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Anatomy of a Gamechanger: BBC Radio 4's Life and Fate

Leslie McMurtry[1]

"Afternoon plays on Radio 4 get two million listeners in one hearing, on average, while a novel is lucky to sell 10,000 copies. Next week's experiment has the potential to change dramatically the literary stature of Vasily Grossman, and our understanding of the realities of Soviet Russia."

Kate Chisholm, 2011, p. 62

The challenge, historian David Hendy has said of radio in the 21st century, is to balance "radio's ubiquity and simplicity . . . with something more fitting for a national institution dedicated to cultural leadership" (HENDY, 2007, p.142). This crucial balance says much about the audience expected of radio on the BBC and underlines some reasons why Radio 4, as steered by Head of Drama Alison Hindell, would have initiated the adaptation of Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate,* a goal realised in 2011. Before the broadcast, few people in the UK would have heard of *Life and Fate*. Even among Russian specialists, the book did not have a high profile. Post-broadcast, Random House printed in excess of 13,000 copies just to keep up with demand. The book topped the charts on Amazon.com, and downloadable versions of the play topped iTunes broadcasts. Journalist Pete Naughton identified the key tenets of *Life and Fate*'s success as its being "mind-expanding drama," well-adapted, with a "big-name cast" (NAUGHTON, 2011). I would argue that *Life and Fate* has made a clear transition from semi-obscure Russian novel into this nexus of radio simplicity and the

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vanguard of cultural leadership. What follows is a presentation and analysis of the journey of the book from page to airwaves.

1. History of *Life and Fate*

In 1905, the book's author was born in the Ukrainian town of Berdichev to a pair of "second guild," intellectual middle-class Jews. The Russified name he used all his life was Vasily Grossman. He wanted to study chemistry as the sciences were seen as prestigious careers, riding the crest of a Soviet future. He attended university but it took him six years to get through his course of study; writing held more interest for him ultimately than chemistry. He became a moderately successful writer of short stories and an unfinished patriotic novel in the 1930s. Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence to suggest that Stalin himself blocked Grossman from winning the Stalin Prize for his novel *Stepan Kol'chugin*, but certainly Grossman's abilities made him enemies (BIT-YUNAN, 2011).

His second wife persuaded him not to bring his mother to live with them—a decision that would haunt him the rest of his life. He did not intervene in the "Great Purges" of the 1930s when his cousin was taken away and he was sent for interrogation in the Lubyanka; however, he did rush to adopt his second wife's children when she was under suspicion for her first husband's "suspect" activities. Having avoided national service by a tubercular (mis?)diagnosis, he still idolized the men at the front and was sent on assignment by the military paper *Red Star* from 1941-45 as their (eventual) leading correspondent. His articles were read avidly due to his ability to get genuine interviews from just about anybody, his courageous ability to tell the truth above and beyond mere propaganda, his bravery (and sheer luck) at being one step ahead of the Germans, and his eye for detail. He had incredible memory recall and didn't take notes during his interviews, rewriting conversations during the night. His article on being among the first to enter Treblinka was used as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials. His later fiction, including the novel *For a Just*

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Cause, was not held in as high esteem in the USSR. His last novel is translated in English under two different titles, depending on the translator: *Forever Flowing/Everything Flows***.**

The "sequel" to *For a Just Cause* was completed in the early 1960s and was based on Grossman's experiences at the front, specifically the siege of Stalingrad. Often the comparison is made to *War and Peace*, Grossman's favorite reading (it was the only thing he could read during the war and he read it twice). With the death of Stalin, Grossman ventured to send *Life and Fate* out for publication. It was seized by the KGB; rather than arrest Grossman, they arrested the book. After writing a plea to Khrushchev, Grossman was told that his book would not see publication for 250 years. Mikhail Suslov, Communist Party's chief ideologue, claimed it would bring "comfort to the enemy" (MARTIN, 2011, p.60). Grossman died a few years later. Two microfilm copies he had given to friends were smuggled to the West, but the Russian ex-pat press were slow to print. *Life and Fate* still remains relatively unknown in English, even among Russian-speakers and has been considered inconsequential in Russia and Ukraine. *Life and Fate* was first published in Russian (out of France) in 1980. "The new Russian intellectual elite, already familiar with Orwell and Koestler, Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus" were sceptical of Grossman, "because in their eyes he was too close to the system he was trying to debunk" (ZINIK, 2011).

In 2008, Mark Damazer, then Controller of Radio 4, came back from holiday having read *Life and Fate,* telling everyone he met that it was the most "amazing book I'd ever read. . . . I absolutely knew that I would have to use such patronage and power as I had at the BBC to do it" (MARTIN, 2011, p. 61). Thus began the process of adapting *Life and Fate;* after Damazer had left the BBC, he commissioned Head of Drama, Alison Hindell, to produce it. By January 2010, the plays had begun to be divied up between the adapters. In the crudest sense, Hindell says the team pursued the "dramatic highlights" of the book and how broadcast structure would affect this.

2. Structure

Perhaps the greatest innovation of this adaptation of *Life and Fate* is its structure. The challenge faced by the *Life and Fate* team was that the book was said to be "undramatizable[2]." With more than a thousand named characters in Grossman's work, the production team were in the end able to reduce it to 159, played by 67 actors.

Table 1 – List of Characters and Cast for Radio 4 Plays (Radio Times listings, 17-23 September 2011)

Viktor Pavlovich Shtrum, *a physicist*	Kenneth Branagh	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Krymov in Moscow* *Viktor and the Academy*
Lyuda (Lyudmilla) Shaposhnikova, *his wife*	Greta Scacchi	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Krymov in Moscow* *Viktor and the Academy*
Nadya Shtruma, *their daughter*	Ellie Kendrick	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Krymov in Moscow* *Viktor and the Academy*
Alexandra Vladmirovna Shaposhnikova, *Lyuda's mother*	Ann Mitchell	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Fortress Stalingrad* *Viktor and the Academy*
Anna Shtrum, *Viktor's mother*	Janet Suzman	*Anna's Letter*
Pyotr Sokolov, *Viktor's colleague*	Nigel Anthony	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Viktor and the Academy*
Marya (Masha) Sokolova, *his wife*	Harriet Walter	*Viktor & Lyuda* *Krymov in Moscow* *Viktor and the Academy*
Leonid Sergeyevich Madyarov	Ralph Ineson	*Viktor & Lyuda*
Zhenya (Yevgenia) Shaposhnikova, *Lyuda's sister*	Raquel Cassidy	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once* *Novikov's Story* *Krymov in Moscow* *Viktor and the Academy*
Nikolai Krymov, *Zhenya's ex-husband*	David Tennant	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once* *Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive* *A Hero of the Soviet Union*

[2] Though Zinik says the confessional nature of the book makes it "in a way, as if it were scripted for radio – a captivating narrator talking to his listeners."

