

The long tragedy of the Caucasus relives in the school essays of its young people. These texts, collected by Francesca Gori for Italian publisher Einaudi's "Struzzi" series, make all the horror of the war as seen

# Chechnya in the words of its children

BOOKS

by Francesca Gori

by those who underwent it, the history of a people and its unending tragedy come alive for the reader. The pride of a nation that continues to fight the Russians for centuries re-emerges throughout

## **WE HAVE SURVIVED THREE WARS**

Madina Gurazova, Grozny, School no. 27,  
11th class

I have lived in the city of Grozny for nearly fifteen years. My family and I have already survived three wars.

When the first war began in 1994, my whole family moved to our relatives' house in Ingushetia. Our family is made up of only five people – myself, my mother, my father and two sisters: Marina who is 15 and Cheda, who is two. Cheda, my younger sister, wasn't yet born. She joined our family in 2001.

Although we did not see what was happening in the city, we knew that they were shooting and killing innocent people there. We found ourselves under fire during the trip. It was horrible: dead women, children and old people and airplanes flying overhead. Thanks to Allah we survived the trip without any losses.

Mummy and Daddy went back to the city when the situation calmed down a little. When they took me and my sister Marina back, we didn't recognise our city. In the fields along the road back to the city we came across dead animals: cows, dogs, cats and hens.

All our relatives used to live in the city – my grandfather, my grandmother, my uncles and aunts. My grandfather remembers the way the

city used to be: tall, beautiful buildings, the cinema, the circus, the clubs, and how many people there were on the streets, how many young people, and how they were always going to the cinema or the theatre. Whereas now my grandfather doesn't want to move to the city because it's very dangerous to live there now: there's nothing left, it's all been destroyed.

When the second war started in 1999 it was the most painful and terrible one for me. The first day of the war<sup>1</sup>, me, my sister Marina and all our friends were coming home from school. There were airplanes flying overhead. Then there was an explosion close by. We ran home, terrorised. There was no one at home. Mummy was at work (she is an elementary school teacher) and so was Daddy (he is a driver). Some time later we went to clean up the refuge. Day after day the situation got worse. Bombs and shells were falling on my city. On the third day they put my sister Marina and me on a bus while my parents remained in the city. That day I saw them kill people with my own eyes. The children, women and old people were crying; our young men were taken away. A splinter hit a woman with a child.

1. 21 september 1999.



There was a lot of blood. They died instantly. No one went near them; everyone was scared. The bus in front of ours was hit<sup>2</sup>, but we stayed alive. In the end we reached our relatives' house. That trip was full of difficulties. We stopped to stay overnight with strangers.

All our relatives live in Ingushetia; we are the only ones who live here, in the city of Grozny. I don't want to leave the city, because I was born here and our ancestors lived here. I am a native of Ingushetia, but I love the Chechen people very much.

My grandfather's house in the town of Katajama was destroyed. My father used to go to School no. 49, where I went too, but even that school suffered because of the war. We moved and now I go to School no. 27. Recently, we went to the school Olympics. We found ourselves, my friends and I, in the middle of a shootout in the city centre, which was full of people. Everyone immediately

started running away: they were all scared. I think that all the people, the entire Chechen population that has experienced the war in Chechnya, will always remember all this. I wish that all the people who read this account will realise that we are tired of living amidst destroyed buildings, without water, without electricity, without transport. In the evenings our children study, but they can hardly see anything. In the morning it's the same thing – we come to school, where we don't see anything: the classrooms are in the dark. But now my city, Grozny, is recovering little by little. New buildings have been constructed. I hope that this city can one day bloom again.

### UNDER THE BOMBS

Ajzan Dzuchaeva, Grozny, School no. 27, 9th class

Until the war in 1994 we lived in the Lenin quarter, bus stop Avtobaza, Building 3, Apartment n. 18. During the war everything burned down, so we moved to the Staropromyslovsky quarter in the fifteenth district<sup>3</sup>. There I went to primary school in School n. 27, where I still study.

Having survived the 1994 war and all its horrors, I didn't think my people were fated to experience an even more terrible war.

