

by admin

The Explosion

Natasha Basin-Levina (1951–2013) emigrated to Israel from Moscow in 1970. She worked as a journalist and editor for Israeli radio and for Kol Yisrael television, where she was head of news and Russian-language programs, but much of her writing was discovered only after her death. This autobiographical story was first published in the Jerusalem Russian-language journal Alternativa, under the title “Terror on Ben Yehuda Street” [“Terakt na Ben-Iegude”].



Natasha Basin-Levina
(courtesy A. Basin)

I inherited the old wall clock ten years ago from my mother, who had in turn received it from her father. It had not been running for many years and my mother insisted that it stopped when my grandfather died, but it stayed on the wall anyway.

I took the clock down after the fourth of September 1997. I couldn't bear to look at it any longer because the time it showed happened to be the exact time of the explosion. I was in the kitchen at the time, trying to be a perfect mother, squeezing some fresh apple juice for my two teenage daughters.

That day we all got up late, the girls were still walking around in their pajamas and Basin was still lying in bed in his favorite pose watching TV. I had just squeezed the last apple when I heard the explosion. I rushed towards the open balcony door to look outside. Before I could reach it, I heard the second explosion and was thrown back into the room together with shards of broken glass, pieces of window frames, and a tangled mass of human flesh. Then I heard the third explosion. Through the bedroom door I could see Basin digging himself out from under the blanket covered with debris. I saw my younger daughter Danilka coming out of her room, her eyes frozen in terror, and then I heard a horrifying scream from my older daughter Anya. When I turned in the direction of the scream I saw the walls of the kitchen crumbling, the cabinets collapsing, and the bathroom door, twisted and torn off the hinges, collapsing and wedging itself in the rubble, blocking the doorway to the bathroom. Somewhere behind that door was my daughter. The screaming either stopped or got drowned in the chorus of other screams conjoined into one unified wail. I imagined the bathroom ceiling no longer supported by the walls collapsing too and thought it was the end and I did not have my older daughter any more.

And then I screamed too. I was holding my head and screaming and at the same time with some part of my consciousness watching myself as if from outside my body and thinking how ridiculous it looked, a disheveled woman standing in the middle of the kitchen holding her head and screaming, and with yet another part of my consciousness registering that I had seen it somewhere before and that I was just reenacting a scene from a Bergman movie. I was still screaming when Danilka rushed onto the balcony and from there climbed into the girls' room window and then into the bathroom through another door and then back the same way with Anya, who was alive and unscathed. We were all alive and none of us had a single scratch. Everybody said it was a miracle.

We started cleaning right away. The apartment was in ruins, the entire floor covered with broken glass and other debris. We were cleaning and Basin kept offering us something to drink. Anya would periodically start crying but Danilka was not saying anything and her eyes looked dead. I was trying to stay calm and to be in charge but I already knew that we would never be able to manage this by ourselves.

The telephone was ringing incessantly. I would pick it up and mechanically answer, yes we are alive but I cannot talk right now I will call you later. Irina Reichwarger from Tel Aviv called several times, I told her to wait a minute, put the phone down on the table and forgot about her. Later somebody called her back but by that time she had already told everybody in Tel Aviv that I had fainted while we were talking and was lying unconscious, and we all laughed imagining how ridiculous it would be, Natasha fainting and lying around when there was so much work to do.

I miss Irina a lot. She died several years later when she fell down the stairs.

Kol Israel called and asked me for an interview, “as a victim of a terrorist attack.” I agreed—it would be

awkward to say no to former colleagues. Our apartment, now doorless and windowless, filled up with street noise, the wailing of sirens and screaming and shouting. We turned on the TV but I did not want to see it so I let Basin watch and describe what he saw. Evidently three Hamas men blew themselves up in the middle of the pedestrian mall right in front of our apartment building on Ben Yehuda Street. Three young girls were killed and there were many wounded.

We continued cleaning like robots, putting the glass and other debris into boxes and small fragments of human flesh into plastic bags. Danilka whispered Kadish over each bag. I stepped out onto the balcony and realized that no help was coming—we were surrounded and blocked off by police and security men. They were guarding the victims and were not letting anybody into the area except for contractors, journalists and photographers—it was their livelihood after all. Misha Gendelev was the first who managed to sneak in—he put on his best clothes and convinced the police that he was some sort of VIP. I broke into tears and we hugged. He grabbed some thick art books and propped up the kitchen shelves. Then we picked up the broken dishes and continued cleaning. It seemed like there would be no end to this cleaning. Then Gendelev hurt his back and left and we were all alone again.

Misha died a year ago and there is nobody left to offer me a shoulder to cry on. Then again, there is Basin.

The police arrived. They made sure that we were all alive and then they broke into the neighbor's apartment below but did not find his body. Luckily, he was not home at the time of the explosion. He died several years later. First he disappeared, then we noticed a strange smell in the stairway and the police had to break into his apartment again. They found him sitting on the toilet, dead. A heart attack.

