

WITNESS TO WAR



Nadia Werbitzky
(1922-2005)
Russian-American artist

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Video Length 3:27

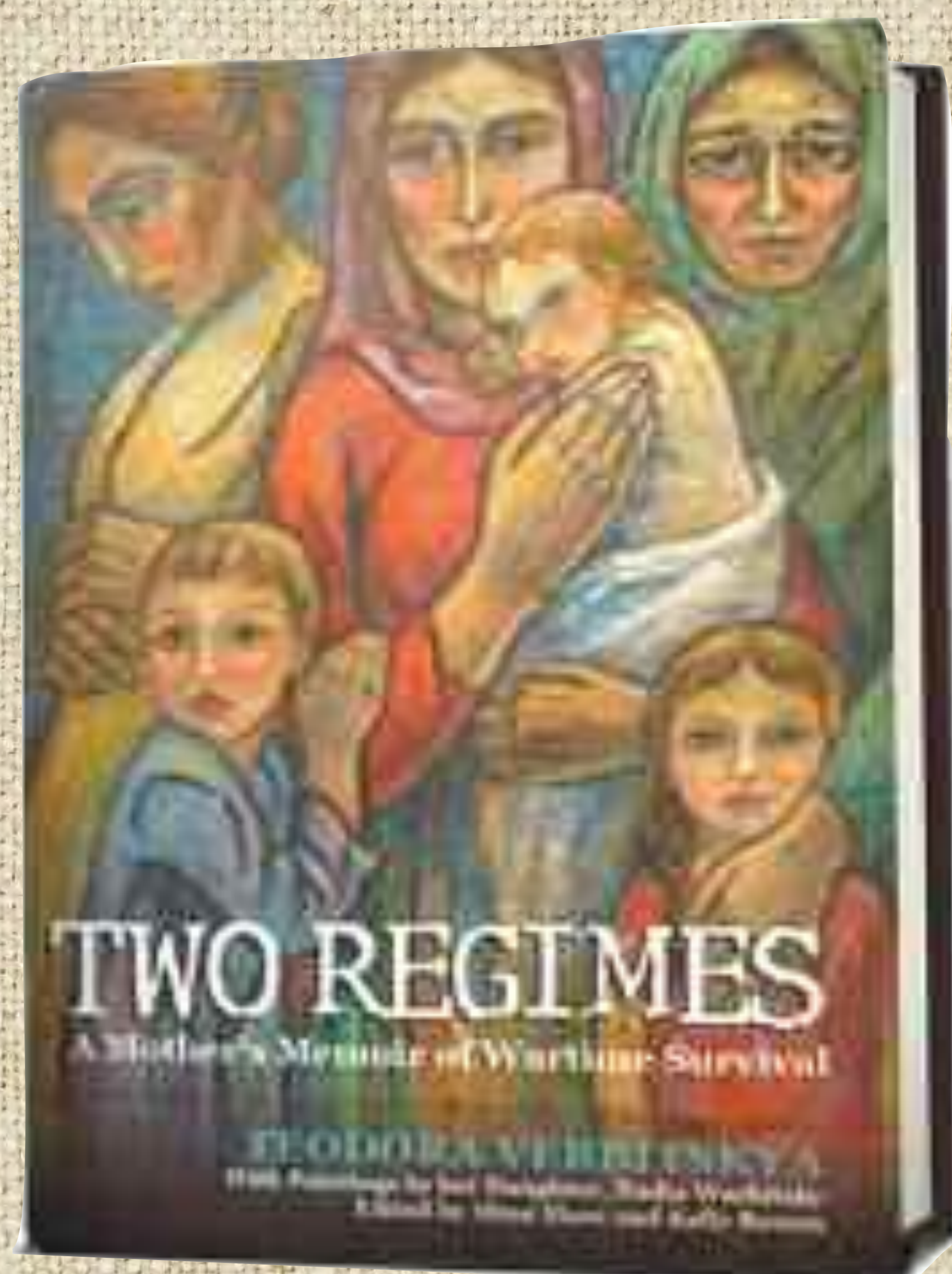
Nadia Werbitzky was born in the Soviet Union, where she experienced deprivation and starvation under the Soviet regime. In 1941, the Nazis murdered 7,500 Jewish friends and townspeople from Mariupol, Russia (now Ukraine).

