-month-old Sergej behind.

That put an end not only to her childhood, but also to her youth. Not yet twenty, Ljuba had to grow up fast in order to provide for her son and herself. She got a job at a metal factory, a male-dominated workplace that was not very welcoming towards women. The work was tough and the tone was coarse. During the two years her husband served in the army she had to learn to do everything herself, to be alone with a small child, to obtain everything, to solve any problem. Even as she broke down physically and became ill from tuberculosis, she had to get up and keep going. She had to pull herself together for the sake of her child. Her mother saw her breakdown coming and encouraged Ljuba to continue her education. She began studying at the university, but quickly gave up. Her mother then suggested she attend evening classes to become an accountant, and though Ljuba could barely drag herself home at the end of the workday, she followed her mother's advice. She completed her education, got a new job and even got herself an apartment, enabling the family to reunite upon her husband's return from the army. The years went by, one after the other, while the marriage crumbled, the husband continued to drink and the son grew up. Not until Sergej was 13 and Ljuba 30 did she get separated from her husband, primarily because father and son did not get along. For while Ljuba's emotional life had pretty much been set on stand-by and for years she had lived like a zombie, a *homo sovjeticus*, who simply got up, went to work at six a.m. and returned home exhausted at five, her love for the son was pure and genuine. That she could always feel no matter how sedated she felt otherwise. She would always protect her son, even against his own father.

Therefore she listened to the rumours about Russian soldiers being killed in a war in Afghanistan of which the public heard next to nothing with increasing worry, ready to fight. Her own son, Sergej, was closing in on his 18th birthday and thus his drafting. The Russian army had a frightening reputation. Anyone knew that the recruits were treated barbarically, that conditions were brutal, and that the weakest were broken. All mothers who had a newborn son placed in their arms feared the day when they would have to pack him an especially large lunch and wave goodbye at the station. And the prospect of sending her most beloved into *battle* made Ljuba sick with worry. Not only did she worry herself sick, but also for the first time in her life she felt indignant. Should the boy for whom she had worked so hard end his days as a name on a list of casualties of a distant war of which no one understood the purpose? She had to do something. She had to act. She had to prevent this from happening.

Yet before she had time to step into action, the situation solved itself, as Russian troops were pulled from Afghanistan in February of 1989, a few months before Sergej's drafting, which would come in May or June. Ljuba sighed with relief, ah! Still— her eyes had been opened and they could not be shut just like that. Ljuba was waking up from her Soviet slumber, perhaps because there was finally something to wake up to. While the years under the Brejznev rule were smothered by a blanket of grey stagnation, his successor, Mikhail Gorbatsjov, had exhibited true willingness to institute reforms, a willingness that he even seemed able to translate into action! Prompted by the harsh financial circumstances, this very different Secretary General realized that the weapons-race had to be stopped. The Soviet Union simply could no longer afford to participate in the military spitting contest, so Gorbatsjov visited the American president to start negotiating a significant disarmament. In other words, less military, not more! Even though Ljuba could not give a detailed account of the paradigm shift in the Soviet foreign and defense policy, and though she had barely reacted to such fashionable words as *glasnost* and *perestroika*, she still sensed a faint quiver beneath her feet: the colossus was moving. To her it had not been particularly relevant that McDonald's was allowed to open a restaurant on The Red Square or that a Finnish supermarket and an Italian Benetton store had been inaugurated. She could not afford to buy burgers or cardigans. No, what mattered to Ljuba was the miraculous sense that decades of pressure seemed to have been lifted. It felt as though the cement block that had always been lying across her chest had been lifted off. She could begin to breathe freely. She even sensed that maybe a tiny space was being built in which there was room for subjective and independent thought as well as action, a room into which she, Ljuba, could enter.