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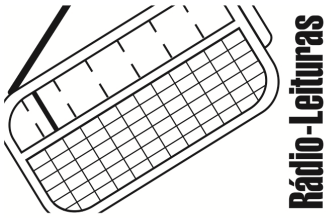
		Krymov in Moscow
Jenni Genrikhovna, *former governess to Shaposhnikov family*	Eleanor Bron	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once*
Seryozha Shaposhnikov, *Lyuda's nephew*	Freddie Fox	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once* *Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Lenya Viktorov, *Vera's lover*	Luke Treadaway	*Vera and Her Pilot*
Vera Spiridonova, *Lyuda's niece*	Morven Christie	*Vera and Her Pilot* *Fortress Stalingrad*
Stepan Fyodorovich Spiridonov, *Vera's father*	Kenneth Cranham	*Vera and Her Pilot* *A Hero of the Soviet Union* *Fortress Stalingrad*
Pavel Andreyevich Andreyev	Malcolm Tierney	*Vera and Her Pilot* *A Hero of the Soviet Union* *Fortress Stalingrad*
Dr Sofya Levinton, *Zhenya's friend*	Sara Kestelman	*Journey*
Abarchuk, *Lyuda's ex-husband*	Malcolm Storry	*Abarchuk*
Colonel Pytor Pavlovich Novikov, *Zhenya's lover*	Don Gilet	*Novikov's Story*
Obersturmbannführer Liss	Samuel West	*Journey*
Adolf Eichmann	John Sessions	*Journey*
Mikhail Mostovskoy	Peter Marinker	*Journey*
Rubin	Peter Polycarpou	*Abarchuk*
Captain Grekov	Joseph Millson	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Katya Vengrova	Katie Angelou	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Peter Bach	Geoffrey Streatfeild	*Lieutenant Peter Bach* *Fortress Stalingrad*
Zina	Jessica Raine	*Lieutenant Peter Bach* *Fortress Stalingrad*
Stalin	Philip Madoc	*Viktor and the Academy*
Dementiy Trifonovich Getmanov	Philip Jackson	*Novikov's Story*
Shishakov	Jack Shepherd	*Viktor and the Academy*
Gen. Von Paulus	Matthew Marsh	*Fortress Stalingrad*
General Nyeudobnov	Peter Wright	*Novikov's Story*
General Rodimtsev	Bruce Alexander	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once*
Major Byerozhkin	Sam Dale	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once* *Fortress Stalingrad*
District Inspector Grishin	Peter Polycarpou	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once*
Limonov	Adrian Scarborough	*Krymov & Zhenya- Lovers Once*
Gen. Schmidt	Elliot Cowan	*Fortress Stalingrad*



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Col. Adam	Jonathan Cullen	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Sergeant Eisenaug	Michael Shelford	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Natalya	Alison Pettit	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Skotnoy	Jonathan Forbes	*Vera and Her Pilot*
Boris	Carl Prekopp	*Viktor and the Academy*
Anna	Alex Tregear	*Viktor and the Academy*
Katsenelenbogen	Ewan Bailey	*Krymov in Moscow*
NKVD Interrogator	Elliot Levey	*Krymov in Moscow*
Solmatin	Carl Prekopp	*Vera and Her Pilot*
Mukhin	Simon Bubb	*Vera and Her Pilot*
Zakabluka	Gerard McDermott	*Vera and Her Pilot*
David, *a young boy*	Laurence Belcher	*Journey*
Musya	Christine Kavanagh	*Journey*
Lyusia	Deelvya Meir	*Journey*
Khmelkov	Henry Devas	*Journey*
Bakhartov	Alun Raglan	*Abarchuk*
Magar	Sean Baker	*Abarchuk*
Mishanin	Jonathan Forbes	*Abarchuk*
Vasya	Stephen Hogan	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Lyakhov	Carl Prekopp	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Polyakov	Peter Polycarpou	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Batrakov	James Lailey	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Zubarev	Gerard McDermott	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Bunchuk	Jonathan Forbes	*Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive*
Gerne	Lloyd Thomas	*Lieutenant Peter Bach*
Fresser	Michael Shelford	*Lieutenant Peter Bach*
The Goalkeeper	Tony Bell	*Lieutenant Peter Bach*
Hospital Sister	Christine Kavanagh	*Lieutenant Peter Bach*
Hospital Orderly	David Seddon	*Lieutenant Peter Bach*
Nicky	Simon Bubb	*Novikov's Story*
Vershkov	Stuart Mcloughlin	*Novikov's Story*
Galina Terentyevna Getmanova	Jane	*Novikov's Story*

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	Whittenshaw	
Mashuk	Peter Polycarpou	*Novikov's Story*
Pryakhin	Gerard McDermott	*A Hero of the Soviet Union*
Ogibalov	Carl Prekopp	*A Hero of the Soviet Union*
Makuladze	James Lailey	*A Hero of the Soviet Union*
Sergeyevna	Christine Kavanagh	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Hitler's Orderly	David Seddon	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Stalin's Secretary	Tony Bell	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Petenkoffer	Lloyd Thomas	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Driver	Jude Akuwudike	*Fortress Stalingrad*
Markov	Simon Bubb	*Viktor and the Academy*
Chepyzhin	James Greene	*Viktor and the Academy*
Vanya	Gerard McDermott	*Viktor and the Academy*

Two structures consistent with the BBC presentation of adaptations were immediately obvious: the Classic Serial format, an hour-long drama broadcast; or the 45-minute structure of an Afternoon Play or a series of these. Ultimately, not one drama slot per week, or even per day, was given over to *Life and Fate;* every drama slot during one week of broadcast, from Sunday, 18 September to Sunday, 25 September, was linked to *Life and Fate*[3].