Shortly thereafter, Nadia's family was deported to Germany, where they were confined to forced labor camps until US soldiers liberated their camp in 1945.

The passages in this exhibition are from the book "Two Regimes – A Mother's Memoir of Wartime Survival" by Teodora Verbitskaya (the artist's mother).

Nadia Werbitzky's paintings are memory paintings: no one posed for her. Teodora Verbitskaya's journals were inspired by her desire to document life and the lives of those who lived and perished before, during and after World War II. Created decades apart, the written word and the artist's brush correlate, as both sets of works are shared memories.

More than just a factual retelling of their experiences, Nadia's paintings and Teodora's memoir bring to life the widespread destruction of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes! Teodora and her family faced the reality that was the Holodomor and the Holocaust. We are grateful that they were able to leave this piece of history behind, for us to learn from!



The passages in this exhibition are from the book "Two Regimes – A Mother's Memoir of Wartime Survival" by Teodora Verbitskaya (the artist's mother).

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
THE WEDDING
 (A0009)

In the Kuban region of the USSR, on the shore of the Azov Sea, forty kilometers from the city of Yeisk, there is a small fishing village located around a group of grain elevators. It is called Pereprava.

My husband, Dimitri Fyodorovich Verbitskya, while living in Mankovka, was the director of the Mankova-Kalitvensk Technical School, located not far from the railway station.

Someone had informed the authorities during a card game (where tongues tend to wag) that he allegedly said, "The Kremlin has become inhabited by little long-noses." This was symbolic of certain little insects that live in the Kuban region, and exist by eating the kernel of wheat grain.

In addition, he was accused of allowing the children of clergy and of the "kulaks*" to enroll into his school without permission from the authorities. Moreover, he was put under house arrest until further notice. Since there were no guards assigned to watch my husband, he took advantage of the situation by jumping out of the window and escaping.

When word spread my husband had fled, the village council took me and my children (one of whom was only two months old) to the railway station and bought us tickets to Mariupol, where my widowed father was living.

***kulaks** - Rich peasants, the word means "fist" in Russian and implies that they are tight-fisted, greedy, money-grubbers. Anyone designated as a "kulak" was sent to forced labor camps.

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Video Length 3:06

As my husband and I had earlier agreed, I was to go to my father's and wait there for further instructions. After some time, I received a letter from him stating that he had found work as an inspector at the grain elevator in Pereprava and that we should join him.

My husband had found an abandoned cottage and fixed it up for our arrival. We decided to wait there until everything calmed down. Perhaps with time they would forget about us. So far we had been lucky!

My husband soon began receiving wages and rations. I began teaching reading and writing to the village children. Pereprava did not have schools and even half of the adults were illiterate. Since I did this for free, the students would sometimes bring me fresh fish or a pitcher of milk as payment so we were not completely destitute. At night while sitting by the stove and listening to the howl of the wind, we felt content and warm.



Painting Title:
ETERNAL MOTHERHOOD
 (A0039)

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
AUTUMN IN GERMANY
 (A0012)

The city was beginning to experience unemployment; however, since my husband was unable to find work, we decided to move on to Mariupol. This came at a time when the New Economic Policy (NEP) was coming to an end. Although the State

was struggling to organize collective farms, there were still many free merchants (chastniki) working at the Mariupol market.

Because of the high unemployment, no one had money. We found ourselves spending the last of our rubles and looking toward an uncertain future. While searching long and hard for work, my husband registered at the unemployment office, as required. Almost immediately he was arrested and then reminded about statements that he made about those little “long-noses.”

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Video Length 2:58

By that time, my father had already passed away and here I was with two little children, without resource or assistance, and with little hope of finding a job. I began looking in offices, factories, at construction sites. Everywhere I heard the same response, “there is no work!” With the advent of unemployment registration, the authorities introduced the so-called “record-of-service.” The huge employment hall could not accommodate all of the unemployed and the lines moved very slowly. To get to the registrar’s window, one had to spend almost the entire day waiting in line.

