

Russia

Nikita Velichko interviewed **Lyudmila Ulitskaya**.

Interview date: December 2019

Velichko: Hello, my name is Nikita Velichko. I'm 29 years old, and I work as a journalist and translator. I'm in St. Petersburg, and next to me is Lyudmila Ulitskaya, a writer, screenwriter and translator. Lyudmila Ulitskaya was born on 21st February 1943 in Davlekanovo, Bashkiria, USSR. She is a two-time winner of the Big Book prize, winner of the Russian Booker prize, and a nominee for the International Booker prize. Ulitskaya is an Officer of France's Legion of Honour, winner of literary awards in Italy, Austria and several other countries.

Lyudmila Evgenyevna, thank you very much for your time. The town of Davlekanovo — is it in Asia or in Europe?

Ulitskaya: It's in Bashkiria. I've never been there; I was taken away when I was nine months old. My family was evacuated. Strictly speaking, my family are Muscovites. But my mother was evacuated, and she gave birth to me there.

Velichko: Have you ever gone back there?

Ulitskaya: No, I've never been there.

Velichko: What was your first memory like?

Ulitskaya: Well, you know, I'm a Muscovite. So, my first memory was of Moscow and Moscow's yards — they were fairly poor, fairly ragged. Two barracks in the yard. And the newcomers, consequently. There were quite a few real Muscovites, and after the war there were mostly newcomers.

Velichko: Your paternal grandfather was the author of two books.

Ulitskaya: Even more.

Velichko: Even more. At the same time, your maternal great-grandmother wrote poems in Yiddish. Whereas your mother was a biochemist, and your father was an engineer, a scientist.

Ulitskaya: Yes.

Velichko: Have you been hugely interested in science or literature since childhood?

Ulitskaya: I was preparing for a career in biology, of course. I really liked biology. My mother was a biochemist, and, sure enough, I was very drawn to it. But it didn't work.

Velichko: Did you live mostly in the north of Moscow?

Ulitskaya: Yes. That's my habitat. The first apartment our family had was in Moscow, it was a half of a summer cottage bought by my grandfather in 1917 before the revolution, in the place where Dinamo metro station is located now. Back then it was a distant suburb. That place was called Petrovsky Park. It was our family's first apartment. My mother was born there. I live a 10-minute walk from that place. So, our family has always lived in the north of Moscow.

Velichko: Was this the only place you could call home?

Ulitskaya: No, we were always moving, it was somewhere around the area of Dinamo station. My father built that very station before the war.

Velichko: You lived in a communal apartment ["kommunalka", with other families] if I'm not mistaken.

Ulitskaya: Yes, of course.

Velichko: What was your relationship like with your neighbours?

Ulitskaya: Very good. My mother was wonderful by nature. She was an absolutely lovely woman — she was sweet, cheerful and friendly. And I have to say that although there were, of course, scandals in our communal apartment, my mother was the kind of person who would wash it all away like water. She was an exceptionally friendly person and kind in general.

Velichko: Do you have a certain feeling from your childhood?

Ulitskaya: No, of course no, it's very diverse. I'm a girl who grew up in the backyard. In those days, the yard was the first children's society. Nowadays there are no yards left, children don't grow up there anymore. But that's where we grew up. We grew up playing lapta, nozhichki [Russian outdoor game played with pocketknives] and similar stuff together. And it was quite a difficult socialisation — there were fights and [attempts at] self-empowerment. It was an interesting school of life.

Velichko: In an interview you once referred to your parents' generation as a "crippled" one.

Ulitskaya: I rather called it a "silent" generation. But, technically, one could call them "crippled", too. Those were people who were very scared — scared of the authority, afraid of being reported. They were partly scared of neighbours who could do a lot of harm by reporting them. Of course, in this regard it was a very torturous life.

Velichko: How would you describe your generation, which came after?

Ulitskaya: Well, you know, I think we were very lucky. My generation has seen a very diverse life in Russia. I was 10 years old when Stalin died, and I remember this time, this day very well. We lived under a different kind of authority — none of which I liked. But in any case, I feel like a participant of all these historical collisions. We got a very interesting piece of Russian life. Besides, it wasn't as bloody as the previous one. 1937 and the entire pre-war period — as well as the post-war period — were the years of great repression. And our generation was less affected by them. Although, my friends were also imprisoned, and Natasha Gorbanevskaya [Russian poet and translator, human rights activist, participant of the dissident movement in the USSR], my friend, was placed in a very violent psychiatric clinic, and Alik Ginzburg [journalist and a publisher of one of the first samizdat journals] — so it affected us. I was friends with Yuli Daniel [novelist and poet], who did a five-year prison term. Therefore, despite the government being softer, it still wasn't a blessing.

Velichko: How did you perceive Europe as a child?

Ulitskaya: You know, it was roughly like in Dumas' books. Some remote space that probably didn't exist at all. It was from the realm of fiction. It was impossible to imagine, and one couldn't even think of ever seeing Paris, London, or New York. It was a geography of an exclusively oral nature.

Velichko: And now you have a house in Italy.

Ulitskaya: Well, not a house, rather a small apartment.

Velichko: Can you call that place home?

Ulitskaya: You know, I've had this burrow — that's how I would name it — for 10 years already. And I worked there a lot because Moscow is a very unsuitable city for work. That's why I go there quite a lot — I was spending time there, working.

Velichko: In general, how many places in your life can you call home?