Table 2 – BBC Radio 4 Scheduling, *Life and Fate,* 18 – 25 September 2011

All plays based on translation by Robert Chandler

Sunday, 18 Sep	**Monday, 19 Sep**	**Tuesday, 20 Sep**	**Wednesday, 21 Sep**	**Thursday, 22 Sep**	**Friday, 23 Sep**	**Saturday, 24 Sep**	**Sunday, 25 Sep**
	Woman's Hour Drama (15 mins) *Anna's*	Woman's Hour Drama (15 mins) *Vera and*	Woman's Hour Drama (15 mins) *Abarchuk*	Woman's Hour Drama (15 mins) *Lieutenant*	Woman's Hour Drama (15 mins) *A Hero of*		

[3] However, as Kate Chisholm points out, Radio 3 has in a sense performed a similar thematic structuring to a week, but with one composer, such as Bach, Beethoven, or Tchaikovsky.

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	Letter Dram. by Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell	*Her Pilot* Dram. by Dir. by Alison Hindell	Dram. by Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell and Jonquil Panting	*Peter Bach* Dram. by Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Alison Hindell	*the Soviet Union* Dram. by Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Alison Hindell		
Classic Serial (1 hour) *Viktor & Lyuda* Dram. by Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell	Afternoon Play (45 mins) *Krymov & Zhenya-Lovers Once* Dram. by Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Jonquil Panting	Afternoon Play (45 mins) *Journey* Dram. by Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell	Afternoon Play (45 mins) *Building 6/1- Those Who Were Still Alive* Dram. by Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Jonquil Panting	Afternoon Play (45 mins) *Novikov's Story* Dram. by Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell and Jonquil Panting	Afternoon Play (45 mins) *Krymov in Moscow* Dram. by Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Alison Hindell and Jonquin Panting	Saturday Play (1 hour) *Fortress Stalingrad* Dram. By Jonathan Myerson Dir. by Alison Hindell	Classic Serial (1 hour) *Viktor & the Academy* Dram. By Mike Walker Dir. by Alison Hindell

The decision was also made, in response to the novel's own structure of following one set of characters, then another, then another, that the plays would be interlinked and follow "strands" from the original novel. It would not be necessary to listen to all the plays in order to be able to listen to and understand one.

Two writers were assigned to the task of adaptation. To quote Tim Martin, "between them responsible for a slew of high-profile radio adaptations from Dickens and Pasternak to Solzhenitsyn and Günter Grass," both Jonathan Myerson and Mike Walker were experienced adapters (MARTIN, 2011, p. 61). Interested in a text-based approach, it was Myerson who generated the semi-improvised asides in which characters "talk to camera." Here the line between fiction and reality, between radio and other media, becomes blurred; the idea, at least in studio, was for the character to be interviewed, though by whom or about what exactly was unclear. Some of these asides do, in fact, remain in the finished 13-part adaptation. On the other hand,

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Walker was interested in "the Chekhovian short story model." Invoking what Grossman said about Chekhov writing one long novel/play about Russia at the turn of the 20th century, Walker suggested taking that approach to the airwaves, in a series of plays that were cumulative, self-contained, and, in a surprising move for radio, where many of the stories of the adaptation never overlap.

In the end, both writers' approaches were incorporated. Myerson focused on the strands of the narrative that culminated in the Battle of Stalingrad, 1942, and those that involved the character Krymov. Walker concentrated on the main thread of the Shtrum family. At this early stage in the production process, there was discussion about whether to use a narrator. "This is a documentary novel," said Myerson. "You don't necessarily expect an overall narrator, it just drops you straight in and says, 'this is what happened on this day'" (WATSON, 2011). This narrative device was rejected, partially because of the pressure of time and partially because Hindell felt Grossman's philosophy was implicit in the storylines and dialogue and did not need a narrator's guiding touch (though in place of a narrator we have monologues from Grossman, Shtrum, and Nadya). Hindell wanted the listener to be left with a "panoramic impression." This, however, made it challenging to balance the already perilous line between overt didacticism and the necessary historical context for listener comprehension. Walker noted that a lot of the material in *Life and Fate* had to be "pushed," ie, made prominent, but in a way that the audience felt it had "learned," not been "told."

Issues inherent in this process included whether listeners could keep track of such a large cast. Also the story was completely unknown to 99% of the population, unlike an adaptation of Dickens, for example. Indeed, some listeners felt the "blanket scheduling" was impossible and disjointed. One listener wondered why the story could not be in the Classic Serial slot once a week for eight weeks. Despite these kinds of difficulties, Hindell felt sure that a series longer than one week risked alienation or a breakdown in listener concentration. Journalist Elisabeth Mahoney praised the "gaps between" to "absorb, and sometimes recover from, the intensity" (MAHONEY, 2011).

Many listeners praised the structure as adventurous and imaginative. One listener expressed a desire to have drama like *Life and Fate* on television as he or she could find nothing of similar calibre to watch on TV. Jane Thynne, a radio reviewer, suggested that the gamble of filling every slot on the network with the "epic paid off fabulously" (THYNNE, 2011, p. 16). Aya Vandenbussche, who listened to almost all the plays the week of broadcast via downloading, felt wholly comfortable with the structuring. "The episodic structure of the plays makes them independent. Though there is an order to the chain of events, you can listen to them in the 'wrong' order and they will still work" (2011).

3. Genre

Often the comparison with *Life and Fate* is made to *War and Peace*, Grossman's favorite reading material. The adapters of *Life and Fate* have also referred to the "Chekhovian" nature of *Life and Fate,* as previously mentioned. Pigeonholing the adaptations into genres is difficult given that each play must be considered in its own right and as part of a whole—marketing *Life and Fate,* however, requires the kind of work John Frow calls "strategies for occasions" (FROW, 2006, p.13). Frow goes on to describe genre as a "context-sensitive drop-down menu" in a computer programme (2006, p.84). In this sense, the layers of *Life and Fate* the adaptation can be seen as a variety of modes emanating from a central whole. Cues are offered at the margins of the text (such as TV trails, iPlayer text, and broadcaster introduction). For example, readers of the newspaper reviews of *Life and Fate* might have gone into pieces like *Viktor & Lyuda* with an expectation of a Solzhenitsyn-style look at totalitarian regime and would have been surprised by a family drama, framed by war. Nevertheless, it is not necessary for genre cues surrounding *Life and Fate* need be taken up as sacred. In the words of Frow, "any text communicated to an *unknown* audience . . . must

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negotiate its relationship with strangers whose response cannot fully gauge in advance" (2006, p. 115).

