Early Praise for *A Broken Russia Inside Me*

An uncommonly and quite remarkably poignant, tender, yet also harshly and unflinchingly raw at times, and—above all—keenly authentic and sharply observed portrait of Russia circa its heady, chaotic transition from the heavy dreamless slumber of the Brezhnevian "era of stagnation"—and indeed, the entire seventy-plus years of the catastrophic "Soviet" stage of its turbulent history. An entirely sui generis, fascinating, and exceptionally readable memoir by a supremely talented writer. A. Molotkov is the real deal.

Mikhail Iossel
Professor of English/Creative Writing
Concordia University, Montreal

In compulsively readable sections, *A Broken Russia Inside Me* traces a remarkable journey from communist Russia to a post-Soviet world to immigrant life in the United States. Molotkov's efficient prose and precise details draw us into a layered narrative, intersecting family, politics, history, and art through an intimate lens. Reading this poignant and illuminating memoir, you will be moved and you will learn. The kind of personal narrative we need more of in the world.

Dariel Suarez, author of *The Playwright's House*

A writer of formidable intuition and empathy, A. Molotkov has given us an important book—part personal memoir, part work of historical assessment, part rumination on the nature of immigration and exile from a place that was never fully his. A generation is blessed when it gets what West Africans call a griot—a chronicler of the past, a keeper of memory. A. Molotkov is destined to become a definitive voice of the so-called "last Soviet generation." Each life journey is unique, yet so many of us will recognize ourselves as characters in his odyssey. In some ways, A. Molotkov's many rites of passage are shared histories—from a late-Soviet twilight zone to the bright colors, overwhelming sounds and dizzying opportunities of post-Cold War United States, from a suffocating gray world of predetermined choices to a strange new land, where one's freedom and need to make a choice can be both exhilarating and crushing. Not everyone makes it. An immigrant's story can be a tale of hope and atonement, but all too often it is also a heart-wrenching account of loves lost, friendships betrayed, families splintered. Things inevitably get lost in transition: we leave behind precious heirlooms and articles of memory, we reinvent ourselves, we adapt, we forget, we try to remember. This beautifully crafted and thoroughly captivating book is such an act of remembrance.

Maxim Matusevich
Professor of Global History at Seton Hall University,
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A Broken Russia Inside Me

A Broken Russia Inside Me

a memoir

A. Molotkov

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"A memory is a ledge on the mountainside of the mind; there we are, drinking and chatting, and on the ledge below us my dad sits in his chair, dead, his face smeared with blood. And on a ledge below him we are sitting in a rest stop somewhere in the Agder region, Mom, Dad, Yngve, and I, we've been picking berries all morning, now we're eating our picnic, and next to us is a river, its waters green and white and icy cold . . ."

Karl Ove Knausgård

"Memory was already literature."

Elena Ferrante

"Russians can only be free when they defeat the Kremlin in their minds."

Volodymyr Zelensky

"Speak my language."

Laurie Anderson

This book is dedicated to those
who have shared my life with me
and who appear on these pages.

AM

1

In May 1990, my friend Sergey and I meet near the U.S. consulate in Leningrad to check the announcements posted outside. We are curious about the possibility of leaving the USSR. The consulate is a beautiful four-story baroque building with a cast-iron gate. A prominent sign on the gate reads,

> *No interviews are available for USSR citizens inquiring about immigration.*

Struck by the directness of this message, we check the Finnish consulate, the Australian. Same thing. No one is interested in us.

"We *really* might need to get out of here," I react to having so little value in the greater world.

"Yes." Sergey's face lights up with the same epiphany. "If we wait, it might be too late."

He is of medium height, like me. Brown hair, a beard, intelligent eyes filled with confidence. A pro-level slalom skier, Sergey also paints, but he's not serious enough about his artistic skills, which I find impressive. We both study physics at Leningrad State.

