During the 900-day Nazi Siege the city of Saint Petersburg, then known as Leningrad, was forced to designate willy-nilly a colossal necropolis, the Piskaryovskoye Memorial, and lay to rest a half million ordinary citizens who died of starvation.

My friend Sergey and I stopped there on our drive up the Neva River while ago and walked the avenue before the well-ordered mounds, 186 of them altogether, each the length and width of a football field. Shostakovich’s “Leningrad Symphony” played from hidden speakers. A towering Motherland statue guarded one end of the cemetery, an Eternal Flame the other. Arranged on either side of the long central avenue the mounds were identical—broad, deep, massive earthen structures approximately three feet high. They were neatly leveled off across the top and beveled at the corners, as if abiding by an aesthetic that might govern the tidiest way to present mass graves. Carpets of grass blanketed the mounds—boundless emerald expanses, a delirium of green that would spread cheer in a park-like setting but served here as a monochromatic veneer for sorrow. The mounds held many thousands of deceased residents from each particular Siege year.

\[
500,000 \div 186, \text{ I thought.}
\]

It was tempting to use the calculator tool on my cellphone, but I fought the urge to be so precise.

Precision couldn’t matter in a place like this where souls had relinquished to the earth all pretense of individuality. Death would force that on every one of us at some point, true—but typical cemeteries, cemeteries that were of normal proportions, maintained the illusion of individuality and originality in one’s final repose, whether through uniquely carved sculptures marking the graves or custom tombstone photos depicting the deceased as they were in life. Death could be simple or extravagant in cemeteries of ordinary dimensions. It was as possible to bury the dead in plain pine boxes handcrafted by chanting monks as
it was to bury them in bacon-themed caskets. An illusion of control governed
the choice—and the normality, the modest and typical size of these Memory
Gardens, allowed that illusion.

Abnormally humongous, Piskaryovskoye had no margin for illusions, nor
the vanity that necessitates them. The scale disallowed it. The place had long
ago reduced everything to its lowest common denominator.

A swell of strings and timpani surged through the hidden speakers. The
music expressed urgency. It was that part of the “Leningrad Symphony” known
as the “Bolero of Shostakovich,” a pounding, relentless, high intensity passage to
rival Ravel. It made me want to pick up my pace, maybe even go dashing down
the central avenue toward the mounds, as if reaching them quickly were
important.

One hundred meters or so away a young couple with a 4 or 5 year old
child had stopped. Both adults looked to be fiddling with their cellphones while
their daughter frolicked about. She twirled down the avenue, perhaps feeling
the music, and then all at once scampered up the sloping grassy side of one of
the mounds. Neither parent glanced away from their devices. Predictably, the
little girl did what children do. She lay lengthwise in the grass at the beveled top
of the mound and rolled on down.

The incongruity struck me, this display of whimsy. It was something I’d
failed to factor in, the way life and its indomitable joy might occasionally stride
step for step alongside the gravity of this place. It didn’t seem like a breech of
decorum though. A child could behave here as children do whenever they
encounter grassy open spaces in the city.

Granite slabs as big as barn doors abutted each of the mounds. Sergey
pointed to them. “There was no way to acknowledge individuals buried, only
the year.” I looked at the slabs and the dates carved into them:

1941,
1941,
1941.

And then

1942,
1942,
If a family had lost someone in 1943, survivors could come here and choose one of the huge mounds marked “1943” to stand before and grieve.

“How impersonal, it’s true,” Sergey said, “but there was no other way.” He didn’t have to shrug. His tone was shrugged enough. He had propped his sunglasses up on the top of his head, and the mirrored lenses reflected the sky.

My translator, my guide, my first friend in Russia. Sergey was a musician, classically trained, a graduate of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. For two years I had come here every six months in an effort to learn enough about the collision of history, nature and culture in this one-time Communist nation to write credibly about it. When I needed a translator, someone at the university in Saint Petersburg pointed me in Sergey’s direction.

“As you can see,” he said, “1942 was the worst year by a mile.” His sweeping gesture took in several dozen mounds marked 1942. “Over 10,000 people buried on Easter Sunday that year alone. And the next day? Nine thousand. Day after day. Just like that.”

Statistics were easier to tally than actual individual deaths. That was not the most horrible thing about this atrocity, however. Mass graves, by definition, underscored the abstract and anonymous quality of the loss. They emphasized the collective aspect, too, the group dimension. I cast my gaze across the tranquility, noting a dense stand of leafy birches delineating the northern border and also birches along the southern border. They bracketed the necropolis, as if to define a subset in a math problem: a line of demarcation that separated the living from the dead. I looked from mound to mound, each as symmetrical as the one before.

Math always asked you to perform functions within the brackets first before attempting to perform those functions that lay outside the brackets.

