

My Tara

Liudmyla Tymoshenko

Translated from the Ukrainian by John Freedman with Natalia Bratus

A play commissioned by a grant from Philip Arnoult's Center for International Theater

Development (U.S.)

There is a scene in *Gone with the Wind*, the funeral of Gerald, Scarlett's father. Before closing the coffin, Will asks Scarlett to go into the house, saying she is pregnant and might lose her child in the heat. The old woman accompanying her says, "He just didn't want you to hear the coffin being nailed shut. And he's right. Remember, Scarlett: until you hear that sound, the person seems alive to you. But as soon as you hear... Yes, it is the most frightening sound in the world. It is the sound of the end."

I was twelve years old when I read these lines. At that time I lived with my grandmother Tania in Ovruch in the Zhytomyr region of Ukraine. When I was seven months old, my parents had sent me from North Kazakhstan, which is where I was born, to live with her. My father served in the Strategic Rocket Forces. What does that mean? When rockets were placed on combat duty, they had to be kept under constant control. They were guided via underground command posts, and they were called "Satan warheads" - the largest nuclear rockets of the time (there were twenty-four of them in my dad's garrison). Officers sat underground keeping constant watch over these rockets. Every officer on duty knew if he were to receive the order, he would have to press a button.

There were three types of readiness. Number One was "constant combat readiness," whereby a green signal light was constantly on in the bunker. Number Two was "increased combat readiness," which was accompanied by a blue light. The third was "engagement danger." For this a red light was lit, and the officer on duty would turn on all devices that eventually would direct the warheads toward their target. All that was left was to push the red button. The officer on duty knew that by pushing that button, he could destroy a city ten times the size of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

I was sent from North Kazakhstan to live with my grandmother in Ukraine because the climate in Kazakhstan is not suitable for a seven-month-old child. Ten months of winter and the rest is summer, as the locals joked. Forty-below in winter, plus-forty in summer. I was often ill. My older brother Serhiy stayed with our parents. He, a five-year-old boy, was very scared. Like all Soviet children living in such military bases, he feared nuclear war. At the age of five, he knew perfectly well what "unauthorized behavior" was. This topic

was constantly discussed among parents, kindergarten teachers, neighbors, shop assistants,

and even hairdressers in beauty shops. The officers on duty were usually men of strong endurance and iron-clad psyche. From time to time, however, their nerves might crack.

The nerves they experienced in the control room staring at the color of the signal light made some of them go crazy. Mental aberrations like this had to be detected or foreseen in some way. Otherwise, this so-called "unauthorized behavior" might actually transpire. That is, if a duty officer realized he had the power to flatten Planet Earth all on his own, he might succumb to the notion he could do anything he pleased.

Such "system failures" might occur not only in a particular person's head, but also in

the bunker's control system. There once was an incident when something went haywire and the red signal light came on completely by accident. While the officer on duty, sweating with animal terror, aimed the rocket at its target, the command center managed to issue the proper directives to rescind the order.

I was not afraid of nuclear war because I lived with my grandmother. She ate dumplings with cherries in summer, and mashed potatoes with gravy in winter. My grandmother took me sledding, drove me to see the New Year's tree, and every Victory Day on May 9, we would attend the parade of flags, rejoicing at the peaceful sky over our heads, and our victory over fascism. My grandfather died in 1958. During World War II, he fought on various fronts, repairing military aircraft. He met my grandmother in Germany where, like many girls, she had been transported by train from Ukraine, and forced to work in German factories. After the war, my grandmother and grandfather, along with my father's newborn older brother Valeri (named after test pilot Valeri Chkalov), moved to a garrison in Belarus in the city of Baranovichi. When my dad Viktor was 9 years old, his father died. Over the Easter holidays Grandpa went from Belarus to his native village in the Zhytomyr region and got caught up in the tradition of going "house to house" (this is when, on holidays, from morning to night, villagers visit their neighbors and drink moonshine). He then returned to his family in Baranovichi and died of a stroke. He so missed my grandmother that, immediately upon arrival, he climbed up on top of her and his heart burst. He was 38 years old. My grandmother, my father, and his brother Valeri remember the sounds of the nails being driving into the coffin. Eight months after grandfather's death, grandmother decided to return to her relatives in Ukraine. She and her two sons were given a room in a communal house in the town of Ovruch. Grandfather's family asked for permission to transport his body to his native village near Ovruch, and, to make this happen, Grandma sold her last valuable possession, a war trophy, a German accordion captured during the war. The coffin was dug up, covered with fir branches to hide the smell of the corpse, and was reburied in Grandpa's hometown cemetery. To this day Dad can't stand the smell of pine needles. Then my grandmother was given the house

where I had come to live from North Kazakhstan when I was seven months old, and where I lived until I was eight, at which time my parents took me to Lviv.

This red brick house was the happiest place I've ever known. On every school holiday, I "flew" there on wings (actually I travelled by way of the Lviv-Lugansk railway with a train change in Korosten). I've always strongly associated the smell of the jasmine growing near the house with the beginning of everlasting happiness. School would end on May 25, and on May 26 I would luxuriate in the smell of the white flowers from this bush. There would be three months of wonderful carefree time ahead of me.

That summer I received a two-volume edition of *Gone with the Wind* as a gift - this book was in short supply, and to get it you had to turn in more than 20 kilos of waste paper. I imagined myself as Scarlett O'Hara, and I saw my grandmother's house as Tara. A

whole new wonderful world opened up for me. The parts about the war bored me, but I re-read the parts about Scarlett and Rhett many times over. When I read those lines about the

sounds of the end, I was frightened for the first time in my life. I realized that one day my grandmother would die and I would hear those sounds. Fortunately, that didn't happen

until I was 40.