Most countries are closed to immigration, while the U.S. remains one of the few whose doors are ajar. If the entire world were wide open, we would choose America anyway. We don't know much about the United States, but we love it for its relentless opposition to our rotten regime and for its literature and art.

Here in the Soviet Union, we have no access to world news unsanctioned by the Communist Party, or to books published in the West over the last half-century. No one has written about the fates of Soviet emigrants. Letters from my friends who emigrated earlier, Vadim and Boris, are my only source of information. We assume the United States is a fair place where democracy reigns.

My future is incomprehensible. It's good to sit here sipping my Heineken, suspended between two lives and still learning to breathe.

It's a good beer. I sip it as I review my incongruent youth.

*

The Introductory Military Readiness class is a nuisance we must deal with in grades 9 and 10. This weekly two-hour block of boredom is hosted by a retired officer, a pompous buffoon with his tales of *the imperialist threat*. We don't believe in America's attack. Anywhere is better than here.

In this lesson, the *voenrook* (military guide*)*, spares us the propaganda. Instead, he shows the class how to load small caliber rifles. The rifles and the bullets are passed around. We focus on the simple fold-and-load design we've seen in movies. It's nothing to get excited about. I dread the shooting range in the basement where we are due for target practice.

All the male students from a ninth-grade class are here. What could go wrong?

A classmate walks over. He makes a joke, and we laugh. He points his rifle at me. I know this is also a joke, so I don't react. I assume the gun is not loaded. He keeps it on my mid torso for a few seconds, then turns the barrel toward the wall. I'm relieved despite my lack of deep concern a moment earlier.

Boom. The bullet hits the wall a foot from me. Holy Lenin and his mummy.

The shooter is stunned. A dent in the plaster, an inch in diameter and half an inch deep, a white pimple on the green wall. I'm in shock, too, my right ear abuzz. Silence reigns. The smell of powder and a fume of smoke.

The voenrook has turned pale. He runs up to us and examines me for integrity. Relief lights up his face when he confirms that no one was hit.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yells at my classmate.

"Sorry. I thought these were blanks."

"Good thing you didn't test it on me." I'm shaking a little and trying to smile to lighten things up.

"I'm sorry."

The small caliber bullet was unlikely to kill me, but I don't like what it did to the wall. How oddly calibrated, life. An event can become a tragedy, yet it becomes a memorable incident, as if both aspects were present simultaneously at every moment.

18

Vadim completes a BA in film at SUNY Binghamton, two hours from Albany by bus. We see each other occasionally. We both love this art form, have seen thousands of motion pictures, and amassed strong opinions about our favorite directors. Yet all Vadim does during his studies is the minimum required to pass.

I'm impressed with his final project, a short film starring our friend Masha and me. The setting: a forest railroad in disuse. Our ghostly figures processed in postproduction tread along the rails to Vadim's recitation of Kafka's aphorisms. Close-ups of Vadim's hands palpate his anxiety-ridden face in ultrahigh contrast. The railroad returns.

> *From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached.*
>
> *A cage went in search of a bird.*
>
> *You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.*

Vadim's voice is slow and thoughtful, his accent barely noticeable. I watch his short film a few times. *Aphorisms* is one of my literary anchors.

"It's marvelous. The visuals complement the text." The world rolls in ecstasy for the two of us, celebrating our unexpected escape from communism in our early twenties and the myriad creative opportunities available to us.

"It's crap." Vadim waves dismissively. "I have no inspiration to be a filmmaker."

"What did the *militsia* say?"

"They had no reason to think it wasn't an accident." Mom looked uncomfortable in this conversation, her tone defensive. "He was absentminded. Maybe he didn't notice the train."

In the KGB scenario, my father was active in a dissident group, tasked with distributing subversive literature. I imagine a polite, muscular young man in a suit inviting him to come along. Why a train? A car with a driver was more typical. Still, the KGB employed various approaches, often infused with theatrical flair. Anything to throw the target off guard.

Come with me if you want your family to be safe.