Ukrainian author Zinovy Zinik wondered whether *Life and Fate* might not turn out to be a "Russian version of *The Archers"* (ZINIK, 2011). In the *Times Literary Supplement,* he elaborated upon this, calling *Life and Fate* "conventional." Certainly, from Zinik's tone we are meant to feel uncomfortable that *Life and Fate* and *The Archers* should be mentioned in the same sentence. Frow suggests that "our experiences of a text always [are] organised in advance—by expectations about what *kind* of text it is, if nothing else" (2006, p.27). With this in mind, it is somewhat puzzling for Zinik to frame *Life and Fate* as an anti-Stalinist *Archers,* as it was never defined that way in publicity. *Life and Fate* was advertised as an "event" rather than a dramatic, ongoing serial, even if Chisholm wondered "will we be able to slot, Ambridge-style, back into the story without skipping a beat?" (CHISHOLM, 2011, p. 62). I did at one point wonder whether the opening monologue of the Classical Serial, taken from Grossman's letter to Khrushchev would cause new readers wading in to think that *Life and Fate* was a memoir by Viktor Shtrum, rather than a novel by Vasily Grossman.

> Perversely, it is now much harder for us to see what there was in Soviet experience apart from tragedy. Between us and the felt reality of the time there now lies a barrier, which is a kind of photographic negative of the problem Grossman faced in trying to introduce any tragedy into a compulsorily optimistic picture . . . Otherwise, we risk treating the past merely as a theatre in which our own wisdom is confirmed (2011, p. 20).

Vandenbussche, on the other hand, despite approaching the plays from an oversaturated historical background, believed one of *Life and Fate*'s great virtues was its lack of dogma.

> It doesn't feel like *Life and Fate* tries to shove an ideology in your face. In fact, the exposure of Stalin's cruel regime is heartbreaking rather than angry, the doubts and second guessing and conflict of the party are difficult, confusing and painful. . . . *Life and Fate* has taken the side of the people rather than the nations, which might not be

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> the communist thing to do, but it is very interesting and makes for a very moving drama (2011).

Necessarily in an adaptation of this kind, scenarios and characters which were present in the original novel had to be cut from the radio broadcast. When I interviewed Hindell, she emphasized that the cuts were made in order to allow the dramatic heart of the novel to emerge. One notable absence from the plays is the story of Darensky on the steppes. Its absence was made much more visible to anyone attending the Life and Fate Conference on 9 September 2011, as many of the impressive, decorative banners created for the Grossman Centre in Turin which adorned the college courtyard quoted extensively from Darensky. Hindell said the decision to leave it out hinged on the fact that it didn't have enough that was "different about it. And horses aren't great on radio." All joking aside, the tension between dramatic necessity and faithful adaptation was brought to the fore during the question-and-answer section of the "Radio Dramatization" panel of the Oxford conference, which we will later return to. This, however, links the concept of "blanks" with the practical necessity of drama. Wolfgang Iser has discussed in his work the idea of *literary work* having two poles; "the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realizing accomplished by the reader" (ISER, 1980, p.106). Iser's theoretical approach to (prose) literature corresponds with great aptness to *Life and Fate,* whose numerous characters coupled with the author's lack of moral judgement passed make it an ideal "tacit invitation to find the missing link" (ISER, 1980, p. 112). For example, different characters presented to the reader can be said to represent different modes of living, which the author presents, makes valid, then they fall away in folds. One character who did not appear at all in the radio adaptation of *Life and Fate* was Ikonnikov.

Alex Danchev, of the University of Nottingham, argued persuasively in his paper, "Vasily Grossman's Ethics" that Ikonnikov, the "holy fool" in the German labor camp, is a moral witness and presents Grossman's case for the ethics of small acts of human

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kindness. There are many examples of this in the novel which help it achieve a sense of morale-boosting. In this ethic, the beneficiary of the act of kindness need not be deserving, and the agent may not be comprehending. However, Hindell argued for the necessity of morality in the *Life and Fate* adaptations "being implicit in every storyline." As she had said earlier on the panel, "He [Grossman] never makes you judge them [the characters]. He leaves the reader to reach their own conclusions . . . some characters are not brave when they should be, some are extremely brave when they needn't be." Danchev believed that Ikonnikov personified the moral centre of *Life and Fate.* However, as a character in the novel, through "individual situations" combined "into a referential field," Ikonnikov falls away and is not presented as the hero of *Life and Fate* (ISER, 1980, p. 116). Though Hindell referred to Ikonnikov as "a passive, static character" who "would have been simply boring on radio," there is the creation of an intriguing blank by not including him. Hindell went on, "If it's too explicit, it can be didactic." The ethic of senseless kindness which Danchev had illuminated shows the subtle shift between moralizing in a novel and on radio.

4. Sound and Fury: The Battle of Stalingrad on Radio

Mike Walker joked that in the Saturday Play, *Fortress Stalingrad,* we are presented with "Stalingrad on a Radio 4 budget!" ("LIFE AND FATE: THE RADIO DRAMATIZATION," 2011). Jonathan Myerson, the adapter for this play, admitted in the Oxford panel that he tells his own students not to try to write battle scenes on radio. There are a variety of reasons for this prohibition. The principal one involves timing. It can be very difficult to pick out the relevant information at the correct speed on radio, as opposed to film or television, so narrative either tends to lag behind slightly or risk becoming confusing. Hindell explains that "The Saturday Play was the first one recorded and the first one written after [Lieutenant] *Peter Bach*," and that Jonathan Myerson "has a tendency to write obliquely." A battle on radio presents the

listener necessarily with a profusion of voices and noise. How successfully can the Battle of Stalingrad as described by Grossman be evoked on air?

The work of Dermot Rattigan and Susan Douglas on the subject of sound perception and identification lends us some answers. According to Rattigan,

> in using the continuous past form of the verb "to hear" it is understood that all sound heard by an individual is post-impulse sound. The sound has been caused to happen and is metaphorically dying, decaying or dead, before our brains have identified or perceived what the sound is meant to be (2000, p.124).

