

Memories

Dedicated to the past generation — people of cruel fate

I was born on the Kamenetsky estate, a godforsaken place in the Dubrovka Uyezd¹ of the Radichi Volost,² about a kilometer from the nearest village, Kokhonovo, and eight kilometers from the uyezd center, Dubrovka (today part of Bryansk Oblast,³ Russia).

The large, single-story house stood on the bank of an artificial lake. Nearby stood several outbuildings, housing two or three horses, a handful of cows, and other farm animals.

A brook, dammed by an earthen levee, filled the long valley with water — so thoroughly that an outsider could never have guessed that the vast, mirror-still lake, with its reed-lined far bank, owed its very existence to that levee.



¹ District (old)

² Region (old)

³ Region

In a photograph taken in 1914, we can see the lake as viewed from the Kamenetsky estate. Further to the left stood a mill.

The garden was bordered by a lime-tree alley, and held fruit trees still young at the time — apple and pear, ringed by cherry trees.

Below the dam sat a squat wooden mill with two large wheels. One could watch for hours its many buckets getting filled with water and its wheels slowly turn. Mother told us flour was made there. That Mother, in turn, made bread from that flour was something our eldest brother knew very well.

I remember that day vividly. The adults were all busy — working at the mill, or out in the field. Mother had gone to milk the cows. Our eldest brother, Vechik, as we called him (his full name was Vyacheslav), was five. I, the middle brother, was three. The youngest, Gennadi, or Genya, was one. Vechik, a serious and independent boy, had been left in charge of making sure his younger brothers stayed out of trouble. The baby needed the most watching — he kept crawling toward the door, trying to get outside and down to the lake. I, meanwhile, was hungry and crying. Not daring to open the oven himself, Vechik decided to give me some bread instead. He took a round loaf and a large kitchen knife from the sideboard, pressed the loaf against his bare belly, and cut. It didn't work — the bread was stale and hard. He tried again, pressing harder this time. Another cut — and to my utter astonishment, I saw a thin white line appear across my brother's stomach, which slowly turned redder and redder, until blood began running from it in rivulets.

Vechik pressed both hands over the wound. The last thing I remember is myself shouting: "Hold it tight, or your guts will fall out! We'll put plantain on it!"

It was 1929.

From that time, and that life, I also remember: the spacious house; the unpainted floorboards, warm and pale; the dining room and the massive table with carved legs and green cloth top bordered in dark, carved wood. Two cabinets stood there, always locked. Elegant chairs, upholstered in green cloth, lined the table and the walls. A light wicker rocking chair sat by the window. Pots of flowers crowded the windowsills and a small side table. The biggest attraction of all was the rubber plant, growing out of a large barrel — it had reached the ceiling and was creeping along it into the next room. The bedroom doorway was draped with fine curtains.

The most fascinating thing of all was what lay inside the chest: letters written in elaborate, flourished calligraphy; postcards showing doves, candles, Christmas trees, and winged infants; and, at the very bottom, feathers in every color of the rainbow — perhaps, I imagined, from the fairy-tale Firebird itself. Mother didn't open that coveted chest very often, though.

In the winter of 1929, it was just us children and our parents living in that house. How was it that so few people remained on such a large estate?

The Kamenetsky Family

My mother, Maria Matveyevna Kamenetskaya, was born on December 4th, 1896, the day of the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to her, the Kamenetskys were members of the gentry, though impoverished ones. At some point — she never knew exactly when — the family had moved from Poland to Belarus, settling in the village of Aleksandrovka (today part of the Shklov District, Mogilev Oblast). Ethnically, the Kamenetskys were Poles, and Catholic by faith. Whether they'd ever owned land outright is unclear. What is certain is that before the 1917 revolution, the father, Matvei Iosifovich, leased land and worked it with the help of his family and hired laborers. The landowner required, as a condition of the lease, that the tenant keep a certain number of farm animals, to maintain the soil's fertility. My mother told me that on holidays and Sundays, the whole family would ride together by horse-drawn carriage to church, where they sat and prayed on wooden benches⁴. Her brightest childhood memory — she left the family at age seven — was of a church wedding, where children carried the long trains of the brides' beautiful dresses.

It was a large family: the parents, Anna and Matvei; four sons — Iosif, Karl, Vladimir, Mikhail, and Napoleon; and two daughters — Kazimira and Maria.

The father was a man of medium height — hardworking, caring, kind, soft-spoken, and easygoing. Maria remembered her mother as a head taller than her husband: a buxom, strong, energetic, and intelligent woman who ran the household and the farm alike.

The family stood as one, both at work and at leisure — love was the thread running through everything. It was a happy, cheerful time. Maria would go on to see many holidays in her life, but none quite like the ones in Aleksandrovka. For the rest of her life, she remembered the preparations for Christmas and Easter: the decorations, the presents, the trips to church, the visits with friends. As a girl, she looked forward to the holidays with real anticipation, since preparations began well in advance. All manner of dishes were made: roast suckling pig on a bed of greens and vegetables, homemade sausages, meat with potatoes, porridge with cracklings, headcheese, aspic, baked goose or duck, Olivier salad, cabbage-and-garlic salads, smoked sausage, Napoleon cake, mousses, homemade ice cream, an array of sauces, rolls, sponge cake, and cookies. For Easter, there was sweet farmer's cheese, painted eggs, and paskha⁵ of various sizes. Cheerful family meals were followed by singing and recitations — and presents! Sometimes the celebrations stretched on for several days, with food left out on the table for anyone to snack on whenever they liked.

But everything comes to an end. The father's brother, Franz Iosifovich, came to visit — tall, slender, handsome, intelligent, and well-educated. At the time, he worked as a factory manager in the city of Krasny Sulin, in Ukraine.

⁴ Unusual for the Russian Orthodox Church which has no benches for believers

⁵ Russian Easter cake



The photo shows Franz standing by the house on the Kamenetsky estate.

His visit came in 1902, when little Maria was not yet seven. Her eldest brother was no older than twenty; the youngest, Napoleon, was only one or two.

The family worked hard, but couldn't manage everything on their own. Day laborers had to be hired, and money was always tight.

Franz arrived with an unusual request. A bachelor, he asked permission to take Maria to live with him, promising her a good education and a comfortable life. He was earning well and had savings set aside, which he hoped, eventually, to leave to someone in the family.

Her father didn't want to part with his daughter. But Anna, ever practical, weighed the matter carefully and agreed. One thing troubled her, though: how could a busy young bachelor provide a little girl with the things only a mother, or a woman, could give? Franz reassured her — a woman, and a very good one at that, his best friend's wife, herself of Polish noble descent, would be by the girl's side constantly, since he and his friend worked together at all times.

Natalia Pavlovna, the friend's wife, had no children of her own. Anna, being sharp and perceptive, suspected that Natalia might be the very reason such an eligible bachelor as Franz remained unmarried. But however dearly she loved her daughter, after weighing every circumstance, she gave her consent.

Little Manechka⁶ wept bitterly upon learning that Uncle Franz meant to take her away from home. She didn't want to leave her close, happy family — her father and mother, her sister and brothers. Would she never again wander into the nearby young forest to pick mushrooms and berries? Suddenly, even the expensive gifts Uncle Franz had brought for the whole family no longer brought her any joy.

Seeing the little girl's tears, and worried her parents might change their minds, Franz moved up his departure for distant Krasny Sulin, though he'd originally planned to stay a week or two. Her father wept quietly, off to the side, while her mother put on a cheerful, confident face, certain it was all for her daughter's own good. There is nothing a loving mother won't do for her children — so long as she believes she's doing the right thing.

But as they say, man proposes, God disposes. Less than a year passed before Maria's childhood came to an end, and her working life began. She would return to Aleksandrovka only once more, for a family reunion — captured, as it happened, in a photograph.

In Sulin, Maria was enrolled in the first grade of primary school. Her teacher was very kind to her — past her prime, but still quite attractive, she took an immediate liking to the diligent, disciplined, intelligent little girl. That fondness only deepened once she learned the child was being raised by a single man.

⁶ Diminutive for Maria

Manya⁷ had already learned to read while living with her parents, in both Russian and Polish. Reading became a source of real joy for her — books opened up a different kind of life, full of beautiful romance, exotic lands, and thrilling adventure.

Uncle Franz introduced the little girl to his friend, and to the friend's wife, Natalia Pavlovna. Since the men were usually occupied with work during the day, Manya was left in "Aunt Natalia's" care. Franz trusted her completely, considering her a wonderful woman and homemaker. And while Manya's first year of upbringing looked much like any ordinary child's, the second year changed drastically. The "aunt," as Manya was instructed to call her, began teaching her how to do household chores.

Every morning, a pile of dirty dishes from the previous night's entertaining would be waiting in the kitchen, and it all had to be washed before school — every plate, every piece of silverware, every glass and cup, washed, dried, and put back in its proper place. The aunt liked to explain that tidiness and cleanliness guaranteed not only good health but happiness in a future marriage, too. She also taught the girl how to do laundry, including washing her own batiste undergarments.

The little girl began arriving late to school more and more often. Once the schoolmistress learned the reason, she chose not to punish her, since Manya remained an excellent student regardless.

The aunt disliked physical exertion and had a real fondness for sweets and pastries — which may explain why a once slim, attractive woman grew as plump as a partridge, and eventually struggled even to stand for long stretches. It came as no surprise, then, that Manya's share of the housework kept growing, along with the standards she was expected to meet. The aunt was a strict disciplinarian who disliked repeating herself, and Manechka would remember for the rest of her life that the aunt's undergarments had to be washed with particular care — since she liked to hold them up to the light afterward, inspecting them for any trace of dirt.

Before long, Manya was missing school more and more — especially around the holidays, when there was simply too much to do at home.