The Chevra Kadisha people came several times. They collected large body parts and left the rest to us. I filled a small bag with human flesh and walked downstairs. Danilka spread her arms trying to stop me but I did not listen, let me go what's the matter with you? Stepping on the thick layer of broken glass was like walking on smoldering coals but I made it downstairs, got outside and handed the bag to a policeman. Next to our door I saw a girl's body. One of her legs had a small black shoe on and the other leg was missing.

Suddenly I felt I had no strength left—run, run far away no matter where, I thought dejectedly, knowing at the same time that it was insane, that all of it was insane, inside of me and outside, and I just had to wait patiently until this insanity vanished.

The house filled with strangers. One was a shamai named Yaki and another was a contractor named Mikhael. The shamai was writing down all the damage and I kept telling him that I wanted everything to be just as it was before. You are strange, he said, look, here is a crack in the toilet and the glass in this picture is broken, and you're telling me that it was like that before, but we can fix it, who cares, everybody does it. But I kept saying that I wanted everything to be just as it was before, including the picture. Then three women social workers arrived. They looked at us with poorly concealed pessimism and tried to convince us to move to a hotel but we declined and continued to clean. The telephone kept ringing. An odd feeling came over me as if nothing had happened, life had not changed, and it simply was always like this.

And then I couldn't bear it any longer. My first husband, I sobbed, Levin, was wounded during the Yom Kippur War just a day before the ceasefire can you believe it we just got married and they were supposed to give him a vacation and the day before the war started he went to the base to hand over his arms and they did not let him go back home and I managed to get through on the phone but at first they wouldn't believe me and a girl told me don't you get it we're in the war and they are in the Golan but he actually was sent to Sinai and those who were sent to the Golan were all killed and he was wounded and developed gangrene he had three surgeries and they saved his leg and my second husband Basin in 1985 was doing his reserve duty and they told me on the phone that he was killed and they were looking for his body and I became a widow but only for a short time the next day those morons apologized and sent me some cookies and I . . .

Then I got hold of myself—stop the hysteria you idiot tell them also about your difficult relationship with your mother and that you are not sure if Basin loves you and that you had difficult deliveries both times. I shut up and offered the social workers some water. They left but kept coming back and I kept offering them water. But they did not drink it. They just took me aside and whispered keep an eye on the younger one, she looks frozen, and then they left. They proved to be right but there was nothing to be done about it.

The next thing I remember was Danilka begging me to stop screaming at a TV cameraman but I continued screaming until I was out of breath—get out of the house you have no right to enter our neighbor's apartment the owner is not there and they didn't break the door open for you to barge in! Gilad Adin from Chanel 10 arrived in one of his perfect suits and his make-up was perfect too and in the midst of this madness he looked as if he'd spent an hour in a dressing room. He chose the most telegenic angles and the cameraman took some shots of him and the gawkers with wide-open eyes and

the blood on the pavement.

Past eleven friends started coming. Reznitsky came and helped Basin to remove three pieces of human flesh from one of the walls. Reznitsky has already died too.

The girls' friends came and brought some smokes, we were taking turns inhaling and were telling bad jokes and giggling inappropriately—it helped to relax a little. I kept finding nails everywhere and giving them to Basin, he could use some to hang his paintings back. He obediently accepted the nails and put them in a small box. Five days later when I found one more nail he looked at me sadly and then I realized where these nails came from and I became very scared.

Anya said she wanted ice cream. Basin said he wanted ice cream too and they went out to buy some. They were gone for some time and came back with four melting cones. This moron policeman, Anya said, would not let us back in and I called him an idiot and a brainless gorilla and now I feel bad I should go back and find him and apologize but how can I find him they all look the same in their gear and uniforms. Anya was going on and on. And Danilka was not saying anything. Then we all went to bed. It was very cold and the girls slept together.

I woke up early, made myself a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and stepped onto the balcony, forgetting they had told us it was not safe. (Four months later, when pieces of concrete started falling on pedestrians' heads, they finally fixed it.) I could not believe my eyes. They brought out tables from Café Atara across the street and set them up in the middle of the road. The cafe is not there any longer. All the tables were taken, the well-dressed people at the tables were reading the newspapers, and the newspapers had red color splashed across the pages, it was supposed to mean blood and the whole thing was supposed to mean that "life goes on" and I thought it looked like all of them were participants in a surreal play. Gilad Adin was back and his suit and tie were even more perfect than the day before. He was "covering the situation" for the evening news. His assistant was shoving the camera into people's faces but they did not mind—it's not every day that you can see yourself in the news. Basin was still in bed, lying in his favorite pose and watching it on TV. Gendelev called and said he saw me on the news and that he liked my red housedress but that my face looked swollen. He must have been watching a different channel.

