The Review

Book review

LIFE AND FATE
VASILY GROSSMAN, TRANSLATED BY
ROBERT CHANDLER
Vintage Classics 2010
PB, 861 pp, £9.99, 9780099506164

This review of a book first published in English in 1985 was prompted by Radio 4's recent abridged adaptation of the work, aired over a week in September [Box 1]. It has been one of the greatest reading experiences of my life: the novel should be as celebrated as its great predecessor, *War and Peace*, to which Grossman himself pays homage.

The story of the book's publication is fascinating, illustrating the arbitrariness and absurdity of the Soviet system which the author so relentlessly exposes. Grossman, a trained physicist, became a renowned journalist during (the USSR's) Great Patriotic War, and covered many of its major conflicts including the Battle of Stalingrad and the Fall of Berlin; he also witnessed the Soviet 'liberation' of the Treblinka concentration camp.

Having evaded arrest during Stalin's postwar anti-semitic purge, he finally submitted his manuscript to the authorities in 1960, mistakenly believing that Khrushchev's thaw might allow it past the censors. The book, but not the author, was promptly 'arrested' along with his typewriter, carbon papers and ribbons; he was told that it might be published 'in two or three hundred years'. In 1964 Grossman died in obscurity, but a copy of his manuscript had been left with a friend, and a microfilm finally found its way to the West via Andrei Sakharov.

The themes of *Life and Fate* include the terror of war and the horror of the extermination camps; the nature of totalitarianism in the macabre mirror images of National Socialism and Soviet Communism; anti-semitism at both

personal and institutional levels; the concepts of good and evil, betrayal, loyalty, compassion, and love. These are explored through several interlocking narratives focusing on the families of Victor Shtrum, a nuclear physicist, and his wife Lyudmila Shaposhnikova, and their acquaintances (readers will be helped by the list of chief characters at the end of the book). Shtrum is to some extent the voice of the author, with whom he has in common a difficult marriage, a passion for his vocation, and, as a Jew, an acute awareness of his precarious existence in the face of both German, and later Russian, persecution. While Victor bickers with his wife and daughter at home and debates science and politics with his colleagues, his mother is being transported to her death in the gas chamber, his stepson is killed at the front, and his brother-in-law is languishing in a labour camp. The family return from evacuation in the provincial town of Kazan to Moscow, where Victor falls foul of the authorities and waits for his inevitable arrest.

Meanwhile we are transported to the inferno of Stalingrad where soldiers of both sides struggle to survive in the most extreme conditions imaginable. We join a Soviet tank corps commander as he prepares his machines and men for the great battle to come. We eavesdrop on discussions in the headquarters of the German VIth Army under General Friedrich Paulus, and their Soviet counterparts Yeremenko and Zhukov. We read about the cold precision of the factory constructing the apparatus to be used in the gas chambers. We hear the screams in Moscow's Lubyanka prison and, in an almost unbearable passage, enter the gas chamber itself as its victims meet their fate. But throughout, we share in the humanity of dozens of men, women, and children caught up in the chaos of the time: the humorous banter of soldiers and

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Dougal Jeffries
Brillwater House, Constantine, Falmouth,
TR11 5AH, UK.

E-mail: dougal6@gmail.com

prisoners, the kindness of strangers, the passions of lovers.

The book is huge, sprawling, unwieldy and sometimes disconnected, but its flaws are eclipsed by its sweeping scope and its overall clarity of vision. My copy is full of tiny markers denoting passages that struck me, from which I will quote just two. The first is written by a Russian inmate of a German concentration camp, and expresses a belief common to both Grossman and Tolstoy:

'Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer.'

The second relates to the title of the novel. In its pages, life is tenacious, precious, and celebrated; fate is a juggernaut steered by totalitarianism and war. Yet:

'A man may be led by fate, but he can refuse to follow.'

To do so in the face of such overwhelming forces as are portrayed in this novel is more than most of us could manage, but it is surely something to which we should aspire.

I was given 800 words for this review, but it boils down to four: great book, read it.

Dougal Jeffries,
Retired GP, Falmouth.

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Box 1. Radio 4's adaptation of *Life and Fate*

Rather than attempt a straightforward abridged narrative, the producers chose to present extracts of varying length, some of them standing alone, others as episodes following the main characters. Unfortunately, the podcasts were available to download for only a fortnight — not the month originally promised on the BBC website — and I failed to catch them all, but those that I did hear proved faithful to both the language and the atmosphere of the book. Kenneth Branagh conveyed the fretful anxiety of Victor Shtrum, and Janet Suzman's rendition of his mother's farewell letter as she approached her death did full justice to what must stand as a masterpiece of Holocaust literature. It is to be hoped that the BBC will make these broadcasts available in another format and as repeats, but I would still urge anyone whose interest was kindled to read the book.