Ulitskaya: Well, my only home is my apartment in Moscow. I love it very much, and I feel very good in there. But generally, I am a very humble person, and my home is where my computer is. I settle down anywhere easily.

Velichko: And where has your computer been most often lately?

Ulitskaya: I mostly work in Italy. But Moscow is where I live.

Velichko: [In other interviews] You mentioned how you got bored in the 10th grade. Did you have any positive memories of school?

Ulitskaya: No, no. School, especially during the last years, was such an unbearable bore. Unfortunately, I wasn't lucky enough to have any great teacher to speak of. Well, there were quite decent people — no bastards (*laughs*). But I didn't have any teacher,

whom I would remember, and who would really give me a lot at school. They came from the outside. There were other wonderful people who would fulfil the role of the teacher for me, but those were not schoolteachers.

Velichko: Was there such a teacher at the Faculty of Biology?

Ulitskaya: Well, when I was studying at the Faculty of Biology, I graduated from the Department of Genetics. Vladimir Pavlovich Efroimson [geneticist and doctor of biological sciences, born 1908] was teaching genetics. He was an outstanding scientist and amazing person. Although they were group studies, there were about ten of us, but I didn't have a close relationship with him. But I knew that he was a person of absolutely colossal level, completely unattainable. And that is true.

Velichko: Do you remember the age or the moment when you realised that you would become a biologist and enter the Faculty of Biology?

Ulitskaya: I knew it since I was a kid because I really loved my mum's laboratory. I would come there — the magic glass, coloured solutions, dogs, the vivarium. I got all this in the end. Not for long, but I did. No-no, with biology... it just so happened that I didn't stay there, but I'm still interested in biology.

Velichko: Did you apply to the Faculty of Biology several times? The same one if I'm not mistaken.

Ulitskaya: Yes, I applied after school — and didn't get in by one point. Then I worked as a histological laboratory assistant for two years. I entered after I did two years of work experience.

Velichko: Why did you choose this particular faculty? Was it the best in the country?

Ulitskaya: You know, there was a choice between that one and the Medical Institute, but in the latter, there was no specialisation in genetics. And I was interested [in this] before school. When the Department of Genetics opened, at a time when I should have already got my specialisation after the second year, I happily rushed there. Because that year the Lysenko's [powerful Soviet biologist and agronomist, rejecting orthodox genetics in favour of Communist biology during Stalin's regime] administration was gone, and real geneticists came. We were taught by awesome people, great scientists.

Velichko: You told a story about how young people who served in the army had certain preferences when they had the German language exam while entering university. Did you consider it as an injustice?

Ulitskaya: Definitely. Those years were quite anti-Semitic — [I was] a Jewish girl. I knew German well. One could not compare my level of knowledge with that of the boys who came after the army. But I was given a "four" [a "B"], and this "four" turned

the scale. They entered as if with experience, so they had advantages. Well, I worked for two years in the Institute for Paediatrics. That was quite useful.

Velichko: As a result, when you entered, was it better? Did the situation you just described change?

Ulitskaya: It's hard to say. There are two things — that, in fact, didn't stop me — which are commonly complained about. Those are the female sex, because boys are preferred in many situations, and nationality. I have to tell you that neither of these things has done me much harm in my life.

Velichko: How do you know German so well and what other languages do you know?

Ulitskaya: Actually, I know languages pretty badly. My mother understood the importance of languages, so I studied with a German teacher from a young age. And there was a time when I knew it decently, but then I forgot it, because any language requires practice. Then I studied English for years, too, and I don't know it well either. At some point in my adulthood I studied French, which I don't know at all. So, no, no. A more gifted person, having spent so much time learning the language, would know all three well. I can barely read an article.

Velichko: Do you read your translations?

Ulitskaya: Foreign? Perhaps English is the only language I could check. But I have a very good English translator now, and I don't check her work. And also, my books have been translated into 40 languages — no one knows 40 languages. *(laughs)*

Velichko: Did you plan an academic career after graduation?

Ulitskaya: Yes, I wanted to do science, of course.

Velichko: But at first you worked...

Ulitskaya: I worked for two years at the Institute of General Genetics.

Velichko: Speaking of work, was your first job as a laboratory assistant?

Ulitskaya: It was after school, when I didn't get in, so I worked as a laboratory assistant at the Institute of Paediatrics as a histology technician. This is a pretty good qualification. And when I graduated from university, I worked at the Institute of General Genetics. I was a research assistant and worked there for two years, after which it ended.

Velichko: What did you do as a lab assistant?

Ulitskaya: At the Institute of Paediatrics?

Velichko: Yes.

Ulitskaya: There were several scientific topics, but mostly it was a brain development laboratory. One of the employees I worked for, specialised on hydrocephalus. It was quite interesting: we did operations on artificial hydrocephalus in rats, so I was operating on rats. I even have a picture of myself sitting, thrashing a rat soundly. And my novel "Kukotsky's Enigma" [in 2001 Ulitskaya won the Russian Booker Prize for the novel] didn't come out of nowhere, it was a story of my life, of course.

Velichko: Then you worked for two years. Why did you stop working?

Ulitskaya: No, I stopped working as a histology technician, because I went to university. And I was kicked out from the Institute of General Genetics, our entire staff was dismissed.

Velichko: The entire staff.

Ulitskaya: Yes.

Velichko: It's been mentioned somewhere, and I don't know if it's true, that you were caught reading and reprinting samizdat.

