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# A Path of Healing and Resistance: Lydia Chukovskaya's *Sofia Petrovna* and *Going Under*

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes the personal and intellectual development of Lydia Chukovskaya (1907-1996), the literary critic, editor, poet, novelist, biographer, and outspoken dissident during the Soviet era. Faced with the arrest of her husband in 1937 and his subsequent execution, she shortly thereafter wrote *Sofia Petrovna*. This novella has called particular attention to the suffering of millions of women standing in long queues trying to learn anything about their incarcerated loved ones during the great purges through the solitary figure of Sofia Petrovna. Chukovskaya's second, more autobiographical novella, *Going Under*, written from 1949-1957, concerns a writer, Nina Sergeievna, who in 1949 is coming to terms with the loss of her husband, also arrested in 1937.

These two novellas represent stages in Chukovskaya's thinking that ultimately led her to speak out against the legacy of official lies and terror of the Stalinist regime. In *Sofia Petrovna*, Chukovskaya attempted to understand the unthinkable events around her by trying to show how a great purge could be possible. She did this by depicting the madness of society through the sudden descent into madness of Sofia Petrovna, a mother, who betrays her dearly loved son.<sup>1</sup> The work of the post-revisionist historian Jochen Hellbeck sheds light on this period; his study of diaries from the 1930s helps explain the popular support of the regime. Some Soviet citizens did find their sense of selves by understanding their lives as part of a historic revolutionary project just as Sofia Petrovna places her identity and faith in the state. However, despite Chukovskaya's own lucidity about the truth of the torture chamber, she was not yet at or in a place to make a public stance.

In *Going Under*, Chukovskaya showed through the character of Nina that an individual's as much as a society's health depends on an honest understanding of the past.<sup>2</sup> This message represented Chukovskaya's desire to offer a solu-

tion for personal and national healing. She emphasized the need for an identity apart from the state, the process of writing to deal with loss, the need to confront feelings of guilt, the role of truth in enabling one to share the pain of others, and the need to publicly speak out. This stage of Chukovskaya's thinking and the character of Nina correspond to the work of the revisionist historian Sheila Fitzpatrick about accommodation and mere outward conformity during this period. The completion of writing *Going Under* became the catalyst for Chukovskaya's resistance as a result of coming to terms with her own pain, loss, and feelings of guilt and affirming her belief that a commitment to truth leads to healing, connection to others, and resistance. During the thaw and beyond, since Chukovskaya saw herself as a person committed to truth and caring for others, she could not help but move from silently bearing witness and preserving cultural memory to a more public stance of defending literary freedom on behalf of others, even at the cost of her own career. Chukovskaya's literary attempts to understand, represent, and work through personal and social conflict demonstrates a path toward resolution.



Lydia Chukovskaya (1907-1996), a literary critic, editor, poet, novelist, biographer, and outspoken dissident during the Soviet era, figured as a heroic resister to the Stalinist regime and its legacy. Although Chukovskaya lived under the shadow of two famous literary figures, her father Korney Chukovskaya and the poetess Anna Akhmatova, Chukovskaya's own experiences and writing not only deserve attention on their own merit, but also shed light on personal, literary, and political attempts to confront individual and social conflict. She worked as an editor in the Children's Literary Section of the Leningrad State Publishing House until 1930 when her section was shut down and most of her co-workers were arrested. In 1937 her life took a dramatic turn when her own husband was arrested.<sup>3</sup> He was tried and executed on February 18, 1938. She learned of his execution in December 1939 but was not officially informed until 1957. She herself escaped arrest twice (once in 1938 for her connection to her husband and again in 1940-41 when the secret police had learned of the existence of a manuscript about 1937).

Though she wrote in an array of genres, her two novellas, in particular, used individual female protagonists as microcosmic examples of the larger society. *Sofia Petrovna* and *Going Under* represent Chukovskaya's view of both the problem and solution, respectively, to a society plagued by fear, isolation, and powerlessness due to official lies and state terror. A closer historical analysis, however, also reveals that these works unveil stages in Chukovskaya's thinking that ultimately led her to move beyond silently bearing witness in the late 1930s to speaking out publicly in the late 1950s. Her literary attempts to understand, represent, and work through personal and social conflict and her commitment to truth show how both her life and work demonstrate a path toward personal healing, an ability to care about the suffering of others, and a fierce boldness in defending literary freedom. Before discussing her novellas at length I will first briefly address the historiography that will help to understand the context in which Chukovskaya lived and wrote.

Historians have attempted to explain Stalinist violence in several ways. They have accounted for: the causes of violence (e.g.—Stalin, the Politburo, opportunism, socialism, and/or modernity); the purpose of violence (e.g.—to protect Stalin's personal power, to ensure internal social stability due to foreign threat, to fill an interwar need to industrialize, and/or to pursue an aesthetic vision of an ideal society); the nature of violence (e.g.—planned, spontaneous, and/or arbitrary); and how large of a role violence actually played (i.e.—the nature and degree of popular support and resistance).

A surface reading of Chukovskaya's novellas might support a traditional, totalitarian understanding in which terror largely due to Stalin cowed Soviet citizens into subservience and atomized society such that citizens faced the elimination of their selves or felt that they had to hide their selves. However, more recent revisionist and post-revisionist research has emphasized the popular support necessary for the regime's existence. Although violence stemmed from directives from the top, post-revisionist historians have stressed the productive rather than repressive aspects of Stalinism that generated this popular support. Post-revisionists such as Stephen Kotkin and Peter Holquist have even described Stalinism as a set of values that

can be seen as part of modernity. They do not locate Stalinism narrowly in Russian Marxism. They trace its social interventionist ethos to broader roots in European history and trace violence to the Imperial period, World War I, and the Revolution rather than Bolshevism. Revisionist historian Ronald Grigor Suny's work also points to a lack of continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism. Though Stalinism was revolutionary, conservative attitudes toward nationality, family, and class conflict also characterized the Stalinist period.<sup>4</sup>

Revisionist historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has demonstrated that most resistance was passive and primarily based on economic reasons. The work of Sarah Davies has demonstrated that women did publicly and openly air complaints, but largely over concerns of shortages of food and clothing. Beginning in the mid-thirties, the Stalinist regime promoted marriage and family. As women, and particularly mothers, the double burden of work and home pressed these familial concerns to the forefront but also enabled women to assert these complaints under the regime's rhetoric of motherhood.