When Uncle Franz was offered the position of chief deputy director at the "Red Profintern" engineering plant in Bezhitsa (now part of the city of Bryansk), his friend and Natalia Pavlovna moved there with him. The friend, however, fell ill and died shortly after.

Before he died, he asked Franz not to abandon his wife in a land that remained foreign to her. Franz promised, and kept his word. In 1902, he and the aunt moved in together, buying a farmstead near the village of Kokhonovo, complete with a large house and outbuildings, arable land, a meadow, and an orchard on the shore of a lake. Together with other local landowners, they also bought a water mill.

Maria had barely finished her second year of school. She never made it to third grade — the weather was still warm and pleasant that September, and the aunt had no wish to leave the estate.

⁷ Informal for Maria

Why, after all, should anyone abandon the beautiful countryside for the city, just for the sake of school? She never tired of repeating: "A woman shouldn't fill her head with schooling. Her purpose is to be a good wife and a good housekeeper — to serve her husband and manage the household. I'll teach you everything you need to know."

As always, Uncle Franz didn't contradict Natalia Pavlovna, and the matter of Manechka's schooling was settled once and for all. Whether this cultured, well-educated man — who had, after all, broken his promise — ever felt any real remorse over it, no one can say now. There was another reason for ending her schooling, too: the new property demanded far more work and attention. And there were always guests to entertain — friends of the aunt's, colleagues of the uncle's — who came in the warm months to enjoy the outdoors, often bringing along children or elderly relatives hoping the fresh air might do them good. Whether it was breakfast or dinner, there were always mountains of dirty dishes, spoons, forks, glasses, and tumblers to deal with afterward. The lady of the house would lead her guests off toward the lake or the orchard, while Maria stayed behind to clean, wash, dry, and put every dish and utensil back in its place — skills the aunt had already drilled into her the year before, just as she herself had once been trained. There was no time, after all, for a little girl to sit idle — and so much still to learn! How to boil, bake, and fry. How to trim meat from a carcass, wash intestines and stuff them with ground meat, salt lard, pluck and singe and butcher a bird, make borscht and soup. She needed to master every recipe, too — porridges, sausages, headcheeses, pies, rolls, cakes, cookies, jellies, mousses, sour cream, cottage cheese, butter, ice cream. It was hard on the girl now, yes — but she'd be grateful for it later! She'd be able to handle any task with ease! And besides, her labor for her aunt and uncle would be richly rewarded one day: all their property, real and otherwise, would eventually belong to her.

Before the family left for the city, someone had to be found to look after the estate. Natalia's brother was offered a permanent place in the house — an elderly man, ill with tuberculosis. Manechka was left with him for the winter, to help out. The aunt's only wish was that she'd hurry up and grow older. In the meantime, peasants from the neighboring villages of Kokhonovo and Radichi were hired to work the fields and the mill, tend the stable and the cowshed, and manage the garden. Natalia Pavlovna proved a methodical, thorough, and consistent teacher. She began by teaching Maria how to wash dishes, and how to set and clear a table properly — which tableware belonged with the first course, the main course, the dessert; how to arrange glassware; where each spoon and fork went — soup, dessert, tea spoons; dinner, salad, dessert forks; where the napkins should sit; and in what order dishes were served and cleared.

The aunt never missed a chance to remind her that proper etiquette was an essential mark of a noble household.

Next, she taught Maria how to clean the rooms and tend the flowers. Her own heaviness made scrubbing floors difficult, which was precisely why such special attention was paid to teaching this particular chore. The wooden floors were left unpainted and had to be kept spotless and pleasant to look at. Washing and ironing were essential skills too, since Uncle Franz needed clean, pressed shirts and trousers for the office each day.

Whatever time remained after these chores went toward Maria's education in the culinary arts — a subject that demanded a careful, step-by-step approach. Cooking for an ordinary day was one thing; cooking for a holiday was something else entirely.

The aunt liked to insist that Polish cuisine was the finest in the world, both in flavor and in portion size — and that no noble Pole could possibly eat the way commoners did.

Mastering the culinary arts was no small task. It took years to learn every intricacy of the kitchen — from the initial preparation of ingredients, to methods of cooking, to the fine details of each individual dish: cold appetizers; soups of milk, meat, fish, and more; sauces; fish and meat courses; porridges and pasta; homemade cold- and hot-smoked sausages; butchery, and everything in between. Nor were the aunt's beloved pastries, fruits, and cheeses forgotten — cakes and cookies, sponge cakes and buns, pies filled with meat, liver, cabbage, or potato, stewed fruits, and puddings.

There was so much to be done in the house that going to school every day became out of the question. Maria no longer had time even to read. Still, whenever the aunt left the house, she'd tell the girl: "Once you've finished your chores, rest a while — read something in Polish, so you don't forget your mother tongue."

Around this time, the Novikovs, peasants from the neighboring village of Radichi, began working at the estate as hired hands.

The Novikov Family

Kirill Ustinovich Novikov was a peasant with little land of his own. His house, and the barn where he kept his cattle, stood in the middle of the village of Radichi, three kilometers from the Kamenetsky estate and five kilometers from the Seshenskaya (Sesha) railway station. Every year or two, his wife, Anna, would give birth to another son — future hands for the family's work. In time, there would be five: Rodion, Mikhail, Pavel, Philipp, and Arseni. Worn down by frequent childbirth and hard peasant labor, Anna died in 1900, when the youngest child was only two. Philipp, four at the time, would never remember his mother. In the village, she'd been known as Anyushka, from the Platonov family.

Kirill was of medium height, with the kind of face typically pictured in Russian fairy tales — the archetypal Russian peasant. He wasn't a wealthy man; it was hard to become one with five small children to raise. But he was independent, hardworking, and devoted to his wife's memory. He refused to remarry until his children had grown and become self-sufficient.

Kirill remained in good health and remarried at sixty. His new wife brought two children of her own, a girl and a boy, whom he raised as his own. His biological sons and his stepchildren grew close, and the whole family continued to gather together for reunions.

The children began working from early childhood, learning every task expected of peasants. They were all hardworking and earned the respect of their fellow villagers. Above all, Kirill

raised them to be kind, courteous people — ones who treated others with respect and were always ready to lend a hand to anyone in need.

When the time came for the older sons — Rodion, Mikhail, and Pavel — to marry, Kirill let them go their own ways. With so little land to divide, Rodion left for Chernetovo to work at a factory, while Kirill built two houses on his own land for the other two. The only property he kept for himself was a large, solid chest. The two remaining bachelors, Arseni and Philipp, received nothing. Philipp asked for nothing, since he was already working at the Kamenetsky estate by then. Arseni asked his father only for a bit of new cloth for bast shoes, and a towel.

At the end of a workday, or on holidays, Kirill could often be seen standing on a small rise near his house, dressed in clean clothes and a black hat.

Philipp had worked around the house and farm since he was small, but his father decided the boy needed a trade to fall back on, given how little land there was to inherit. He sent him to apprentice with a shoemaker — running errands, twisting and waxing thread, carving wooden pegs. The boy was sharp, watching and learning everything the master did, and soon began taking on small repair jobs of his own. But his father cut the apprenticeship short, deciding — on Pavel's advice — that working for the Kamenetskys, where his older brother already worked at the mill, would prove more useful. Philipp was hired first as a shepherd boy. He was quiet, diligent, respectful, and hardworking. During the midday heat, when the cattle were brought into the barn to escape the gadflies, Philipp never lay down to rest with the other boys — instead, he'd go help the young mistress, Maria, wash dishes or take care of some other task around the house. She was three years older than him, and it was no surprise that she often rewarded him with something tasty from the family's table.

His father made sure he got an education, too. Philipp graduated from the parish primary school with excellent marks in every subject except reading and writing. Despite Maria's efforts to get him interested in books, he never developed a taste for reading, preferring instead the kinds of work he considered genuinely useful, in a peasant's eyes. His speech, too, remained largely that of the countryside, even after years spent around estate owners who spoke cultured, unaccented Russian.

One especially memorable event for Philipp was a trip with his father to the uyezd town of Roslavl. Here's how he remembered it:

"I was ten at the time, back in 1908. Father went to Roslavl to sell a cartload of hay, and took me along. Whenever he needed to step away from our goods, it fell to me to make sure no one stole the horse or the sledge — you had to keep your wits about you in the marketplace. We heard a story there that was said to have actually happened. A peasant's horse had died. How was a man supposed to live without one? He scraped together what money he had, borrowed some more, and went to the market to buy a new horse. There were good horses for sale, but too expensive for him. A Gypsy man was selling the cheapest one, though the mare looked somewhat gloomy. The peasant asked him why. 'She's thinking about something,' the Gypsy said, and gave the horse's belly a quick, secret tap with his little whip.

"That woke the mare right up — she tossed her head, shifted her feet, and wouldn't stand still. The peasant took his time walking around her, checking her teeth, patting her neck. The whole while, the Gypsy kept repeating: 'See for yourself! The mare won't see for you!' The peasant bought the horse and set off for home. But the horse walked in a straight line and promptly ran into a wall. The peasant waved his hand in front of her eyes — she didn't even blink. 'That Gypsy cheated me! He sold me a blind horse!' The peasant hauled the man before a justice of the peace. The Gypsy told the judge: 'I never cheated him. I warned him more than once — see for yourself, the mare won't see for you!' In the end, the peasant went home with his blind horse."

My father never remembered how the hay sold. But he remembered stopping afterward at a teahouse, where they ordered a three-liter kettle of tea with lump sugar.

"Father ordered a hundred grams of vodka for himself, and some large candies and a handful of lollipops for me. He drank his vodka, and we sat there a long while, drinking tea. He never drank much, and lived his whole life without serious illness. Right to the end, he kept all his teeth, his memory, and the full use of his hands. But he never once climbed out of poverty."