She was home pondering that realization while Sergej served the first months of his military duty. And then suddenly, on November 9, 1989, it happened! The Berlin Wall fell! Torn down by the citizens of the DDR! With their own hands! And the most amazing part - Gorbatsjov let it happen. This time, no Soviet intervention was ordered, no tanks rolled off in columns down the cement road between Moscow and Berlin. The fact that the fall of the wall was the beginning of the end did not occur to the Russians overnight, including Ljuba. This was not particularly strange, since, as usual, the Soviet public only received censored and highly toned-down reports about the historic event. No breaking news signs were flashing and no objective TV commentators reported excitedly that this could, in fact, mean the collapse of the Soviet Union. The anchor- people on the news at the state-controlled TV station barely raised their voices, but appeared as laconically unaffected as always. But Ljuba, whose thoughts constantly revolved around Sergej, ultimately realized that the Baltic States, where Sergej was stationed, could become a dangerous battle zone as a result of these events, namely when the Baltic people would rise up and demand their freedom.

This was when Ljuba Kuznetzova stepped into character. This marked the time when she transformed into what today she calls "the new Ljuba." She took action, and she took action as a mother. She thought that maybe there were other mothers with whom she could share her fear and frustration. At first she found a few mothers whose sons had fallen in Afghanistan (still without a phonebook). That brought her to another group who

lobbied for the young men's deferment from military service provided they were enrolled in school. This group of mothers called themselves "The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers", and they had already been met with some attention. And when Ljuba stepped into this office for the first time and met these highly involved mothers, she experienced that suddenly she had found her *cause*, something she burned for - helping the soldiers and their mothers.

"I knew nothing about organizational work. But I arrived with this great need to *do something*. So we simply started out right here in this apartment, using my private phone as a *hotline*. And soon the telephone began ringing off the hook, because the entire city was full of desperate mothers and unhappy young men who needed help," Ljuba says, today a 49-year-old woman with short reddish hair and a characteristically Slavic face with sharp features, dominated by heavy glasses. She speaks eagerly about her awakening, the sonorous, tuned tones of her Russian unfolds in double twines, only interrupted by the interpreter. Sadly, I, who only speak a moderate sort of homespun Russian, understand only a few scattered words, yet the drama and the Russian pathos, which we know it from a Pusjkin, a Tjekhov, a Tolstoj and a Dostojevski, are obvious.

"We arranged demonstrations, we verbalized slogans. It was a fantastic time. But I wasn't the only one undergoing transformation - the times were like that. It was a new epoch. People began to talk, talk about everything, about how we saw life, what we thought about. And my new friends in the group taught me to stand up and speak up, taught me to help others. It was during that time that I changed into the person that I am today: an independent woman."

"I intended to change *the system*. I was no longer naïve, because every time I took a new step I discovered that nothing was like I thought. All my illusions burst, because to my surprise we were met with enormous resistance from these military people and other powerful men. Facing men of that caliber who considered you the enemy was something of a wake-up call. We did it for the sake of our children, you see! But the difference between them and us was that we wanted *peace* while they wanted *war*. Back then it made me tense and afraid. I had never faced such an overwhelming opponent before. Now I have gotten used to it. But deep inside I'm still afraid of being too small. Afraid that my struggle to save my sons, my relatives, my friends, the soldiers and their mothers mean nothing to people like that, to their money and their interests."

"So I realized soon that this would cost me something. A realization, which sometimes made me feel tired and discouraged. Yet, at the same time we got an enormous response from the public, which confirmed that we were making a difference, that our work was desperately needed. And I couldn't very well go back, could I? Just like there was an ex-Soviet, there was also an ex-Ljuba. The old Ljuba was not very brave or strong. She wasn't particularly good at solving her own personal problems. But the new Ljuba is both tough and powerful! She doesn't crawl into a corner and cry like a baby. She knows both her own rights and the rights of others and is able to use the law to solve her problems. In a word, I am much more self-assured now. I no longer do what

others tell me to do, which my private life is proof of, by the way..."

Ljuba gestures with her hand in a motion that includes not only the spacious (but full!) suburban apartment characterised by colourful tapestries and floral wallpaper, but also the universe in which she is the energy-filled core, the centre of everything. A lively five-year-old boy, *Sasha*, is orbiting her closely, the love-child whom she has with *Kolja*, her partner who is twenty years her junior (!) It is Saturday and though he works flexible shifts as an ambulance driver, he, too, is at home today, just like the now adult son, *Sergej*, who also lives in the apartment with his wife and their child, Ljuba's grandchild.

