



Pat Bertschy Reviews

**A Mountain of Crumbs
Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain
A Memoir by Elena Gorokhova**

Simon & Schuster, 2010

Elena Gorokhova was born in Communist Russia in 1955, making her a contemporary of the U.S. "baby boom" generation.

It's a fascinating contrast to see Elena as a schoolgirl in the 1960's, while in America, we were practicing hiding under our desks from the Communist threat. We imagined Russians as the enemy, but through her narrative, we experience Elena as a child very similar to ourselves.

She questions authority and recognizes the hypocrisy of "Vranyo," the game of pretending that all the citizens play. Elena describes the game: "The government leaders lie, citizens know they are lying, they know we know, but keep lying and we keep pretending to believe them."

She describes the hardships of her childhood in plain, straightforward prose, without sentimentality. There was a pall of gloom over her family, the lack of freedom corroding their spirit, especially the adults. Elena wonders why her mother gave in to the make-believe and deception of the Communist party.

As a young woman, her mother was an independent thinker who graduated medical school and became a physician. She wrote to Stalin himself to get permission to open a maternity ward in the hospital where she worked. Later, she fought to get her husband medical attention. Her mother hated the party for making her beg, but she continued to support her government and everything it stood for.

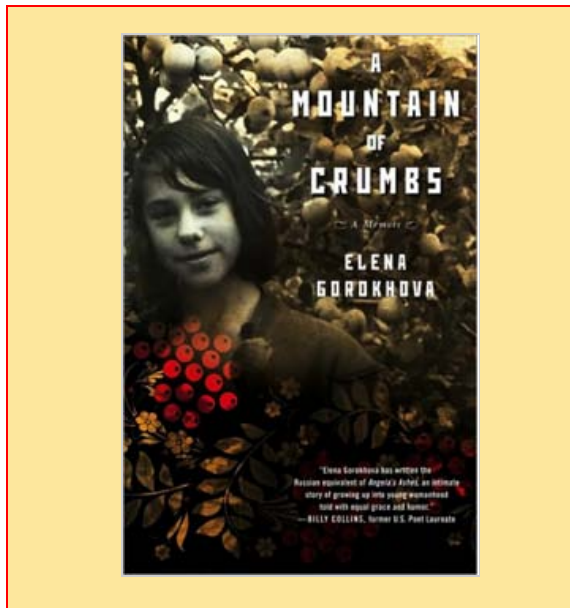
Somewhere, Elena notices, her mother "lost her smile." Elena seeks a different life; she wants to learn English, to become a tutor, to read non-Russian authors, to buy mayonnaise.

The only way to experience what life was like for Elena is to read the account in her own words: store shelves are sparsely stocked, fruit is rare, pineapple and quail are not allowed, shrimp unheard of. Citizens do not go to restaurants, clothing is gray, brown or black, and there are no leather shoes or cosmetics worth buying.

Education at the University is free, but children of workers and peasants are admitted first, children of professionals last. Books are contraband. A professor sneaks in a contemporary novel, *The Other Side of Midnight*. Elena will wait her turn to read it behind all the full-time faculty of the English Department.

Elena longs to leave her country. By the time she was twenty, she'd never seen an American newspaper or magazine – in fact, she had "never seen a live American" – and yet she longs to come to America.

This is a simply but beautifully written memoir of a life we could never experience, but reading Elena's memoir, can now imagine.



Available at:

www.Amazon.com

www.borders.com

www.barnesandnoble.com

Pat Bertschy is an avid reader who lives on Cape Cod.

She was recently awarded a scholarship to attend this summer's **Cape Cod Writers Center Conference**, held at the Craigville Conference Center, for her nonfiction story "Discovery."

Pat was also named one of five finalists in the **Norman Mailer Cape and Islands Community College Writing Awards** for a work of non-fiction titled "The Long Walk".

At a January 22nd ceremony, Pat was awarded third prize in PrimeTime Cape Cod magazine's 2010 Writing Contest for Poetry and Prose, for her short story, "The Dress."