Philipp kept his fondness for drinking tea with lump sugar his whole life — nipping off a small piece with tongs or a knife and holding it in his mouth while he drank, just as he had as a boy.

For years, little Philippok⁸ kept coming to the estate. Beyond herding, he took on new and more demanding tasks over time. In summer, when the workday began at sunrise, the shepherd boy stopped going home each night and lived permanently at the estate instead. In winter, he came later each morning and returned home in the evening.

And truly, God works in mysterious ways — who could have guessed that this shepherd boy, this little Philippok, would one day bind his fate forever to a member of the Polish nobility, the Kamenetskys?

Maria Earns Her Inheritance

Other peasants hired from the neighboring village of Kokhonovo would also go home for the night, and in the gray, dull winter months, when Uncle Franz and the aunt stayed behind in the city, Maria and Natalia Pavlovna's brother were often the only ones left on the estate.

Here's how Maria remembered that time:

"Snowdrifts everywhere on the estate, the road buried, the cold biting and the wind relentless. It's dark outside, the wind howls in the chimney, and the trees creak ominously. I'm wearing a sheepskin jacket, sitting on a kitchen chair, dozing off with my head resting on my arms. I want to sleep, but I mustn't. Every half hour, I go out to the barn, so as not to miss a birth — another cow is close to calving. The newborn calf has to be brought inside right away, or it will freeze to death; there's no waiting until morning, when the workers arrive. And the second cow needs milking often, too, or her udder will become inflamed — she has to be milked and massaged by

⁸ Diminutive for Philipp

hand. It's so hard for a girl my age, with no one to help carry the calf, since the aunt's brother is old and unwell. And after that, there's still so much work left, tending to both the cow and the calf."

This is why Maria never puts out the Fledermaus kerosene lantern — not that it gives off much light. Outside, it's pitch black, and the night seems endless. "It's frightening, being alone in the house. What if bandits come? You could scream for help all night, and no one would hear you. You start listening to every sound outside. In the wailing of the wind, you suddenly think you hear a baby crying, and then something like laughter. Goosebumps rise on your skin, and your hair feels like it's standing on end."

No, it's not a baby, Maria tells herself, trying to stay calm — it must be an owl. But sleep is gone now. She hears wolves howling nearby. Just yesterday, peasants from Kokhonovo told her the wolves had already taken several of their dogs. One man, driving home late by sled, had been chased by a pack. And just yesterday, she herself had seen large paw prints near the barn. Was it even safe to go out there? And now the dog is barking itself hoarse. She has no choice but to wake the only adult in the house.

The old man steps outside with the revolver the Uncle Franz had thoughtfully bought and fires into the darkness.

At times like these, Maria would think back on her happy childhood — her beloved mother and father, her brothers and sister. She felt bitter, cheated: sent away for a better life in the city, and here she was, back in the countryside after all, alone, buried in endless work, forced to please an uncle and aunt she didn't even love. Tomorrow morning, she'd be back at it — washing potatoes, chopping beets for the cattle, lighting the stove, cooking for herself and for the cows, the pigs, the dogs, the chickens, the turkeys, and the two peacocks, all of them clucking, quacking, cackling, demanding food, water, attention, cleaning, exercise.

No — she wanted none of this wealth. How gladly she'd have traded it all to go back to her own family!

But then, one day, a letter would arrive from the aunt: she and her friends needed to be met at the station. On such occasions, a sleigh had to be sent out in winter, or a carriage in summer, by a set time. This time, the uncle and aunt were coming home for New Year's Eve and Christmas. And though it meant even more work for Maria, and no time left for reading, it also brought a welcome change of pace. For the holidays, a pig would be slaughtered, and all sorts of delicacies prepared. Only Maria could be trusted to properly wash and clean the large and small intestines, and the stomach, so they could be stuffed with ground meat, or buckwheat, or potatoes with cracklings; to cut the lard into small pieces by hand, never ground; to prepare the organ meats, the liver especially, into a proper headcheese. And then there'd be the fir tree — plenty of those nearby — decorated with ornaments, glittering tinsel, and candles. Then guests would arrive, with their children and presents. It was thrilling: games, dances, sleigh rides! The only shame was how quickly that happy stretch of time always passed.

Maria's Adolescence

My mother did receive a thorough grounding for meeting life's challenges — though not the kind of upbringing her birth, or her guardians' means, might have suggested. Her guardians, the aunt especially, seemed far more concerned with their own comfort than with the girl's future, treating the inheritance she'd one day receive as something that first had to be earned. For years after the move, the girl cried, and even wrote letters home begging her parents to take her back to Aleksandrovka. Her father did come once — quiet, undemanding, and averse to conflict as always — and calmed her down, convincing her to stay: this education, he told her, would serve her well someday, and the property shouldn't fall into a stranger's hands. She'd grow up and run her own household one day. Besides, there was plenty of work at home too, and not much to go around; things would improve once her brothers and her sister, Kazimira, were older.

So Maria kept working. The isolation, the lack of other children her age, the endless training and labor — all of it left her thoroughly skilled in nearly every kind of household work, save sewing, which she never quite mastered, despite how essential it was to daily life. Reading, and time with people her own age, were possible only on holidays and in summer — likely the only real joys of her brief moments of rest.



In the photograph, young Manechka can be seen on a picnic with guests — seated second from the left, arm around a friend. In the next picture, she sits beneath an apple tree with the aunt, and possibly the aunt's brother, looking into the camera with a somewhat put-out expression.



A couple more years passed, and Manechka grew into Maria — a good-looking young woman. By then, the Kamenetskys were frequently visited by her peers.

Here she is, in the center, surrounded by friends:



Among them were the sons of the landowner Tsatsurin, the son of the wealthy entrepreneur Orekhov, the daughter and son of the priest Fomin, and the Laricheva and Makarova girls.

The Orekhov brothers were passionate hunters, but hardworking too — during haymaking, they cut grass alongside the hired laborers. Now came the time to rake the hay into windrows and stack it into haycocks, with a thunderstorm rolling in. The workers hurried, the heat and the damp wind making it hard to breathe. Suddenly, somewhere off toward the forest, in the underbrush, a dog let out a quick, high-pitched bark that rose into a sharp yelp. Soon the barking came in rhythm with a furious sprint — ah, ah — and a second dog joined the chase. The sound moved fast: the dogs were after a hare, or some other creature, and wouldn't stop until they lost the scent, or the hunter brought the animal down.

At a moment like that, a hunter's heart pounds, the blood rushes to his face, and he no longer hears the calls to hurry back to work, doesn't even notice the rain starting. In his mind, he's already there, with his dogs. He knows exactly where to run to cut off the hare. He's certain,

now, that feeding and training that dog — the one he traded a whole cow for — wasn't wasted effort. The hound will drive the hare straight to him, if not on the first pass, then the second. Nothing else matters to the Orekhovs in that moment. They snatch up their rifles and take off, chasing the hunter's luck.

With the Family

Around that time — evidently for some important occasion — the entire Kamenetsky family gathered for a reunion in Aleksandrovka, all except Vladimir, who worked as a turner in Petersburg and lived there with his wife, Gelena, also Polish. In the group photograph, the father and mother stand at the center, surrounded by their sons and daughters.



From left to right: the eldest son, Iosif; Kazimira; Karl; Maria. Below them, Mikhail and Napoleon, the youngest son.

That was Maria's first visit back to Aleksandrovka since Uncle Franz had taken her away. What a striking family they made! Even living in a poor Belarusian village, it's clear they stood apart from their fellow villagers. Their bearing, the dignity with which each of them poses for the camera, their open, earnest expressions, and finally their clothing — all of it speaks to a family that remembered its noble origins, and took pride in them.

The photograph bears out what Maria always said about her mother, Anna: the true head of the family, strong in both body and spirit, an active, resourceful, demanding woman. Anna needed no jewelry for the picture — no rings, no pendants. Her thick hair was styled simply, out of the way of work, almost like a working woman's short crop. Her blouse was plain, trimmed with a white jabot. Her thin lips were pressed tightly together.

Her husband, Matvei, by contrast, carried every mark of a gentleman: his jacket fastened with a gold clasp, a ring on his finger, a Paul Buhre watch, a waistcoat and tie. He wore a short mustache and a neatly trimmed beard; his high forehead gave way to a bald patch; his full lips seemed on the verge of a smile; his eyes were kind and earnest. He was shorter than his wife. Maria leaned against her father's shoulder in the photograph — she would remember him all her life with real tenderness.

The eldest son, Iosif, looked tense, almost defiant — evidently a man of stubborn character. His mother had tried to talk him out of marrying a simple peasant girl, but he loved her and married her anyway, and she bore him a son, Gennadi. Later, this choice would prove fortunate: his family would escape being dispossessed and exiled north. Kazimira, already well past marrying age by then (she'd been born in 1889), would never marry at all — first because of her noble birth, and later because of her status as a pariah, once she too became "an enemy of the people."

Karl, an enterprising man, was the family's main breadwinner. He'd served in the navy before going on to sail commercial vessels, and it was with his earnings that the family bought its farm equipment — a horse-drawn threshing machine, a winnowing machine, and more. Among the places his travels took him to was America, where a close friend eventually settled. It was through this friend that Maria came to know a young engineer named Andrei. They fell in love and made plans to leave together for America. But that would come later, several years on.

In the photograph, Maria wears the traditional dress of a secondary-school student. It's 1911. Time was moving quickly now, and Maria along with it.

Her plan to remake her life entirely seemed within reach — her love for Andrei had everyone's blessing, and their marriage was all but settled. He was already waiting for her in America. Her two closest friends had emigrated with their own families and were eagerly anticipating her arrival, sending her charming postcards decorated with little angels, along with a photograph of themselves at a skating rink, dressed in matching white fur coats, hands tucked into fluffy white muffs.

