

The text is edited, transcribed and translated from recordings kept in Jan Ivar Bjoernflaten's Archive of Russian Dialects. The text is based on recordings 15-B-92, 16-A-92, 17-A-92, 17-B-92, 18-A-92, 18-B-92. The recordings were made in the village of *Serbino, Pljusskij rajon, Pskovskaja oblast'*, on July 6, 1992, in the house of Evdokija Leont'evna. The interviewers were Valerij N. Čekmonas and Jan Ivar Bjoernflaten.

A Woman's Life in Russia.

Evdokija Leont'evna was born in 1904 in the now abandoned village of *Myška*, a few kilometers from the larger village of *Serbino*. Both villages are set in the endless forests of Russia, the *tajga*, in the river valley of *Pljussa*. This dark river which lies seemingly motionless in the eternal shadows of gigantic pine trees, adds a sentiment of mystery to the area's general atmosphere of God-forsakenness. No bus-service runs to *Serbino*, and no telephone line connects the village with the outside world. The villages around lost their permanent inhabitants long ago and deserted as ghost-towns in the winter, being to some extent repopulated by pensioners in the summer months. The only permanent resident in the area is a drunk in *Myška*, a *pjanjuga*, as Evdokija calls him, who moved to the abandoned village of *Myška* from St.Petersburg. Evdokija can't, however, understand how he, living alone, manages to provide himself with liquor.

Evdokija was 5 years old when her father died and with her mother, two brothers and three sisters, she then moved to live with her uncle, her father's brother. She went to school only two winters. But they had plenty of land and got a lot of grain. The grain had to be dried before being threshed and it had therefore to be kept in heated barns called *rigi*. They harvested so much grain that they in one summer could fill the barn 25 times. She remembers the threshing of the grain as hard work, especially in the summers as they stayed up late, walking around in the village with other youths. Then the uncle had to wake them up in the morning, oh, how they wished that the grain was humid or not properly dried, so that they could sleep longer, but no, they had to get up to do the threshing.

When Evdokija was 16, her mother died and she had to take over all the work that her mother used to do, because the uncle was not married; he had deformed feet since birth. She had to do much of the work on the farm, the *khutor*, to mow the grass and to plough the field. A marriage proposal she got, too, from a man who lived alone on a farm after the death of his parents. But she understood that he was only looking for a woman to keep the house for him, and that she did not want to do. At that time, there was a lot of people living in

Myška as well as in Serbino. In Serbino, there were a shop and a church, later a cinema was set up, too. Evdokija remembers well the estate owners here, the *pomeščiki*. One of them was German, probably from the Baltic provinces. He was a very enterprising person. If someone hadn't sufficient land, they could work for him. He was also a good man, for if someone didn't have seed grain, it could be borrowed from him, and he wouldn't hear mentioned interest rates. Evdokija also has only good memories about the Estonians that had cleared land around in the forests. They were really hardworking people and spoke Russian very well, but they had their own church and graveyard. They raised excellent livestock which they sold in St. Petersburg, 276 km away. Eventually, all the land and property of the Estonians were confiscated. As prosperous peasants, *kulaki*, they were arrested, deprived of their property, *raskulačeny*, and deported.

Every Sunday people went to church, and in the evening the young people walked around in the village or from village to village. This is how she got to know her husband. And they agreed among themselves that they wanted to get married. Nonetheless his family came to her house to ask for her hand on behalf of the son. They came in two carriages, Evdokija remembers, the mother, the aunt and several others. They reached agreement and a date for the wedding was set. A dowry was not mentioned since Evdokija was an orphan and lived with her uncle, her late father's brother and with her two sisters. All three sisters got married. In other circumstances the bride might have brought with her a cow or another farm animal. In the case of Evdokija this was not spoken of. She had a chest with cushions, mattresses filled with straws, towels and linen. 21 years old Evdokija was wedded in the church of Serbino. After the wedding the bride and bridegroom were offered bread and salt and woven towels and an icon that had already been blessed by the priest. A lot of people had come to celebrate the wedding. 5 or 6 tables were set up, and the bride and the bridegroom sat in the middle with their groomsmen and bridesmaids, two for each of the newlyweds. Then everybody ate and cheered while it continuously was shouted bitter! *goroko!* Then the bride and the groom had to kiss as it is customarily in Russia to this very day. After the meal, the groom and bride with their maids and groomsmen walked around in the village with a large bouquet of paper flowers to bid goodbye since she now was moving in with her in-laws. In her new home, Evdokija's mother-in-law took care of the household, and Evdokija seems to have been happy with that arrangement. She preferred to work outside, growing vegetables and working in the fields.