While Fitzpatrick has looked at the popular support of Stalinism due to the national pride, social welfare, and personal benefits it promised, she has also placed emphasis on the mere outward conformity of many Soviet citizens.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, post-revisionist historian Jochen Hellbeck has pointed to evidence from his study of diaries from the 1930s, which demonstrated that support of the regime cannot be explained by the revisionist's view of self-interest. Hellbeck argued that the modern Soviet state actively intended to make people into revolutionary subjects, who consciously and voluntarily would participate in the building of socialism and derive their sense of self from doing so; this is a far cry from the totalitarian notion of trying to repress or obliterate their sense of self. He argued that some citizens did internalize Soviet ways of thinking such that they practiced self-realization and self-transformation by understanding their lives in terms of a historic revolutionary project. Hellbeck pointed out that a public/private binary did not hold in the Soviet context in which self-expression "thrives on, public deeds and texts."<sup>6</sup> These diarists did not keep diaries in order to cultivate a private existence from the pub-

lic sphere, but rather, they deemed inferior and unfulfilled any private existence that was distinct or opposed to the life of the collective. Hellbeck's larger conclusion was that people's sense of selves did not arise independently of the system in which they lived.

While Hellbeck's view helps illuminate the lack of resistance to the Stalinist regime during the great purges in the late 1930s, the period about which Chukovskaya wrote *Sofia Petrovna*, Fitzpatrick's work on outward conformity provides insight into the years around 1949, the year about which Chukovskaya wrote *Going Under*. Correspondingly, internal and external developments allowed Chukovskaya to move from silently bearing witness and trying to understand the events around her at the time of writing *Sofia Petrovna*, to a more conscious outward conformity at the time of writing *Going Under*, to a more defiant public stance after the completion of her second novella in 1957 during the thaw and beyond.

Chukovskaya wrote *Sofia Petrovna* from November 1939 to February 1940 about the years 1937 and 1938. In 1962 she wrote that although she had "no hope at the time of seeing this story in print" or even of her manuscript's survival, she wrote while the events were "still fresh in my [her] mind" in order to bear witness to the senseless persecutions of that terrible historic moment.<sup>7</sup> Although her manuscript survived the Leningrad siege, her friend who hid it did not.<sup>8</sup> Yet, not until 1988 did Chukovskaya get to see the desire of her heart—the publication of *Sofia Petrovna* in her own country.<sup>9</sup> In fact, her novel's unquestioned value as a source of historical truth long overshadowed its artistic value in the eyes of scholars. Told through the solitary figure of the "little woman," Sofia Petrovna, Chukovskaya did bring attention to the suffering of the millions of mothers, wives, and sisters who stood in long queues trying to learn something of their incarcerated loved ones.

Yet, her work itself can be interpreted more critically to reveal a preliminary stage in Chukovskaya's personal and intellectual development in trying to understand the unthinkable events around her. At the time of writing *Sofia Petrovna*, Chukovskaya was not yet the heroic resister she would become; in addition to preserving memory, Chukovskaya was attempting to make sense for herself of the events

around her through literary representation. In this novella, she offered an explanation for a society in which the great purge could be possible.<sup>10</sup> She portrayed a mother's betrayal of her beloved son such that this ordinary woman's sudden descent into madness represents the madness and violence of the Stalinist regime.<sup>11</sup>

The mother, Sofia Petronva, finds her identity foremost in the state. As Beth Holmgren has noted, initially the novella resembles a social realist success story. Sofia Petrovna, after her husband's death, successfully moves into the public domain by working for a big publishing house in Leningrad. She quickly becomes senior typist. She enjoys her newly acquired self-realization and public fulfillment so much that she finds that she cannot wait to return to work after her vacation. Her model son, Kolya, is a loyal Komsomol member and rising star at the Ural Engineering Works. His picture even appears on the front page of *Pravda* for inventing a method to cut cog-wheels.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Holmgren argued, what is so disturbing is the "unexpected perversion of her success; from a plateau of integration and fulfillment she is plunged unawares into a nightmare of loss, disruption, and isolation."<sup>13</sup>

Sofia Petrovna's total faith in the state prevents her from understanding the reality of events around her and isolates her from others. She runs into an old family friend Mrs. Kiparisova, whose husband has been arrested. Sofia Petrovna ineffectively attempts to reassure Mrs. Kiparisova, "Nothing can happen to an honest man in our country. It's just a misunderstanding. Come on, don't be discouraged."<sup>14</sup> Even when Sofia Petrovna's own son is arrested, she firmly believes in his innocence. Yet at the same time she disparagingly looks down on those who are standing in the long queues just as she is:

Just think of it, all these women, the mothers, wives and sisters of saboteurs, terrorists and spies! And the men, the husband or brother of one... They all looked perfectly ordinary, like those on a streetcar or in a store. Except they all looked tired and baggy-eyed. 'I can imagine how awful it must be for a mother to learn that her son is a saboteur,' thought Sofia Petrovna.<sup>15</sup>

When she reads the newspaper accounts of treachery, Sofia Petrovna feels justified in purposefully distancing herself from others:

No, Sofia Petrovna had been quite right to keep aloof from her neighbors in the lines. She was sorry for them, of course, as human beings, sorry especially for the children; but still an honest person had to remember that all these women were the wives and mothers of poisoners, spies and murderers.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Sofia Petrovna attempts to feel okay about herself by simultaneously denigrating others and affirming her own innocence and tenderness. However, to her own detriment, Sofia Petrovna cannot share her burden with others because she fears they would view her suspiciously since they do not personally know her son.<sup>17</sup>