“Do you have your record service?”

“No. I haven’t worked before.”

“Where does your husband work? ... Oh, I see. Come back tomorrow.”

“But I have hungry children. I’ll take the hardest job.”

“I said come back tomorrow. Next!”

The crowd had already pushed me away from the window. So it was, once in a while I was able to work for a day, hauling bricks to a construction site or cleaning up stores. This was not sufficient work because even a full day’s pay was barely enough to buy a little bread, and so we starved.

“Mommy, did you bring us some bread?”

“No, my children, I couldn’t find work today.”

“Well, all right, then bring us some tomorrow.”

This was how my children often greeted me.

Painting Title:
FEARS
 (A0047)



WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:

PARTING WITH HIS HORSE (A0044)

Mariupol was the main city of our region and our office was considered the regional one—the city councils that belonged to our office were called the Periphery. All the farmers living on the periphery, whether they owned livestock or not, were expected to contribute a precise amount of meat to the government agency. In addition, the State took their surpluses, and levied fines down to the last cow or goat. They were labeled as “unwilling and evil tax evaders.”

For the first time in my life, I actually saw a cow cry. An elderly couple was ordered to give up their cow to the State. “We cried the whole way,” the old man said. “My wife was hugging and stroking her Mashka,” and Mashka seemed to understand where she was being taken. “You see, she’s still crying.” And sure enough, I could see tears coming from the eyes of the cow.

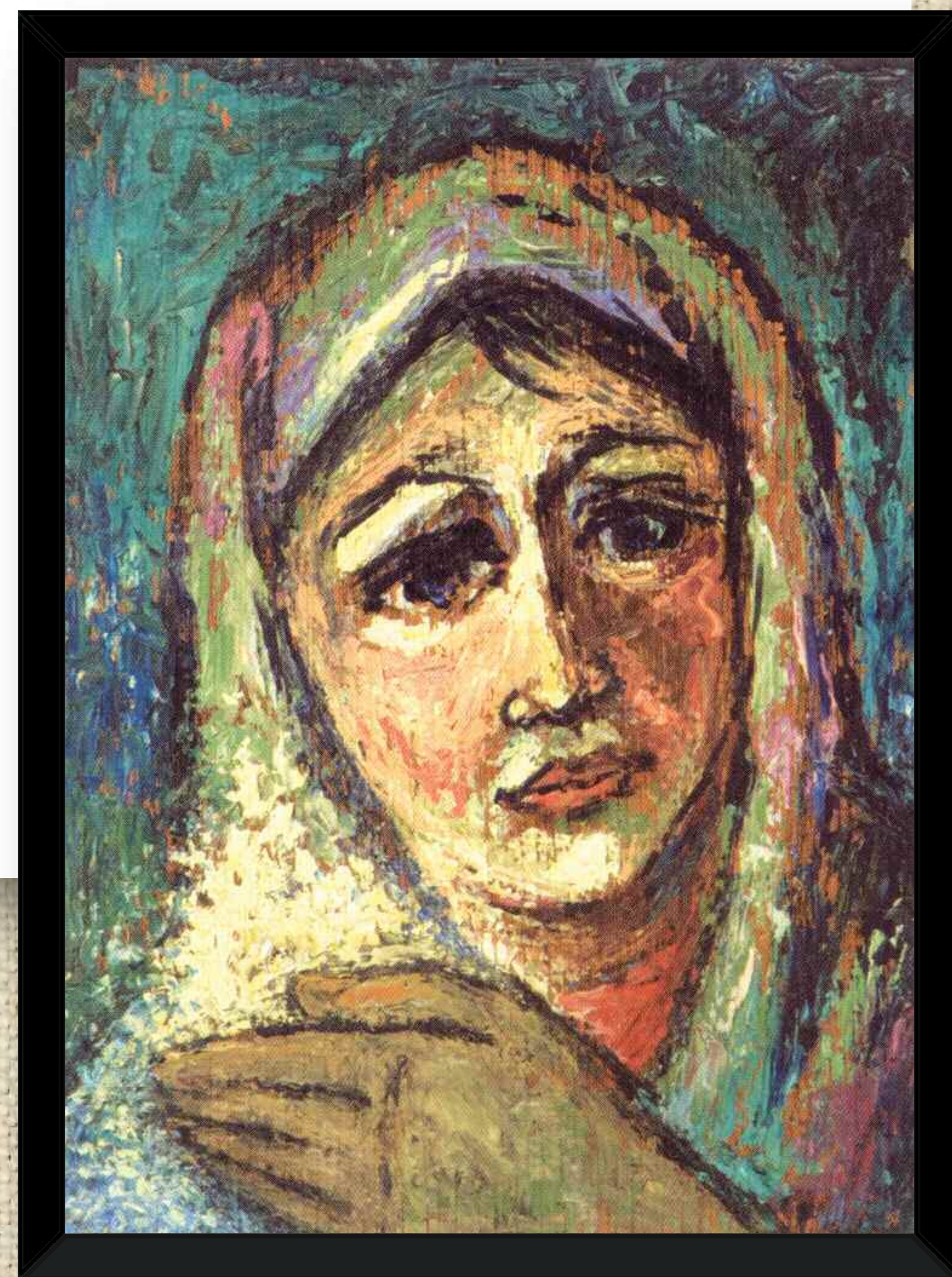
After stroking this cow, the old people, deprived and crying, shuffled back the ten kilometers to their village. The regime that supposedly represented the worker-peasant had just robbed them.