Ulitskaya: Yes, that's why we were dismissed. Samizdat.

Velichko: That is, it was not just you.

Ulitskaya: There was a whole group of young people reading, and the laboratory was just closed. But no one was imprisoned, thankfully.

Velichko: Could you tell what kind of samizdat it was?

Ulitskaya: Well, it was different. In that particular case it was [Leon] Uris' novel "Exodus". It's not great — an average-quality book, but it was banned because it concerned the organisation of the state of Israel. Back then it was very concerning.

Velichko: How did they find out that you were reading that novel?

Ulitskaya: We gave it to the typist to reprint, and either she or her relatives ran to the KGB and reported us.

Velichko: What did you do afterwards?

Ulitskaya: I just didn't work for nine years. I was married, had one child, then another. I read books. And then I started working not in biology, but in theatre.

Velichko: Did you have any dreams related to biology when you were in that field?

Ulitskaya: Well, no, I just didn't have enough work experience as a biologist. I'm still very interested in it; I'm very interested in genetics. Modern genetics is incredibly interesting. But, unfortunately, I don't go further than reading nonfiction. Although, I'm still close friends with some people who remained in this field, and their job is very interesting.

Velichko: You worked shortly after on the discovery of DNA. It was a big [discovery].

Ulitskaya: DNA was discovered in 1953 [by James Watson and Francis Crick]. I graduated in 1967. So, this was a fresh idea. In fact, genetics was only developing. Molecular genetics, that skyrocketed later. I still follow it with great interest, but I can't understand everything anymore, because it's a science that develops at an incredible speed. But its main ideas are clear to me, for sure.

Velichko: During those nine years you started writing. You were writing different things. Do you remember your very first important text?

Ulitskaya: You know, I recently opened my archive, a big cabinet, and I saw how many plays I had written. Children's books. By the way, several children's books did come out then. I was writing scripts for animated films. No, it was a period of study, but quite sensible study. I didn't manage to study at any educational institution, but I attended some seminars at Dom Kino. There were very good, strong animators who were teaching scriptwriting in animated films. I attended those. It was very useful.

Velichko: Was there an important figure for you?

Ulitskaya: Andrei Yurievich Khrzhanovsky, [Yuri Borisovich] Norstein and, [Yaroslav Kirillovich] Golovanov would come. Those were very bright characters. Soviet animation of that period was top-class.

Velichko: Did you study under them? Or by their example?

Ulitskaya: No-no, they would come and discuss the scripts. It was all very interesting. But it was only once a month. I attended those seminars for a year and a half or two.

Velichko: So, you started from scripts. Those nine years... When did you start working as a literary director?

Ulitskaya: It was in 1979. It was a total accident, I got there by a miracle.

Velichko: What exactly did you do there?

Ulitskaya: Working as a literary director was quite boring because the repertoire was very small. Generally, the literary director should keep an eye on the repertoire, to form it partly, but it's the director who does it. Correspondence of various kinds. Quite a lot of paperwork. A little work with the theatre staff.

Velichko: So, you were interested...

Ulitskaya: It was very interesting. Having worked in this theatre for three years, I could work in any theatre. Besides, I was writing plays back then. Since then, I still write plays sometimes, and I still have a particular interest in theatre.

Velichko: What did you like most about your life in theatre and what did you like least? Maybe, it was the relationship between people?

Ulitskaya: No, relationships in theatre are always disastrous. It is a filthy wreck — in any theatre, big or small, there are hard tense relationships. Actors are vain, ambitious, and they fight for their place in the sun. Theatres where the relationships are friendly and humane are very rare. The theatre is a difficult place to live. But I got through it somehow. Actually, those were the three years when I worked in-house. After that I never worked in-house again. I love theatre a lot from the audience's perspective when I come and watch the play. But its “kitchen” is quite heavy stuff.

Velichko: Today [at the presentation of a new book, a collection of stories "About the body of the soul", after which this interview took place] you were speaking about poetry and poems that you started writing at a young age. When did you start writing prose and how did you learn to write it?

Ulitskaya: You know, I started writing, when I started writing. I've always kept some diaries, written some notes. Writing has always been entertaining to me. I've always enjoyed doing it.

Velichko: You once advised that everyone should keep diaries.

Ulitskaya: Yes, it's very useful in many ways. A person expresses their thoughts, looks around, makes some conclusions. One has to think through some situations when writing. It's handy.

Velichko: Do you return to your diaries?

Ulitskaya: Yes, with great interest.

Velichko: What is the feeling? Does it change?

Ulitskaya: Yes, of course. First of all, you realise how much you change. How time changes. I've immersed myself in reading my old diaries recently — it's very interesting.

Velichko: And now you've said that you return to your old texts. How do you perceive them?

Ulitskaya: In various ways. There are some things I like. First of all, I just completely forgot many things. But some of them are good enough, quite lively.

Velichko: Did you have maybe an unexpected discovery — a text that you found to be powerful after a while?

Ulitskaya: No, there were a few things I was late with. There were some developed ideas, which were before me... Well, I just had to come out earlier. But it was hard to make a statement because it's tough for a young author. But it's okay, I'm happy that I did a good job.

Velichko: But how did you make a statement after all? Was it through cinema or the first publication that occurred abroad?

Ulitskaya: The first book came out in 1993. It was published in French, not in Russian, by [Éditions] Gallimard, as a fluke. The first book in Russian was published in 1994. 25 years [ago].