Sofia Petrovna's sudden downfall is compounded by fear and increased isolation. Directly after another encounter in which Sofia Petrovna assumes the guilt of her trusted former director when she meets his wife standing in line to speak with the prosecutor, Sofia Petrovna receives more upsetting news. Her son, ironically, not only has received a sentence of "[t]en years at remote camps" just as her former director had, but Sofia Petrovna also learns that her son has confessed to crimes of terrorism.<sup>18</sup> With Sofia Petrovna's loss of her own position at the publishing house and the loss of her only supporters—Alik, Kolya's steadfast friend, who is arrested and Natasha, her closest friend, who commits suicide after her loss of employment—Sofia Petrovna spirals into complete isolation. She becomes afraid of everyone and everything. She desperately fears her own arrest and forced exile. She fails to send Alik money for fear the authorities may link the cases of Alik and Kolya. When she does find new work she does not speak a word to anyone. Chukovskaya paints a depressing picture of Sofia Petrovna's complete lack of care for herself—living in bed and hardly eating. She only cares about Kolya—for example, she stockpiles food in hope of being able to send food to him, heats her room only once a week to save money, and only bothers to flick off the dust from the few belongings she has of his.<sup>19</sup> The alienation and fear that imprisons Sofia Petrovna undermines

the ideal of social solidarity of the Soviet state.<sup>20</sup> Sofia Petrovna finds no strength in other women, whom she never doubts are wives and mothers of the enemies of the state. However, they suffer alone just as she does.<sup>21</sup>

Sofia Petrovna relies on deception in order to reclaim her life so that it is more than a shadow of existence. She reconstitutes her identity and feels justified to reenter society only by deceiving others and herself with lies about Kolya's release and happy future. Thereafter she receives a real letter from Kolya who begs her to do something on his behalf and tells of the torture chamber by which he has falsely confessed to having participated in terrorist activity.<sup>22</sup> Sofia Petrovna's decision not to write an appeal, due to the fear of her own deportation at the advice of Kiparisova, and her decision to burn the only evidence of the truth, seals Kolya's fate. Just as Sofia Petrovna stamps on the flame in the last line of the novella, so is the hope of saving Kolya's life put out. The novella concludes with a sense of hopelessness in which victims live their own private horrors.

Sofia Petrovna's attempt to survive in this threatening atmosphere not only causes her to leave her son to his fateful end but also to help perpetuate state violence through her silence about her knowledge of the torture chamber. These acts of complicity show the bankruptcy of the Soviet ideal of motherhood within an atmosphere of falsity and terror—i.e. lies spread by newspapers and officials, state persecution, and the resultant mistrust and isolation that reign in society. While Alexis Klimoff and Annette Julius have disagreed as to whether or not Sofia Petrovna believes in Kolya's guilt, Chukovskaya made clear her own interpretation of what Sofia Petrovna believes in *The Process of Expulsion* (1979). Chukovskaya explained that Sofia Petrovna goes crazy because she attempts to believe that her son is innocent while simultaneously believing the prosecutor who tells her that her son has "admitted his crimes" and deserves his sentence, "ten years at hard labor without the right of correspondence."<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, a mother's betrayal of her son symbolizes the violence of the Soviet state toward its citizens, the madness of putting one's faith in the state over one's personal ties, and the tragic consequences of self-protection and silence.<sup>24</sup>

In Chukovskaya's attempt to account for a society in which the purges could occur, Chukovskaya did not absolve Sofia Petrovna or other Soviet citizens from complicity in the lies of the state, however, in later years Chukovskaya refused to blame them for it. In the novella, Chukovskaya's use of free indirect style gives both a sympathetic and critical view of Sofia Petrovna. Narration through Sofia Petrovna's limited vision allows readers to feel the doubt, anguish, and confusion of a simple mother. In contrast, critical and ironic omniscient narration interspersed throughout creates the distance necessary to glaringly expose Sofia Petrovna's naiveté, superficiality, and susceptibility to manipulation—such as her thoughtless acceptance of the media and faithful spouting of the official party line despite her lack of political knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Chukovskaya portrayed Sofia Petrovna as both a victim and enabler of the state.<sup>26</sup>

However, despite Chukovskaya's belief in Sofia Petrovna's complicity, Chukovskaya did not place the blame on Sofia Petrovna. In 1972, Chukovskaya stated that most people were like Sofia Petrovna, that is, "incapable of grasping the truth" in the conditions of 1937. Chukovskaya clarified that she "wanted to depict the helplessness of Soviet people that stemmed from their being prisoners of the lie."<sup>27</sup> In *The Process of Expulsion* (1979), Chukovskaya placed the blame on lies, terror, and the resulting isolation:

Sofia Petrovna isn't able to generalize from what she sees and experiences; and she's not to be blamed for that, because to the ordinary person what was happening seemed purposely planned senselessness; and how can one make sense of deliberately planned chaos? Particularly when one is all alone: each person was cut off from anyone else experiencing the same thing by a wall of terror. There were many people like Sofia Petrovna, millions, but when people are denied all documents, all literature, when the true history of whole decades is replaced by fictitious history, then the individual intellect is cast back on itself, on its own personal experience, and it works less well than it should.



Chukovskaya explained that for those who genuinely believed that “We don’t imprison people for no reason,” to believe otherwise meant the collapse of one’s universe, “Lose that faith and you’re lost, nothing’s left but to hang yourself.”<sup>28</sup> Hellbeck’s work might best help explain how some Soviet citizens did find their sense of selves by understanding their lives as part of a historic revolutionary project just as Sofia Petrovna places her identity and faith in the state.

