

All Svetlana's Voices

by Som Atents

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— The Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievich talked with Som Atents and the public during the Literal Fair.

— “The world is again as it was: on Russian television we are continually seeing images of tanks, warships and warplanes.”

Svetlana Aleksievich (Ukraine, 1948) is never alone. The hundreds of voices that she has listened to since her childhood, and that are gathered in her books, travel with her. That is how she explained it one afternoon in Stockholm in 2015 as she was receiving the Nobel Prize. She restated it in Barcelona during her presentation at the LITERAL fair. Aleksievich addressed a packed room and spoke about her focus during many decades of work: human beings. Everything that happens revolves around human beings and it has allowed her to construct her own genre using oral histories. Some have called it the ‘literature of voices’. These voices have accompanied her since she was a child and, above all, they talk about love. That is until they talk of pain, wars without heroes, loss and sadness.

The literary concept of the power of the written word to liberate resonates throughout your work. This was a sensation that was conveyed to us, for example, in *Second-Hand Time* when you wrote about kitchens, those intimate spaces and places where the world could have changed if enough people had read the *Gulag Archipelago* by Solzhenitsyn. Do you continue to have faith in the power of literature such as it was in the times of kitchen dissidence?

The kitchen is a unique place in Russia. It's a parliament, a church and it's also a meeting place, where families meet. After Perestroika, when the people were on the streets, the kitchens were empty. But now, with Putin, the situation has changed; he himself has openly said that he's an authoritarian leader. The country is in a state of hysteria and people are jailed if they participate in protests. This frightens people and they are once again meeting in the kitchens.

It seems to us that you belong to the tradition of Russian realism that observes normal men and women in the street, the tradition of Chekhov and Dostoyevsky that still exists today. However, some dispute that you write literature and say that what you really do is compile documentary data. You have even questioned it yourself. So what is literature today?

It is something I often ask myself. I think that it relates to the fact that I have problems with the technique. Our life has changed. Now, we are in another age and we are different people. Everything evolves. If we analyze modern music we realize that there

are many composers who talk about *the music after the music*, which is totally different to how it was before. The same happened to painting. No-one now denies the existence of installations as an art form. But it seems that everything that has to do with literature needs to stand still. Why? I remember the voices of hundreds of women who had gone to war from my childhood. It sounded like a Greek chorus to me. I said to myself that I didn't need to be afraid of such a powerful sound. We must move forward. We must not think that *documenting* or journalism should be limited to external events. It used to be thought that a documentarist shouldn't write about the inner lives of the protagonists and shouldn't touch on complex issues. Why shouldn't a document live by the rules of art? This is what I have tried to do.

You use interviews as a method for writing. Due to their length and the resulting intimacy, you, the journalist, and most of your sources establish a very strong human connection. What is the nature of this relationship and what distance, if any, do you put between yourself and the interviewee?

If I asked myself these questions I wouldn't move, I wouldn't step forward. I'm not a sociologist and when I talk to a person I don't exactly interview them. It is more of a conversation. We start talking about life, like two people who, by chance, have found each other on Earth. Both of us are part of an era, of events. We are witnesses to our time, our hopes and to our utopian ideals. We talk about everything: about serious things, but also about a blouse someone's wearing and that's been burnt while making a cake. It's at these moments that we are most human. You have to be a very simple person and not be afraid of not understanding or not knowing about something. Nor should you be judgmental, because all of us have experienced things going wrong. Now I'm working on a book about love between men and women. And I can honestly see that the women's stories are more powerful than the men's. Sometimes I don't understand the men's stories. Maybe I don't know how to ask the right questions. I don't censor myself and I'm not scared either. But perhaps the only censorship that I suffer is through not knowing how to ask the right questions. So I have to dip into the life of another person through talking. I don't look for people with a trivial or banal life. I look for people who reflect, who think and who have an awareness about life. That's when we start talking about certain things.

The coexistence of the past and the present in the Russian collective imagination

-You have just spoken about women in your stories. Thirty years have passed since you wrote *War Does Not Have a Woman's Face*. With regards to the voice of women in our society, especially in a context of conflict, has anything changed?