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Video Length 3:17



One evening I took my place in a line for meat in order to be among the first when they opened at seven in the morning. By nine I had to be at work. I reserved my space, making sure that all those in front and behind me knew who I was, and went home to check up on my ill children. (Many women at that time had sick children requiring attention.) It was around four in the morning and going home was chilly and frightening. I hurried along in the center of the street, without looking back. Making a turn onto my street, I passed the NKVD headquarters and noticed several heavily loaded trucks headed for the train station. I moved to the sidewalk and walked alongside them, counting eight trucks. By chance, I happened to look into the last truck and collapsed from shock. Underneath the stretched canvas, I saw a pair of human eyes looking at me. My knees began to shake. When I stopped a thought hit me like a lightning bolt: I could be arrested right here on the spot for witnessing this and never see my children again. Apparently, they were moving inmates from the NKVD basements to the trains. I lagged behind the caravans and, as soon as I turned the corner, ran down the street and directly home.



Painting Title:

MATRYONA

(A0036)

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
*THE ROAD AND
 THE LONE FIGURE* (A0005)

My husband returned after serving his six-year sentence. He returned to find himself again without work, under the surveillance of the NKVD, and without friends. Old friends had also been arrested, while others were too afraid to continue a friendship. He did manage to find someone, but sometimes he would come home tipsy from drinking, and that is how it continued until the catastrophe, which destroyed our family completely.