Chukovskaya, however, may have felt a personal or social need to defend why she did not speak out earlier since she possessed more perspicuity than many others around her. Perhaps she felt a strong need not only to absolve those who betrayed their loved ones but also others who did know something by describing how they completely lacked the freedom to speak out during the terror. In a letter addressed to the editor of *Izvestia* on the fifteenth anniversary of Stalin’s death in 1968 Chukovskaya expressed these same themes in her description of the Stalinist era, “Wives renounced their husbands, children their fathers, and the closest friends turned from one another” but that “these people, the betrayers, were also victims of a sort—victims of the organized lie.” She went on to tell of the terror:

Some did not know because they were unsophisticated or naïve, while others really did not want to know. Whoever knew or guessed what was happening was doomed to silence through fear of instant death—it was not the fear of some kind of unpleasantness at work, or of unemployment or hardship, but fear of simple physical extermination.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, Chukovskaya’s fictional account of an isolated mother who tragically betrays her dearly loved son mocked the socialist ideals of Russian motherhood and solidarity. Sofia Petrovna represents both victimhood and complicity. In her suffering Sofia believes the lies of the state, mistrusts others, distrusts her own experience of the wrong done to her, creates her own lies in order to face others and carry on, protects herself instead of her son, and remains silent about the truth of the torture chamber. At the same time, she loses her employment and her only friends, feels immense fear and shame, and loses that which is dearest to her, her son Kolya. Thus, by

depicting the sudden descent into madness of Sofia Petrovna, Chukovskaya desired to bear witness to the suffering of victims, the truth of the torture chamber, and the lies of the newspapers and officials with the truth of fiction.<sup>30</sup> *Sofia Petrovna* represented Chukovskaya’s earnest desire to make sense of the disturbing events around her by attempting to testify about and explain them, however, at this point she was not yet in a position to publicly resist.

In contrast to *Sofia Petrovna*, in which Chukovskaya’s purport was to record and respond to events in the time and place in which they occurred, *Going Under* was written over a longer span of time from 1949 to 1957 and described events of February and March 1949 which resembled the terror of 1937.<sup>31</sup> *Going Under* took shape from Chukovskaya’s journal from 1948-1951.<sup>32</sup> This later novella is structured as the journal of a culturally educated woman, Nina Sergeievna, who like Chukovskaya, is a writer coming to terms with the loss of her husband, who was arrested in 1937 and sentenced to “ten years without the right of correspondence.”<sup>33</sup> She later learns that this actually means execution. Nina becomes a model heroine. In contrast to Sofia Petrovna, Nina rejects official lies, makes her private beliefs public, and works through her own suffering through writing. This novella concludes with an ending full of hope—connection to others and confrontation with the past makes possible the true preservation of one’s self from the state and the ability to help others experience healing. The novella expresses the message that an individual’s as much as a society’s health depends on an honest understanding of the past.<sup>34</sup>

Nina Sergeievna’s development, in contrast to Sofia Petrovna’s rapid decline, demonstrates a process of recovery. The novel opens with the self-aware, first person voice of Nina, who privately determines to confront both her past and herself. She officially goes to a writers’ rest home in order to do translations, but upon her arrival she says of her first private room since the war, “Within these unfamiliar walls it would at last be possible to recover, to face oneself again. But it was clear that this meeting with myself was going to be no easy thing because I immediately started trying to avoid it.”<sup>35</sup> Nina is aware of the difficulty she will encounter in submerging herself below a false official narrative to face the pain of loss.

The novel is unabashedly about Nina's anguish, her attempt to understand the past, and her willingness to wrestle with guilt. Although Nina has children and thinks, "Yes, it would seem there was no rest from a mother's anxiety," the focus of her thoughts are hardly her daughter Katya.<sup>36</sup> In the same way, even though she is suffering from the lack of information regarding her husband's fate and his death of which she eventually learns, the novella is not about her husband, Alyosha, but rather about her. With the exception of her husband's arrest, Nina neither spends time thinking about memories of him nor missing his companionship. As Annette Julius pointed out, her dreams of Alyosha's death are more about Nina's own experiences, since they are based on a conversation with a girlfriend in the fall of 1940 when Nina first learned "for certain why everybody always confessed and slandered one another" during the process of interrogation.<sup>37</sup> One nightmare in particular reveals Nina's fears and feelings of guilt. She dreams for the third time that Alyosha returns and that he does not want to see her. Nina interprets her dream to herself:

I was guilty. Alyosha had passed judgment on me, condemned me to perpetual separation. But for what?...Tonight I understood where my guilt lay. I understood it from my dream. I was alive. This was it. I was living, going on living after they had shoved Alyosha into the water with sticks [the way she dreams of his death by interrogation]. He had come back for a moment to reproach me. That was what my dream was about.<sup>38</sup>

When Nina does learn that Alyosha's sentence of "ten years without right of correspondence" meant execution by firing squad, she tries to imagine his last steps and again focuses on herself, "Where had I been at that moment? Had I been with him in my thoughts?"<sup>39</sup> Undoubtedly, Nina cares for her husband, but *Going Under* is actually about her coming to terms with herself before she can reach out to others. Chukovskaya's decision to focus Nina's attention on herself is particularly interesting since scholars have emphasized Chukovskaya's deeply caring and more self-effacing nature.

From the outset, Nina hopes that by facing her pain through writing she can help others, "The book was me, the sinking of my heart, my memories, which nobody could see [...] but it would become paper, binding, a new book on the market and—if I were to plumb the depths fearlessly—someone's new soul." Eventually she is able to understand and put into words why she descends into the past, "I wanted to find brothers—if not now, then in the future. All living things seek brotherhood and I sought mine. I had been writing a book to find brothers, even if only there in the unknown distance."<sup>40</sup> However, it is only by learning the truth from Nikolai Bilibin about her husband's death that Nina is able to connect with others. Her next entry after learning of her husband's execution appears as March, reflecting a significant turning point. The very next day, despite her initial unwillingness, Nina meets encounter after encounter of others telling her their terrible sorrows—Lyolka, Luydmila Pavlovna, and the "stout gentlemen with high blood pressure."<sup>41</sup> Truth liberates her to listen to others' pain.