Maria was now waiting on her travel papers. Her fiancé had already sent an ocean-liner ticket. Still, the transatlantic crossing frightened her — Germany and Austria-Hungary were now at war with France and Britain, and, according to the newspapers, German submarines were sinking ships, though military vessels only, for the time being.

Her brothers Iosif and Mikhail, and her sister Kazimira, came to the Kamenetsky estate to say their goodbyes. The three of them appear in a photograph together: Iosif and Kazimira seated in a light sleigh, drawn by a white filly with a fluffy tail and mane, Kazimira looking directly into the camera. Mikhail stands nearby, in a long coat with a

black collar. Behind them stands a house — or rather, an old house converted into a barn — its condition reflecting rather poorly on its owner, Uncle Franz: the roof damaged in several places, the windows boarded up from the inside. The year was 1914.



Maria the Bride

In the three years since her visit to Aleksandrovka, Maria had blossomed into a striking young woman — a fine oval face, her hair braided and pinned up, a short, curled fringe, a long neck, a slender figure, and a kind, warm expression.

In one photograph, she stands beside a handsome young man in military uniform — her brother, Mikhail, home on brief leave before his army service. Their sister Kazimira is there too, though not as tall or as striking as her siblings.



Another photograph from around this time shows Uncle Franz gazing calmly, thoughtfully into the camera; the aunt beside him stares off into the distance, as though trying to make something out. Maria, too, looks serious, almost as if her mind were already somewhere far away. Iosif appears in this photograph as well.



On the back, an inscription reads:

"Dear Andryusha!⁹ I received your letter, though I haven't yet had time to answer it. I won't be able to come to you by August, since my papers won't be ready in time — but I may manage it by the end of August, though I confess I'm a little afraid to make the trip. I'm sending you my photograph, though it's only a group picture — I don't have one of myself alone. This one was taken at Easter. Yours faithfully, Manya."

Then, unexpectedly, the aunt died — right after her guests had left. Uncle Franz's health began to decline rapidly afterward, and he grew deeply depressed. Perhaps he feared losing his tireless, devoted ward and the care she provided him. Or perhaps the war weighed on him more than he let on — it was already reshaping their lives. Young men had been called up to the front. Villages emptied out, and hired help grew scarce. Taxes rose. And with each passing day,

⁹ Diminutive for Andrei

Maria's planned move to America grew more dangerous still. Yet the departure date fixed by her ship ticket kept drawing nearer.

At this critical moment, the ailing uncle did something entirely unexpected: he wept, and begged Maria not to leave him now — not to abandon a sick, lonely old man. Besides, he told her, travel was far too dangerous just now, and the war was sure to end soon, with Germany's defeat all but certain — she could always leave afterward.

And so Maria stayed. That was the end of a period in her life that, in hindsight, could almost be called happy. She had no way of knowing — no one did — what awaited her in the very near future.

Maria Stays on the Estate

The aunt had long since died, and the uncle was ailing, but guests from the city still liked to spend their time at the Kamenetsky estate. Maria's workload only grew heavier. Of the Novikov brothers, only a few still worked there — the rest had been drafted and sent to the front. Death notices began arriving, along with wounded men returning home, grim and despondent. Resentment toward the well-off and wealthy was building. Rumors spread of land seizures, plundered estates, forests cut illegally, meadows mowed without permission, haystacks stolen outright. It was fortunate the uncle owned a revolver — but living so far from other people had become genuinely frightening.

Maria's emotional state, in particular, was dire. For the first time in her life, she had fallen in love and felt loved in return — had come so close to leaving to join that love, to bidding her family farewell, to giving up the inheritance she'd been promised! Her beloved fiancé, Andryusha, was gone; her friends were gone too, writing to say they were counting the days until her arrival, looking so happy on their skates in the photograph. And yet here she was, forced to shoulder the yoke all over again, since there was no one else left to look after the people and the animals — no help to be found, and none to hire.

Only a woman of real inner strength could have carried on, could have survived and still preserved any compassion for the sick and elderly around her — sacrificing her own life and future in the process.

It was Philipp now who helped nearly every day with the cattle and around the house. He'd grown taller, though still thin and light on his feet. He felt for the young mistress, exploited, it seemed, by anyone who felt like taking advantage. The city guests kept coming every summer, young and old alike, staying the whole season. Their friend Natalia Pavlovna was long gone, yet they still lounged in the garden or sunbathed by the lake from morning till lunchtime, then ate and napped the afternoon away — never once helping Maria cook dinner or clean up afterward. Were he the one in charge, Philipp thought, he'd never have stood for it.

At last, Maria did what her fiancé, Andryusha, had asked — she had her photograph taken. Whether he ever received it, no one knows. But the moment survives, captured forever: a fleeting

instant suspended between her past and her future. A beautiful, slender young woman, fine-featured, with a calm, self-possessed gaze.



Then, even here, in this remote backwater, the revolution finally arrived. Factories to the people! Land to the peasants! All power to the Soviets¹⁰! And the war drew close behind it. Now it was Philipp's turn to be drafted — to defend the Revolution. Word was that Denikin's¹¹ forces were advancing. So Philipp was issued a greatcoat and a rifle, though he'd never fired a shot in his life. Facing Denikin's advancing troops, he was placed in a trench, rifle resting on the parapet, and told simply to fire on command. No one explained how to aim. Looking out over the parapet was frightening enough on its own, so he fired blind. He may well have killed someone. It became the story he'd tell schoolchildren years later — how he'd defended the Soviet government. But his favorite tale, the one he loved dramatizing most, was about how political consciousness had been instilled at the front: "A Menshevik gives a speech, promising everything will turn out fine. We applaud. Then Trotsky steps up, carrying a sack. He asks the soldiers, 'What's inside?' No one knows. He pulls out a large cat and asks, 'What's this?' Everyone shouts, 'A cat!' But Trotsky lifts the animal by its hindquarters, tail raised. 'It's not a cat — it's a tomcat! Don't believe the Mensheviks!' The soldiers roared with laughter. The Menshevik was finished — no further argument needed."

Philipp forgot much of what happened to him during that war, but those two moments stayed with him for the rest of his life. Every year, he'd be invited to speak to the local school's classes on the history of the Bolshevik Party, sharing his memories of fighting against General Denikin. And every year, he told the very same story.

Not long after that battle, he was allowed to turn in his rifle and return home.

The Novikov brothers were a tremendous help to the Kamenetskys, as was the water mill. Bread was needed at all times, revolution or no revolution, and the mill remained their main source of income. What income there was, though, the government made sure to take its share of — food taxes, local levies, grain requisitions, and the rest.

The World War ended, and a civil war rose in its place. Dear Aleksandrovka would remain out of reach for years to come, and America would stay forever just a dream — the brightly lit skating rink, dear friends in pretty white fur coats, all of it. All that remained were the photographs, the little angel-and-dove postcards, and the memories.

Those were bleak, lonely, hopeless years. Estates withdrew into themselves. Many were plundered outright, their owners fled or arrested. Maria's old friends stopped visiting altogether, as though they'd vanished into thin air. Uncle Franz and Maria felt especially isolated in that big, cold house through the long, dark evenings of autumn and winter.

The Kamenetskys themselves had not yet been touched — they worked their own land and gave others work, too. Uncle Franz lived on the estate full-time now, having nowhere else to go; there was no work, and no apartment, waiting for him back in Bezhitsa. He'd aged and weakened remarkably fast. He often stared blankly into the distance, tears welling in his unseeing eyes. This intelligent, cultured man understood, by then, that Maria would never live to enjoy the inheritance he'd meant for her. Taken from her family as a small child — her mother and father,

¹⁰ Workers and Peasants Councils

¹¹ A White Guard general who fought against the Red Army in South Russia

her sister and brothers — she'd lost her fiancé, and now stood to lose the very thing meant to reward her years of hard work. He knew he bore much of the blame for that. Though her own parents were still alive, Maria had effectively become an orphan — and now he, too, was leaving her alone in a world closing in around her, hostile and ever-narrowing, ruled by proletarians and by those "who had once been nothing, and now were everything"¹²."

The uncle died peacefully, most likely in Bezhitsa. His death passed almost entirely unnoticed.

Uncertain Times

It was 1929. The Soviet government had struggled with the peasantry ever since 1917. Cities needed bread, but simply taking it from peasants without payment proved harder than expected. Poor peasants barely had enough to feed themselves, and the better-off had no wish to hand theirs over. Surplus-grain requisitioning, food taxes, flat taxes — all were tried, none with much success. And whenever the authorities tried to seize "the surplus" by force, peasants resisted, burying their grain or hiding it however they could. Greedy people, these "kulaks"¹³ But the leaders of the revolution had known all along that there was a simpler way. Gather the peasants into cooperatives. Strip them of their farm equipment and livestock. Assign each one a production quota, to be paid out only once the State's food-supply plan had been met. Seed grain would be kept under State guard, so peasants couldn't eat it themselves. Work poorly, and you'd receive little in return — though there was never much to receive anyway, since a developing country needed grain not only to feed its cities but to export abroad, in exchange for machinery. These cooperatives were called kolkhozes¹⁴. The poorest peasants had almost nothing to contribute in the first place, but the better-off understood clearly enough: hand over what they'd built through years of labor, and they'd cease to be their own masters — they'd become slaves instead.

The Party and the government pressed ahead with "collectivization." The poor joined willingly enough; the kulaks resisted as long as they could.

The authorities tried to force them into the collective farms through taxation — pay off one tax, and another would appear. After all, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had taught that peasants bred capitalism with every breath they took. In the end, the Party issued the order: annihilate "the kulak class" entirely.

