

Elena Marttila - Andrew Spira, March 2017

In the 1920s when Revolutionary idealism was at its most intense, it became commendable to uphold that not just ‘picturesque landscapes’ and ‘society portraits’ but *all* art was a bourgeois indulgence. Image-making, it was maintained, should not be for pleasure, which was superfluous to the requirements of life, and it was certainly not about self-expression which was utterly irrelevant to everyone apart from the artist; it should serve a practical purpose - for the direct benefit of society as a whole. Subscribers to this view aimed to raise art above the realm of randomness to a level at which nothing inessential and subjective remained.

But while such enthusiasts worked towards a form of art that was more functional than pleasurable, they never reached a point at which art became a necessity for *survival*. This is what we see when we look at the work of Elena Marttila, now 94, for whom art was a ‘road of life’ during the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1944. It is clear, both from her work and from her words, that the practice of producing art, enabled Marttila, quite literally, to survive conditions that, over a period of almost 900 days, killed over a million people. Maybe it is for this reason - that her work had a truly existential dimension, in the sense that her existence depended on it, before it had an aesthetic one - that it has remained unseen for so many years. The exhibition of some of her works, at Darwin College, Cambridge, from January to March 2017 - the first such occasion in the UK - was therefore a revelation.

In an entry in her journal, one freezing night in February 1942, Marttila described how she specifically chose not to go to sleep, fearing that she might be too exhausted to wake up, but to draw a portrait of herself instead. Throughout the night, each new perception and its corresponding mark gave her another reason to live. Even without her words, one feels this from the work itself, much of which survives in lithographs and prints from engraved cardboard that Marttila produced, after the siege, from her original drawings. Her subject matter gives an impression of the extreme bleakness of her circumstances - involving microscopic food rations, bulked up with sawdust, in temperatures that plummeted as low as -30 degrees.



But her struggle does not have the ostentatious bravura of ideological defiance that the Soviet authorities wanted it to have; it was rooted in a much quieter, but deeper, inner strength. Indeed, in some cases the difference between life and death was almost invisible; people simply faded away. In one image - of a man collapsed in the middle of a deserted street covered in thick snow - it seems that the life force

simply ebbed away until there was none left, and movement and breathing ceased to happen. But in another image, a very similar man - comparable in scale and setting - is trudging through the snow with a sledge. It could be a corpse that he is dragging behind him - not an unusual sight - but it is not; it is a cello. There is a precious ounce of life left in him as he makes his way, maybe towards the Grand Philharmonia Hall (where Marttala heard Shostakovich's 7th Symphony and made a drawing of the composer).



While the line between the living and the dead was sometimes a thin one, the pilot light that burned to stay alive had its own power. Something of its lust for life is conveyed by the distinctive quality of Marttala's lines. These can be frail and feverish on the one hand, searching to capture the texture of a surface, but they can also be bold and uncompromising in their search for a strong, definite sense of form. Curiously their intense, expressionistic quality has no precedent in the Russian tradition. It was absent from the repertoire of Russian avant-garde artists of the 1910s and 1920s whose provocative innovations were more concerned with the graphic and political potential of art than with self-expression; even the Cubo-futurists tended to avoid the expression of personal sentiment. And there was certainly no place for it in the confident naturalism of Social Realism which prevailed throughout the 1930s. On the contrary, the closest parallels with Marttala's style can be found in the Germanic tradition in which a mode of expressionism had thrived from the time of Durer until the beginning of the twentieth century. The graphic work of Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945) especially comes to mind. This comparison would be ironic were it not for the fact that Kollwitz, whose work railed against the political injustices that lead to starvation and war, was also hounded by the Nazis, on account of her artistic and communist sympathies, and threatened with deportation to a concentration camp.

It seems perverse however to attempt to appreciate Marttala's work by contextualising it art historically. The key to its power lies precisely in the fact that it was not produced to be interpreted in relation to the conventions and narratives of art history. It was produced, like the few hundred grams of bread that were issued daily to the ever dwindling numbers of Leningrad citizens during the siege, as a means of survival. And in age in which art has officially become so 'free' - or arbitrary - that it can mean 'whatever you want it to', it is deeply refreshing to encounter creative work that really does focus on the essentials, inspiring us to survive, in negative circumstances - heavens forbid - and to become more deeply aware of our present existence and its potential in positive ones.