To paraphrase Hindell, the problem with a gun on radio is you don't know who shot it. Dialogue has to support the actions in order that the brain can make some sense of them in a reasonable amount of time. Rattigan's insight into timing and brain perception is very helpful here: the brain's ability to receive, filter and recognize a single sound in isolation is relatively simple and quick. However, the more information provided, the better the aural picture will be. For example, a simple screech will, as Hindell suggested, not give a very clear idea as to the action. However, if a listener perceives a screech, then a scream, and a bang, and breaking glass, almost instantaneously, the probability is high he will associate it with a car crash. The brain has pre-programmed sets of sounds as an associated group to create a new singular sound. Aural imaging, therefore, is the collecting separate sounds, following a sequential experiential pattern to form unitary sound by belonging together.

In the case of *Fortress Stalingrad,* "a moment of confusion or uncertainty may follow if the associated sounds do not occur as the brain constructs a new and different image for the portion of sounds heard" (RATTIGAN, 2000, p.128). In Hindell's experience, the best possible outcome was achieved: "People said, 'I got lost, but it didn't matter.'" Furthermore, the question of authenticity creates further nuance in the faithfulness to the novel versus dramatic integrity debate. Much effort was made to preserve authenticity in the use of sound effects that were period specific. My personal recollection of the care taken in studio ranged from the right telephone

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handset on which Viktor answers the call from Stalin to the use of a fountain pen for Viktor to use to sign his recantation. Mark Burman personally recorded authentic tank sounds for *Novikov's Story* at the Tank Museum in Bovington, Dorset, using one of their Soviet T-34 tanks. There is, perhaps, a risk of pursuing this policy too rigidly. However, Hindell maintained that the level of accuracy is worth the trouble: "it successfully suggests the scale and chaos. You cannot follow battle on radio on a Tolstoyan scale."

An interesting counterpoint to the role of battle sounds is the play *Vera and Her Pilot,* which uses both the sound of airplanes and nicely constructs an ambiguity where the peaceful forest of Viktorov's flying corps can include Vera, even though she is hundreds of miles away.

5. Casting

Hindell asserts that good casting makes a director's job easier. The actors "come in only concerned about their own characters, and the directors make sure each actor is performing in the same play." The most important casting was for the role of Viktor Shtrum, in what was referred to as the "star casting." Hindell noted that for the role, an actor was required who was a big name, affordable by Radio 4's budget, a strong radio actor, and one who was not often heard on radio. With this in mind, the actor whom Hindell heard speaking Shtrum's words in her head was noted Shakespearean Kenneth Branagh. Branagh was interested in the role, but various scheduling commitments had him tied up. A year's delay had to be enacted on recording the Shtrum section of *Life and Fate* in order to wait for Branagh to finish directing the film *Thor.* Toward the end of December 2010, Hindell was resigned to having to decide upon another choice. However, in the end Branagh did take on the role of Shtrum.

Branagh brought the right star quality to a series of plays already remarkable for the way they were being structured, and the critical and journalistic response went

beyond the production team's expectations. The impact of Branagh's casting is undeniable. Waiting for the first panel to begin at the Oxford conference, I overheard two women saying to each other, "Have you read the book yet?" "Well, if Kenneth Branagh can do it on the radio . . ." with the assumption being the second woman didn't need to read the book if she was going to hear Branagh perform it on the radio. (Reviewer Clare Heal said much the same thing; she had not read *Life and Fate* "so I cannot tell you how faithful Mike Walker and Jonathan Myerson's adaptation was, but it was good radio" (HEAL, 2011, p. 63)). In terms of Branagh's dramatic contribution, there can be no doubts. The energy and consummate professionalism he exuded as he performed the readthrough buoyed the rest of the cast. When interviewed, Branagh explained his ability to get into the role, "There's an electricity to what we hear, which is all about making people understand, OK, imagine those things [the Stalinist regime] and now let's go and meet this normal family" (MARTIN, 2011, p. 61).

Another important "star casting" role was that of Krymov, who was played by David Tennant (or, as Giles Coren put it, "an ex-Doctor Who" (COREN, 2011, p. 24). Krymov's story is utterly central to the book. As Jekaterina Shulga (UCL) argues very persuasively, Krymov is a victim of time; he is tortured by time. In *For a Just Cause*, he was utterly relevant to the politics of the time; by *Life and Fate*, he is out of step with reality. Regarding the structure of *Building 6.1* and how it related to Krymov, Vandenbussche wrote, "this structure gives a sense of fractions, fragments of life during the war, and together they paint a terrible picture of a time and a place" (2011). The casting works partially because Tennant is so well-known in heroic terms. Like nearly every character in *Life and Fate,* Krymov believes he is in the right. In *Krymov in Moscow,* it so happens that the NVKD Interrogator who tortures Krymov was cast as Elliott Levey, who was at the time of recording playing opposite Tennant in the Wyndham Theatre's production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in London's West End. Levey played Don John to Tennant's Benedick, so the casting was surprisingly serendipitous. It also appeared to be effective—Paul Donovan called *Krymov in*

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Moscow, "in which a man is beaten to a pulp in the Lubyanka, . . . almost as powerful [as *Anna's Letter*]" (DONOVAN, 2011, p. 84).

One potential casting problem was the similarity between the voices of Madyarov (Ralph Ineson) and Karimov (Stephen Grieff), both excellent actors in their own rights. However, their voices were rather similar, to the extent that even I who knew what was going on got confused as to who was speaking. Reviewer Chris Maume did not seem to have this problem, as he singled Ineson out for praise, "whose rich Yorkshire burr graces the role of a suspected informer" (MAUME, 2011, p. 62). The casting of Raquel Cassidy was Zhenya was also lauded. During the readthrough for *Viktor & Lyuda,* I asked Cassidy, "What do you think of Zhenya?" "Blimey, that's a question," she replied. Vandenbuscche was full of enthusiasm for Cassidy's portrayal, "Zhenya is amazing, and I suppose a lot of her qualities come from Raquel Cassidy who played her and has surprised and impressed me so much that I couldn't help falling in love with her" (2011).