I wrote this book about women as we live in a time where there are laws that allow you to kill people and even award medals for doing so. When my father talked about how many Germans he had killed, I, from another generation, could not understand his enthusiasm. When I heard women talk about war, I realized that they understood it like I did. War was not a matter of heroics. I talked with a woman who had been a nurse during the war. She had been tasked with checking to see if there were any survivors on the battlefields. She explained to me that she was sad to see the young shoots of wheat, standing up in the snow like soldiers, and the birds that died and fell to the ground, just like soldiers too. This was what women say. They consciously note the details; they always have done. I think that is determined by your genetics. I wanted to write a book to express this feeling. It wasn't published until Gorbachev

came to power. I went from one publisher to another, a fact that benefited the company who finally published it. People were ready to accept the truth. In the 90s we were romantics. We had a very idealistic vision in the Gorbachev years. Now, this seems like a fantasy, because the world is again as it was. On Russian television we are continually seeing images of tanks, warships and warplanes. We've lost faith in another way of life and, therefore, I think the book *War Does Not Have A Woman's Face* is very contemporary.

You were published thanks to a gamble by a publishing house. From that moment on, you were established as a dissident voice, just when journalism was struggling to continue to be journalism. How do you think journalism today is taking on the responsibility of visibilizing social injustice and non-mainstream stories that are unrelated to the hegemonic discourse? What tools do journalists have?

In any society, and especially in ours, there will always be someone who suffers. In society there are many differences, there are the rich and there are the poor. Only in childhood are people equal. Then, when they grow up, they become very different. There are too many people who don't understand how others think and that's why journalists are murdered in Russia. When journalists are investigating economic or political issues, they're at great risk as the ruling classes don't want to share their fortune. But in our profession there's no way out, you have to keep going until the end. When I published the book about the Afghanistan war they threatened me, and even prosecuted me. But time saved me: it was the era of perestroika. However, I don't remember being scared or backing off. During that war, I saw many things I would rather not have seen, such as the behaviour of our military. I once fainted but that didn't stop me. I had to keep going until I'd finished. Any type of fear will be reflected in the text.

And in the context of what you are speaking about, can this link between journalism and literature be a powerful resource for building free societies?

You, journalists, are those who make the link possible. There are many journalists who made the transition from journalism to literature, not only in Russia. Much has been said about Solzhenitsyn and Kapuściński, but they're not the only ones. It's something entirely possible. It just depends on you.

In *Second-hand Time* you explain that in your country, you grew up in the midst of its own national narrative, which was disabused in Afghanistan. However, in the early chapters of the book you explain how the new generations have often forgotten what happened. You say, and we quote: "I meet young people in the street who have once again started wearing hammer and sickle T-shirts. I really doubt if they know what communism is." We would like to ask you about this ambivalence of the people who are once again engaging in a critical discourse and who are protesting, and bringing back bad memories for you we imagine.

That's not exactly true. Those of us who made perestroika a reality, we lost. The word democracy doesn't exist in our society. Putin, who talks about the dream of being a great country, primarily aims his message at youth who accuse our generation of being the one that failed a great country. There's too much nostalgia. When I travelled the country I saw the works of Engels, Marx and Trotsky in student residences. As Dostoyevsky wrote: "There will always be young Russians who dream of a new revolution." And these young people do. We think that Putin is a monster who has

robbed us of our ideals and that thanks to him we lost. However, we too are guilty of being defeated. The new generations think otherwise and find strength in the works of Marx, Trotsky and Lenin. When I ask them about it and tell them that all of this is very old hat, they tell me: "You didn't know how to do it, but we do and we will succeed." There are millions of people who have been robbed and deceived ... everyone's lost something. The truth is that Putin manipulates their feelings. Only 7% have taken advantage of Russia's great wealth. Everyone else is nothing, they have nothing, and this has perpetuated the divide between the rich and the poor. Capitalism is not well suited to the Russian mentality. When we were in the squares, no one ever said: "All power to capitalism". Now, Russian capitalism is like Chicago in the 1930s. Nevertheless, young people still believe in the idea of a great Russia. It's true that we didn't have everything, they tell me, but education was free, and books, and health... These young people want to belong to a powerful, strong country. Putin takes advantage of this feeling and that's why he's dangerous. It's just like when they spoke of a great Serbia or a great Germany. Luckily, people read books about how fascism emerged in Germany, about how the Bolshevik revolution began in Russia in 1917. We're lucky that these underground warning sounds are there to tell us we're living in very dangerous times. Behind Putin's discourse is the belief that, when everyone is scared of us, when we have more tanks and warplanes than the rest, we'll be a great country.