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Video Length 2:08

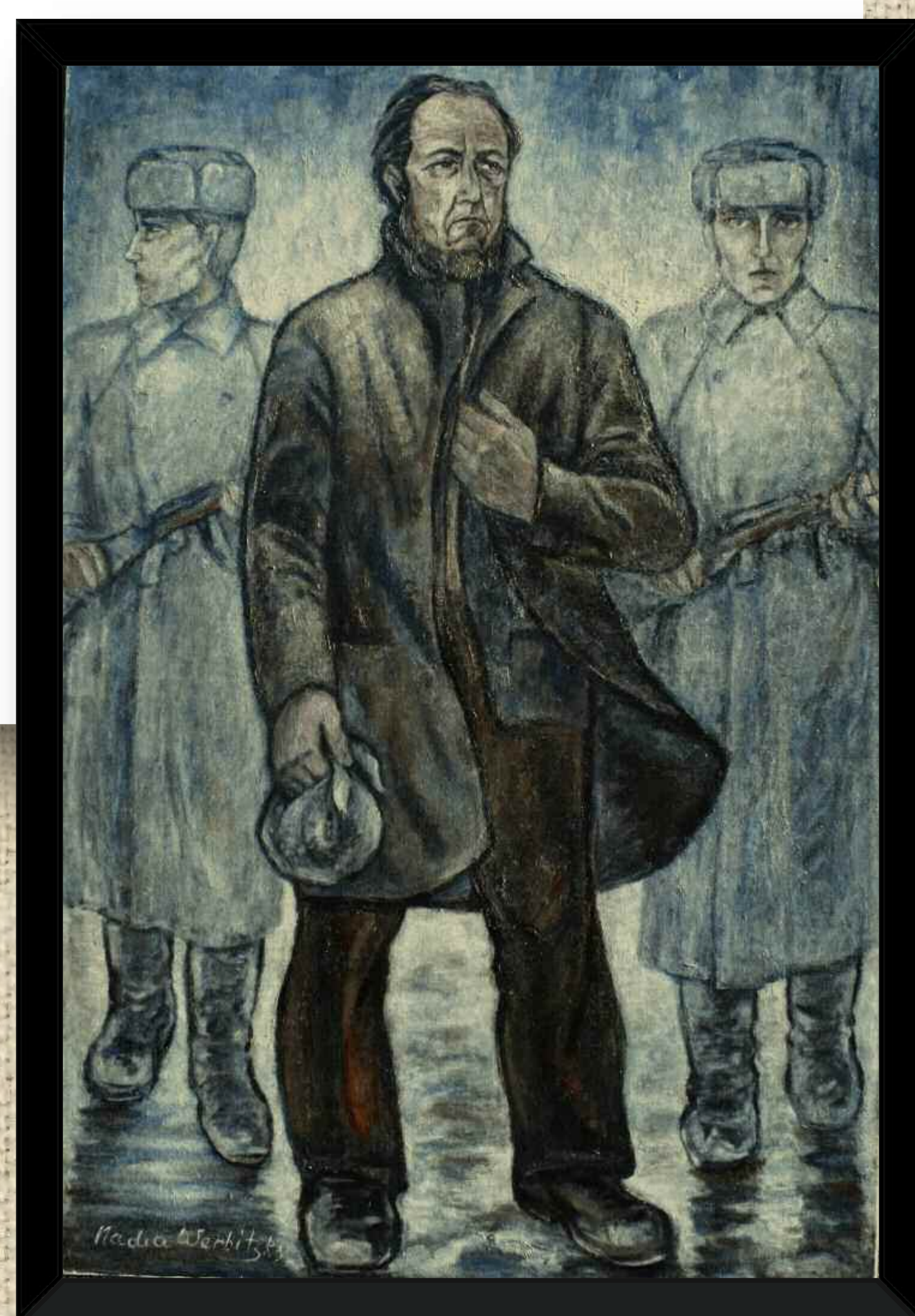
One night we were woken up by a noise from outside. Listening closely, we heard a car quietly approaching our gates. My husband realized who it was and whispered to me, the "black raven". We continued to listen, trying to figure out where they were headed. "Prepare a coat, a hat, and some bread," my husband whispered and quickly began to dress. We listened more intently, wondering, will they go into our yard or the neighbors'? The footsteps were approaching our yard. My husband's teeth began to chatter involuntarily and he had to hold his chin with his hands.

They went to our neighbors' apartment below us. We overheard some quiet voices and several minutes later they began to leave. Very carefully we separated the curtains and looked out of the window. There were three men; the one in the middle was Gene's father, the Greek.

Everything became quiet downstairs. There was no crying or farewells during arrests. It wasn't allowed. As soon as one is arrested he is seen as an "enemy of the people." Forget about him. The State is above all.

*black raven - A particular kind of black car used by the Soviet political police.

Painting Title:
ARRESTED
 (Alexandr Solzhenitsyn)
 (A0048)



WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
TORMENTED
(A0059)

This storm, too, had passed. Life moved along swiftly. Before one had time to think of today, the concerns of the next day overtook us. The arrests continued. The Greeks and the Ukrainians were labeled as ...“enemies of the people” and taken away. Then the engineers (those “saboteurs and spies”) were arrested, followed by bank directors and their assistants, office workers, school principals, and many others. I, too, had to bid farewell to my husband. We shall meet again at God’s throne. Forgive me and farewell.