Velichko: How come the first book was published in French?

Ulitskaya: My friend was working in France at the time. She took the manuscript with her and showed it to a translator she knew who translated for Gallimard. She liked it. She brought it to Gallimard. I got a contract that completely shocked me via mail. In Russia, I had some publications in magazines. And then suddenly Gallimard, the best publisher in France, the most famous, offers me a book. It was wonderful, of course.

Velichko: When did you go abroad for the first time?

Ulitskaya: During the university years, to Poland. Probably, in 1965.

Velichko: Can you tell me about this trip, please? What did you remember? What was it associated with?

Ulitskaya: No, I don't think I saw anything particularly interesting there. It was a student group trip with a KGB officer who would look after us, and that was pretty nasty.

Velichko: What was your first trip that had any special memories associated with it?

Ulitskaya: Well, I've travelled to America a lot since the late 80s. My children lived and studied there for 10 years. Therefore, my first foreign experience was an American one. After all, there was a lot going on in New York. I didn't live there, but I went pretty often. Of course, this was the time when [...]. You know, such trips abroad, from the Soviet Union, at that time, in fact, didn't give much knowledge about the country you're going to. They provided much more knowledge about the country you left.

The difference between American and Russian lives was much more striking than my knowledge of American life. In the month — or the month and a half that I spent there — there's very little one can learn. But at the same time, you perceive your life in a totally different way. So [speaking of impressions,] it is rather an antipode of a kind.

That was a time when I was very fascinated by America. It both amazed and shocked me, it seemed like a perfect country. Which changed then. But back then there was a feeling of an absolute allure. I didn't want to live there, but what I saw there definitely impressed me. The contrast was huge. I remember very well how I would come from America in the late 80s with two bags of food, and then unload them onto the table. So, the neighbour's five-year-old boy came and said, "I recognised the cheese instantly." So, the boy could only recognise the cheese because he remembered that such product existed. And those crazy lines in the stores, and empty counters, and then that generous America. Of course, that was very striking. And also, I was in the university, I saw the learning process there — I've seen it, too... And then, sometime later, my son studied at Columbia University. It was quite a trial for him because there was no money at all. He studied and worked at the same time. Well, he did well. Those were very hard years. But it was okay, he graduated from Columbia University. *(laughs)*

Velichko: And when was the first trip to Europe that you remember?

Ulitskaya: In 1990, to Paris.

Velichko: Did you have a special relationship with Paris?

Ulitskaya: Both with America and with Paris. I had an American fiancé. I didn't marry him, but even after breaking up, we were very good friends. And since he was a man with a complex biography — he was French, as well as American and Russian, he had lots of different stories — he was a remarkable person. At first, I went to America at his invitation. Then he welcomed my eldest son, who stayed at his place. Then he died in a car accident. But before his death, while we were in France, we went together to Aix-en-Provence where he used to live. And in Paris he showed me... It was such an important part of my life because I got Europe and America from the perspective of those who knew those places well, who understood both their advantages and disadvantages. He came from a family of Russian émigrés, so his outlook wasn't flat or one-sided, but very distinct.

Velichko: And you also mentioned your friend who was related to the translator.

Ulitskaya: Yes, she was a translator, she took my manuscript with her. But she still lives in Paris. She comes from a family of translators. She took my manuscript by accident — my stories just started to appear in magazines a bit. Nothing foreshadowed any career.

Velichko: You were also given an award in France, the Legion of Honour.

Ulitskaya: Before I was awarded the Legion of Honour, I also received Prix Médicis for the second book published there, a novella "Sonechka". It is a very prestigious literary award for the best translated novel of the year. It was in 1996, I think. And then

I received two more Orders in France, and after that the Legion of Honour. Yes. My books were well read in Germany and France.

Velichko: But at the same time, you said that your favourite award was Budapest Grand Prix.

Ulitskaya: Yes, because that is the country which had signs of Soviet attacks on houses. Not the German ones, but Soviet. For that reason, Hungarians' attitude towards Russia is quite tense. So, when they gave me the Grand Prix, I knew that was a big cultural victory. Culture defeated policy. That was very significant to me.

Velichko: How did you perceive Europe when you started visiting it when you saw it?

Ulitskaya: You know, the thing is, for me, Europe started with Paris. And I didn't understand Paris during my first visit, because I was walking there, and I had a feeling that I was walking between postcards. The city was so cut off from me. But when I started visiting it more often, it became both warm and interesting, of course. And I found friends there. The city isn't really made of buildings — it's mostly made of people. When you find Parisian friends, it becomes a completely different urban story.

Velichko: When you started visiting Europe, did you feel the difference between Eastern and Western Europe?

Ulitskaya: Yes, sure.

Velichko: And what was the difference?

Ulitskaya: First of all, there was nothing in common. Poor miserable life, a communal apartment. On one half of the table there was mum and dad's thesis research, on the other half of the table there was a frying pan. One room. Everybody lived that way. European life, which doesn't include any communal life, has much more respect to the human and human dignity. Sure thing, that is all conspicuous. Besides, I had quite a few other Christian friends who were very humble about the Soviet life.

Velichko: Do you perceive Europe and the USSR as opposites? Has Moscow ever been a part of Europe?