I had seen a wartime photograph of a woman pulling a makeshift sled through the snowy streets of Leningrad, the tightly shrouded body of a dead child tied to the sled. She pulled it through the snow to a destination such as this. Multiply that times all the Leningrad losses. The sheer numbers alone forced one into math’s bloodless realm, its nameless, faceless, fleshless realm—which was Piskaryovskoye’s realm, too.
The move here had moved everything and everyone to that realm—without pride, without identity, scarcely recognizable any more as human. Starving people weren’t just skinny with bones protruding. Starvation left bodies misshapen, distended here, swollen there, caved in, withered, the skin surface oddly blue. I had read enough of historian Anna Reid’s LENINGRAD to know that a starving person’s last hours were spent in an agonized pantomime of eating—fingers to the lips, mouth working, tongue flitting as if tasting, tasting.

Sometimes math helped us make an exchange, especially when dealing with very large numbers. Math helped us place one particular thing—like a human being—within something more comprehensive in order to make the enormity of the sum manageable. A daughter, for instance, was no longer a daughter but got subsumed into the domain \( x \), which contained the Leningrad half million. Piskaryovskoye had had the unenviable but necessary task of managing the enormity of its sum. A deathscape of this immensity could only be understood mathematically.

I glanced at Sergey. He had dropped the mirrored shades over his eyes and was gazing off toward the Motherland statue at the avenue’s end. He had shared the story of how his grandmother, hardly more than a girl at age 20, had escaped Leningrad. This was three months into the Siege, during that first brutal wave of the blockade, when the mortality rate was rocketing: 8000 dead on Monday, 7000 on Tuesday. I noted my knee-jerk tendency to round up or round down, as if to simplify the numbers since what they denoted was anything but simple. Sergey’s grandmother fled across frozen Lake Ladoga northward, to Murmansk, and that’s where she stayed.

The Siege eventually lifted, 1944. The war eventually ended, 1945.

And she never came back. In Murmansk she married Sergey’s grandfather. Sergey’s mother was born there, and a couple decades later Sergey, too. He alone of his family had returned to Leningrad. By then it was Saint Petersburg once more, its original name from the Imperial era, and the Conservatory offered him a scholarship in Choral Conducting. His grandmother had a good long life. She was treasured and revered by her children and her grandchildren alike. She forged a living lineage for her progeny that had
nothing to do with mass graves like this. The woman lived to be 90 and was blessed in being able to hold several great-grandbabies in her arms.

Sergey was here today, at Piskaryovskoye, the way I was, as a visitor to a historic site, like an onlooker at an exhibition, someone peering into the sorrow from the outside, separated from it by grass and soil, cordoned off from it by life itself, saved by the pulse that leapt in our own bodies.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. He turned the mirrored shades on me, and his expression was of course unreadable. I pressed my lips together and found myself nodding. It was like being in a zoo for sadness.

The Motherland statue held her arms outstretched, a garland of oak leaves, plaited and braided as a mourning banner, draping from them. All of this was gigantically cast in bronze. Her eyes gazed placidly over the well-ordered rows of mounds, 93 to the left, 93 to the right, as if she were well-pleased with the pragmatic arrangement. The effect was of the Pieta, but on an overpoweringly massive scale—the Pieta to the 10th power. Unlike the Madonna cradling her crucified son, this Motherland could not clasp any of her dead to her. Her arms would be empty save for the rigid mourning banner. Nonetheless, she appeared to be striding toward the graves of her children.

Carved into a stone wall at the base of the statue, a poem by Olga Berggolts reinforced the unknowable character of the dead:

Here lie Leningraders—
Here are the citizens—men, women and children.
They defended you, Leningrad,
With all their lives.
We cannot list their noble names here
There are so many of them under the eternal protection of granite...

I stared at the Cyrillic letters and pondered. In his novels, Tolstoy lavished loving attention on Petersburg and didn’t neglect any of its splendor: opera nights at the Mariinsky, fountain-splashed parks, magnificent marble palaces along Nevsky Prospekt, the latticework of rivers and canals that laced its way through the city. In War & Peace, the protagonist Pierre Bezukhov played a mischievous prank once as a young man—tying a small black bear to a
Petersburg policeman and tossing them both into the Moika River. Scene after scene featured the imperial city’s elegance. The formal dinner parties Tolstoy chronicled lasted all night and were as luminous as chandeliers.

But even a great literary genius could not imagine the horrors that would devastate this place. The horrors transcended human imagination, genius or not. Scarcely 30 years after Tolstoy’s passing, the cherished playground of his literary kingdom was a cityscape altered and enlarged by death on an industrial scale.

The last lines of the poem by Olga Berggolts were inscribed on the granite pedestal at the feet of the Motherland statue: “Know this, those who regard these stones. No one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten.”

