

Downeast Colloquy
The Blue Hill Library
September 2024

This is an assignment I give my university students.

To understand history or politics or world affairs requires putting yourself in someone else's shoes, to try to see their situation and the world as they do.

Consider the turbulent and terrible events of the 20th century in Russia and the eastern half of Europe. Write, briefly, the life story of one of the people below, in a way faithful to the events of the times.

You are Pavel Grigorievich Trofimov, born in Yuzovka in 1901. Your mother came from a Ukrainian village; your father from a small city in central Russia to work in the Donbas mines. Hardworking people. You spoke Russian at home. Your mother was barely literate; your father could read a newspaper. When you were a small child, she went to church; he did not, grumbling about what God and “those stupid priests” had never done for workers like him.

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Now, in 1978, returned to your hometown, you are respected as a man of achievement and heroic experience. You live alone and go out occasionally to meetings or to see friends. You look at the medals and certificates on the wall of your two room apartment, remember friends you have lost, and put on your padded overcoat to go out in the cold rain and wait in line at the market.

You are Elena Sergeyevna Volodina, born in Kiev in 1908. Your father, a native of Kiev, was a Professor of Mathematics at Kiev University. Your mother was a noted hostess, proud of her descent from a Russian noble family but also a freethinker and a feminist who wanted Russia to “grow up and become modern”. The house was full of books and you had tutors in French, German, mathematics, and piano. You spoke Russian and French at home, and you remember childhood trips to Vienna and Paris and summer vacations in Crimea. Then your world fell apart . . .

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Now, in 1993, you are returning to Kiev from your home in Boston for the first time in many years. You are traveling by way of Moscow, and in both cities you will be giving talks and signing copies of the Russian language edition of your book, *The Triple Life of an Enemy of the People*.

You are Yakov Grossman, born in 1902 in Odesa. Your father was a merchant, your mother cared for the family of seven. You remember the arguments at dinner, between the cousin leaving for America with one suitcase and his violin and the other cousin, the one you admired, who stopped coming after he disappeared into the revolutionary underground. You learned how to avoid toughs and drunks who roamed the streets intent on beating up yids. That cousin whom you admired once let you come with him to hear speakers talk about unity of the oppressed people of the world, which made a lot of sense.

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Now in 1981 you are old, but surviving, and you live in Moscow with your third wife, Yevgeniia, who has persuaded you to write your memoirs – one version for publication, the real, complete one for *samizdat*'. The way things are going, she says, it won't be long before they let you publish anything you want.

You are Anna Hryvnenko. You have lived in this village not far from Kharkiv all your life. About 1000 people live there now, a number not much different from the time of Gogol and Taras Shevchenko. You think you were born in 1912, but are not sure; the records were destroyed. You are telling your life story to granddaughter Anna, the child of your one surviving son. It is 1987 and the *kolkhoz* has finished its spring planting and flowers are out along the wood fences lining the unpaved street. You want to explain about peace, and about a good harvest, and about nuclear radiation, and about why children should not watch war movies on television, and about what happened to family and your neighbors. You have seen everything, but you are not sure how to begin.