In response to these encounters, Nina comes to terms in her own mind with her feelings of guilt as a survivor by again affirming that she wants to be able to tell everything to "future friends—brothers":

And the fat man was worrying about his high blood-pressure! Was looking for a new medicine. Want wanting to get well! Wanting to live, live, live, bearing within him the memory of the children who had been burnt, like logs. But by what means did he destroy his memory in order to fall asleep? And by what means did I? For I lived with the memory of Alyosha's last smile and slept and even last night had slept after learning about the back of the neck. And Bilibin lived with the memory of how he had tied the tag on the leg of his dear friend, Sasha [...] The fat man still had a son left. I had Katya. One had to live. No, not just for Katya. But for future friends—brothers, to whom I would be able to tell everything.<sup>42</sup>

The relationship between truth and sharing others' pain is also evident in the title Nina chooses to name her secret manuscript, "Street



Lamps.” In “Street Lamps” she is able to express compassion to other women in the queue, unlike Sofia Petrovna. Nina names her manuscript after the interaction with Bilibin in which he reveals that he was in a concentration camp and she first tells of her husband’s death. Just after she tells him that she’s had no news for twelve years, she narrates, “We stood on the road under a lamp and gazed at one another. A street lamp is not the moon. There is nothing mysterious about its light. Once again the wrinkles, the hollows and furrows on his large, broad-browed face became visible. The marks were not pockmarks, but scars left by boils.”<sup>43</sup> Just as the light from the street lamp truthfully shows the marks of his camp experience, unlike romantic moonlight, so too had this moment of truth transformed Nina that she hopes to have many street lamp experiences with others. In this sense, truth frees her to care for others.

As the result of her working through by sharing and writing in the end of the novella she is able to desire a “collective ‘going under.’” She says of the others “If only I could go under with them and see what they saw. That would really be a descent. Taking them with me. Getting into their memory. Well, at least into the memories of the people in this carriage.”<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the weak Sofia Petrovna whose self becomes nullified by the state, Nina Sergeievna possesses a very strong inner self resistant to its lies. Nina preserves her identity as separate from the state by her passion for nature and poetry. At one point she observes, “The presence of the forest, the snow, the little fir-tree on the hill—that’s what forbids one to read the papers.”<sup>45</sup> She says of the Germans who had been there in 1941 that they had had no right to be there because they only saw the surrounding nature as a territory, a place—unlike Pushkin since “[t]he trees and river were for him like beloved friends.”<sup>46</sup> As she is out walking among the birch trees in the snow she begins reciting what she feels is appropriate to her surroundings—Pushkin, Pasternak, Nekrasov, and Akhmatova. She muses, “All the words grew from this soil, and drawing in a deep breath, stretched upwards to the sky like the birch-trees. As I recited the poetry I felt not only its beauty but also its lassitude and its joy in itself. My lips were happy to meet the words and the words my lips.”<sup>47</sup>

Nina’s intellect aids her critical reading of the newspapers. She thinks to herself that nothing came of reading the newspaper because the one thing she desired to learn about they never wrote about.<sup>48</sup> Later she feels sick as she reads the newspaper and recognizes lies that resembled those of 1937:

I had read all that before. And “Raise the standard”—only in those days it was the “standard of vigilance”, and “inveterate”—only then it was usually applied to “double-dealer” or “enemy” (the fixed formulae were “raise the standard of Bolshevik vigilance!” and “inveterate double-dealer”). And that hyphen so horridly familiar in the attribute “ideologically-unhealthy”, even that hyphen was from those days... They were clichés turning somersaults in emptiness.<sup>49</sup>

Nina is the only character to speak up and voice any dissent, in defense of Pasternak and against the newspapers. She says, “What strikes me when I read the papers [...] is that everything they write about these people is, on the contrary, blatantly untrue. It’s the blattancy of the lies that strikes one, that is so palpably obvious.” When challenged she goes on to remark, “But there’s not one grain of truth in what they write about them. That I can vouch for... One can hear it immediately... They’re not thoughts, but ready-made clichés. One can hear it in the monotony...in the word order...in the syntax... tone...intonation.”<sup>50</sup> As Holmgren has argued, Nina distinguishes herself from the other men and women at the rest home. She breaks through the silence and makes her private belief a public stance, thus avoiding the intellectual conformity of the men. But she also abstains from the vulgar materialism and sensual indulgence of the women.<sup>51</sup>

Lastly, Nina proves to be a strong woman because she does not succumb to Bilibin’s romantic attentions. Her unwavering commitment to truth explains both her attraction and repulsion to him. At the beginning of their acquaintance she knowingly does not react because she knows that he was talking for her own benefit. She intuitively distrusts his “insistent familiarity and amiability” though she is not unaware of him. Of his eyes, she distrustingly has “the im-

pression that they were veiled by something” even though they “were wide open and looking directly at me.”<sup>52</sup> Nina is not impressed when she and Bilibin are walking close together on a narrow path alone for the first time: “‘What a banal situation! A moonlight walk in the forest,’ I thought, ‘with an attractive man. It would just suit Ludmila Pavlovna... What will he talk about next? We’ve already talked about poetry. It’s time to go on to love. On an abstract, philosophical plane of course... for the first time.’”<sup>53</sup> Contrary to her expectations they soon begin to speak about the concentration camp in which he worked. This is the first person from whom she might learn something of Alyosha’s fate. They are truthful with each other, he about what the camps were like and she about the death of her husband of which she still knows nothing. She begins to become emotionally attached. She savors the notion, “only I knew his real voice.”<sup>54</sup> Nina and Bilibin become closer, spending many hours together and sharing about their lives. She even opens up her solitary communion with nature to include him, “The grove no longer lived for itself, its own secret life, at one with the snow, wind and clouds, but existed for us [...] to preserve us from the whole world and not to hinder us as we listened to one another.”<sup>55</sup>