Ulitskaya: No, never. Never. Of course, there was Russian culture, much more closely linked to the European world than the Soviet one. Obviously. From a young age I was very fond of [the Russian author Boris] Pasternak, who was surely a European. He was a person who got his philosophical education in Germany. He had brilliant knowledge of languages. The Silver Age of Russian literature was absolutely unique. And yet, it was amazing with its huge European background. Soviet literature was also in a huge cultural decline in a way, though not lacking some interesting things. The Russian avant-garde was an interesting movement, after all, and also purely Russian. But of course, we generally didn't come close to Europe in many respects.

Velichko: Still not.

Ulitskaya: Yes, of course. Yes, of course.

Velichko: I wonder if Moscow and Saint Petersburg are different for you in this regard.

Ulitskaya: Of course, there's a very big difference. It's constantly changing. This difference is also not a constant one, it's moving. The rivalry between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, emphasized in culture, fades away at some point. But let's say, every time I come to Saint Petersburg, I enjoy the city. It is a real city, not a collection of dissimilar houses, dressed up in different ways. It is undoubtedly a very noble city and the only one in Russia with complete architectural scenery. And Saint Petersburg's faces are absolutely different, they're more northern-like. And the pace of life is, as they say, a steady-pulse, calmer.

Velichko: Do you have any place in Europe — besides Italy where you have an apartment — where you work best?

Ulitskaya: I guess not. The thing is this [i.e. this place in Italy] is a Ligurian village. There's nothing artistic or cultural about it. A fishing village, a small one-room apartment with a gorgeous sea view. It's very nice there, very calm. Not knowing the language, it absolutely calms me. (*laughs*)

Velichko: You once said that you had never lived under authority that you liked.

Ulitskaya: Yes.

Velichko: Was there any authority that you liked better?

Ulitskaya: You know, there wasn't. I simply don't like authority. That's in my specific nature, I guess — I don't like authority at all. I don't like being commanded. Authority can be more malicious or less malicious. I try to stay away from it. I don't have many topics in common with it, with authority. I pay my taxes honestly, and I think, within our relationship, this is the end of the matter.

Velichko: Have you ever liked any authority in Europe?

Ulitskaya: No, I've never... I think, wherever I live, I won't make friends with authority. This is a completely different category of people, different psychophysics. People who like to command, who want to build governmental things. I'm a person of privacy, and I insist on it.

Velichko: You once said you were never an activist of the dissident movement. You signed letters, you distributed samizdat. But at the same time, you may call yourself a dissident.

Ulitskaya: You know, *you* may call me a dissident, if necessary. I have never defined myself that way. But I've been friends with people who were part of this movement. I was friends with them. I was acquainted with them. I supported them in every possible way when it was needed.

Velichko: Could you please elaborate on what you were doing back then? What did you distribute?

Ulitskaya: No, I did not do distribution. I reprinted what seemed interesting to me. What I wanted to have myself. Natasha Gorbanevskaya, my friend, was more into it. Natasha would bring something. Honestly, I didn't even know that she... Well, I knew, of course. She was bringing her poems, Brodsky's poems, who was definitely an underground poet at that time. And other Saint Petersburg poets as well. At that time there were four poets, and it wasn't quite clear who was the best amongst them — I mean Brodsky, Bogushev, Naiman and Rein. At that time Natasha was bringing lots of poems. Back then I was more interested in poetry than... Perhaps even now... We read a lot. Really, really a lot.

Velichko: How did you feel about politics in your family, where you...

Ulitskaya: Well, how... Well, our family has always suffered from this authority. We couldn't stand it. And my father was a member of the [Communist] party — my grandfather sometimes made fun of him. No... We had no illusions.

Velichko: And in your family now? How do your sons feel about it?

Ulitskaya: About what?

Velichko: About politics, about the topic.

Ulitskaya: I don't know, they live totally outside of this.

Velichko: So, you don't discuss it at home.

Ulitskaya: No. I guess both me and them have only a deep disgust for it. So, there's no such topic, not really.

Velichko: In one interview, you called this decade "a beginning of the end of Putin's era".

Ulitskaya: Spoke too soon.

Velichko: Recently you spoke at the rally for the right to vote in Moscow on August 10th. How did your feelings change about the...?

Ulitskaya: Society? Well, I like it. I have a feeling that social movement was revitalised somewhat. I have such feelings. But it can be crushed down at any moment because

this authority hasn't been this violent and repressive as it was in 2019. So, I think it can be crushed down easily.

Velichko: Why did your feelings change?

Ulitskaya: Oh, please, of course, the “Moscow case”¹. Absolutely innocent people are handed a sentence.

Velichko: So, you say about crushing the movement. But you just said that it had changed for the better.

Ulitskaya: What changed for the better? Well, people started waking up! Some public opinion appeared. At the same time repressive powers became stronger. So, these processes run in parallel. It's clear that the more there are free voices, the more riot policemen will take to the streets. It is quite obvious.

Velichko: Compared to the beginning of the 2010s, when there was...

Ulitskaya: Yes, it's disgusting. Disgusting, yes. I certainly feel like they're cracking down.

Velichko: Actually, you avoid politics. Do you generally follow the political news?

Ulitskaya: Of course. You go check the Internet in the morning and read everything.

Velichko: And do you follow the events in Europe?

Ulitskaya: I'm a person living in the Internet. So, of course, something's getting through to me. I can't say that is the centre of my interests, but of course I know.

Velichko: How do you feel about it? Say, from the perspective of a frequent Italian visitor.