2. "The bus in front of ours was hit": on 24 September 1999, federal air force planes bombed the road from Rostov to Baku near the village of Samaski; 8 of the bus's passengers died (from the Amnesty International report titled *Russian Federation: the Chechen Republic, November 1999*).

It happened in September 1999. We were at school. The unexpected roar of an aeroplane interrupted the lesson. I was so scared that I had gooseflesh. A thought went through my head: maybe it was war? I was right: it *was* the war! It was terrible. After some time the planes began to bomb Grozny. The walls of our school were trembling because of the bombs exploding. The children started to cry because they were worried about their parents and they wanted to go back home as soon as possible. I was overcome with fear for my parents' condition. There was only one thought in my head: getting home and seeing my parents. The teachers took us back home. And, when I saw my parents, my eyes filled with tears because I was so happy to see them alive. But the worst was yet to come. The next day the people in the neighbourhood began to leave

3. *The 15 quarters of Grozny have different names - there are hamlets (the hamlet of Majakovsky), inhabited localities (such as Kalinin), villages (Staraja Sunza) and then the "districts".*

and only five or six families remained. Our family too decided to stay. My aunt Chazan stayed with us. The planes continued bombing the city; the oil wells were in flames.

My brother and I were terrorised; we didn't know where to hide. Fortunately, there was a bomb shelter in our neighbourhood. The women who hadn't left cleaned it up. My aunt's husband Ruslan built a stove. It was fed by wood that the boys chopped.

We all slept in the shelter, because the artillery fire intensified at night.

One morning we came out of the shelter and went to our house. Daddy lit the stove and Mummy set about making breakfast. All of a sudden we felt a blow and above us we heard a bullet whistle past. We heard a loud explosion. I screamed in fear and fell, pushed to the floor by the impact of the strike. Mummy hurriedly dressed my brother and we ran towards the shelter with the bullets whistling over our heads. A nearby explosion covered us in earth. In the end we reached the shelter, but the



explosions didn't stop. The women and children started crying, reading prayers to Allah and asking Him to save us. These memories make tears come to my eyes and my heart contracts with fear. In fact we could have died then! We couldn't come out of the shelter for two days; explosions could be heard everywhere outside.

But the most terrible night was 12 December 1999<sup>4</sup>. It was cold outside; it had already started snowing. At night we went to the shelter: the bombing had started. It continued all night long. The walls of the shelter were trembling because of the explosions. A group of boys didn't make it to the shelter in time. Two of them were wounded and a third never came back. He was found the next day, towards evening. He was stretched under a fir tree that had been split apart by an explosion. Achmed, that was the boy's name, was still breathing. The men found a car with a lot of difficulty, but they didn't make it to the hospital in time. He died during the trip.

When his mother was told about his death there was an agonizing scene. Tampusya, Achmed's mother, started screaming, crying and pulling out her hair out in desperation. It was the pain of a woman who had lost both her husband and her son in the space of one month. The bombs had killed Tampusya's husband Achyad on 9 November 1999. After that night we tried to leave, but each time we were shot at on the road and had to return home.

In the end, when the last corridor<sup>5</sup> was opened on 7 January 2000, our family managed to leave Grozny. My mother and I, my brother Chamzat and my three-year-old sister Zarema walked along the road towards the village of Ken'-Yurt in the province of Nadterechnaya, 34 kilometres away, after having tied white T-

4. On 6 December 1999 it was announced that the safe corridor in the area of Pervomayskoe village would remain open only until 11 December; in fact the city's inhabitants were given an ultimatum.



shirts on sticks. It was very cold outdoors; our hands and feet turned blue and lost all sensation. We climbed up a hill where there was a watch-post and asked the soldiers for permission to warm ourselves inside their tent. The soldiers let us in. After we had warmed ourselves up we decided to carry on. We had another 25-27 km to go, but the soldiers stopped a car that took us to our village. When we reached our relatives' house we started to hug each other. Everyone was crying. They were tears of joy because we were alive. On the third day my mother left for Grozny together with an aunt. My father had remained there.

I only saw my parents again on 9 April 2000, when I was taken back home. As soon as I saw them I burst into tears. My parents' hair had

*5. The so-called "safe corridors" actually did not guarantee the safety of the civil refugees who crossed them, as it was rare that they were not hit by artillery fire.*

turned completely white.