The Dispossessed

The inheritance left behind by Uncle Franz became a crushing weight on the shoulders of the young mistress of the Kamenetsky estate: eight desyatinas¹⁵ of arable land, two meadows, a purebred mare, a cow, a house, a bathhouse, a yard with outbuildings, a share in a water mill, two purebred pigs, a bull calf, five sheep, seven beehives, twenty-six chickens, thirty poods¹⁶ of

¹² Words from "International", the revolutionary hymn

¹³ Well-off peasants

¹⁴ Collective farms

¹⁵ One desyatina = approx. 2 ¾ acres

¹⁶ One pood = approx. 16 kg

rye, thirty poods of oats, fifteen poods of barley, four poods of pork lard, eight hams, a summer horse-drawn carriage, a pleasure sleigh, a work sleigh, an assortment of farm tools, and a cargo wagon fitted with metal suspension. Not to mention a wall clock that struck the hour!

It's a common misconception that farmers have little to do in winter. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cleaning out the stalls and the cattle shed alone took more than an hour. And how much time did it take to groom the thoroughbred, wash the manure off the cow and calf, warm water for the animals to drink, boil beets and potatoes to feed the pigs and chickens, milk the cow, separate the newborns from the adults, and train the young cow to be milked?

While snow still covered the ground, the farmer had to haul manure out and spread it over the soil to be tilled. He also had to request timber from the forest warden, cut it, haul it home, and split it — both for firewood and to keep the mill running and safe in case of flooding. There was more soil and manure to bring in, farm equipment and tools to maintain, fruit trees to prune and whitewash so the spring sun wouldn't scorch their bark, pigs and sheep to slaughter, meals to cook for himself and for the workers. No one could be sent out to the woods or the meadow without lard or ham in their stomachs — poorly fed men did poor work, and hard labor demanded proper food.

Everything would have been easier with more help. So, once he returned from the army, Philipp worked day and night. He felt real sympathy for the young mistress of the house. Even hiring workers took effort — someone had to travel to the neighboring village of Kokhonovo, and negotiating with grown men wasn't considered a young woman's business.

Philipp regarded his mistress with genuine admiration and helped her however he could. Unlike other peasants, he never cursed or swore. He was no Hercules, certainly — thin, though wiry and strong, hardworking, respectful. A simple man, one of the lads. But no fool, either: he simply liked to play the simpleton, letting whoever he spoke with believe he respected them, valued their judgment, even deferred to them — when in truth he saw things quite clearly himself.

Maria couldn't shake the feeling of having been abandoned in a hostile world. She was afraid to be alone — not just at night, but during the day as well. Philipp understood this. He no longer went back to Radichi at all; there was no way to manage the estate without him there.

Being a farmhand now carried a certain prestige — much as being a nobleman once had, before the revolution. It was, in its way, a ticket to a better life, and it lifted Philipp's spirits. He was glad, too, to see his mistress's warmth toward him growing by the day, and he was always there when she felt afraid, or sad.

Exactly how their relationship developed, no one knows for certain — but in 1924, at the Radichi village council, a civil marriage was recorded between Philipp Kirillovich Novikov and Maria Matveyevna Kamenetskaya.

Nothing changed in their daily routine, their working life. There was no pause for rest, no honeymoon, no lightening of the daily labor for either of them. There wasn't enough money to hire real help. From time to time, peasants from the neighboring village worked in exchange for

food, when they found themselves in need or had a little free time. Only the Novikov brothers worked the estate on a permanent basis. Pavel ran the mill, worked the fields with his pair of horses, made hay, and drove grain or livestock to market to help cover the ever-rising taxes. Mikhail and Arseni pitched in with odd tasks as well. By dusk, the brothers went home, leaving the animals' care entirely to Philipp and Maria.

But even this routine was soon to change. At the end of May, Maria told her husband they were expecting a child. Philipp proposed a solution: his younger brother and his wife, Aksinya, would move onto the estate. A house was built for them, with land set aside for a vegetable garden.

Given the size of the inheritance and the sheer number of livestock, one might well ask: why did they need so many animals, just the two of them? Were they simply gluttons?

The livestock served practical purposes — paying hired workers in kind, and covering taxes, some of which were paid in produce, such as grain. Beyond providing food, the animals also fertilized the soil.

January 7th, 1925, brought not only the joy of Christmas but the birth of their first son as well. He was named Vyacheslav, as his mother had wished. The boy was healthy and even-tempered. His parents were overjoyed.

A year passed quickly, and this time Maria hoped for a daughter. But on the fourth day after Christmas, in 1927, I was born instead. It happened to be bitterly cold, both outside and in, and within the first days of my life I fell ill. My parents rubbed my chest with turpentine and goose fat, hoping the illness would pass — but the coughing and wheezing only grew worse.

It wasn't until January 20th that they finally believed I would survive. Only then did they register my birth with the church, and have me baptized for good measure. I would carry the effects of that early illness with me for the rest of my life.

It's possible that more than just the cold or the infection had shaped my fragile health — my mother's own physical condition, worn down by years of relentless labor, may have played its part too. That much is reflected in a photograph taken by a not-particularly-skilled traveling photographer.

The picture was taken with no special preparation, against a garishly painted canvas backdrop showing two swans that looked more like geese, a gazebo, and a puddle meant to represent a pond. Philipp sits in a chair; Maria, tall and thin, stands beside him, poorly dressed. Father wears a military uniform, and he too looks thin. I sit in his lap — my oversized head, crowned with snow-white hair, draws the eye immediately, tilted at an angle that seems less a pose than a simple inability of my thin neck to hold it upright. My legs, too, are strikingly thin. My expression looks sad, almost pained. Vyacheslav — Vechik — stands tall beside them, his face sunburnt, making no effort to hold on to his mother: already, at that age, an independent boy. The photograph was taken in the summer of 1928.



How much Maria had changed in just a few short years! Where was that beautiful girl we see in the photographs from the time she'd planned to marry Andryusha, the one who waited for her in vain in America?

The children brought Maria joy, but her old dream — a daughter of her own — remained unfulfilled. So she decided to try once more. This third child, surely, would be a girl! And on the second day after Christmas, in 1929, she gave birth to another boy instead — Gennadi.

Taxes kept rising, while cattle prices in the area stayed low. To cover the latest round of taxes, Philipp decided to sell a yearling bull calf. He'd heard that prices in the city of Bezhitsa ran considerably higher than at the markets in Roslavl or Zhukovka — though the trip there would be a long one, some seventy kilometers.

At daybreak, Philipp harnessed the horse, tied the calf to the back of the wagon, and set off for the city, hoping to reach, by dusk, the home of some old friends of Uncle Franz's — a family that still spent its summers at the Kamenetsky estate. It was an exhausting journey, but Philipp was glad to arrive well before dark. Instead of a warm welcome, though, his hosts greeted him with sheer astonishment — he'd never once visited them before. They were even more surprised to learn he'd traveled by horse-drawn wagon rather than by train, and only believed it once they'd come outside to see for themselves. But the moment they spotted the large bull calf tied to the wagon, and realized Philipp intended to spend the night, picturing what their tidy yard would look like come morning, their surprise turned to outrage. They couldn't fathom how he could have even imagined such a thing. Absolutely not, they told him — he should find an inn instead, since the smell of horse, calf, and manure around the house was simply unacceptable. At first, Philipp was stunned by this reception. Then he grew furious. Where was he supposed to find an inn at this hour? "Fine," he said, shaking with rage, "if that's how it is, then I don't want to see any of you again, either!"

He would go on despising these "summer visitors" for the rest of his life — though he still made exceptions for the ones willing to spend most of their vacation actually helping him with his work.

The summer of 1929 arrived. Work left Maria almost no time for her children. It was during this stretch that the memorable incident occurred — Vechik cutting both the bread and his own stomach.

The year 1930 was declared the year of total collectivization. The poor, under the watchful eye of Party commissars, banded together into communes. Peasants of middling means, along with the better-off, refused to join the kolkhozes or surrender their equipment, horses, and cattle.

The Soviet government mounted an aggressive propaganda campaign, raised taxes further still, and emptied barns down to the last grain. Most peasants were convinced nothing good could come of any of it — those who hadn't worked hard before, they reasoned, certainly wouldn't start working hard on a collective farm. Some said so openly.

The Soviet government remained determined to radically remake the peasantry, which, in the words of the international proletariat's leader, V. I. Lenin, "breeds capitalism every single day, every single hour." Many well-off farmers and priests sold off their land and property and fled to the cities. Some of the Kamenetskys' own friends left as well — most without leaving any forwarding address at all.

It came as no surprise that Maria felt no fondness for her inheritance. More than that — she'd come to hate it. At times, she suggested they sell everything and move to the city, since so many others had already been dispossessed and sent away, whole families at once. But her husband wouldn't hear of it. He'd never owned property of his own before in his life, and now, at last, his luck had turned! Yes, it had cost him hard work — but what an inheritance it was! Not a kopeck to his name before, and suddenly, wealth! How could he simply walk away from his own good fortune? Why on earth would he? He'd paid every tax demanded of him — the flat tax, and the next one after it — and there was still something left in the barns. The mill helped enormously. Besides, he was just a farmhand himself; he'd never exploited anyone. Surely he wouldn't be dispossessed. He wasn't going anywhere, and he wasn't selling a thing. "Just look at the two of us," he'd say to Maria. "Are we exploiters? We work like slaves — dawn to dusk, no day of rest, winter or summer alike. And now we have three children besides."

Still, the atmosphere of hostility kept growing more palpable by the day — like the first chill of an approaching autumn, or the cold that would come with the next hungry winter.

Here is what my good acquaintance from the village of Ryabchi, Maria Yegorovna Akulenkova — daughter of my mother's closest friend — told me about those difficult years, in that same Dubrovka District:

"Our family lived in the village of Aleshnya. We were well-off. My father, Yegor, was hardworking, industrious, good with his hands at any trade. We had a big house, outbuildings, a steam mill, a fine horse for going out — his name was Shorokh — and a workhorse besides; arable land, a meadow, a cow, sheep, pigs, chickens, geese. All of it took a lot of work and care.