"My friends say I am a living paradox. First I have a child at a very young age, and then I have another when I'm old.. ."Ljuba smiles and sends *Kolja* an affectionate glance. In return he gives her a kiss and a shy declaration of love. ("What can I say about her? She is the woman I love.... And the work she does is incredibly important. I'm proud of her!").

"I've known *Kolja* since he was a child. He was my girlfriend's son. And when he was being drafted I helped them with their case like I have helped so many others. Sadly, my friend fell seriously ill, and as a natural thing, *Kolja* and I cared for her together. We supported each other and became very close during that difficult time. We weren't a couple or anything, not at all, but we kept in touch, after my friend died. And eventually, over the course of a couple of years, a close friendship developed into love."

Ljuba smiles once again. She knows very well that her relationship is controversial. No one gets riled up about a middle-aged man and a young woman dating, while the reverse is still outrageously provoking. It is never spoken out loud, but one senses that *Sergej*, the first-born, who is older than his mother's partner, has had his share of difficulties taking it lying down.

"Indeed, the family went into shock, I have to admit that," she says. "My mother was the only one who remained calm. She could tell I was happy. Eventually, everyone grew to accept the situation, because *Kolja* is such a wonderful man whom everyone loves. He is so generous and giving, always ready to lend a helping hand. We have been together since 1995. No, we are not married, but we live together as husband and wife. In 1998, we had *Sasha*, and we are very happy together. *Kolja* is a wonderful father. He and *Sasha* are very close, which is good because I'm away a lot. I'm still a soldier's mother, you see."

Indeed, because even though Ljuba is not on the payroll one is tempted to describe her as a "professional soldier's mother." Since 1994 she has worked full-time — provided for by the men in her life — for the budding organization, which has now bloomed into an entire network, *The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia* (UCSMR) with branches and offices throughout the Russian Federation. She gets up each morning at six— "just like I've always done, only now it's meaningful to do so!"— and goes into the centre of Moscow where the building, which houses a number

of NGO's, including the Soldier's Mothers Committee, is located. I have visited the building as part of my research and can report that the offices are small and cramped, the furniture looks like something out of a dumpster and a scratch collection. The computers are outdated and the staffs of volunteers are not comprised of people from the latest generation. The noise level is high— the telephones ring incessantly while people are talking all at once. The mood among the women is warm and intense and apparently still infused with the initial pioneer spirit, because with the exception of a couple of active men, one of them with a military past, the place is inhabited solely by mature, authoritative women. Their established status does not appear to have affected them at all. The tea is being sipped from chipped cups, the cigarettes are burning in overflowing ashtrays and toilet paper can be found somewhere in the mess should one need to relieve nature down the hall. Out there in the uncomfortable chairs sit nail-biting young men, often accompanied by their mothers, waiting to be called in for personal counselling.

As one of the experienced founders of the committee, Ljuba is highly practised; if anything at all can be done to get a young man out of the army's claws, it will be done. Yet, she doesn't sit and weep with her clients; her approach is extremely frank and unsentimental. And no, the soldiers' mothers do not hide deserters. They don't break the law. However, their sympathy for the young man and their understanding of his motives is extensive. During her time as an active soldier's mother, Ljuba has heard the most frightening stories from fraught young men and their even more anxious mothers. She is able to abundantly confirm what everyone is claiming to be true: That the Russian military service is hell, and that you would do anything to escape it— such as paying a 5000-dollar bribe. Not only is there a risk of falling in Chechnya, there is also a real risk of being fatally injured, either physically or mentally, even if one never gets within range of enemy fire. According to the soldiers' mothers, about 3000 soldiers are killed each year in the Russian army (the official number is 1500), either as a result of violence, homicide, accidental shooting or suicide. And many of those who apparently return unscathed are often so mentally scarred that they can never escape the horrors of massive mental problems. In any case: No apple-cheeked, carefree boy returns from the army unharmed. According to the soldiers' mothers, the army might make "men out of the boys," but what kind of men....

"That's how it was with Sergej, too," Ljuba says with a glance at the adult son who profusely denies having been hurt by his years in the military.

"No," Ljuba says and becomes meek for the first time. "It's quite possible that you don't think you were harmed, but let me put it this way: The army didn't do you any good. You left home a sensitive and carefree boy. But the army made you hard, didn't it?"

Sergej responds with a sullen move of the shoulder and pulls away from his mothers' power zone.