Despite all this I thank Allah because we survived that terrible inferno.

Mere words and the pages of this notebook are not enough to recount all the misfortunes and suffering that we have gone through, all the horror of the war.

Adults! I beseech you: become yourselves again; stop! Have pity on us, your children!

### **RACHIMAT AND GRANDMA OLJA**

Milana Mezidova, Grozny province, Il'inskoe village, 10th class

The entire history of a people is made up of the biographies of individuals. Whether this history will be happy, tragic or dreary depends on each person. And, if there are many people with stupid ideas and sordid biographies within this population, they will manage to sully the history of the entire population. If everyone lived like the heroine of my story, the biography of humanity would be clear and bright with no stains, either black or white.



One could say a great deal about Rachimat. She comes from an ordinary Chechen family. She faced up bravely to all life's problems: she brought up her only daughter on her own, worked during the war, remained at home in Chechnya and underwent the machine gunning. She still wears the coat perforated by splinters; there's no money to buy a new one. But that doesn't bother her: thank God she is still alive despite the splinter that has remained stuck inside her!

Her brother was reported lost during the first war. She had looked for him in every possible place. And when she found him, she didn't know whether to be happy or despair: her brother didn't recognise anyone after the torture he had undergone. She had to put him into a nursing home.

Despite these vicissitudes she did not harden, shut herself off in her pain and nurture hate for people of a different nationality. And, even if she could only make ends meet with difficulty, she did everything possible to help

not only her daughter and her niece; she also took care of an invalid elderly Russian woman in the neighbourhood.

Ol'ga Kozlova, Grandma Olja, had taken part in the great patriotic war. When she retired, she started doing small jobs and agreed to look after the little Malika, Rachimat's daughter. At the time, Rachimat worked as a tailor in the cutting and making-up factory in Novogroznensky<sup>6</sup>. She was bringing up her daughter on her own, without a husband. Time passed quickly. The daughter, now grown up, married early and Grandma Olja looked after the little granddaughter Marcha, whom she called "Little Cloud" (for her name means "cloud" in Chechen).

War broke out<sup>7</sup>. Grandma Olja and Rachimat often spent the nights together. During each round of machine gun fire the two women

6. The town (often called "village" by its inhabitants) of Novogroznensky (Oyskar in Chechen) is located on the plain in the region of Gudermes in eastern Chechnya.





Contrasto\_Magnum

went down into the basement and waited for silence to return. One day, deceived by the silence, they decided to come out of the basement, but the sudden explosion of a device near the house threw them down the stairs. After the fall Grandma Olja fractured her pelvis. She remained in plaster for eight months. Rachimat moved into her house, because the federals often closed off the roads and she would not have been able to stay close to Grandma when there was the need. Rachimat's daughter Malika and her husband often came to see them and supply the two recluses with the essentials. After the plaster was off, when the military operations in the region of Gudermes stopped, Grandma Olja decided to go to her sister in Ukraine. She had no money for the trip and there was nothing left to sell. She had not received her pension money for a year. But Rachimat collected the money and prepared Olja's bags for her, making sure they were not too heavy so that she could carry them. The

*7. During the first war in Novogroznensky, military actions were carried out in mid-December 1995 and the most violent offensives and "cleansings" occurred between 17 and 20 December 1996.*

grandmother was very grieved about her icons. She had to leave them in a land torn apart by a pitiless war. But she was not physically strong enough to carry that much weight.

They went to Khasavyurt in the son-in-law's car and put the grandmother on a direct train to Mineral'nye Vody. The women gave each other the addresses of their relatives living in Russia in case they lost touch. In 2001 Rachimat came to know from her relatives who lived near Pyatigorsk that Grandma Olja was in the old people's home there. The sister had put up with her as long as the grandmother had money, but did not want to keep her in the house after that. So Olja ended up in a rest home.

Rachimat lost no time in gathering the grandmother's icons (about a dozen of them), eight months' pension and set off, once again in the son-in-law's car, with the granddaughter this time. The first thing Rachimat did was to go to the relatives near Pyatigorsk; she prepared a lot of *chingals* (pumpkin pie) and *cepalgas* (cheesecake) in a big pot. Nonna Olja adored these Chechen-Ingush dishes. She only went to see the grandmother after having finished these preparations.