Her older brother was arrested at his place of work. He got 20 years. Then they came for her husband: "I lived with my husband 10 years, then they took him". The youngest child, the boy, was only 6 years at the time. Evdokija's husband was sentenced to 10 years without the right of correspondence. "Why was he taken?", she says. "It's the envy of people. My husband was a conscientious worker". At meetings he was praised as an example to be followed. He kept beehives and put up nice rail fences. In the newspapers the

names of those taken in 1938 here and in other villages in this area have now been published. They were all taken to a place outside Leningrad called *Levašovo*. In this place there is a church with a fence around it. They were all brought to this place and shot immediately. "I am sure that my husband was among them, but his name was not on the lists recently published in the newspapers. After the 10 years without right to correspondence, I wrote to Moscow. Then I got a certificate of death. He should have died from ulcer in September 1942 at the place of his imprisonment. Where that place had been, I did not get to know. In the letter it was further stated that he had been posthumously rehabilitated. I got paid two month's pay from the forest collective farm with which he had worked as a forest ranger, but no pension. And I got money for the rifle that they had taken. I was summoned to the Big House, the KGB's headquarters in Leningrad on *Litejnyj prospect*. Here they gave me 300 roubles for his two barrel rifle. That was all. I got no pension. And I had to support three children and my husband's mother".

Just a couple of weeks after the German attack on the Soviet Union, July 4, 1941, Evdokija with her three children were evacuated. Her mother-in-law was left behind in the village. All the livestock of the collective farm was herded and driven away. Evdokija brought her own cow. On foot they went to the *Jefimovskij rajon, stancija Jefimovskaja*, a village outside the town of *Tikhvin*, a North Russian town some two hundred kilometers to the East of St. Petersburg. There she worked as a ranger in a collective farm. It is difficult to tell how they survived. They had carried nothing with them, just a bundle, and the people who lived there had little or nothing to share. It was the cow that saved them. Everything depended on whether they would succeed to find fodder to feed the cow so that the cow survived until the spring. Then the cow should calve, but the calf died since they had nothing to feed it with. But compulsory delivery of meat had been introduced, and when the calf died, a commission was immediately on the spot, drawing up a document on delivery of 40 kg of meat. Evdokija had already delivered the meat, but the receipt, the *spravka*, had been lost. But it was ordered that either she delivered the cow or paid one thousand roubles. Evdokija insisted that she had delivered the meat and that the new calf had died and that she had three children who depended solely on the cow to survive. But at that time no mercy was shown. The village *sovjet* had already sold the cow, and they had come for it. At that moment Evdokija pointed to a propaganda poster that was lying there with the image of a German who confiscated the cow of a villager. In front of the chairman, *predsedatel'*, of the collective farm and the agent, she said, "look, there you see a German, and you are cut from the same cloth". The chairman of the collective farm was also evacuated, but he said that nothing could be done. They had to take the cow. Evdokija answered that if anybody laid a hand on the cow, she would chop it off with the ax, because without the cow they were done with anyhow. "I won't let the cow go. I have escaped from the Germans, I have three children and you

want to take the cow away from me. I have got the receipt”. The agent who accompanied the chairman, then said: “Get a *spravka*. I go home now, but when I come back tomorrow, you must show me the *spravka*, otherwise we will have to take the cow”. And Evdokija ran 25 km to the nearest police station, where she got a *spravka*, and then she ran 25 km back again. At three o’clock in the morning she was home, so tired that everything got black. But they did not take the cow.

