Lidia Iakovlevna Ginzburg (1902–1990) is primarily known to the international reading public as the author of Blockade Diary, a testimony from the years of the Siege of Leningrad. Originated given a title which in a literal translation from Russian would be “Notes by a Besieged Human Being” (Gipol’ Molodezhi che- boroshch’), this book is one of the most outstanding docum-
ents of World War II, describing survival under ex-
treme circumstances which reduce humanness to the “bare existence” (Ginzburg’s term) of a walking corpse, and thus equalising living a life, as we recall, melts, and soon is it only a skeleton of “connections” that is left. “Connections” are actually sought for pragmatic rea-
sons but are also painful reminders of the relationship that is dead. His theoretics breaks up into life separated from theory, and writing separated from experiences.

The writer has to find himself a source of living in which Ginzburg calls “profession” — reading and writ-
ing and applied skills useful for state construction. This is a routine practice that is adequately remunerated by an institution but is not inspired by the presence of a relationship “Profession” is care and nourishment at the same time. Life-as-writing and life-as-relationship postulated as an indivisible whole in a writer fall apart.

We write and we know that there can be various situations: the book will be rejected and you will not get paid at all; you will receive an advance, but the book will not be published; you will receive 50 percent of the payment, but the book will not be published; the book will not be published, but you will receive your fee in full; the book will be delayed for a year or two, or three years and will never be published. At any event, this will never ever be your case. (p. 95–96)

The parties respect “profession” and are willing to pay for smoothness in its exercise: formal techniques and routines of literary work, an ability to put words together, and skills in articulating the will of the authorities in an understandable smooth language. Good money is paid for teaching, while those who, notwithstanding, for some reason cannot abandon writing, can feed on passing “parodic and cheap belle-lettrism in which a beastly vocabulary has become the technique” (p. 95), a lifestyle in which reading and writing are in-
cluded mainly as an attractive commodity. It is no longer the writer who “writes” the work and the reality the work is supposed to be about, but the technique4 are gone […]. Nowadays [in 1928] it is not any longer the writer but the “technique” which “writes” the text and the reality the work is supposed to be about.

The author is also “the most accomplished reader of his time” (p. 35), reading and writing con-
stitute one process, reading being the inner speech of writing. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the Leningrad of the late 1920s and early 1930s, “people get banned, one stops buying his books and in its place, putting them where others might see them” (p. 79). “I found myself on an uninhabited island, I would make a friend of some reason cannot abandon writing, can feed on passing “parodic and cheap belle-lettrism in which a beastly vocabulary has become the technique” (p. 95), a lifestyle in which reading and writing are included mainly as an attractive commodity. It is no longer the writer who “writes” the work and the reality the work is supposed to be about, but the technique which “writes” the work and the reality the work is supposed to be about.

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The naked human being in a forsaken world. Is it about surviving? Man or monster?

Hunger makes the author Ginzburg taciturn. Leningrad exerted itself little. Books and people are banned.

Lidiia Iakovlevna Ginzburg Notebook by Irina Sandomirskaja Illustration Moa Fränzen
A pedantically responsible observer, Ginzburg makes a note concerning the practice of producing realities by an alien force. 

This is a book with a pre-determined result produced in starvation which feels relieved of creative responsibility. Because the author and his book there arise an uneasy thought which is united by belief in the impossibility of reducing itself later on in the daily experiences of the siege seasons. The winter with its catastrophic months of the winter of 1941, Ginzburg pointed out the dead city’s “mocking beauty” (p. 617) — so that is also the beauty of a feast and hungry word created through the cumulative effect of trauma, on one hand, and creative responsibility, on the other. The simulated, carefully engineered and maintained self-censoring is written by a body that is a symbol of continuing life (any life) and as substitute for evil. It served as a physical defence and a shelter from the horror of autonomic verbalization as an economic rather than a peculiarity of the Stalinist symbolic economy. Sacrifices become a daily necessity. Everyone is included in the iteration of the distribution of food and everyone participates in the hierarchy of “dependants” and “var- not death, but death as the ultimate alienation of “bare existence”. 