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Video Length 2:28

The Germans tore Poland to pieces in a few days, descending on the country like an evil hurricane! The Poles ran toward the border for safety and were met there with bayonets.

Twelve thousand of the Polish army's finest had to take refuge in Katyn forest.

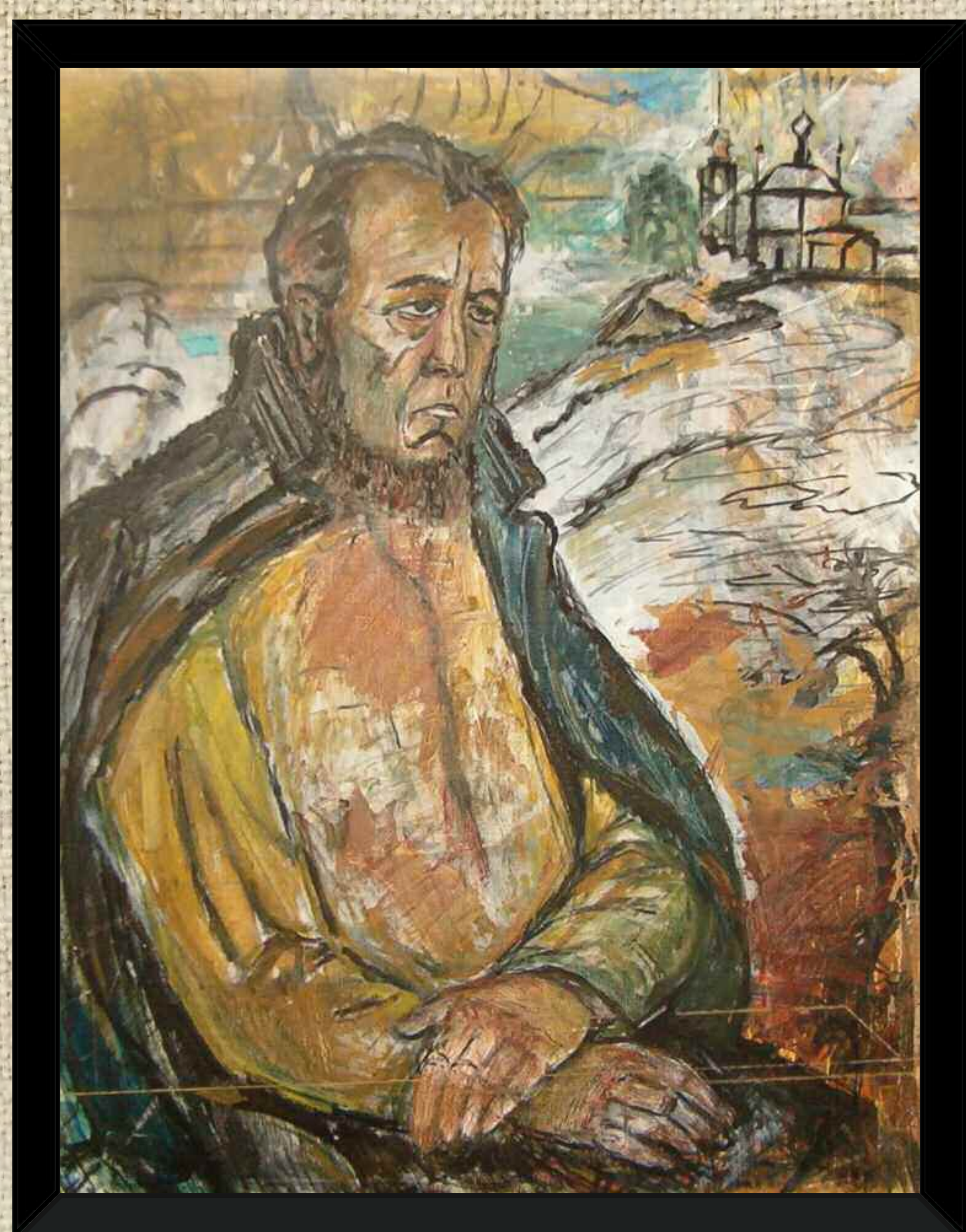
Nor was Russia spared the fate of Poland. The German vultures swept down on the Russian soil, crumbling and burning everything in their path and bringing death.