The production team of *Life and Fate* made some all-encompassing decisions from the start. These included pronunciation ("com-RAIIID" rather than "com-RADD"), patronymic-name consolidation, and as regards accents: no cod Russian accents, no cod German accents, and regional accents among the cast, who were from all areas of Britain (no standardization of this, ie, all Moscovites were not Northern, etc). The one place we hear a Russian accent is in *Lieutenant Peter Bach*, and in that instance is highly memorable. The voice is Jessica Raine's and she is playing Zina, a Russian girl "collaborating" with the enemy. The enemy is Lieutenant Peter Bach, played by Geoffrey Streatfeild, and one of the characters that in the adaptations it is difficult with whom to feel empathy. His treatment of Zina is sub-human. She has the Russian accent in order to illustrate how she sounds to Peter: there is a communication breakdown. Yet the danger is that it might make the audience start to think of her in the way he does: ignorant and only useful up to a point.

Hindell was shocked when people told her, in all seriousness, " 'I'm so glad you didn't do it in Russian accents.'" Using foreign accents is a practice that has not been

standard on Radio 4 for at least thirty years. Still, the reaction to the use of accents was not universally appreciated. One caller to the BBC during *Krymov & Zhenya-Lovers Once* felt the play had been dramatized incorrectly, as Nazis were all played with northern accents and Jewish characters with southern accents (despite there being no Nazis in this particular play). Two listeners commented on 23 September 2011, during the *Hero of the Soviet Union* play, regarding accents, though both seemed a bit confused in their objections. One asked why no Central European accents were used. "Islamic" players should have been used, suggested another.

In *Journey,* a family friend of the Shaposhnikovs, Dr Sofya Levinton (played by Sarah Kestleman), is in her fifties when she finds herself on the way to the gas chambers. Her act of "senseless kindness" is one of the most poignant episodes of the book. In that sense, the horrors are as perfectly viable through sound as they would be through that overly-used cinematic visual sense. Great care has been taken with the soundscape in *Journey*; the sounds during the final moments of Sofya's life are more arresting than any tele-visual representation. I think the subject matter risks being maudlin, but with a starkness devoid of any sentiment, the sound cuts right to the heart of the characters. This was a sentiment echoed by Tom Meltzer, "the sound effects are unpleasantly perfect . . . the horror of the gas chambers evoked with unspecified crunches and cracks" (MELTZER, 2011, p. 24).

In *Anna's Letter,* Viktor's mother Anna is played by Janet Suzman. Anna's story mirrors that of the mother Grossman left behind in Berdichev. Grossman drew strength from his mother's generous moral example, as does Viktor. *Anna's Letter* was read in monologue form, almost without editing from the form it appeared on *Woman's Hour*, by Janet Suzman at the "Life and Fate Dramatization" panel during the Oxford conference. It was very powerful to hear "live," and through emotion and the characterization provided both by the actress and the writers, it works equally well in all three media—as a dramatic monologue, as a radio piece, and, of course, as part of the novel. It is highly appropriate, and certainly a shrewd decision, that the

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monologue follows *Viktor & Lyuda* even though they couldn't in form and content be more different from each other. Audience reaction to *Anna's Letter* was overflowing: one listener called to thank the BBC, as he or she had never been so touched by a programme on television as by *Anna's Letter*. Critical reception was no less overwhelming: Pete Naughton admitted to listening to it through tears, and Mahoney "sobbed on a busy train," as did Controller of Radio 4, Gwyneth Williams (MAHONEY, 2011). The fate of Soviet, particularly Ukrainian Jews, during the war was something Grossman had been determined to represent, despite the revisionist policies adopted by the regime in the immediate postwar period, "a striking nonsimultaneity of the simultaneous" as Motzkin puts it (MOTZKIN, 1996, p. 272).

6. Publicity and Audience

There was an unprecedented amount of publicity expended on *Life and Fate.* As per Hindell, the goal of the radio adaptations was "to raise consciousness" of Grossman and the novel. She cited the real sense of occasion given to the amount of trails—TV trails are unusual for publicizing British radio—and supporting programming. Critics noted that the trails were "endless" and ubiquitous. The only area of concern for Hindell was the insistence of the *Radio Times* in numbering the plays in its listings. The plays had been given titles under the branch title of *Life and Fate* and not numbers, such as episode 3, for a specific purpose; in order to heighten the sense that they could be listened to in any order and without having heard all the plays before listening to a certain one. Many listeners found this confusing.

The use of iPlayer and downloading the plays was extremely important in how *Life and Fate* was disseminated. Despite a rights struggle with the book's English-language publisher, Random House, Hindell thought these methods of accessing the radio plays were "absolutely essential." Clare Heal felt this kind of radio event would be "impossible without the iPlayer on the internet" (HEAL, 2011, p. 63). Radio reviewer Gillian Reynolds, for example, confessed she could not listen to a whole week

of *Life and Fate,* having listened to three plays, then downloading a fourth via iPlayer (2011). Another reviewer, Miranda Sawyer, yearned "for a long, lonely car drive and to listen to the whole drama all in one go" (SAWYER, 2011, p.36). Giles Coren, a self-confessed fan of the book, had, until the plays, been unable to persuade people to read the novel; "people would rather plug in their iPod and flick through *Hello!* Magazine. But now you can plug it into your thick ears while you're jogging or mowing the lawn, and you simply must" (COREN, 2011, p.34).

A lucky but unanticipated publicity event was the two-day conference hosted by St Peter's College Oxford, on 9 and 10 September. Mark Damazer, current Master of St Peter's College, organised the event with the BBC hosting a series of panels in order to publicize the adaptations and Grossman's work to a general audience. The corresponding academic conference, "Vasily Grossman: Ruthless Truth in the Totalitarian Century: An Interdisciplinary Symposium," was organised by Dr. Patrick Finney of Aberystwyth University and was an international event with a variety of papers presented on Grossman and his works. It was attended by the leading Grossman scholars and by representatives of the Turin Centre for Grossman Studies. Hindell felt that it "happened at the right time, but has given me ideas for deliberately attempting to tap into a response—on the BBC's own terms." Finally, the commissioning of a family tree to help listeners keep track of characters was important to Hindell almost from the beginning. Elisabeth Mahoney is one of several who mentioned the surprising usefulness of this: "never before have I printed out a family tree to accompany a radio play, or missed other favorite shows to keep up with one" (MAHONEY, 2011).