Later in the day Volodya Voronel called from Tel Aviv to ask if I was OK. I said yes cheerfully but he said you don't understand your photo is on the front page of Yedioth Ahronoth, and by the way you look great. Basin went out and bought the newspaper. Everybody complimented the photo. I realized that in a play about a terrorist attack everybody is assigned a role, and this was mine. Then mere acquaintances started calling to ask how we were doing. Some of them sounded almost envious —just think of it, to be at the epicenter of a suicide bombing and come out unscathed. We felt nauseous. Sasha Cantor came. He prescribed something homeopathic and the nausea stopped after three days.

The nausea reminded me of an episode 10 years ago. A close friend came from France to visit. The Intifada was in full swing and we usually did not go to the Old City, not because we were afraid, we just thought it was fair: they didn't want to see us and we didn't want to see them. But she insisted and we took her to see the bazaar near the Arab Quarter. When she was bargaining over some typical tchotchkes, a sense of danger suddenly filled the air over the bazaar and the shops started to close. The Arab shop owner was anxious to lock the doors and seemed to be willing to give away his goods, but my friend remained oblivious to the commotion. And then I saw that other Arab. He was walking up the stairs away from the Arab Quarter, towards us. His face was distorted in pain and fear and he was pressing his hands over his stomach trying to stop his guts from falling out. I explained to my friend that he must be an assassinated collaborator, nothing to stare at, let's-go-we-have-seen-enough. But she kept looking back in excitement—it was something to tell about back home and "it was not even dangerous."

We were still suffering from nausea when they began the repairs in the apartment. Mikhael the contractor was in his element, bossing around his workers who were all Arabs, what else. They did not hurry, fixing one crack in a wall a day and telling us that we would all be living in peace if it were not for our leaders, they are all the same, Arafat and Netanyahu, they both are shits. I did not say anything, just kept making them coffee and bringing falafels.

The repairs were not progressing and turned into another nightmare. Mikhael practically lived in our apartment. One day he brought his brother Koby, who thankfully installed a new door and windows. Mikhael's wife, children and friends would come to visit. We felt exhausted. One month later we asked Mikhael not to come back. He was terribly offended, said we were like family to him and one doesn't treat family like that. I yelled back at him that in all this time he at least could have cleaned the blood off the windowsill. I called his brother Koby for help. Koby said he was not responsible for his brother who does not know a thing about house repairs and just ruins his, Koby's, reputation and he would come do it himself.

In a month and a half the apartment became habitable. We had already paid for the repairs, which added thirty thousand shekels to our debt. As we were instructed by the assessor, we paid for the repairs

out of pocket and the department of property tax was supposed to reimburse us in a month or so. But the department acted as if we did not exist. It turned out that they were underpaid and went on strike. We received our money just before Christmas.

Ten days after the explosion Anya went to stay with some friends in New York. She called me periodically and sobbed, she was having nightmares. I was having nightmares too and often screamed in my sleep and Basin would wake me up and not let me see the dream to the end. Danilka said she did not have nightmares.

For a long time Basin and Gendelev were trying to convince me, looking me straight in the eye, that there was no leg in a small black shoe, that I just imagined that shoe like I imagined a penguin in the Rest and Culture Park in Moscow where I went with my mother as a child and we were sitting on a bench and I was looking at the penguin and the penguin was looking at me and nobody can convince me that there were no penguins in the Rest and Culture Park. Finally they took pity and stopped torturing me and admitted that there was a leg and a small black shoe and no other leg.

Then an old friend of mine, Lyosha Prigozhin, came to visit. He always shows up when there is a disaster, not counting the 20 years after I left for Israel in 1970 and he was still living in Moscow. His coming was very comforting, we were sitting in the small room in our apartment, he was talking in his soft and tender voice and for a short time I forgot about everything. Then Ezra came. He laughed loudly and said, can you imagine, I have a friend, she works in Café Atara across the street and she was in shock after the explosion and they took her to the hospital but she was okay and they sent her home and when she got home—Ezra laughed again—she was combing her hair and there in her hair she found a finger—can you imagine, a human finger! I laughed back insincerely and felt as if pus was spilling out of my brain.

The spectacle was coming to an end. I was waiting for somebody to come out and announce, “Many thanks to all of you, you can go home now.” But the authorities and all the rest of the world must have believed that we would figure it out by ourselves. Three months later the defaced entry of our apartment building was finally fixed and painted over. The contractor this time was called Igal and the painters were two different Arabs. They worked fast and did a good job and I made them Turkish coffee. It was all over, we survived the explosion and could continue with our life. I thought perhaps we could go on living just as it was before, but each time I looked at Danilka I knew that we couldn't.

Once in a while through the open windows of our apartment we hear the shouts of police. They are disabling yet another suspicious object, which usually turns out to be harmless. Our dog Kaia dashes like a bullet to the bedroom, climbs into our bed and stretches there like a human. It almost looks as if she is trying to pull the blanket over her head.

A year passed. Some people gathered in front of our apartment building. Somebody played sad music on a lute and they installed a memorial plaque. They tried to light the memorial candles but it was windy and the candles would not stay lit.

Translated from Russian by Sonia Melnikova-Raich