In mid-September, they started organizing a kolkhoz. My parents were asked to join. But how could anyone give up everything earned through years of hard work? Besides, there was already so much to do — what did we need a collective farm for? Mother — Antonina Sergeevna — ran the household and had three children on her hands besides. But the Soviet government said: 'If you won't join willingly, we'll make you!' We paid one tax, and they slapped on another. We paid that too. Our barns were swept clean — nothing left. But there was still the mill; we thought we'd work and get through somehow. I was eight years old at the time.

One day I came into the house, and Ma was crying. 'Ma, why are you crying?' She said, 'They took your father.' I didn't understand — took him how? Where to? He never came home that night.

They also took our two horses and a big pig, some special breed. They led them off to the village of Zhukovo, to the kolkhoz 'Free Path'; confiscated the mill, the house, the outbuildings; harnessed Shorokh, tied the cow behind the cart, and the pig too. They didn't even list them on

the receipt — just made Ma sign a paper saying she'd come every day to Zhukovo to tend her own animals herself. So she went, every day, and looked after them. We stayed home alone, one smaller than the next — I was eight, my brother Vaska was five, and Volodka wasn't even a year old yet. I rocked him in his cradle.

They sent a man from the city to be our kolkhoz chairman — one of the 'twenty-five-thousanders.'¹⁷ He moved into our house, took over our sitting room, and pushed us onto the 'shelf' — the wooden platform behind the stove. Our homemade chest of drawers, and the round clock that struck the hour, were confiscated — taken without so much as a piece of paper, just carried off. God bless that chairman, though — he told Ma: 'Sergeevna, don't go to Zhukovo anymore to look after your cattle. If any of them get sick, your children will be left without a mother — they'll say you poisoned the animals yourself!' He felt sorry for us.

So we lived on that shelf for a while. Then came the day we were driven out of there too. Ma took us to the nearby village of Lyubimovka, to her brother Sanka, who lived there with their grandfather. The government hit him with one flat tax, then another. His barns, too, were swept bare. Sanka was a sober man, a teetotaler — if he'd been a drinker, it might have gone easier for him, somehow. He was dispossessed. We were thrown out of his house as well. Ma couldn't find anywhere to rent a room — people were afraid. They could be accused of helping kulaks! The government kept saying back then: 'The people and the Party are one! Hate the kulaks more! It's them, the exploiters, keeping our people from living well and happily!' So Uncle Sanka lost everything — his property seized, and he wasn't exiled outright, just sent to fell trees in the forest. We found shelter again in Aleshnya. Our old neighbors let us live in their bathhouse.

One day, Uncle Sanka came into the bathhouse and climbed up into the attic. I remember his hands — terrible to look at, so badly bruised. He only said to me, quickly: 'Manya, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid.' I ran to Ma: 'Uncle Sanka's here — he's climbed into the attic!' By nightfall, he came down and lay on the shelf. Whenever someone passed outside, he'd scramble up onto the stove¹⁸, shaking with fear. When it got dark, he went to Lyubimovka, said goodbye to his wife, kissed his children, and left. No one's seen him since.

We stayed there a while longer, Tolik, and then moved back to Ryabchi. Relatives let us live in an unfinished barn — one wall was missing, and there was no ceiling at all. We patched it up with boards and logs, braced together, and papered the walls with old newspapers. That's where we settled. But how were we supposed to live? We weren't given any real land — just scraps of wasteland here and there. Nowhere near enough to survive on.

Two years passed before we got a letter from Father. Come, he wrote. As a good worker, he'd been granted a kind of 'free' exile — free, meaning he could work in the forest and simply had to report once a month to the authorities to prove he hadn't run off. His exile was on the Northern Dvina River, a hundred and twenty kilometers from Arkhangelsk. So we went to him — by train to Arkhangelsk, then by the open deck of a loaded barge. There were three of us: me, my brother

¹⁷ The party sent 25 thousand factory workers, communists, from cities to the countryside to organize kolkhozes

¹⁸ Russian stove is big structure that takes a large part of the room it is in; it is used for cooking and heating and has enough space on top to sleep several people

Volodka, and Ma. Vaska stayed behind with relatives — he was too weak to travel. In three years of life, he'd never once eaten properly.

Even before we reached Arkhangelsk, Ma heard that Pa had already rebuilt a mill, and been given a house for it. The house was empty, and there wasn't much food. But the woods were full of mushrooms and berries, more than anyone could count! Father got hold of a rifle, and a concertina too — man doesn't live by bread alone! Mushrooms and berries, at least, were never in short supply. I even carried the blueberries I picked down to the river to sell — one ruble for three glasses. Nowadays people say children shouldn't be made to work, that they're too small for it. Take you, Tolik — would you send your granddaughter Anka out to work like that? When I was ten, I was sent out to pick berries, to walk to the wharf, to hike eighteen kilometers to where my father worked. I'd walk alone through the woods, without seeing a single soul, just to bring Pa whatever food we had — soup, rusks... And I'm sure Ma and Pa worried themselves sick the whole time."

"Of course they were, Maria, I bet they were! There were plenty of former convicts around back then. All sorts of people..."

"No, Tolik, there were no bad incidents."

"What does that tell us, then, Maria? That most of the dispossessed kulaks were decent, honest people..."

"That summer, Father was sent to make hay. He had a little shelter out there to hide from the mosquitoes — we'd heat it up a bit and sleep inside. People there didn't use scythes like ours; they cut with big sickles instead. Pa made himself a proper scythe and snath, and soon became the best hay maker around. They'd cut the grass in the morning, and by evening it was already stacked. The hay was woven around a crosspiece, the same way we mound potatoes for storage — a pole driven into the ground with a crossbar, the hay wound loosely around it, without pressing it down. So Pa made hay through the summer. Once it turned colder, he started repairing the mill instead. It hadn't been working, since the miller had gone blind and no one had replaced him. Pa fixed it up and became the miller himself. I remember when they brought the blind miller in to check his work — Father stopped the mill, and the old man ran his hands over the millstones, the cams, the flour, feeling everything carefully. He was satisfied, and praised the work. That's how we got by.

"But there was no meat, no milk. And my brother Volodka fell ill. The doctors said if we didn't leave that place, he'd die, and prescribed him a pitcher of skim milk — not even whole milk. Thank God, Father's good work counted for something, and he was released after four years instead of the full five.

"We came back to our home village in the autumn of 1934. That was the hunger years. Ryabchi's mill had fallen completely to ruin by then — the dam had been neglected, and the spring flood had broken it apart. It made more sense to build a new dam and mill farther up the Belizna River, near the village of Chot. They came to Father and said: 'Come on, Yegor, let's go — only you can do this.' So he went, did the work, and brought us along to Chot.

"He started grinding grain again, and that's what got us through the famine. But the moment the mill was running, people showed up to oversee it, and eventually to run it themselves. Without Father, though, it always fell back into disrepair. He'd fix it again, and we'd move back — and the whole cycle would repeat. Eventually we moved back to Ryabchi, into a little hut."

"I know that hut, Maria. The Byrdikovs lived there in 1936. Their little boy, Petka, was a keen, skilled fisherman. And Aunt Dunya used to visit them often — she'd also come to see my father, for a hair of the dog. Father was a veterinary assistant and had access to pure alcohol. Once he poured her a hundred grams and told her, 'Add a little water.' 'No need, Kirillich, let it play a bit,' she said, and drank it straight down — then choked, turned pale, and fainted. Father carried her out into the garden, gave her mouth-to-mouth, and brought her back around. It scared him too — he knew he wouldn't have gotten off easily if something had happened to her, considering he had served four years out of his eight-year sentence, building the Belomorkanal¹⁹.

"So, Tolik, I've counted — this is the eighteenth house I've lived in now. Father took on every kind of work imaginable. He herded cattle, made wagon wheels and sleighs. Once, on March 16th — no, the 15th — of 1937, during Maslenitsa²⁰, when men were wandering the village nursing their hangovers, the kolkhoz chairman came by and asked Father to build him a spring-mounted buggy. Just then, two men in leather jackets pulled up and came inside. The walls were papered with old newspapers, and they seemed to like that. 'Look at these kulaks,' one said. 'Doesn't matter to them — they've made themselves right at home again! Where's the owner?' 'He's out back, chopping wood,' Mama said. 'Go on, Manya, call your father.' I went out and told him: 'Pa, there are two men here asking for you.'

"'Well, Manya, this is it,' he said, and drove the axe into the log with all his strength." (Here Maria's voice broke, and tears ran down her cheeks — the memory was clearly still painful.)

"We went back inside. The men began searching the house. They never said what they were looking for, and there wasn't much to find — we hadn't managed to acquire anything yet; we didn't even own a cow. Still, they searched everywhere, even under the floorboards. They found two photographs — one of my godfather, Ivanov, who'd once had a shop across the street. 'Who's this?' they asked. 'The children's godfather,' we said. 'Where does he live now?' 'In Bezhitsa. He has two sons.'

"They took the photograph, and they took our father. On the 18th, Mother went to Dubrovka to bring him some rusks. That same day, the flood broke the dam — the lake vanished, and there was no way to cross the river. The water swept away our chickens and our rooster, who got tangled in the bushes downstream. I went out to bring them back. Ma came home the next day. Father had been sentenced to eight years. She'd been at the trial herself, in Smolensk.

"You know, Tolik, dreams really do come true sometimes. Ma was at the trial, and I was home looking after the little ones. I had a dream that Dad had been sentenced to eight years. When the

¹⁹ White Sea Canal

²⁰ Pancake Week, the last week before the Great Lent during which the Russians celebrate the end of winter and, traditionally, bake blini (pancakes)

door opened and Ma walked in, I asked her, 'Ma, is it eight years?' 'Eight. How did you know?' 'I saw it in a dream.'