However, despite their emotional intimacy, she intuitively refuses to let him kiss her.<sup>56</sup> After the breach in their relationship she sorrowfully thinks:

How wonderful it had been two weeks ago. I hadn’t cared whether he was sitting in the guestroom or not. He had been a stranger. He could sit where he wanted. And I could go to the grove alone and not wonder how I would tell him that I had seen a purple-grey circle over the birch-trees; I could make my descent and read poetry and examine people and write letters... But now? And now my loneliness was full of him.<sup>57</sup>

However, despite her hurt and longing for him, she acknowledges and gives vent to her anger. To her, the value for human bonding takes precedence over passion. She thinks, “And after such a miracle he had dared to say that he was not happy! That evening on the

footpath and the moment when he talked for the first time, after the heart attack? Those two weeks when we exchanged memories every day? And he was not happy!”<sup>58</sup>

Her initial cautiousness toward Bilibin becomes justified on two counts. The first is when she reads his manuscript based on his camp experiences and expects to hear his real voice but instead reads what is a conformist social realist fiction. She feels betrayed because Bilibin has knowingly disguised the truth—that which she had valued most in him. She is not afraid to tell him, “You’re a coward,” I said. ‘No, worse, you’re a false witness... You’re a liar. You’re pretentious, you’re an old woman.’” She says goodbye and asks:

“Why did you not have the decency to remain silent? Merely remain silent? After all no-one demanded this from you... Do you mean to say...out of respect for those...whom you buried in the earth...you couldn’t earn your bread and butter in some other way? Doing something else? Instead of at the expense of the forest. Or the mine. Or the child from there. Or...the stuttering of your friend?” He left the room.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, when she sees him later pull for his nitroglycerine, she still cares for him and compassionately aches:

“Forgive me!” I wanted to say. “I didn’t have the right to judge you; least of all I, for no dogs ever threw themselves on me and I’ve never seen the wooden tag on the leg of a dead man...Forgive me! You wouldn’t wish to go back there: to felling trees, to the mines. Go back for a second time! The story you wrote is your weak shield, your unreliable wall... Forgive me! You’ve already had one heart attack—illness is expensive and you need your earnings. And how else can you earn money as a sick man? Only by writing. Writing lies like a hack...Forgive me! I didn’t have the right to demand the truth from you. I’m healthy and yet I keep silent. I was never beaten at night in the investigator’s room. And when they beat you I kept silent. What right have I then to judge you now? Forgive me my cursed cruelty, forgive me!”

Her sensitivity to her own silence and her ability to see more than one side to the matter allows her to not self-righteously judge Bilibin. Rather, she feels sorry not only for him but also for herself and for her country. But she maintains her self-respect and rather than running after him and asking for forgiveness, as she wants to do, she merely says goodbye.<sup>60</sup> The second confirmation of Bilibin's unworthiness of her occurs when they leave the rest home and Nina must meet Bilibin's wife, Marina Avgustinovna. Bilibin's falseness shines through one last time as he casually introduces his wife to Nina without revealing their deep emotional involvement at the rest home.<sup>61</sup> Nina is a strong self-assured woman, with a sharp intellect and a deep love for poetry and nature. But foremost is her deep commitment to truth which prevents her from being silent and from entering into a physical relationship with a man who knowingly acts falsely. However, Nina does not remain hard and judgmental in her moral conviction but is a woman of compassion who willingly confronts her own feelings of guilt in order to connect with the pain of others.

In contrast to Sofia Petrovna, who integrates the lies of the state into herself and remains silent about her own suffering and the torture chamber, Nina Sergeievna overcomes silence by sharing her own experiences and speaking out against the lies of the state. Sofia Petrovna is isolated and protects herself while Nina learns how to connect with others and face herself. Taken together, *Sofia Petrovna* and *Going Under* express the message that a commitment to the truth allows the self to become the starting point for healing and of resistance against the state. A strong self is a self that is committed to facing oneself, to confronting one's pain, and to valuing one's identity apart from the state. A strong self is necessary for sharing one's personal experiences with others and publicly speaking against official lies. Truthfully sharing with others enables one to break through falseness, silence, and isolation. At the same time, as in the case of Nina's learning about Alyosha's execution, truth frees one to care for others.

Moreover, these novellas demonstrate Chukovskaya's own commitment to truth against the lies and terror of a society that caused persecution, suffering, isolation, and fear. In the process of writing

these novellas and trying to understand the violent events around her, she bore witness (to the suffering of victims and the lies and persecution of the state), faced herself (wrestled with feelings of survivor guilt) and confronted her pain from the past. She also valued compassion and hoped that her aim of working through or "going under" would help others in the end. The completion of *Going Under* in 1957 provided the necessary catalyst for her transition from a position of outward conformity to her subsequent support and public defense of writers beginning in 1958. These writers included Boris Pasternak, Iosif Brodsky, Andrei Sinyavsky, Yuli Daniel, Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Alexander Ginzburg and Yuri Galanskov. Chukovskaya also officially learned of her husband's execution in 1957, whether this truth came before or after she completed *Going Under* would be interesting to know for certain. As Chukovskaya took steps to resist publicly, her actions became more and more courageous. In *The Process of Expulsion* (1979) she wrote about how she could no longer tolerate the compromises writers had to make and that this forced her into open opposition with the state. She reached a point at which "truth took her 'by the throat' and 'possessed [her] soul forever.' She could no longer write with the censor in mind even if it meant no line of hers would ever again be published in her own country." In fact, Chukovskaya was not officially published in her own country from the late sixties until 1988.<sup>62</sup>

Chukovskaya eventually resisted primarily because of her commitment to truth. In *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice during the Holocaust* (2004), Kristen Renwick Monroe proposed a persuasive argument for why the moral exemplars she studied partook in rescue activity during the Holocaust. She argued that identity (how we see ourselves) and perspective (how we see others in relation to ourselves), rather than choice, primarily accounts for what causes humans to do good.<sup>63</sup> Beginning with the aspect of identity, in the case of Chukovskaya, she viewed herself as a person who valued truth. My evidence for this is that she wrote *Going Under*, though a fictional text, as consciously opposite to *Sofia Petrovna* and with autobiographical elements. The epigraph for *Go-*