Ulitskaya: The thing is that I fall under the category of people — probably not too wide a category, — who don't make friends with authority, but observe what they do. The same people surround me in Italy, France, wherever I am. They are able to look at the outside world with a critical eye. It's not that everything is bad, but everything bad is visible. (*pause*).

Velichko: What do you mean by that? “It's not that everything is bad, but everything bad is visible”.

¹ In summer 2019, there was a wave of street protests in Moscow — approved and unapproved rallies — after opposition politicians were barred from running in Moscow City Duma elections. Many people were arrested on charges of “mass rioting” and/or assaulting police. That riot case has been dubbed the “Moscow case”.

Ulitskaya: Well, we see massive strikes in France going on right now. Is it good? It's bad. Because life gets disrupted, because I don't know who goes out on those strikes. I know that normal human life stands still at this point. And, speaking of what they want to achieve — France is extremely generous to its officials. Their salaries are very high, and it's impossible to cut them. I'm not a political expert, but I think that a large part of the demonstrators are people who want to get more. They are not given enough. In our country, pensioners as well as people with disabilities also get very little, so I don't want to say that this movement doesn't have a right to exist. Although to us [Russians] they just seem to be acting fussy.

Velichko: One of the politicians you mentioned in your interviews and who you showed sympathy for was Boris Nemtsov.

Ulitskaya: Yes.

Velichko: Was there such a politician in the world, in Europe?

Ulitskaya: Look, I don't do politics at all. I can't answer this question. That breed of man doesn't really interest me. I'm much more interested in writers, artists, actors. But not politicians. That is a separate breed of people seeking power and money. I don't really care about them.

Velichko: Is art completely separated from politics for you?

Ulitskaya: No, sometimes there's a connection. Sometimes there's no connection. Because art is free, and politics is biased.

Velichko: You've already talked about trips to France, and in the 90s you got a scholarship and went to Germany.

Ulitskaya: Yes, I used to visit it a lot.

Velichko: What did you do there?

Ulitskaya: I was working, writing my books. That was a very Kulturträger German work. They were spending a lot of money to bring Russian, Polish writers — writers of whichever origin basically — and giving them an opportunity to work. I've stayed there on scholarship many times, and I'm very grateful for that. Books published from the 90s to the beginning of the 21st century were mostly written in Germany. I didn't have my little burrow in Italy back then, and I was living on scholarships quite a lot. Then I began to decline as my books started to get printed and I realised that scholarships should be given to younger people.

Velichko: So, in terms of literary work, there's quite a connection with foreign countries for you.

Ulitskaya: Yes, I used to work abroad a lot. My work is Russian, but sometimes I went abroad to work. It's very difficult in Moscow. The city is dynamic, noisy, it has you constantly falling behind schedule.

Velichko: Do you mean the feeling you get from the city?

Ulitskaya: No, it's just lots of people, friends, some events taking place in their lives that I'm involved in.

Velichko: Where did you work in Germany?

Ulitskaya: Several places. Like guest houses for artists. Once it was Feldafing, a tiny little place. Once I lived near Berlin in some kind of a writers' house. A room and a table. That's all. Well, something like a scholarship.

Velichko: Sounds like a quiet daily routine of a writer. Waking up, working on a book. Were your days like this?

Ulitskaya: Exactly. Nobody disturbs you; you just sit there and work.

Velichko: You got the same kind of scholarship in France.

Ulitskaya: Yes, in France I got it twice, I think. About three times in Germany.

Velichko: Where in France?

Ulitskaya: At first in the north, the second time it was in Paris.

Velichko: Besides the fact that you got into a certain space, where you had no friends around, how was life in Europe different from life in Russia back then?

Ulitskaya: You know, the thing is that Europe is a very good place to live. It's better to live in Europe than in Russia. But my life happens in Russia. That's why I might go to Europe for pleasure, enjoyment, travelling or communication. But my life is here, on this ground. All events that concern me happen here.

Velichko: It's interesting, what do you mean when you say "life"? Does it exclude enjoyment?

Ulitskaya: No, by "life" I mean talking to people, working, meetings. Today I'm here, in Saint Petersburg for work. I've had a public speech in the bookstore today. That is my life; these are the events forming it.

Velichko: So, in Europe there are no such events.

Ulitskaya: Of course.

Velichko: You once mentioned that your favourite stage director who adapted your plays was Andrzej Buben.

Ulitskaya: I didn't say it like that. Andrzej Buben staged what I'd done better than anybody. That's for sure. That's how we put it.

Velichko: Could you please tell me how you bonded?

Ulitskaya: We never bonded. He found my plays, he called me. We didn't have any relationship, and I didn't help him during the process. He was in charge of everything, I just attended the opening night.

Velichko: Do you think the fact he is a Pole [and has European perspective] is the reason why his adaptation was the best one?

Ulitskaya: I don't know, it's hard to say. Perhaps, his perspective is fresher or just different, because it's tooled for another country. I like the way he works.

Velichko: Do you have any foreign non-Russian speaking friends?

Ulitskaya: I don't think so. All my foreign friends are Russian speaking. My English is not good enough to make friends with anyone. Friendship demands some particular level of verballity. My knowledge of the language is way too elementary for discussing more delicate, complex topics.

Velichko: Do you have a lot of friends who left Russia?

Ulitskaya: Enough of them.

Velichko: When did most of them leave?