Biopolitics of besiegement. Writing, sacrifice, and bare life in Lidiia Ginzburg’s notebooks. This experience of simulated authorship fully reproduces the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still more profound one that underlies the sign of one overarching metonymy: a lesser evil substituting for a greater one. It is precisely this choice in favor of evil to prevent a still
and it replaces the category of pleasure by the category of value. Which category, in its turn, presupposes the category of retribution. (pp. 731–732)

This, “in a reality where everything that moves (for example, war) threatens the (individual) with destruction, while everything that is stable and peaceful threatens with emptiness” (p. 144), the threat to life comes first and foremost from value, and value is threatened by life. In the “environment catastrophes of the 20th century”, all orchestrated by military, bureaucratic, and writerly technologies, life (for the writer, again, indivisible from writing) becomes a mere existence “...that is being dragged forward by some forces, and it is not essential whether these forces are understandable or inexplicable. Instead of a free world of ideas, one lives in a suffocating world of total necessity, a world filled with the objective horror of living.” (p. 199). Life becomes ethically impossible, and “art is productive if it explains why the human being still goes on living (it cannot be out of mere cowardice!), art that shows or seeks to show the ethical possibility of life, even in the environment of the catastrophes of the 20th century.” (p. 200)

Thus, Ginzburg expands her thinking, and thinks the Siege in such a way as to include Stalinism, and likewise thinks the Soviet experience in such a way as to include modern European history. In her generalization, she repeats that expanding gesture by which Walter Benjamin in 1933 folded the whole of the European civilization into the “us” under the sign of radically impoverished experience:

[N]ever has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contarrined by positional warfare; economic experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. The generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.

Benjamin refers to a community whose “hallmark” is “a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it”.

This is a definition to which Ginzburg would have probably subscribed.

Ginzburg’s “bare existence” is that threshold towards which life and language move, incapable of living under the conditions of the Siege but equally incapable of dying because of the necessity of survival. In the construction of bare existence she seems to echo Benjamin’s other conception of poverty: his notion of bare life (ein blosses Leben). The similarity between these two poverties lies not only in how bare existence or bare life are opposed to life as such, but also in the way both are determined ethically. Benjamin’s bare life as he discusses it in his Critique of Violence is not the outcome of violence as such, nor the result of the imposition of external conditions which make life impossible. Bare life is life facing its violent divine Creator, a life before life, only preparing itself for “ethical possibility”. Indeed, the term ein blosses Leben in Benjamin’s writing occurs invariably with one and only one attribute: that of guilt, or debt (Schuld). It is the Schuld alone that determines the difference between life and bare life, and the bareness of bare life itself: it is a life barren of any other predicates but Schuld. This presupposes bare life’s potential development towards a life as such, a “good life” (Benjamin), or an “ethical possibility” of life (Ginzburg).

A “good life”, Benjamin says in an earlier fragment, is a life that is immortal — i.e., to express this in Ginzburg’s terms, a life that is ethically absolutely possible. For Benjamin, the immortality of human life is not the eternity of nature, but the infinity of a life that is unforgettable: “it is a life that is not to be forgotten, even though it has no monument or memorial, or perhaps any testimony. Such life remains unforgettable even though without form or vessel.” The unforgettable life of Prince Myshkin lies wholly in the realm of freedom from necessity, in unrestricted ethical possibility. Ginzburg would have probably also subscribed to this understanding of a good life, as opposed to “bare existence”.

Thus, it is only unforgettablity — an attribute of life that precedes memory in those who do not forget — that is capable of resolving the bareness of bare Schuld, of relieving the bare guilt of necessities in the name of survival, Ginzburg’s “all-pervading betrayal that no one has evaded”. Why am I writing all this, Ginzburg asks herself at the end of her notes from the Siege. The Siege goes around in circles, and so does destruction, the logic of survival offers no exit either into living, or into death. It is in these circles that life suffocates and transforms into the guilt of “bare existence”, the betrayal. Describing such a circle, Ginzburg says, might help to break it up and thus to give bare existence a fraction of ethical possibility. Breaking up circles is a duty towards the unforgettablity of (betrayed) life — and only secondly is it a piece of testimony, a service to the memory of those who are supposed to remember.

Here, however, language makes another circle, and the ethical possibility of life, almost established, once again becomes a specter. Opisuyat’ krugi – in Russian, “describing circles” — also means walking around in circles, aimlessly and sometimes in despair, without an exit. What is, indeed, Ginzburg’s project of witnessing and theorizing survival — is it a gesture of resolving the circular logic of dystrophy, or is it a gesture of resignatio to dystrophy’s forgetfulness, its bad eternity? Indeed, I cannot say.≈

REFERENCES

1 Lidiya Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, London 1995. (Note: Ginzburg’s given name, Lidia, is transliterated in different ways by different publishers, thus the variation in the English spellings seen in books translated into English.)


4 Ginzburg refers to Viktor Shklovskii’s 1916 concept of “denuding the technique” (of writing) (obnazhenie priema) as the central critical procedure in the formalist interpretation of text.

5 G. D. Barber & A. R. Dzeniskevich, op. cit., p. 56


8 Ibid., p. 733.


10 Walter Benjamin, “Dostojevskij’s ‘The Idiot’”, ibid., p. 78.