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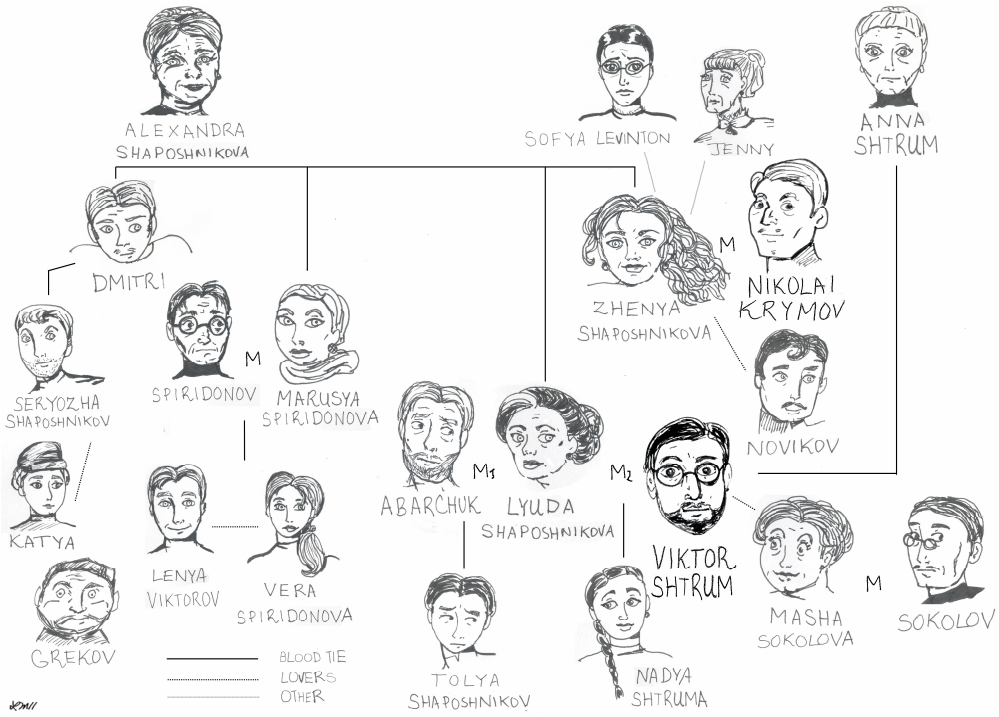

Figure 1 – BBC Radio 4's family tree for Life and Fate, drawn by Leslie McMurtry and available from the BBC's website

One theme recurred throughout the Oxford conference and my interviews with the production team: the agreed high intellectual ability and general level of knowledge in the typical Radio 4 audience. The audience membership was, as far as informal research on the part of Hindell and myself can determine, primarily hardcore Radio 4 listeners. It's an intelligent audience, who by listening to Radio 4 realize the material has been lent some credibility. The audience for *Life and Fate,* then, seems unlikely to have been the kind of listener who tunes into Radio 4 once every six months, or someone with no background in radio, drawn in by the TV trails. This goes back to the so-called Reithian ethos of Radio 4. John Reith, of course, was the first Director-General of the BBC. The Reithian ethos has sometimes been defined as

> straightforwardly elitist, patrician, authoritarian, stifling . . . when Reith talked of bringing to British people "the best" of things—ideas and culture and information they did not know they wanted but which he, at least, knew they needed in an era of mass democracy—

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> he undoubtedly played the neo-Victorian paternalist to perfection (HENDY, 2007, p.2).

However, some have argued that this ethos also has an element of mass appeal to it, to create a "common culture," and it is true that Reith never approved of the Third Programme because of its elitist and narrow approach.

Life and Fate would very much have fitted into the Reithian ethos, as acknowledged by Hindell, Walker, and Myerson, among others. Yet, all were aware of an attempt not to be too didactic, as illustrated with the discussion of the character of Ikonnikov from above. In Hindell's experience, people wanted chronology provided (which order to listen to the plays) and some did "sampler listening, getting a taster." On the question of audience participation, Mike Walker brought up the immediacy of radio drama. "You can set the book aside," he said, "but radio is closer to you. . . .You can't turn away from sound, it's so much more raw. [You need] an audience that's engaged, intelligent, and willing to invest" ("LIFE AND FATE: THE RADIO DRAMATIZATION," 2011). This is very much related, again, to the findings of Rattigan and Douglas. Radio exists on a "macro scale, that is, to all listeners at the same time; but it's heard on a micro scale by individual listeners in the private act of conscious (active) and unconscious (passive) listening" (RATTIGAN, 2000, p. 13).

Another play in which sound effects (or lack thereof) made an interesting contribution was *Abarchuk,* a *Woman's Hour* play detailing Lyuda's ex-husband in a prison camp. In studio, the story ended with the sinister sound of a knife being drawn, but it appears the sound wasn't convincing enough, so the broadcast version just ends with Abarchuk acknowledging that someone has come into his room who doesn't mean him well. Vandenbussche (2011) felt this was, for her, the least effective play of the 13, though less for sound effects reasons and more for the way it presented the Party's dogmatic failure with Abarchuk.

Of this audience, the negative reaction fell into two types. The first objected to the Radio 4 schedule being swamped with *Life and Fate,* from which some listeners felt there was no escape. Some listeners felt the content was too mature for the time of

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day it was broadcast, objecting to bad language, murder, and torture. It seems possible that these objections represent a small but vocal minority; as described by Hendy, "instinctively, conservatives of all persuasions looked to the BBC as a bulwark against the worst aspects of modernity" (HENDY, 2000, p. 19). Secondly, there were academic extremists. One mocked that he or she did not know which novel the play has been based on, for it did not resemble *Life and Fate.* He or she announced that the productions had failed to bring any understanding of Grossman's genius to the airwaves. It would be very interesting to hear more about this caller's opinion of what had gone wrong in the adaptation.