Love, a belligerent feeling

In your Nobel Prize acceptance speech, you said one thing that worried us. You said that in the times we live in, it's difficult to talk about love. What were you referring to exactly?

In the speech I had to explain who I was. I explained that I had three homelands as my father is Belarussian, my mother is Ukrainian and I was educated in the Russian culture. It was difficult to talk about it at the time, due to the war in Ukraine. I love Ukraine, so I linked it with the fact that it is difficult to speak about love in that context. But now I'm writing a book about men and women who talk about their love stories, about their efforts to be happy.

The 'Svetlana' technique

When you talk with your interviewees, to what extent is what they say what later appears in the books?

They're voices from the start. It takes between seven and ten years to write a book, and I talk with 500 - 700 people. There are people with very interesting stories. And so I visit these people five to seven times more. You can imagine the amount of notes that I have. There are stories that take up 200 pages. Therefore, it's the idea I focus on, because it is impossible to include everything. I try to condense the other person's life into words.

Can we say then, that with regards to what you are told, your accuracy is literary rather than literal?

Out of respect for feelings, there are no footnotes. With regards to the material, the arrangement is that, when I write half a page, it's written as it would be written by a writer.

Once you have finished the topic, what do you do with the recordings and transcripts?

In the nineties we didn't know that the Soviet Union would be dismantled so quickly. We thought about socialism with a human face. I gave many tapes and thousands of pages of notes to the museum. But afterwards, the people revolted, and all of it was just thrown into the street and it disappeared, and not just the recordings. I do keep the tapes of the book *Voices from Chernobyl*, but normally I don't. Of course, when I'm no longer alive, they'll have to empty my apartment ... There are thousands and thousands of pages of notes there!

You have had disagreements with some of your sources once they saw the material published. In some cases, it even resulted in legal action. Why do you think that happened?

To look after the tapes, I gave them to the people. I thought the families would look after them. I used the cassettes at the trial and, thanks to them, I was able to win the lawsuit.

You know that the Spanish Civil War was the first battle of the Second World War. And that this battle was lost. There are living descendants of those who disappeared and who are still buried in unmarked roadside graves. From this perspective, we are grateful to you for the books you have written. Do you think that what you do is psychological history? Here in the West there are those who speak about de-democratization. Do you think that what is happening is a process of forgetting?

Psychological history is a good term, but I always say that I'm not a historian. I write stories about feelings. Of the entire history of the 'reds', what interests me most is how socialism lives in the human soul. These feelings are hard to hide. I remember the story of an old man who explained that they first imprisoned his wife, and then him, in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. During the war he was released to be sent to the front and he survived. When the conflict was over he wanted to become a party member again. They had taken his card when they arrested him. They told him: "We can't return your wife to you, she died in the Kolyma, but we can return your party card". And he confessed to me that he felt happy! They had taken this man's wife and he was happy because they had returned a piece of card to him! I asked him how this was possible and he replied that he couldn't judge anyone for their ideas because he belonged to another generation. What I wanted to explain was the danger of this fanaticism, what happens when people are subjected to an utopian ideal. It's an idea that exists in the human soul, but it's very dangerous.

Are men from wars and woman from Venus?

You have said that sometimes you find it difficult to understand stories written by men. From this starting point, how can you offer a credible story to readers when the person explaining the story is a man? What method do you use to overcome the male-female dichotomy?

I'll give you an example of what I say. I met a woman who told me a wonderful story. She was a woman who had separated. She told me that her ex-husband would come along as well so that I could speak to her first and then listen to his story. She explained how he had tried to seduce her, how he had given her flowers ... she

explained her love. Conversely, he didn't understand why he had given her so many gifts, why he had done so many things for this woman. He was already in another phase, passionate about someone or something else, and didn't remember the same details as her. It was a very difficult case for me. I realized that a woman remembers all the details that were an integral part of her love, while for a man, this part of his life doesn't bother him so much any more. Perhaps men will say that I'm not right ...