

Maria Tumarkin, *Otherland: A Journey with My Daughter* (Vintage, 2010)

Part memoir, part travelogue, and part sweeping history of the tumultuous last hundred years of the Soviet Union, Maria Tumarkin's *Otherland: A Journey with My Daughter*, is that rare hybrid of a life narrative that manages to combine the intensely personal and political without getting either cloyingly affective or numbingly polemical. It is a compelling read and not the least of its pleasures is an idiosyncratic introduction to a host of East European writers and cultural literati's musings on language, the social dimension of memory, heroism and human suffering, the nature of art in the erstwhile Soviet Union, among other issues. Sombre stories of the siege of Leningrad and the long spell of starvation that ensued, the massacre of 33,000 Jews at Babi Yar, and the disastrous nuclear accident at Chernobyl, are mixed with gossipy rumors of Lenin's affair with Armand, a ballerina of the famed Kirov Company, along with reflections on Russian women's penchant for high heels and make-up, the Moscow Metro, and the peculiar drabness of communist apartment complexes.

Otherland continues the provocative trajectory set by Tumarkin's previous two books, *Traumascapes* (2005) and *Courage* (2007) that were extended cultural essays on the meaning of grief and the tangible signs of trauma left by catastrophic events of a huge magnitude such as the 2006 Tsunami at Bali or the bombing of the Twin Towers in 9/11 in New York, and the meaning of courage in the face of events big and small in our everyday lives, respectively. Although the title *Otherland* makes a witty allusion to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 utopian feminist narrative, *Herland*, the allusion works more by suggestive ironic contrast since the chaotic post-*glasnost* Soviet Union that Tumarkin travels to with her 12-year-old daughter Billie from Melbourne, Australia, is a far cry from the female republic that Gilman imagines. Tumarkin portrays contemporary Putin era Russia with its totalitarian, macho, insular state, and its strange capitalist economy, where money has got decoupled from a self-regulating economy to become something like a primal force of nature itself, with a refreshing candor that is guilty neither of the sappy sentimentality of those returning to one's homeland or the bitter tirades of those who rail at the imperfections of the new world wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Intensely self-reflexive, Tumarkin steers rigorously clear of the registers of irony and guilt which, to her mind, characterise contemporary accounts of Russia.

Above all the book is an extended exercise in introspective culturalist auto-ethnography as Tumarkin surveys cities, neighborhoods, friends, relatives, institutions of her childhood like the Moscow Metro, the apartment complexes, the opera and puppet theater, against the backdrop of both personal family history and the history of the Soviet Union. She left Russia as a 15-year-old in 1989 with her parents and sister, when there was still an air of euphoria and hopeful expectations of a positive social transformation wrought by the opening up of the Soviet Union by Gorbachev's policies but, as she states ruefully, 'she missed the whole point.' She left before the whole dream collapsed alarmingly with Gorbachev under house arrest and different regions claiming independence from the USSR: Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, and Russia. Her warmest, most intimate connections are with her childhood friends and the childhood friends of her mother. She speaks glowingly of hospitality given despite straitened circumstances and space, of women who continue to inspire her,

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and of making up with particular friends by soothing their feelings of betrayal, assuring them that despite the passage of time and the distances travelled, her life has turned out to be just as messy as theirs.

Tumarkin's travels take her to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Leningrad, Kiev, Kharkov, and Babi Yar, Belarus, and the Ukraine, among other places with which she has a personal connection, where she meets up with childhood friends, and friends of her mother, and with Katya, her daughter's friend. If the compelling personalities of Katya, Sasha, Ira, and her Grandparents and Aunt people the pages of the book, so do the towering political personages of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin, who function to plot Tumarkin's distinctively personal history against the backdrop of landmark historical events and personalities that have shaped the destiny of Soviet Union, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In many ways the narrative has the jumbled, sometimes frenetic, pace of a kaleidoscopic dream world where memories and reflections haphazardly jostle each other in a stream of consciousness punctuated by quotations from various artists, poets, writers, theorists, and cultural interpreters. What leavens this sometimes exhausting narrative is the story of her relationship with her daughter, an amazingly independent and clear eyed 12-year-old, whose diary entries are islands of normalcy in an otherwise emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually over-determined journey to Russia. It is an entertaining and touching story of the emotional minefields that define mother-daughter relationships full of insecurities and occasional hysteria. The voice of the daughter captured in a spattering of diary entries, clear-eyed, focused on unfamiliar sights and smells (especially smell), and adolescent rebellion against a sometimes overwhelming mother, are oases of normalcy in text over-laden with memory and the desire.

A running theme in *Otherland* is the burden of Tumarkin's Jewish identity, of her painful reflections of the anti-Semitism she experiences as a young girl growing up in Jewish in the Soviet Union. She is determinedly optimistic and applauds the progressive policies put in place by Ukraine's with respect to its Jewish population although anti-Semitism may still linger in day to day life for most people. One of the most compelling sections of the text is Tumarkin's visit to Babi Yar, the little known site of the massacre of 33,000 Jews in the Second World War, just outside Kiev, in 1941. The journey to Babi Yar also signals a shift in her relationship with Billie who teaches her the lessons of acceptance and peace by commenting on the beauty and serenity of the grasslands at Babi Yar. At first Tumarkin is horrified and sees Billie's comment as a refusal to engage with the past but it also forces her to reassess her stridency and anger regarding the inordinate injustice of the Holocaust. The injunction to not forget the horror of the holocaust, to keep it frozen in the 'moment of catastrophe,' so that such an event may never happen again, has to be balanced with the recognition of the sanity-preserving focus on birds twittering and grass growing.

It is puzzling however that while Tumarkin is at such pains to trace the memories of her childhood and connect to her family's and country's past, she does not spare any thought for her current abode, Australia. In that sense the book's cover seems to encapsulate this one way journey. It shows a young woman holding a suitcase which depicts a picture of the Red Square of Moscow, and is symbolic of the places we traveled to, and places we have traveled from, carrying a suitcase of memories, but where are we now? Although Tumarkin speaks of returning to

Melbourne, Australia and connecting with her year-and-a-half old son, Miguel, again, she does not speak of her new homeland. If the Soviet Union is otherland, Australia is clearly not homeland. At least, not yet.

Rajender Kaur