"Of course they become jaded," she adds in a conciliatory tone when he has shut the door behind him. How else would they cope with the inhumane treatment to which they are subjected? The weakest and most sensitive of them are driven to suicide or hurt

themselves in order to get sent home or to the infirmary. Or they desert out of sheer panic. Then some of them come to us. We don't hide them, but we help them with their case so that they avoid imprisonment and can be either ordinarily dismissed as unfit to serve or can serve the remainder of their time within a different division, away from their tormentor. We also make an effort for the perpetrators to be held responsible for these criminal acts that they commit under the cover of being superiors. We believe that the penal code ought to extend to those in the military."

The deserters make one group, the newly drafted another.

"Twice a year, in the spring and fall when the new groups are being drafted, they *flood* our offices. Each Thursday we have open consultation and often there are more than five hundred clients waiting for us! Of course we cannot help them all, except to inform them of their rights and generally prepare them mentally for what awaits them. But if they do have some physical or mental defect, we help them get thoroughly examined and obtain the proper doctor's notes so that they have a chance of being dismissed. The army's physical examinations are extremely insufficient - their main goal is to recruit as many as possible! - which means that many of the actual recruits aren't fit to be soldiers. Either they break down physically or they have such extensive psychological problems that they become a liability, either to themselves or to others, once they have a weapon in their hands. There is rampant alcohol and drug abuse within the divisions, and needless to say, things go awry when intoxicated people handle large military vehicles. By the way, I didn't mention that the military training they receive is so poor that it alone puts them at risk of being hurt or causing serious accidents."

The soldiers' mothers' declared long-term goal is to attain *peace* — nothing less! This includes pulling the Russian troops from Chechnya where about 25,000 young men have lost their lives. Their short-term goal is to do away with the mandatory military service and substitute it with a professional army. And apparently the president, Vladimir Putin, has been listening, because at various occasions he has stated that his plans are pointing in the same direction.

"When that happens, I'm out!" Ljuba says. "Then I can retire to my *dacha*, my summer house, and tend to my vegetable garden!"

But while this political quest is within the range of possibility, Ljuba knows very well that the one other topic of increasing concern to her is not so easily realized: To change the male dominated macho culture, which penetrates the entire Russian society at great harm to the Russian man, who, statistically speaking, is somewhat of a wreck. His expected lifespan is decreasing— according to the most pessimistic numbers, it's all the way down to a mere 58 years! — among other things due to (too much) vodka and (too much) violence.

"I'm convinced that the collapse of the Russian man is tightly connected to the army's macho culture," Ljuba says. "The hardening that takes place there leads to the men's downfall. Men come to us after having served their time in the army because they

are strung out and have nowhere to go for help. They are traumatized and need treatment. It's a pity for them, but for the women, too. Not only are we the ones who get beaten by drunken men who use our bodies as an outlet for their frustrations. Even though this is a man's world and they are the ones in power, from the bottom to the top of the ladder, creating all the norms and rules— we are also the ones who have to solve the problems! Really, it ought to be the fathers looking after their sons, right? But the fathers do nothing. They have lost their drive, lost their pride. Characteristically, there is no "Committee of the Soldiers' Fathers!" Perhaps because deep down they support the notion of war," Ljuba ponders while she rummages through the cardboard box containing old family photos, which someone— apparently Kolja— has pulled out.

"Look," she waves around the picture of the young son in uniform. "Sergej as a soldier!" she says, a bitter touch of sarcasm in her voice. She knows that the boy is actually proud of that photo, because it proves that he passed his manhood test as a defender of the fatherland. It is also proof that he is liberated from the female, from the mother. I wonder if it's still the archetypal illusion of manhood and thus an unconsciously handed down and almost indestructible boyhood dream? To become one of the warriors? To be a member of the ultimate masculine community of battling comrades? Is this where the man finds his identity — as the one who can take lives? (And at the same time demonstrate his hierarchical superiority by realizing his darkest sides as a sadistic sex-monster and degrader and rapist of women?) The warrior who meets death in the battlefield and, ironically, dies with the word "*Mom!*" on his lips.