## Memorial, a Nobel Peace Prize candidate

Memorial is an association founded in Moscow by well-known academics and dissidents in Russia at the end of the 1980s. From the beginning, the association's main objective has been to safeguard the memory of the political repressions in Russia's recent past. Today, it is a union of a dozen organisations working in Russia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Georgia and Ukraine, carrying out historical research, divulgation and the defence of human rights. Memorial has created specialised museums, collections of documents and libraries. The Solovki stone was placed in Lubyanka Square in Moscow on Memorial's initiative and many monuments dedicated to the victims of political repressions on the entire territory of the former USSR have been erected. In 1991, the law on the rehabilitation of victims of political repressions was passed on Memorial's initiative. The organisation also offers legal and occasionally material assistance to former prisoners and concentration camp survivors. Memorial carries out research on the history of the gulag, the repressive Soviet apparatus and the dissident movement in Khrushchev and Brezhnev's time. Memorial collects material with the help of groups of observers in the hot spots of Russian territory (especially in the Caucasus in recent times), verifies, analyses and publishes data on human rights violations. Memorial, a candidate for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, has produced dozens of books, articles, radio programmes and exhibitions on the tragedies of the past decades as well as the current attempts to re-introduce a repressive policy in the country.

Rachimat said later that the worst thing was that she hadn't been able to control the trembling of her hands when she had tried to open the door of the big five-storey building, go in and ask the warden: "Does Kozlova Ol'ga Nikolaevna live here?" She was afraid to be told that Olja was no longer there. The administrator perceived the visitor's agitation and quickly replied: "I'll take you to her. She lives on the first floor. And how are you related to her?" The visitor did not answer; her chin was trembling. The administrator noticed again how agitated the woman was and did not insist. He offered to accompany the visitors to the room. When Marcha was told that this was Grandma Olga's house, she started calling out in a loud voice: "Babusta! Babusta!" (instead of *babuska*, Grandma, because she couldn't pronounce the letter "k"). A happy voice was heard exclaiming from behind the door: "My goodness! It's Little Cloud!"

They were together for three days. The administrator gave them a room. Grandma Olja telephoned for a taxi and took them around the city in it for two days, showing them the sights of Pyatigorsk and being

photographed with them to have a souvenir. The people in the rest home were surprised by the Chechen woman who had brought the precious icons and the pension money. The day of departure was not a sad one, as Rachimat promised the grandmother that she would often come to see her. During their stay, Grandma Olja kept thanking Rachimat and the son-in-law for the icons they had brought, not least because she had felt pangs of conscience all that time for having abandoned them to save her life. The rest home was well furnished and the rooms all had a telephone, a television and two beds. Everything was clean and comfortable and the staff was very pleasant. Rachimat said that if she had had the slightest inkling that Ol'ga Nikolaevna was not happy in the new place, she would have taken her away without a second thought. Ol'ga Nikolaevna did not accept the pension money that Rachimat had brought from Chechnya. She said: "You're going to a place where the war is still on, where are there no jobs and there won't be any for a long time. This money will be of greater use to you. And don't worry about me. I have everything I need, they pay my pension regularly, there's free medical assistance. After your visit I consider myself a richer person: I am no longer alone. Before your arrival, no one here believed me when I said that in 70 years of life in Chechnya no one had ever offended or humiliated me. I will pray to God to protect you, so that the war does not bring sorrow to your home, and you pray to Allah to give us at least one more chance to see each other". This year too Rachimat is getting ready to pay a visit to Ol'ga Nikolaevna. "I will stitch a light summer coat and a thick dressing gown for her", she says, displaying the fabric. "We just have to wait for the holidays, since Little Cloud has started school this year". Ol'ga Nikolaevna lives in an old people's home in Pyatigorsk, while Rachimat lives in the village of Novogroznoe in the Gudermes region. The characters in my story are simple people. But it is their biographies that make up the brightest part of the history of my people. They do not make distinctions between their own misfortunes and those of others; they do not make distinctions between the right religion and the wrong one.