Ulitskaya: They started to leave at the end of the 70s. In the 80s and 90s as well. I've lost some people; with others we maintain relationships. Last year I visited a friend who lives in Washington. I'm probably going to Canada to see another friend — she is ill. Lots of people live in the West.

Velichko: You said once, back in the day when someone emigrated, it was like bidding farewell to them for good.

Ulitskaya: Yes, there was a time when it was hard to even send letters. I remember going to the Central Telegraph in early 90s, talking to my children in New York over the phone and paying crazy money for it. It was both difficult and expensive. Now there's mobiles. You press a button and hear a dear beloved voice. It was incommensurately harder back then.

Velichko: Have you ever reconnected with anyone after many years?

Ulitskaya: Yes, I have.

Velichko: Could you tell me a little about that?

Ulitskaya: I met a friend who I hadn't seen for 20 years and I was quite disappointed. All the common "valences" [chemical term: relating to or denoting electrons involved in or available for chemical bond formation] we had, were lost. She is interested in one thing; I am interested in another. And the warm relationship we used to have never got back on track. It's different. But we often go our separate ways with people who live in the same city. Some new people emerge. Actually, there's no fundamental difference. Even close friends — I see them once a year. Those who live in Paris or London — I also meet them once a year.

Velichko: Do you feel that people's mentality changes when they move from Russia to a European country?

Ulitskaya: No, I don't feel that way. That's probably because those people are highly intelligent, so our area of interests stays the same.

Velichko: You've already talked about reprinting written material in the USSR. Which one influenced you the most at that time?

Ulitskaya: The variety of reading was enormous. Samizdat was more than just poetry. There was political, fiction and even scientific content. It was philosophical and historical, to a large extent. We were reading all those authors, whose books are in stores without high demand nowadays, in secret. It took an effort to get works by Berdyaev or Solovyov. All these were old shabby books, either samizdat or YMCA Press. So, that was pretty interesting. Reading was very precious during those years.

Velichko: Did you watch any movies back then?

Ulitskaya: The first VCRs came pretty late. I remember the first movie I watched on VCR was "Jesus Christ Superstar". What an era, can you imagine?

Velichko: In your novel "Daniel Stein, Interpreter" one character says: "I have been interested all my life in the topic of personal freedom. It always seemed to me to be the supreme blessing". Do you agree with these words?

Ulitskaya: The thing is that freedom is very personal. It means different things to different people. Besides that, freedom is perceived differently at different life stages. For a child walking around kindergarten freedom means climbing over the fence. That's when it feels free. It manifests its freedom running away from its mother or grandmother to some more dangerous open space. That's why now I feel like a free person. I don't feel bound by anything. There is nothing in life that I would like to have, to do, to eat or to see — and I couldn't because of the lack of freedom. No. I can do it these days. Perhaps I may not have enough money to go to Mexico for the premiere

of the new play by a director acquaintance. It would cost a lot, and it's a little tough. But I don't feel like there are any restrictions to my freedom.

Velichko: When did you experience the most restrictions? And how has it changed over time?

Ulitskaya: Of course, in the Soviet times when restrictions were all around. It's ridiculous to talk today of how many of them there were. You see, a person is always surrounded by borders. Alone, in a cage, inside a very small space, like an animal. The other one conquers more space. Now, I think, I'm as free as a human can possibly be. But our restrictions do exist age restrictions, language restrictions, health restrictions, after all. There are always restrictions that, let's say, violate our freedom. But, most of all, it's age. A very significant border.

Velichko: You once said you didn't like Mikhail Gorbachev because of some particular events.

Ulitskaya: I never... I've never been interested in politics. Gorbachev was probably the most humane of them all. He loved his wife Raechka very much — this makes him stand out in my eyes. But generally, no. He became much more interesting after he stopped being a ruler. That's when he became a man of human interest. When he was the master of the country, he was not very different from the others. The military interventions in Georgia and the Baltic countries happened during his reign, after all.

Velichko: You once said he was an "evolving man".

Ulitskaya: Yes, certainly.

Velichko: Do you classify people into certain categories? This man is evolving, that one is something else.

Ulitskaya: No, I can't say I do this kind of collecting.

Velichko: Has your perception of freedom started to change during the period of Glasnost or in the 90s? You say that you feel like a free person now. In the USSR you didn't feel free, and...

Ulitskaya: Oh no, there were way more restrictions. Way more restrictions. It didn't affect me, but it did affect people around. When believers couldn't go to church, because someone would find out about it, report them, then they would be fired, that kind of thing. But it didn't really affect me. I didn't have a full-time job for a long time. So, there was no need to measure your behaviour with the committee of the party nor with trade union committee or with the bosses. I wasn't interested in this famous triangle stamped on your personal reference.

Velichko: So, there were more restrictions, then there were fewer restrictions, but did you feel like a free person the whole time?

Ulitskaya: No, why? Definitely not the whole time. I had the same path as my generation did. It was rather difficult... The restrictions were everywhere. The iron curtain was not only about travelling abroad but also about telling the truth. You know, I dropped out of society pretty early. I just didn't want to lie, to pretend. That's why I ran abroad. Now, for many years I've been living in a luxurious situation where I have neither superiors nor subordinates. There's no one who could tell me: (*knocks on the table*) come on. No one. I wanted that. And in a way, I've been fighting for that.

Velichko: You said once that every person lives in the time that they choose. And you live in the past in many ways.