*ing Under*, a quote from Leo Tolstoy, “The integrity of a man is evident from his attitude to the word” helps explain why Chukovskaya, after feeling and writing such strong convictions about truth, would feel compelled to take a more public stance against the lies and lack of literary freedom. To act otherwise would have contradicted her need for preserving a positive self-perception of herself. Seeing herself as a person with a deep regard for truth formed the basis of her facing herself (her loss and feelings of guilt) and resisting by bearing witness and later speaking out. In the 1968 letter written on the fifteenth anniversary of Stalin’s death, she argued against silence and called for the preservation of memory. She stated that, “A great poet is memory personified.”<sup>64</sup> This value for what she saw as the truth of the past would explain her sense of urgency in penning *Sofia Petrovna* in 1939-1940, in compiling the experiences of children orphaned in World War II in 1942 for whom she cared<sup>65</sup> and in committing to memory Akhmatova’s verses before later recording them.

Chukovskaya’s view about her relationship to others also helps explain why she resisted. Monroe argued that rescuers shared a perspective by which they saw themselves at one with all humankind. They believed that all individuals fit into a universal category that entitled everyone to equal treatment. This perspective not only accounts for why they refused to exclude Jews from their community of moral obligation, but also accounts for rescuers’ views of themselves as ordinary, not extraordinary sacrificial martyrs. The way one categorizes and classifies others bears heavily on how one treats them.<sup>66</sup> Chukovskaya shared a similar other-oriented or humanitarian perspective toward her fellow compatriots. She sought to write for future brothers, understand others, and exercise compassion rather than condemn the Soviet citizens whom Sofia Petrovna and Nikolai Bilibin represented. In fact, even though Chukovskaya deeply cared about justice, themes of vengeance are glaringly absent from her novellas. In her 1968 letter, she stated that, “I have no desire for vengeance.” She argued against “the execution of executioners” since “our people do not deserve to be fed on executions.” Instead she argued for clear independent thought and true and precise words.<sup>67</sup>

Monroe further noted that, the sense of human connection common to rescuers that caused them to risk their lives, was also fundamental to a rescuer’s own well-being. She stated that “allowing and cherishing the humanity in others” helped the rescuers “to fully claim the humanity in themselves.” Monroe believed that the way in which rescuers found meaning in their lives and gained a sense of themselves through helping others exposed a mistaken, artificial construct usually erected between the concepts of individual self-interest and caring for others.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Chukovskaya’s belief in sharing and expressing compassion to others represented her belief in the link between transformation of the self and the healing of her country. For example, her defense of the freedom and power of true words in 1968 included her belief in the potential of true words to become a book and reach “the soul of man” just as Nina hopes about “Street Lamps.”<sup>69</sup> In this way, Chukovskaya had a sincere desire to reach out to others through dealing with her own pain through writing. The connection between Chukovskaya’s own well-being and relationships with others can best be seen in her close relationship with the famous poetess Akhmatova, whom Chukovskaya met standing in the prison queues while Akhmatova was seeking information about her son. This friendship helped Chukovskaya sustain herself, not only by sharing her burdens, but also through her personal care of Akhmatova and her writing about Akhmatova. Chukovskaya at one point wrote that she wrote about Akhmatova when nothing else seemed real to her due to the devastating loss of her husband.<sup>70</sup>

Instead of reducing Chukovskaya’s actions to merely a “female” means of finding identity through her relationship to others, Monroe’s partial synthesis of “self-interest” and “caring” allows us to value Chukovskaya’s actions more deeply and to gain further insight into how to practice an ethic of care. Since Chukovskaya was able to work through her own loss due to her commitment to honesty and through her relationships with others, she was also able to care for others rather than use them as a means of achieving a sense of self-worth. In conclusion, her life and works demonstrate steps in a path to personal healing, the ability to show sensitivity to the pain and needs of others, and the firm defense of literary freedom.



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## Notes

- 1 Annette Julius, *Lidija Cukovskaja: Leben und Werk* (München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1995), 133. Blanche H. Gelfant, "Newspapers: Chukovskaya and Le Sueur" in *Cross-Cultural Reckonings: A Triptych of Russian, American, and Canadian Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29.
- 2 Julius, 151.
- 3 This was her second husband, Matvei Petrovich Bronshtein, who was an astrophysicist and author of science books for children. Beth Holmgren, *Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 40. Annette Julius, *Lidija Cukovskaja: Leben und Werk* (München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1995), 20.
- 4 Stephen Kotkin, "Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization" in *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*, Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 107-126, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). Peter Holquist, "State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism" in *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*, Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 129-156, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). Ronald Grigor Suny, "Stalin and his Stalinism: Power and Authority in the Soviet Union, 1930-1953" in *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*, Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 11-35, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).
- 5 Sarah Davies, "A Mother's Cares: Women Workers and Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia, 1934-41" in *Women in the Stalin Era*, 89-109, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times" in *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*, Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 161-177, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).
- 6 Jochen Hellbeck, "Working Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts" in *Stalinism: The Essential Readings*. Blackwell Essential Readings in History, 181-209, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 205.
- 7 Lydia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, trans. Aline Werth, revised and amended by Eliza Kellogg Klose (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 7, 8. In her note written in 1962 as a preface to *Sofia Petrovna* she also wrote that even though it was dangerous to hold on to the copy, "I regarded it not so much as a story as a piece of evidence, which it would be dishonorable to destroy," 7. At another point, in an excerpt from *The Process of Expulsion* (1979), she refrained from judging its artistic value, but held that the

"value of accurate testimony is indisputable." Chukovskaya, Afterword to *Sofia Petrovna*, 111.

