



Karl Eliasberg conducting Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7



Olga Berholz reading poetry through loudspeakers

KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE IN THE DARKEST HOURS

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The story of the siege of Leningrad is the deadliest blockade of a city in human history. From September 1941 to January 1944, the people of Leningrad endured nearly 900 days of extreme suffering - starvation, freezing temperatures, disease, and constant bombardment (*Glantz*). Food was so scarce that even a crumb of bread was like gold (*Ginsburg*). The only way to bring food and medicine into the city was through the “Road of Life” across frozen Lake Ladoga, where drivers risked their lives, steering trucks on thin ice and under constant bombardment. What kept the people alive when there was no food or warmth - what sustained their dignity, living in a hunt for survival? Despite relentless hunger and cold, the city did not collapse, because of the community of Leningrad intelligentsia, the cultural workers who lifted the spirit of the city under siege despite their own miserable conditions. In this essay I will show how the city on the verge of spiritual and physical breakdown survived and preserved their humanity and dignity with the help of artists, musicians, teachers, librarians.

In August 1942, conductor Karl Eliasberg gathered the remaining musicians of the Radio Orchestra to perform Dmitri Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 7 which was written during the blockade for the people of Leningrad. Many musicians were near death from starvation. Eliasberg wrote in his diary, “They came to rehearsal pale, trembling, some without shoes. Yet when the music began, they played as if life itself depended on it.” (*Eliasberg*) This performance was an act of resistance. The survivor in the audience

later recalled, "When the symphony played, we understood: if we could create art, we could not be defeated." (*Adamovich and Granin*) Music became proof that the spirit of the city was still alive and unbroken.

Acts of courage extended beyond music. Even during the bombing, teachers continued lessons in underground shelters. One teacher, Galina Malakhovskaya, wrote in her 1942 diary, "In the shelter, we recited Pushkin by the light of one candle. The children's lips were blue with cold, but they asked for another poem." (*Malakhovskaya*) Librarians also carried books through snow so that patients and children could continue reading. As Anna Cherkasova, a librarian, wrote, "We carried books through the snow because people must read. A book is a warm thing." (*Cherkasova*) In a city deprived of heat and food, books provided emotional warmth and hope. These small, quiet acts of bravery made a big difference for the survival of the civilians.

Would you have hope in such conditions? How would you sustain your morale and humanity? The people of Leningrad had a hero who brought them the hope they needed for life. Olga Bergholz, a poet, enormously contributed to the survival of many people. She read inspiring poetry to the citizens in freezing rooms into loudspeakers around the city, "I could barely stand from hunger, but I spoke to them. I told them we would live. We had to live." (*Bergholz*) Everyone came out of their houses starving and frozen every day to listen to the "Voice of the Blockade" because Olga's poetry gave them hope. This shows how even a single individual can make a vital contribution to the entire city.

The story of the Siege of Leningrad is remarkable not only because its citizens survived, but because the people, the civilians of Leningrad, the cultural workers, who could have given up and just hoped for the military to win, chose to uplift their community through music, art, and literature. As Olga Bergholz wrote in her diary, "Art in Leningrad during the blockade was not entertainment. It was proof that the human soul had not surrendered." (*Bergholz*) They refused to let hunger and fear erase their humanity. From Shostakovich's symphony to teachers and librarians risking their lives to educate to Olga Bergholz reading poetry in frozen rooms, culture became a form of resistance that kept the city alive in body and soul. Today, during the ongoing war in Ukraine, civilians show courage, while continuing to create, perform, and educate even under constant threat. We must also learn from this incredible community. Understanding that the smallest contribution to this world can make the biggest difference, and remembering that even in the hardest times, we can always find a way to uplift our souls and be hopeful.

Bibliography

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Bergholz, Olga. "Diaries." In *A Book of the Blockade*, edited by Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin, Raduga Publishers, 1983.

Cherkasova, Anna. *Diary*, 1942.

Eliasberg, K. I. *Memoirs*. Leningrad Philharmonic Archive, manuscript.

Glantz, David M. *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1944: 900 Days of Terror*. Zenith Press, 2001.

Ginsburg, Lydia. *Blockade Diary*. Zaharov Press, Moscow, 1998.

Malakhovskaya, Galina. "Diaries of a Blockade Teacher." In *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*, edited by Harrison E. Salisbury, Da Capo Press, 2003.

The following are videos, that i found inspiring about Ukraine today:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4wSIBaw2J0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbZw9D46s7Q>

Note: For all of these sources, I read them in Russian in archives that were not citable properly, however I tried my best to cite them as I could.