Ulitskaya: We partially create the time that we live in. We live in the same city with some people at the same time. And yet the lifestyles are quite different. In fact, each person builds their life the way they want. Not everyone succeeds, that's another issue. Someone who's in prison can't build their life. And someone who works as a street cleaner, a Tajik — we have people in our yard who do not live the way they would like to. They have a degree, and they work as street cleaners, they send money and feed their whole village. They do their duty for the family; I feel nothing but respect for that. Fortunately, my destiny doesn't force me to do that. But when I was young, I would pass by the subway station checking if there was an advertisement looking for a night-time cleaning lady. Because that month I might have had the money, but the next month I would probably have had to...

Velichko: So, you don't have a feeling that you live either in the past or in the future, do you?

Ulitskaya: No, I live in the present.

Velichko: How did you imagine your future when you were a child?

Ulitskaya: I didn't think about it. I just remember that when I was a girl I wrote in my diary: "I'm going to finish school, enter Medical University, when I'm 23, I will get married and have a child". That's what I remember. I was around 10.

Velichko: Did it happen that way or...

Ulitskaya: Absolutely not that way.

Velichko: When did you begin to imagine your future?

Ulitskaya: No, I generally live for today. I'm not deeply concerned by tomorrow.

Velichko: And has it always been this way?

Ulitskaya: Pretty much.

Velichko: Did you wish a certain future for your children?

Ulitskaya: I guess so, but it didn't turn out the way that I wanted.

Velichko: I wonder if you could share the future you wanted.

Ulitskaya: In fact, it just turned out to be absolutely surprising. My eldest son lives in London and works in Moscow. He flies between the two cities a lot. He likes the job he's doing, but his life is very difficult. He has three kids in another city, so he's always in an airplane. Every week he goes here and there. And my youngest son is an interpreter, he makes money doing simultaneous interpretation. And actually, he's a musician. Unfortunately, with music it didn't work out the way he wanted it for himself. He's into music, but it's not his source of income. It is his source of joy and happiness. Well, he's still happy. Happy and satisfied. But I'm sorry that it didn't work out with music.

Velichko: You spoke today [at the presentation of your book] about one of the scenarios of the future that you've read. Humanity can destroy itself. You were asked what would happen in 30 years. Is the situation in Russia and Europe different in terms of the future?

Ulitskaya: No, absolutely not. The planet became small, it's the same. The borders that were significant 100 years ago are completely insignificant today. 19 Chernobyl disasters would destroy the whole world. And there are 18 more stations in the country built on the same principle as Chernobyl.

Velichko: You also spoke once about the volunteering movement. That there was nothing quite like that before. How did you start noticing and feeling it?

Ulitskaya: There is not a single person among my friends who is not engaged in either volunteering or charity activities. There was nothing like that before. And, on the one hand, it is very good. On the other hand, it indicates many areas of life where the government doesn't work properly. And people realised that they could spend their time and money to fix that hole. That's great. That's the right thing.

Velichko: At the beginning of the conversation, you said that European cities were like realms of fiction to you when you were a child.

Ulitskaya: Yes, of course they were. The first trip to Paris was very strange, because I felt like I was in a movie. There was no sense of reality. And now it's quite realistic. You come into the city, you see it, you meet people. You can live in any city in the world.

Velichko: Did Europe seem like a realm of fiction to you back then?

Ulitskaya: Of course. Sure.

Velichko: Was this feeling gone over time?

Ulitskaya: You see, the world is made in a planetary way. That's the last important thing I'm going to tell you today. The thing is that young people of today — I am very fond of them — are willing to work wherever they are able to obtain the most interesting job. They know languages already, and they easily learn new ones. I see these modern young people everywhere. They come from Russia, and they can study anywhere. In the 19th century, dozens of people studied in Heidelberg, Marburg. There were some people who studied in England — in Oxford or Cambridge. There were dozens of them. And now quite a few Russian youngsters' study in Western countries. They graduate as fully-fledged professionals who can work anywhere. And they choose either the most interesting job or the most high-paying. It depends on the trend as well as on personal values.

I think that the future belongs to those people. Those who come back to the home country in order to work and require some particular conditions. The creative conditions, conditions of freedom. And I think that today's authority doesn't contribute to those brilliant young people coming back here. When this changes, I think everything will work out for us. The amount of young people who don't want to come back being well-trained professionals is really huge. I do like these people. When I see them, I think of them as of our future. kaya

In London, I met a boy from Kazakhstan who received a good English education. He's currently working on his doctorate, and he's going to go back to Kazakhstan after that. That is the model, and I really like this kind of model. We'll see how it's going to be realised. I look at young people with much hope and joy. They are less aggressive than our generation, they are much more educated. And they are much freer. So, I wish for all of us good "movement" with all my heart. The last question.

Velichko: Let me ask you about faith. "I am deeply convinced that faith is deeply personal," as you once said. How has your relationship to faith changed throughout your life?

Ulitskaya: You know, I was baptised when I was young, and this decision was rather conscious. And for many years... In those years, the Orthodox church was more persecuted. The people I was talking to didn't belong to the official Orthodox church. It was a Russian priest who came back from France and some quantity of Russian re-émigrés. That was my social circle. So, I was very happy when the pressure was eased, and the church became legal. As for now, it disgusts me a lot, because it's politically bent, and it lost its Christian ideals. Today I'm experiencing some kind of separation. It has nothing in common with the fact that I'm a person of faith. But, apparently, these days I represent those people of faith who don't need any formal representation of their beliefs.