- 8 The copy did not return to her hands until 1956. *Sofia Petrovna* circulated in *samizdat* by 1957. Though accepted by for publication in 1962, the publishing house denied publication after a change in party attitude. The publishing house had already given Chukovskaya partial payment in advance. Chukovskaya sued and remarkably received the remaining 40% in 1965, although *Sofia Petrovna* remained unpublished. A slightly distorted version appeared in print Paris in 1965 under the title *The Deserted House* and a correct version appeared in print in New York in 1966. Alexis Klimoff, "In Defense of the Word: Lydia Chukovskaya and the Russian Tradition," an Introduction to *The Deserted House*, by Lydia Chukovskaya, trans. Aline B. Werth (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company 1967), xv, xxix. John Murray, Introduction to *Sof'ya Petrovna* by Lydia Chukovskaya (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1998) v, vi, viii. Julius, 20, 102, 105.
- 9 "There's only one thing I want, just one thing I'm waiting for; to see my book published in the Soviet Union. In my own country. In Sofia Petrovna's country. I have been waiting patiently for thirty-four years. There is but one tribunal to which I wish to offer my novella: that of my countrymen, young and old, particularly the old, those who lived through the same thing which befell me and that woman so different from me whom I chose as the heroine of my narrative—Sofia Petrovna, one of thousands I saw about me." Chukovskaya, Afterword to *Sofia Petrovna*, 119-120. In the first public mention of her name since 1969 at the anniversary of Boris Pasternak's death in February 1987, she refused the publication of excerpts from her Akhmatova diaries until the publication of *Sofia Petrovna*. About the Author, Lydia Chukovskaya, *To the Memory of Childhood*, trans. Eliza Kellogg Klose (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 156.
- 10 Julius, 133.
- 11 Blanche H. Gelfant, "Newspapers: Chukovskaya and Le Sueur" in *Cross-Cultural Reckonings: A Triptych of Russian, American, and Canadian Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29. Chukovskaya, Afterword to *Sofia Petrovna*, 112.
- 12 Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, 20, 26-27. However, despite Sofia Petrovna's social success through her absorption of party doctrine, her life never takes on the full significance promised within her society and ironically her traditional bourgeois attitudes toward gender and class are only reinforced. Holmgren, 47-50, 55.
- 13 Holmgren, 47.
- 14 Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, 31, 37.

- 15 Ibid., 50.  
 16 Ibid., 60.  
 17 Ibid., 61.  
 18 Ibid., 74-75, 77-78.  
 19 Ibid., 92, 93, 95, 96.  
 20 Gelfant, 31.  
 21 Holmgren, 56.  
 22 Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, 102-105, 106-107.  
 23 Chukovskaya, Afterword to *Sofia Petrovna*, 112.  
 24 Gelfant, 31. Holmgren, 55-56.  
 25 Murray, ix. Julius, 114, 115, 118-120.  
 26 Julius, 124.  
 27 Klimoff, xxviii from "Sudebnyi protsess Lidii Chukovskoi protiv izdatel'stva Sovetskii pisatel'," *Politicheskii dnevniki*, I (1972), pp. 53, 55, 57.  
 28 Chukovskaya, Afterword to *Sofia Petrovna*, 112.  
 29 Lydia Chukovskaya, "Letter by Lydia Chukovskaia" in *In Quest of Justice: Protest and Dissent in the Soviet Union Today*, 313-318, ed. Abraham Brumberg (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 315, 316-317.  
 30 Gelfant, 25.  
 31 Holmgren, 44.  
 32 Julius, 134.  
 33 Lydia Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, trans. Peter M. Weston (New York: Quadrangle / The New York Times Book Co., 1972), 45.  
 34 Julius, 151.  
 35 Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, 6.  
 36 Ibid., 12.  
 37 Ibid., 17-18. Julius, 138.  
 38 Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, 20.  
 39 Ibid., 70.  
 40 Ibid., 36, 38.  
 41 Ibid., 73-83.  
 42 Ibid., 84-85.

- 43 Ibid., 45.  
 44 Holmgren, 65. Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, 138-139.  
 45 Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, 26.  
 46 Ibid., 32.  
 47 Ibid., 55.  
 48 Ibid., 21-22.  
 49 Ibid., 73.  
 50 Ibid., 95, 96.  
 51 Holmgren, 61-62.  
 52 Chukovskaya, *Going Under*, 15, 16.  
 53 Ibid., 41.  
 54 Ibid., 44-46.  
 55 Ibid., 110-111.  
 56 Ibid., 118.  
 57 Ibid., 120.  
 58 Ibid., 121.  
 59 Ibid., 129-130.  
 60 Ibid., 134-135.  
 61 Ibid., 139.  
 62 About the Author, Chukovskaya, *To the Memory of Childhood*, 154-156.  
 63 Although Monroe's argument attempts to account for the trademark response of rescuers that they "had no choice" and that their acts were not extraordinary—which may not exactly apply to Chukovskaya—her argument still is useful for an analysis of Chukovskaya. Monroe argued that rescuers had integrated the core values of the sanctity of human life and human well-being into their sense of self to an unusual degree such that to act contrary to this view of themselves would render their selves incoherent. In this way, protecting one's desire for self-esteem and need for continuity of one's self image plays a critical role in limiting one's perception of choice in a highly moral situation. One feels that one could not act otherwise. Kristen Renwick Monroe, *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice during the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 188, 237, 260-61.  
 64 Chukovskaya, "Letter," 317.  
 65 Klimoff, xvii.

66 Monroe, 249, 261.

67 Chukovskaya, "Letter," 316-317.

68 Monroe, 250, 262, 263, 264.

69 Chukovskaya, "Letter," 314.

70 For more information see Holmgren, 69, 79-80. Pratt, Sarah. "Angels in the Stalinist House: Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, Lidiia Chukovskaia, Lidiia Ginzburg, and Russian Women's Autobiography," in *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, 158-173. Edited by Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 165.