"Who benefits from war?" Ljuba asks rhetorically and places the photograph back in the box. "Wars are made by men! If we weren't subjected to male domination there wouldn't be any wars! If women had more power— and if only they knew how powerful they are, they would *get* more power! — the wars would end because we would never think that going to war could solve any problems! Of course there would still be conflicts, but we would try and find peaceful resolutions. I'm aware that they would say that "war has always existed!", and they would even add that "you can't change that." But my enthusiasm springs from my conviction that things can be changed. That war is not obligatory."

Ljuba slumps a bit, suddenly tired. A fatigue that sometimes takes her over, she says. But though her mission— to abolish war and patriarchy— could seem improbable, it is still a fact that the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers has managed to move the mountain. Not only have the soldiers' mothers become a well known and respected "brand" to the Russian public, they are also considered "clean," which in the era of cock-and-bull-capitalism is synonymous with not being corrupt or having otherwise become wealthy at other people's expense. The committee plays an increasingly influential role as pressure group and activist while also being internationally known and award winning— in 1996 the soldiers' mothers were given The Right Livelihood Award, also called "The Alternative Nobel Prize"— and they are primarily sponsored by foreign foundations and sponsors, like the Hungarian-American financial wizard George Soros, who is funding the Committee's work.

"I was proud when we received that award. I went along to Stockholm to accept it. We also spent a couple of days in Copenhagen, invited by the Social-Democratic Party. I was pregnant with Sasha then, I recall. Those were wonderful and exciting days. We continue to be encouraged and reassured that we are doing the right thing. That we are necessary. I have no doubt that we have saved the lives of thousands of young men. You have to remind yourself of that when the opponent— the army and the government gang—respond with more powerful attacks the more influence we obtain.

I never intended, and I still don't intend, to make a career from other people's misfortune. So even-though I love being at the office and am always filled with energy and joy when I'm around the other mothers, I often wonder if I should quit soon. My conscience constantly torments me because my own family has to suffer because I am so involved in my work. I wish I could spend more time with Sasha. That I had the time to take him to the circus or the children's theatre, you know, attend the children's cultural festival, things like that. I also considered joining the board at the kindergarten ... to simply be involved in something joyous that would also benefit my own family. Yes, and then I would like more time for myself—as I said, I love my garden. And I love to read. The truth can be hard to find in the newspapers, but in books you can find some. The great autobiographies, historical works, even travel books make you wiser. And I'd like to be wiser! Every day Sasha asks me a question— "why?" he says all the time— and I would really like to be able to answer. I would like to know things. If I had more knowledge, maybe I could understand the world in which we live, understand the mechanism that we are up against."

She lowers her voice. Once upon a time, the walls in Russia had ears. Maybe they still do, who knows?

"You see, I can still be seized by fear. I become afraid that there will come a day when the winds will change and someone will attack us, eradicate us as though we never existed. As though there were never any groups of soldiers' mothers. That is also why I am reluctant to retire from the committee. I am afraid that no one can take my place. And I also justify it by saying that I am working for Sasha now. He, too, will turn eighteen some day."

Ljuba nods and looks ahead, letting her eyes rest on Sasha, who is playing with Harry Potter-Lego bought (by me) in the legendary toy store, *Djetskij Mir*, The Children's World. The fact that his mother has pressed her nose against the window when she was his age and would have been thrilled at having been given even the poorest Lego reproduction or a clumsy copy of a Barbie doll, he may never comprehend. Just like he may never understand how important it was to a child's fate on which side of something called the *iron curtain* you were bom....

Sasha senses his mother's gaze and looks up. "Aren't we leaving soon?" he asks, remembering his impatience. Ljuba catches him in her arms and gives him a hug. Yes, they are going soon. Out to the dacha. Driving in their own car. It is, after all, Saturday and both mom and dad are off on the weekends just like other people. Whether they are

from the East or the West, from Moscow or from London.

"I guess I consider the committee my third child," she adds and fixes her glasses after Sasha has squirmed himself loose. "That's what it is. I protect The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers the same way that I protect my family. I won't allow anyone to erase it."

Once upon a time, there was a grown woman by the name of Ljuba Kuznetzova....

Epilogue: Since the spring of 2004, The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers has worked at organizing a regular anti-militaristic political party, United Peoples Party of Soldiers' Mothers.