Who wouldn't comply?

Next, the absentminded scientist scenario. He skips work and takes a suburban train. So many bright thoughts hover in his head. He loves to wander about, thinking. This time, he gets too distracted, too far outside himself. The train is moving too fast to stop.

Why does he get out at that suburban station? Is he meeting someone?

Then, the unreliable person scenario. He is having an affair. I imagine a second family, with a replica of myself, a blond child wondering about his parents. I imagine my father's compartmentalized mind and his struggle to control both realities.

I doubt this version.

I doubt all these versions.

me. She's become a friend. Having a child of my own has contributed to this change.

At the end of August, after twenty-five days of tense but friendly coexistence, I'm both sad and relieved when she passes through security at Portland's cozy airport on her way back to Russia.

She waves and disappears.

*

Two months later, I receive an envelope from the Department of Justice. Inside, Mom's Green Card, which is, in fact, pink.

I've followed through on all the steps that led to this, but it's not a simple situation. She is way too opinionated to live with us. Xander, his mother, and I already have enough interpersonal troubles. This leaves the option of renting a small apartment, another sizable expense for our budget, already in the red. The sale of the St. Petersburg flat should help, but we have no idea how much it might fetch. These challenges go through my mind as I call to share the news.

"What will I do there?" Mom sounds more troubled than excited. "I don't want to be a burden to you."

"You won't be." I'm not being candid. "You can get a job once your English improves."

How do you decide something like this for another person? I'm not even certain moving to the U.S. *is* her best choice. Am I locked into a mental pattern in which my émigré guilt is supposed to be assuaged by her move to this *better* new environment?

"Maybe." I hear the hesitation in her voice. "But let's be serious for a moment. I'm not getting a college professor job, am I? And Lev, what about him? I don't love Lev, as you know. But I like him enough. He's been a friend. You matter so much more to me. But he helped me with things. I'm not sure I can just pick up and leave him behind. And if I brought him along, he'd be a burden. To you, to me. Besides, he'd never come. His son and his grandchildren are here. I need to think about this."

*

I call her on December 5 to catch up. I try to be in touch every three weeks or so. This small luxury is becoming increasingly affordable as international rates decline.

Mozart, at least, had the opportunity to travel throughout Europe. None of us chose this homeland, this gruesome place of mass graves where we'll probably end our days.

Uncle Yura plays and sings, one of the authors of my life, one of the ghosts writing this.

✷

Sasha and I met when I was two, but drifted apart in our teens. In 1989, he packed his bags and left for Israel. When I arrive in the United States in 1990, we begin writing to each other, building a new relationship.

Sasha settles in Jerusalem and studies philosophy, with a focus on linguistics. Our correspondence is based on humorous make-believe narratives, placing the writer and the addressee in dystopian worlds submerged in bureaucratic problems. We must still be trying to get the Soviet poisons out of our systems.

"The livestock vs. dead stock ratio on your farm is also suspicious," I explain in a lengthy missive. "*With the total count of zero live animals, you are seriously undercutting your potential in today's dynamic market."*

We see each other in Philadelphia in 1991 and take in the tourist attractions, including the cracked Liberty Bell, hanging in its copper-and-nickel glory. Its history as a symbol in the abolitionist movement is inspiring. It doesn't matter that the Bell is muted by the crack.

"Do you remember skiing?" Sasha asks.

"How can I forget?"

✷

In September 2002, the Toksovo mass graves are discovered a few miles from where we used to ski. Memorial, the human rights group focusing on documenting communist atrocities, has been searching for the spot for five years. This sinister fragment of oral history gains tragic concreteness.

Decades later, Memorial's monument to the victims of communist terror will be defaced. *They should have killed more*, will write an unthinking supporter of—what exactly? As if terror were purer than life. As if it meant more than its reasons, more than its victims.

In 2022, Putin will eliminate Memorial. The group will receive a Nobel Peace Prize soon after.