With the war – came the flood of refugees. As soon as the first bomb was dropped on Poland, bread and all other products disappeared from the market. To receive a quarter of a pound of margarine, I stood in a line with seven thousand people, and behind me there were at least as many. We stood day and night and got nothing!



Painting Title:
WANDERERS
(A0042)

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN
(A0023)

The food lines, the refugees, mobilization...life became a boiling pot. The newly drafted soldiers marched at a brisk pace down the main street and alongside, keeping up on the sidewalk, were their families: shouting, lamenting, crying. Those departing kept turning around to see, just one more time, the face of a loved one and bid farewell. They were herded toward the railway station.

A neighbor who was a lieutenant came in for a minute to say good-bye. He sat down and began to cry. "Here I am going to the front to fight and all they gave me were seventeen-year-old boys. They are untrained and never held a rifle in their hands. Now what am I going to do with them? There is no transportation – we have to walk to the Polish border. I was given three rifles. This is not a war, this is murder."

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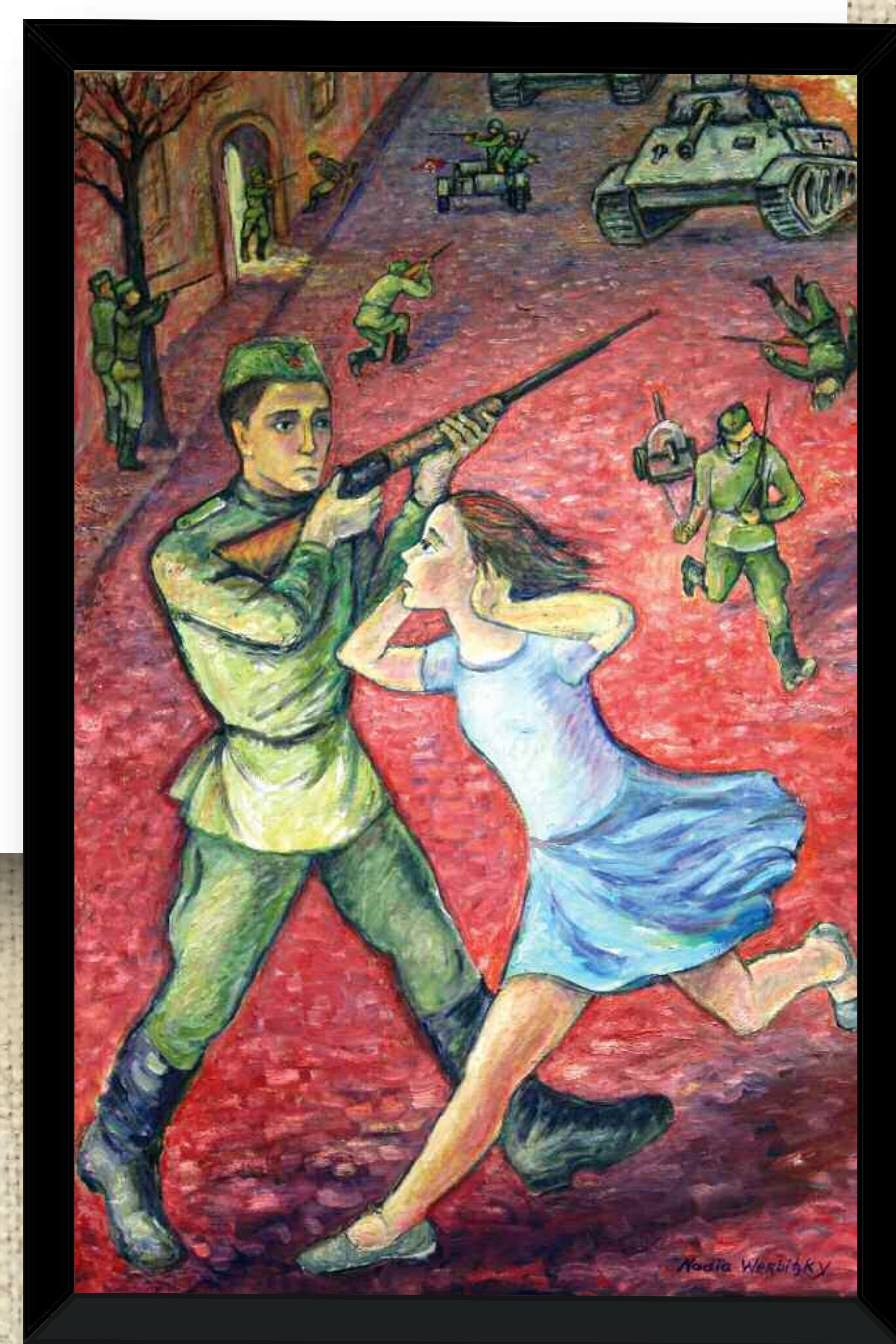