"After that, they started harassing me at school — one teacher especially, Kuznetsov. He drowned in our lake later on, fell out of a boat. He gave me a failing mark in zoology, and I never even sat the exam. I didn't make it into eighth grade. Kolka Byrdikov, on the other hand, finished seventh grade with good marks, and applied to eighth — but was turned down, as the son of 'an enemy of the people.' He wrote to Krupskaya²¹ about it, and she ordered that he be admitted. But he never was.

"In 1941, all the young people were sent to dig trenches, but I wasn't allowed to go. A month later, though, I was entrusted with driving the kolkhoz cattle east."

"They must have been desperate by then, and simply forgot who you were. They knew perfectly well you weren't an enemy — neither were you, nor your father, nor any of your relatives. My own father, dispossessed and convicted just like yours, drove cattle all the way to the Volga. Early in 1942, he was drafted into the army — forty-four years old by then. He told them: 'Why are you drafting me? I'm an enemy of the people — convicted under a political charge, Article 58 of the Criminal Code.' 'Half the men here are Article 58,' they told him. And he went on defending the communist regime clear through to the summer of 1945."

"Well, my father didn't live to see Victory Day. When his rehabilitation came through, we were told only that he'd died in March or April — no place given, no region mentioned. Before that, we'd been told he was building some factory in Krasnodar."

"That was probably right around when the Germans were pushing to seize the Caucasus, Maria. The situation there had gotten critical, and all the 'enemies' were executed, since there was nowhere left to evacuate them to. No man, no problem."

"One more thing, Tolik. To help Dad after his first arrest, Mother went from village to village, gathering peasants' signatures in his support. But the signatures were dismissed on the grounds that we'd supposedly paid for them. Around the same time, a newspaper ran an article claiming that Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova was riding through the villages in a trotter-drawn carriage, agitating people against collective farms. Investigators came and demanded: 'Where are these trotters?' She told them: 'We had one trotter, called Shorokh — but he was taken away, and now he's with the militia.' 'And where are your sons?' 'Here's my whole family,' she said — 'little Vaska in the cradle, and here's Volodka.'

"By the way, the part of the village near the lake was always called the 'genteel' part.

"There's one more thing I want to mention. When we came back from evacuation, I was made kolkhoz chairman, and I managed it well. The farm workers respected me — they always came to me for advice on anything work-related, whether it was plowing ('Many, how much land should we plow?') or haymaking ('Where should we stack it?'). And how well they worked! We

²¹ Lenin's wife; she was deputy minister of education at the time

plowed up to half a hectare a day! I remember your neighbor, Polyukha, hoisting a haycock and darting off with it like an arrow — such a fine worker she was."

"Maria, tell me about your son Vasily."

"He was born in 1929. Finished seven grades of school, worked in the kolkhoz. While serving in the army, he trained as a driver, and once he came home, he worked first as a driver for the kolkhoz, and later for the town executive committee in Dubrovka. At some point, someone suggested he apply to join the Party.

"He gathered his recommendations and appeared before the local Party bureau — everyone there knew everyone else, no strangers among them. But the most 'well-informed' comrade present asked him: 'Vasily Yegorovich, where's your father?' 'My father, Petrovich, is wherever you people sent him.' His application was denied, and he lived the rest of his life as a non-member."

There were real reasons behind that denial. He'd learned from his mother that Petrovich had been one of "the vigilant ones," a man who gave false testimony to the NKVD²² against so-called enemies of the people — a fact that came out at the trial itself. Beyond simple class hatred, Petrovich also held a personal grudge. Both Yegor and Petrovich were passionate hunters, each with his own hounds. They hunted the same grounds, often on the same days — the start of the season, the first snow, the freshly fallen snow, the spring and autumn bird migrations. One particular incident turned them into enemies for life.

Yegor's dog had flushed out a hare and given chase. Yegor fired and, by his own account, wounded it. But then Petrovich's dog joined the hunt, and being closer, caught and killed the hare first; Yegor's dog sank its teeth in as well. Petrovich reached the spot first, kicked Yegor's dog away from the carcass, and fired a shot into the air for good measure. Yegor insisted the hare was rightfully his, since he'd been the one to wound it, and his own dog would have caught up regardless. He pressed his case so forcefully that Petrovich eventually backed down and let him take the kill — but not before promising to make Yegor pay for it.

He didn't waste any time keeping that promise. He talked two other men from the village — one of them, notably, a relative of Yegor's — into signing a report to the NKVD, accusing his hunting rival of subversive activity. The response came swiftly. The "enemy of the people" was quickly dealt with. Though even without that denunciation, a miller and mill-owner like Yegor would likely have met the same fate anyway, given the Party and government's broader campaign to eliminate the kulak class entirely.

Nowadays, people say the Motherland needed to do it — that building up the country required hardworking people, as well as free slave labor. There was also a belief that it made sense to root out the kulaks' "seed," since their children could hardly be expected to feel loyalty or love toward the Party and its government. Under such inhuman conditions, the kulaks' wives still tried to raise children who were hardworking, honest, and capable of understanding both what was happening to their families and what had caused it. They taught their children to remain open and compassionate toward the suffering of others — not to grow bitter against the whole world —

²² People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Soviet ministry of the interior

and to serve as an example to others, and perhaps even a quiet reproach to their powerful persecutors. More than once, after all, people had been heard to sneer: "Look at these kulaks — comfortable again, already! It's all like water off a duck's back!"

How did Antonina Sergeevna manage to survive out in the wild taiga with three children? Through labor alone, love for her children, resourcefulness, and a deep belief that they'd get through whatever came — that the Lord and the Blessed Virgin would never abandon them, and would send their blessing in time. But how was one supposed to live without shelter, land, education, or a trade, in a village like that? She taught herself to sew — with no teacher, no manual to guide her. I witnessed it myself once: a woman came to her asking for a blouse, and without so much as a measuring tape, Antonina Sergeevna had the fabric cut within minutes.

Her sewing machine effectively replaced the old steam mill. How the Soviet authorities ever let that happen, I couldn't say. And curiously, once Sergeevna — and plenty of other former kulak families like her — finally secured a decent place to live, it invariably became the house where visiting officials preferred to stay: militiamen, prosecutors, men on official business, judges, propagandists. The reason was simple enough: the house was always clean and tidy, the food perfectly acceptable, the welcome warm, and — naturally — no payment was ever expected. We had the very same experience ourselves. And we'd often hear them remark: "How nice it is here! Time you got dispossessed all over again!" That last part was always especially "delightful" for the hosts to hear. Interestingly enough, it was often the very people who'd helped dispossess these families in the first place who recommended their houses to visiting officials — they understood perfectly well how to curry favor with the local petty elite.

To close this account: this conversation took place while Maria was gravely ill. Her health had been declining rapidly. Milking the cow had become too much for her, and a neighbor had to step in to help; eventually, she sold the cow altogether. Her granddaughter did everything she could to help her get back on her feet, but her legs kept failing her. Her mind and memory, though, remained remarkably sharp, and her understanding and clear-eyed view of reality never wavered. She was the first person to say to me: "Tolik, you understand, don't you, that you and I are victims of political persecution, and that we deserve rehabilitation? I read about it in the newspaper, and I've already sent an inquiry to the FSB. I'm preparing the paperwork now, for the court, to seek compensation for everything that was illegally taken from us back in 1930."

Almost every day, we visited Maria and her husband, Andrei. Her legs were painful just to look at. She suffered day and night, unable to walk, for more than a year. And yet we never once saw her fretful, irritable, or discontented. She and her family had endured so much over the years, and in the end, fate showed her no mercy — never granting her the happiness and good fortune she'd waited for all her life. She and her husband fell gravely ill at the same time, lying in separate beds in the same house. Maria passed away on February 7th, 2005, one day after her husband.

Maria Yegorovna and her mother, Antonina Sergeevna, were among the most remarkable women I have ever had the good fortune to know, to live alongside, and to talk with. They were worthy descendants of the skilled, hardworking people the Soviet government destroyed under the label of "kulaks."

But let us return now to the Kamenetsky-Novikov family.

Philipp never developed a taste for reading. He never read, nor took any interest in, the founding works of Marxism-Leninism. No one had ever told him that knowledge was power, and he'd never come to understand it on his own. The decisions handed down by the Party and government held little interest for him. He believed the dispossessions and requisitions might, in some cases, be justified — there were, after all, plenty of genuine bloodsuckers exploiting poor peasants. But surely, he thought, none of that had anything to do with him.

In the dead of a dark, snow-lashed night — the kind of night when a good master wouldn't let his dog outside — four men arrived at the Kamenetsky house in two sleighs. The dog began barking furiously, until a shot rang out, and the barking turned to a yelp, then silence. Loud banging followed at the door. While Maria hurried to light the kerosene lamp, the door began shaking under heavy blows. Philipp pulled on his trousers in a rush. His question — "Who's there?" — was answered with curses and demands to open up at once, or the door would be broken down. Four men in leather jackets came inside. They ordered the family to hand over the revolver they knew was somewhere in the house, and to sit down. Without introducing themselves or explaining anything, they began searching — turning everything upside down, shaking it out, tearing things apart, tossing belongings onto the floor. Little Gennadi began crying. Mother went to his bed, leaned down as if to comfort him, and quietly felt beneath the pillow for the revolver. She waited for the men to move into the next room before throwing it out the window, into the snow. The visitors gathered up some letters and photographs and began drawing up their report, questioning my parents as they went. I lay awake, watching my parents' pale, frightened faces in the dim, smoking light of the kerosene lamp. That feeling — fear mixed with utter helplessness — has stayed with me for the rest of my life.