7. Sound and Emotion

Walker had alluded to the fact that while humans have eyelids, they don't have "ear lids." To paraphrase Douglas (2004), as infants, when we are still focusing our eyes, we are much more soothed/startled/scared by sounds than sights. This may in some sense explain why the adaptation most favoured by critics was *Journey,* though neither adapter had wanted to work with it. Walker, who ultimately did the adaptation work, commented that writing it was among the most difficult moments during the dramatization process, though he hoped it would "leave people changed" ("LIFE AND FATE: THE RADIO DRAMATIZATION," 2011). "You want to leave them weeping, but you don't want to leave them suicidal" (MARTIN, 2011, p. 61). As noted by Wendy Lower (Ludwig Maximilian University), less than 2% of Ukrainian Jews survived German occupation, a fact compellingly told in *Life and Fate*. Grossman highlights their plight in two strands that have been hauntingly dramatized in the plays. Miranda Sawyer was frustrated with the first Classic Serial; "the family scenes were stagey, Viktor's character an irritant" (SAWYER, 2011, p.36). However, by the time she heard *Journey,* her opinion of the plays had changed.

Another important play was the concluding serial, *Viktor and the Academy.* For Vandenbussche, (2011) it was one of her favorite plays. "It is the one in which I have

gone through the biggest range of emotions; from frustration and anger while siding with Victor, elation at his victory to heartbreak at the end." One of the most chilling scenes in the book is a late-night phone call to Viktor Shtrum from Stalin. Apparently Grossman was inspired to write this from the experience of his colleague Ilya Ehrenburg. Ehrenburg was another prominent Soviet Jewish writer who became adept at manipulating the system to his advantage; with Grossman, he collaborated on the *Black Book* project which challenged the official Soviet view of German wartime atrocities against Jews. The Stalin phone call scene is a perfect example of, as Joshua Rubenstein (Harvard) put it, "How did one survive [the Soviet experience]? Only Stalin knows" (RUBENSTEIN, 2011). "There are no 'superheroes' in this," said Kenneth Branagh, "except Stalin himself. The spectre of Stalin hangs over the whole work" (T. DAVIES, 2011, p. 23).

The casting in general was well-received. Surprisingly, one listener felt the casting of Branagh was a bad choice, feeling he was too "starry." David Tennant, likewise, received a surprising lack of rapture, Pete Naughton declaring his performance "less impressive than I'd expected" (NAUGHTON, 2011). Most newspaper interviews focused on Kenneth Branagh, but *The Guardian* interviewed Janet Suzman on the strength of her performance.

8. Life and Fate: Truth and Fiction

As Hindell told me in the aftermath of *Life and Fate,* the buzz word for the production was "gamechanger," which signifies a success that can't be often repeated; otherwise it loses meaning. Hindell revealed her bosses were asking her, "What's the next big thing?" In response to this, she noted that the "bread-and-butter-smaller scale drama" is necessary in order to have a culture between the makers and listeners of radio drama which can every now and then be elevated by an "event." In Mahoney's view, all the elements that Hindell felt were necessary—the structure, the casting—were what guaranteed *Life and Fate***'**s success**.** "It tells stories that are

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immediately real, vivid, heartbreaking and illuminating about one of the darkest interludes in our history, and does so with commanding skill" (MAHONEY, 2011). Serena Davies, without having heard the plays, suggested it was "Event Radio, especially if Ken Branagh is at his bravura best" (S. DAVIES, 2011, p. 40).

Hindell believed a fictional approach was preferred over straight fact-telling. The importance was the emotional resonance and Grossman's humanity. As Laura Guillaume (Aberystwyth/Open University) puts it, in *Life and Fate***,** Grossman doesn't offer a guide to judgement. In part he exonerates individuals and puts responsibility on the state— but that is not his only attitude. Time and time again, devotees, admirers and scholars of the work point to the fact that Grossman's characters live their lives without moralizing authorial comment. Paul Donovan said of the concluding Classic Serial, it "skilfully brings together Grossman's themes of moral weakness, anti-semitism, pain, betrayal, intellectual contortion . . . and the similarities between Hitler and Stalin," proving an appropriate bookend for the all the themes in the plays (DONOVAN, 2011, p. 85).

When I asked Hindell to sum up her feelings on how the project had turned out, she revealed that she did not believe it would have been better had it been longer. While editing, she had thought, " 'This is so fabulous, I can't bear the fact we aren't including *This*.' Grossman lives in the lovely, tiny details, this is his originality. He gives flesh to people who often don't have backstory or psychology or endings." To have made *Life and Fate* even longer would have been merely self-indulgent. Most of the critics felt that the experiment had succeeded. "In its portrayal of both victims and perpetrators it is affecting and unflinching, a very bold thing to broadcast at 2.15 in the afternoon" (MELTZER, 2011, p. 24).

In the end, the goal of the project, as Hindell told me repeatedly, was to bring attention to Grossman's work. In this, it seems it definitely succeeded. Beaumont propelled Grossman to the top of the lists of Second World War novelists, "Grossman had the most intimate knowledge of his subject . . . He understood the contingencies of betrayal" (BEAUMONT, 2011, p. 42). And despite all the trappings of dialogue,

sound effects, music, and scheduling machinations, Grossman's writing was still plainly showcased.

Life and Fate has set the bar high for all large-scale radio adaptations that will follow, both on Radio 4 and other networks, and it will be fascinating to observe the world's response.

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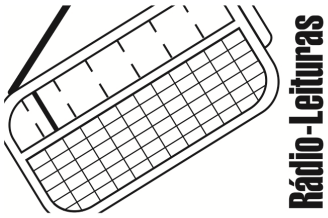

Anatomy of a Gamechanger: BBC Radio 4's Life and Fate

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Abstract

Before the broadcast of a series of radio plays on BBC's Radio 4 in September 2011, few people in the UK would have heard of Vasily Grossman's Life and Fate. The ubiquity of the Radio 4 adaptations in 2011 meant that not only did many more people know the book by name at least, but perhaps they were among the millions who downloaded the plays from iTunes. There were many elements to Life and Fate as a production that were unique, including its structure, the role of star casting within its production, its approach to adaptation, and its approach to genre-within-marketing. This paper explores the progression within BBC Radio 4's drama department in the context of Life and Fate. As BBC radio drama evolves to respond to its audience(s), what kind of audience did it seek to reach with Life and Fate and how successful was it in doing so?

Keywords: radio, drama, adaptation, BBC, literature, audience, Russia, technology