As soon as Serbino was liberated, as she puts it, they started home on foot; it must have been in August-September 1944. For 24 days she went on foot with three children and the cow that kept them alive. They first went to *Novgorod*, then to *Luga*. Everywhere she saw burned or deserted villages. But the worst was that they could not move away from the road because of the danger of mines. Posters along the road warned for mines. At the same time the cow had to graze and drink water. The milk she could change for bread and grain. One place she noticed a strange smell, and she thought it might be a cadaver of a horse. A military she met told he that over in the grove 500 bodies were lying, and nothing could be done before the mines had been neutralized. At last they arrived home. Her son managed to get on a train the last distance. And Evdokija with her three children and with the same cow that she had taken with her three years earlier, returned to Serbino. Her mother-in-law who had not been evacuated, had managed in some way or another to survive in the village these three years. But their house was gone. All the people she had worked with in the collective form were gone, dead.

The worst time was the life in the collective farm after the war. First of all, everybody had to work in the collective form to fulfill the requirements for work. For this they got 200 grams of bread every day and a plot of land for their own use. But since she had four people to support, her own three children and her mother-in-law, she had to get another job as night watch in the collective farm’s grocery store. In this way, she earned more money and got a little more land for her own use. They were fully dependent on their plot of land for fodder for the cow and the sheep. In addition, they grew potatoes and vegetables. During the day, starting at 9 o’clock, she worked as a ranger in the collective farm. The work was to mark trees that were to be cut down and then to cut them down. During the night, until 4 o’clock in the morning, she kept watch in the store. From 4 o’clock in the morning until she had to start working in the collective farm, she had to mow the grass for the cow and the sheep and to work on her plot of land. When she then at 9 o’clock started to work on the collective farm it was as if everything went black. In the fall, they had to deliver the grain. The collective farm grew grain on 50 hektar, and practically everything had to be delivered to the state, and it had to be transported to the railway station at Pljussa. The sacks with grain had to be carried on the back up a ladder to be emptied into the railway carriages. It was a gruesome toil. After this work not a single hair on her head was dry, she says. “It is not to be believed what people

endured, where did they get their strength from”, says Evdokija. Emancipation came in 1953. Her aunt died in Leningrad, and the aunt’s husband traveled to the village and took her with him to the city.

“I only lived with him 3 years, then he died”. She also brought her mother-in-law to Leningrad. In some way or another she managed to provide for her a permission of residence, a *propiska*. When her mother-in-law died 90 years old, she had lived with her for 40 years. And Evdokija brought her mother-in-law to Serbino and saw to that she was laid to rest in the local cemetery there. “Some years later I bought a house for 300 roubles here in the village. It was in a bad shape, with thatched roof and in leaked all the time, and I could only spend a couple of weeks each year here. I did not manage to take care of it. After 3 or 4 years I sold it for 1000 roubles to the timber mill here. They repaired the house and laid a proper roof. Then the timber mill was shutting down, and I got a letter from a neighbor: “Your house is for sale for 3030 roubles”. And I wanted so much a house in the village. I took a second job. I washed all 60 windows of the hotel before the holidays in May and October. My daughter sent money, and in some way or another I managed to scrape together the 3030 roubles which was the price of the house. After I had bought the house and had come here, it appeared that the house had sunk and had to be jacked up. I had to buy 10 logs and to pay 500 roubles to have the house jacked up. Now I live here from May to October. We are several pensioners who hire a car together, a truck that takes us down here and comes back in October to bring us to Saint Petersburg. He will come for us October 18. We paid him 300 roubles to drive us here. But he will surely ask for 500 to take us back”.

In the spring her son had been here. He had set up fences, shoveled the land, planted potatoes and cabbage. But then he had got a heart attack, and without a telephone in the village the situation had turned out to be critical. A neighbor had, however, driven 5 km to the nearest village and called the ambulance. Everything had turned out well and the son had come back. After that he had traveled to the town of *Ržev*, where he lived, to collect his pension for the first time. Because the first payment of the pension could only be received in person. Evdokiia was very worried since she for a month had not got any letter from him and because he had been ill.

(Translation from Russian to English: J.I.Bjoernflaten)