I studied the words and thought about the stonemason who had struck the letters. In my mind’s eye I could see his hand gripping the iron chisel. A reasonable man, hardworking, 3rd generation mason, son of Leningrad, his hammer poised to strike, an artisan surrounded by stone. It seemed to me even if you couldn’t read Russian you’d nonetheless know what these words meant. They meant the dead would always be present among the living in Saint Petersburg now, a compelling census in ratio even to the current residents.

Piskaryovskoye was a shadow city, a ghostly doppelganger forever attached to the spirited living one, a city of silence occupying the same zip code. As much as the art, architecture, ballet and opera were solidly here, undeniably here, so too were the mass graves.

“You know, she spent the entire 900-day Siege in Leningrad,” Sergey was saying. He nodded to the poem. “Olga Berggolts.” He told me that during the bombardment she broadcast daily over the sole radio station that was still functional. She became known as the “Voice of Leningrad.” In 1971, a Soviet cosmonaut named a planet in a distant galaxy for her, 3093 Berggolts. A crater on Venus was named for her, too.

I smiled at our inadequate attempts to immortalize somehow, in our quite mortal way, events that blew the doors off anything we could comprehend.

Dwarfed by the Motherland statue, Sergey and I stood there. I tried to focus on the information he was sharing, tried to fathom the quite heroic calculus of Olga Berggolts.

“She received the Order of Lenin,” he let me know.
But it was difficult, very difficult, to hold onto his words.

Piskaryovskoye asked death to be at once abstract and hard to conceptualize (“500,000”) but also palpable and present (“never forgotten.”) It occurred to me that we thought about things “not forgotten” in very specific ways even when they denoted absurdly large numbers.

Let ‘x’ represent the subset of things forgotten, I thought.

Something not forgotten was thus expressed:

- (x).

Being here now was a way of not forgetting. Bringing a flower on Victory Day or laying a plastic poppy on the graves—also, a way of not forgetting. It’s not that we need to remember, I thought. It’s that we won’t forget. I turned to Sergey. “Not forgetting is different from being remembered.” I pointed to the word “forgotten” on the pedestal: забыт. “Do you know the etymology?”

He stared at the letters and took a moment. “If it were a musical term, I could probably tell you.” He was the choral director of an a capella group called Nevsky Style. “Of course, if it were musical, it would be in Italian.”

If we didn’t ever think again about the Siege of Leningrad, that wouldn’t mean it had ceased to exist. This was not like that tree falling in the woods: did it make a sound? The Siege of Leningrad functioned apart from us. It was not reliant on us to reconstruct it.

I turned to Sergey. “‘Not forgotten’ means they are always in the back of our mind. They’re with us. We don’t have to summon them up. They are not forgotten.”

“Not quite present,” he said, “but...”

“Sergey—your son is 19. He grew up with all this practically in his backyard. But you know how it is with kids today, distracted by cell phones and devices. I mean, my son is 22, my stepson 16. I get it. They spend a lot of time on social media. How real is any of this for your son? Does he think about it?”

“The suffering was personal for the ones who lost someone but also for the ones who survived it. And the ones they knew. And the ones they knew. Think of my grandmother. Think of her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren.”
I took this in and nodded. Exponentiality. If everyone who died had at least one surviving family member who went on to have two kids, that would be 1.5 million. If everyone who survived, 1 million people, went on to have two kids—and so forth. More than the population of Saint Petersburg by now. More than a living city full of people who were connected palpably to this place. Multiply those people by the ones who had cousins or who had a friend or who had merely heard about the Siege, like me—someone who had come from half a world away. The progression had a House That Jack Built kind of feel.

Sergey watched me do the math. “Social media can’t touch this, Barbara. In fact it is beside the point. Technology? No impact.”

What he meant was, the Siege would never belong only to Time or to the Ages. What he meant was, there would never really come a moment without Leningrad.

Rename it. Call it Saint Petersburg. No change of name could change a thing. Math could not reduce it. It was absolute and sacrosanct.

A few more visitors drifted into Piskaryovskoye. Others, like me and Sergey, drifted out. We drove in silence along the Neva River embankment, past the marble palaces and stone mansions fronting it, past the pleasure boats and jet-skis out on the sparkling water.

Maybe the inhabitants of the planet Berggolts 3093 in that quite distant galaxy would scan the null darkness tonight and find us, a tiny blue glow amid the stars. They would of course have no way of knowing how we had charged them with the task of holding a celestial space for their poet namesake. Her words honored those who sometimes could do nothing more valiant than curl up in a dark desperate corner, like winterkill creatures—their organs failing, each breath weaker than the one before, defending Leningrad, defending Leningrad.