Video Length 2.46

Our city was soon surrounded by the Germans. The formal retreat began and the Red Army soldiers could be seen running through the city toward the sea, dragging their machine guns. Many would throw off their uniforms and ask for civilian clothing, while others begged to be hidden in our homes.

Twenty or so soldiers ran down our street and everything grew quiet. Someone started firing a cannon in the city park, but after two shots there was silence. The troops finally passed by; the shooting ceased; people began walking up and down the street.

My daughter ran up to me. "Mommy, the girls are going to look in on the stores. Maybe there is some bread left. Can I go?" "Go ahead, but come right back." The store was around the corner. Just as they turned the corner, I saw them running back. "Mommy there is a German soldier on a bicycle." (It was a motorcycle.) This was a sign that the Germans took the city without a battle. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.



Painting Title:
RUN HOME LITTLE GIRL
(A0099)

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title: *HELL'S THRESHOLD* (A0097)

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Video Length 2:44



Up to now, the Jews had been left alone and walked about freely, although the authorities were keeping track of them. On a certain day, old man Gorlin, who had been a neighbor, came knocking on my door and informed us that the Germans had ordered the Jews to pack up their belongings and prepare to leave.

By evening of the same day we watched as they were led down the street toward the military barracks outside of the city. By the time we ran outside, the first column had already passed the house. In front were the rabbis, the doctors and their families, and the Jewish intelligentsia. Next were the elderly, supported under the arms. The sick were on stretchers, and the children walked along, carrying knapsacks and small bundles. The procession moved very slowly.

After the last column passed and the convoy had all but disappeared from view, we saw a young woman running with two children, desperately trying to catch up. She held an infant under one arm. Clutching her other hand was a three-year-old girl, dragging a large doll. The guards had apparently forgotten about them. The doll was slowing them down, so the mother grabbed the girl with the doll and placed her on top of a bundle that was tied to her arm. Then she continued running, trying to catch up with her people.

It was difficult to believe that they would shoot down seven and a half thousand people for no reason, but several days later they were executed and buried in those same trenches that we had dug around the city before the Germans arrived. Apparently, many of those buried were not killed because the earth continued to move for some time afterward.

A vile, inhuman, and criminal act had taken place in history.

WITNESS TO WAR



Painting Title:
BEHIND BARBED WIRE
(A0002)

Several people died in our building; the Jews had been killed, and the yard became empty. My children and I were sent to Germany.

At the Mariupol station we said good-bye to everything that had been dear to us. And we said good-bye forever. The railway car was filled to the limit and the doors were bolted shut with a padlock.

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Video Length 1.24

One of the men in the prison was a German soldier, a deserter. He had been arrested because he went home to visit his sick wife and children without permission. He told us about the battle at Stalingrad and the German defeat on all of the Fronts; the armies destroyed and retreating. He said that half of Germany was already in American hands. We listened in amazement, not believing our ears, but saying nothing. We did not want to miss a single word of his account. Throughout our entire four-year imprisonment, we had not known what was happening on the military front. We stood for hours in the hallways with the other prisoners, talking, without being told to return to our cells.

Painting Title:
WOMAN LISTENING WITH CHILD
(A0043)

