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SHE WAS IN MOSCOW

Visiting American Woman Describes The Siege

"EVERYTHING that I tell people sounds to me just words, and words that have lost their meaning," said Miss Rowena Meyer, in an interview with *The Listener*. Miss Meyer passed through New Zealand on her way home to the United States after eight years spent in Russia as a teacher of English. She lived through a year and a-half of wartime Russia and a year of siege conditions in Moscow.

"Coming from Moscow I can only say that you here in New Zealand seem to me to live in unexampled luxury. You just don't know what shortage and hardship can be. You see, Russia had no chance to build up large supplies before the war. All her efforts were poured into defence. Rationing came in almost immediately after the invasion. There was no hoarding, and anyway, it would have been impossible for people to hoard in large enough quantities. Every Russian family has children, and not just one or two children, either. A little put by soon went. No, soon everyone was reduced to one diet, black bread; and during the day at the cafeteria of the institute where I worked I got a soup made of cabbages and potatoes, half-rotten, because dug in desperation from the frozen ground. With it went a square of dough made of black flour and water. Neither was palatable, but it was food. People used to divide their day's ration of bread into three parts."

"And with all this the people have kept their morale?"

"It sounds fantastic, but I think they have. You see, they hate the Germans very bitterly. Well, perhaps I shouldn't say Germans, but Hitlerism, which is contrary to everything that they have been taught since the Revolution. I think they will starve and die and see their children starve and die rather than let the Nazis win. Of course some parts of Russia are better off. We in Moscow were very near the front. I personally lost



MISS ROWENA MEYER
Words have lost their meaning

50 pounds in weight, though I have got most of it back since I left Russia last December."

We asked about fuel throughout that first winter of siege.

"The first year was very bad because the situation was unexpected. The summer of '41 was exceptionally cold. There hadn't been a single hot day, and then when winter came, all the fuel was needed for war essentials. So there was an announcement that for three months of winter there would be neither heat nor light for civilians, and this meant that there weren't any candles, either. As soon as we got home at night, we just went to bed with all our clothes on and hoped to keep warm. But as we all worked from 12 to 14 hours, most of us were glad to get to bed."

"Last winter was not so bad?"

"No. They had had time. Everyone up to about 45 years of age was mobilised to go to the woods and cut down logs. It was hard work, but very healthy. Even schools did not reopen till late so that everyone could help. The logs were brought to the outskirts of the city and then loaded on to street cars, tram cars you call them, and brought to depots in the centre of the city. There they were rationed out, and people would go with their coupons and drag them away on sledges or with ropes. It was a common sight to see a university professor or a well-dressed woman in a fur coat carting home her wood herself. No one thought her funny: only lucky to have fuel."

Germans at the Gates

"Was there no evacuation of civilians?"

"By the time that the Germans were near to Moscow, the population had thinned considerably. When the news came that the Germans had broken through the first line of defence and were only 20 miles away, everything possible was done to hold up the advance. Every available individual joined what was the equivalent of your Home Guard. They were armed with what they could get. All that mattered was to delay the German advance. I knew some of them, men and women from the institute where I worked. None of them came back. We did not know what happened to them. We only knew that the German advance was halted."

"Were there any disturbances in Moscow during the siege?" we asked.

"None. Everyone was working too hard. About a month after the German invasion we had our first air-raids, and these continued night after night until the winter, when only occasional planes got through to the city. But there was no panic. I lived on the top of a seven-story building, and felt as though the whole bomb-laden sky would drop on my head. So I moved to the ground floor. There I felt safer, though I knew that seven stories crashing on the top of me would be as unpleasant as falling seven stories down."

Lost Children

"By this time were many children left in the city?"

"Yes, because children were brought in from the nearby villages and from the country that was occupied by the Germans. Every militia or police station had to deal with large numbers of lost or orphaned children. It was a big problem. In every office and factory, employees were asked to give an hour of their time each week to dealing with some of the correspondence that arose out of this. You see, one parent might be fighting at the front, and the other working in a factory, and the children sent to a village well behind the lines. With the rapid German advance, the children would be sent further and further back, and the parents would not know what had become of them. Some may never get in touch with their children again, but the children will, of course, be well cared for."

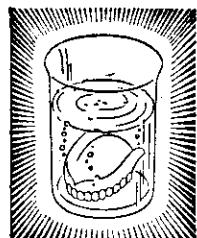
"You mentioned earlier that all Russians seem to have large families. A criticism that we sometimes hear of Communism in Russia is that it tends to break up family life. Would you say that that was so?"

"Certainly not in Russia," Miss Meyer replied. "The Russians always seemed to me to be exceptionally fond of their children, and they certainly do have large families. Everything is done to make it easy: for instance, there are special regulations allowing mothers time off work on full pay for three months when they have babies. But there is also every opportunity for women not to have children, either. There are birth-control clinics, where advice is given freely, so that it would be easy to blame birth-control if the population were falling. But it isn't."

"Russians probably more than any other people look to the future and forget the past. I find myself being questioned here about things that happened in Russia four, six, 10 years ago, things that at the time stirred us greatly. They are forgotten in Russia now. If a lesson has been learnt, well and good, but past rancours and scandals must be quickly buried, or they will undermine the foundations of the future."

"Do they feel that their allies are helping to the limit?"

"I certainly had that impression. The Russians will never give in; they will fight over every river and through every town—but they fight more gladly with the knowledge that America and Britain are fighting with them and helping them."



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