A questionnaire was filled out for persons arrested and detained by the NKVD, including a formal warning about criminal liability for providing false information:

Last name: Novikov. First name and patronymic: Philipp Kirillovich. Citizenship: USSR. Ethnicity: Russian. Place of registration: Roslavl Region, Dubrovka District, village of Radichi. Year of birth: 1898. Education: village school. Wife: Maria, age 33. Occupation: farmer. Address: Kamenetsky farmstead. Sons: Vyacheslav, age 5; Anatoly [sic], age 3; Gennadi, age 1. Party membership: none. Profession: farming. Military service: Red Army, private. Property: 8 desyatinas of land, 2 meadows, 1 horse, 1 cow, small livestock, house, yard with outbuildings. Employment history: hired farmhand, 1914–1918; enlisted in the Army as a private. Arrested: 01.29.30. Arresting officer / warrant issued by / warrant number: [illegible] — GPU²³ investigator. Place of arrest: Kamenetsky farmstead, Dubrovka District. Signature of the person arrested: Ph. Novikov.

²³ State Political Directorate, intelligence and secret police, part of the NKVD

WARRANT No. 46

Valid until 01.31.1930

Issued by the Dub DE²⁴C (the entries here are sloppy and largely illegible — perhaps the officers were in a hurry, or simply didn't consider the warrant worth much care. Or perhaps the writer's hand had simply grown tired: so many enemies of the people to process.)

To: [rank illegible], [name illegible] — Golovanov Fyodor. Regarding the Kamenetsky farm: [] Novikov Philipp Kir[ilovich].

Purpose: [illegible]

Regardless of the search's outcome, Novikov Philipp [patronymic illegible] is to be detained.

Chief: [bold signature, no name given, no date]

Inventory

of the property of citizen Novikov Philipp Kirillovich, as of January 29th, 1930

House, with entry porch, 12 × 9 arshins — 300 rubles

Barn, wood, 7 × 7 arshins — 50 rubles

Barn, wood, 7 × 8 arshins — 60 rubles

Outbuildings — 150 rubles

Bathhouse, wood, 7 × 7 arshins — 50 rubles

Shed, wood, 25 × 10 arshins — 100 rubles

Horse, 6 years old, purebred — 200 rubles

Cow, calved 6 times, grey — 150 rubles

Pigs, 2, purebred — 100 rubles

Bull calf, 7 months, purebred — 40 rubles

Sheep, 5, ordinary — 15 rubles

Rye grain — 50 rubles

Oats, ordinary — 30 poods

Barley — 30 poods

Pork lard, 4 poods — 160 rubles

Hams, 8 — 160 rubles

Bees, 7 hives — 105 rubles

Metal-frame wagon — 40 rubles

Chickens, 26, at 1 ruble 50 kopecks each — 39 rubles

Wall clock, 1 — 30 rubles

Total: 1,895 rubles

Investigator: [signature]

Extract from Minutes No. 15

of the OGPU²⁵ Troika²⁶ meeting for the Western Region, March 24th, 1930 Heard:

²⁴ Probably Dubrovka District Executive Committee

²⁵ Joint State Political Directorate

²⁶ Extrajudicial three-person commissions that fast-tracked sentences during the Stalin era

Case No. 10214, charging Orekhov Roman Zakharovich, Orekhov Pyotr Vasilyevich, and twelve others with offenses under Article 58, paragraphs 10 and 11, of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR.

Resolved:

To sentence:

Orekhov Roman Zakharovich and Orekhov Pyotr Vasilyevich to 10 years each in a concentration camp;

Fomin Ivan Mikhailovich, Krasnosheev Semyon Samuilovich, and NOVIKOV PHILIPP KIRILLOVICH to 8 years each in a concentration camp;

Larichev Mikhail Feoktistovich and Larichev Semyon Mikhailovich to 5 years each in a concentration camp;

Makarov Yevtikhy Pavlovich to 5 years in a concentration camp;

Makarov Pavel Antonovich to 3 years in a concentration camp;

Begunin Alexei Fyodorovich to 3 years in a concentration camp, suspended.

The sentence for all ten begins February 2nd, 1930.

Secretary of the Troika: [sprawling signature, three strokes, with a bold flourish at the start and a long straight tail at the end]

My father was arrested for "subversive activity against the Soviet government" and "agitation against the collective farms." He was accused of saying that "we won't even have a chicken egg to drink around here." I doubt he ever said that out loud — more likely, he'd merely thought it. Either way, his words turned out oddly prophetic, as if he'd seen it all in a crystal ball. Decades of collective farming later, poultry farms would indeed become scarce, and even the few that remained would barely produce any eggs at all. Chickens tended to die young, and the ones that survived often ate the eggs themselves — the moment one hen left her nest, another, patiently waiting nearby, would swoop in and gobble the egg down. Eventually, producers' cooperatives had to start buying eggs for city markets directly from private individuals.

There's a story, still told among his fellow villagers, about the time Philipp asked the manager of the village shop to sell him a pair of socks: "Vera, give me those socks over there!" She warned him: "Kirillich, those are only traded for eggs!" To which he replied: "No, Vera — I need them for my feet!"²⁷

This little joke became well known throughout the area, and even twenty-two years later, a man not much older than middle-aged retold it to me as though he'd witnessed it himself.

The group case against these "enemies of the people" was finally resolved by a conclusion issued by the Bryansk Region prosecutor, 2nd Class State Counselor N. V. Vikulin, dated August 14th, 1989, concerning Criminal Case No. 12557, which stated:

On January 29th, 1930, P. K. Novikov was arrested and charged with anti-Soviet agitation, allegedly carried out over a period of several years.

²⁷ Untranslatable play on words: "eggs" in Russian slang also means "testicles"

Having found Novikov guilty of the offense described under Article 58, paragraphs 10 and 11, of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, the OGPU Troika for the Western Region, on March 24th, 1930, sentenced him to 8 years in a concentration camp.

As the case files show, the actions of Novikov Philipp Kirillovich did not, in fact, constitute the elements of a criminal offense. His case therefore falls under Article 1 of the Decree of the Supreme Council of the USSR of January 16th, 1989, "On Additional Measures to Restore Justice to the Victims of Repression During the 1930s, 1940s, and Early 1950s."

Senior Assistant Prosecutor: V. K. Potapov

Deputy Chief of the KGB Administration for the Bryansk Region: V. K. Parfyonov

The Bryansk Region Prosecutor's Office subsequently issued a document certifying that the extrajudicial case against P. K. Novikov had been declared null and void, and that he was to be considered rehabilitated, by decision dated August 14th, 1989.

Philipp Kirillovich Novikov never lived to learn this news. He died in his small house on February 12th, 1976, in the village of Ryabchi, Dubrovka District — twenty-two kilometers from his native village of Radichi, and fifteen kilometers from the once-prosperous Kamenetsky estate.

No one in his family ever learned of his rehabilitation, except for me.

I, Anatoli Philippovich Novikov, having been deprived, as a minor, of my father's care and custody — a father baselessly persecuted on political grounds — was myself formally recognized as a victim of political persecution, and rehabilitated in turn.

(Certificate of Rehabilitation No. 13-121-02, dated 06.05.2002, issued by the Bryansk Region Prosecutor's Office.)

In the Home Village of the Kamenetsky Family

During the period of the NEP²⁸, the family of Matvei Iosifovich Kamenetsky, back in Aleksandrovka, was doing quite well for itself. They had land, and the children had grown. With Karl's money, they'd bought a threshing machine, a winnower, and other equipment, along with purebred livestock — a couple of horses, a couple of cows, two sows, a handful of turkeys. Vladimir had married a Polish woman, Gelena, and moved to Leningrad, where he worked as a turner in a factory. Mikhail had finished his military service and come home, still unmarried. Iosif, Napoleon, and Kazimira all worked the farm, and Matvei himself, along with his wife, still lent a hand where they could. The harvests were good, the livestock purebred, the equipment

²⁸ New Economic Policy (1921-1928) represented a temporary retreat from the policy of extreme centralization aimed at reviving the economy

new. The family didn't just use their threshers and winnowers for themselves — they leased them out to other farmers too, and were recognized several times in Mogilev as a model farming operation. For a while, it seemed things couldn't get any better. Then tragedy struck: Anna, the family's hardworking, sharp-minded matriarch, passed away. Matvei Iosifovich, the head of the family, followed her less than a year later. Iosif moved away to live with his young peasant wife.

Starting in the spring of 1929, in Belarus just as in central Russia, the Soviet government began its campaign against the "bloodsuckers" — the kulaks.

The persecution didn't spare Vladimir Matveyevich Kamenetsky, even in the city, where he worked until 1937 at the Putilov Plant in Leningrad. His family lived at 76 Kurlyandskaya Street, apartment 2, near the Narva Gate. Across the street stood a large mechanized canteen where his wife, Gelya²⁹, worked as a cashier. By 1930, their daughter Stasya was in college, their son Konstantin was in seventh grade, and their younger son, Mechislav, was in fifth.

But even there, the Soviet government went looking for enemies of the people — and found them, in whatever numbers the quotas demanded. Stasya was arrested along with a group of fellow students, charged with plotting an armed uprising, and executed. She was twenty-one years old.

Hard Times

I, Anatoli Novikov, am sitting with my cousin, Natalia Pavlovna Novikova, at her house in the village of Sesha, Dubrovka District, reminiscing together about times long past. She's the last living witness of those difficult years in the Novikov family. It's a great pity I can no longer speak with any of my other relatives, to hear their own accounts of surviving that vast, insane social experiment carried out across Russia. Even many of my close relatives have remained strangers to me — partly through my own youthful carelessness, partly out of the necessity, back then, of burying one's own past, of never drawing attention to it, so as not to bring harm down on one's children, relatives, and friends.

I wanted to know what Natasha remembered about the period of kulak persecution — about our parents' lives, and life in general during those hard years.

In 1930, she was eight years old. Her father, Pavel Kirillovich — my father's brother — lived in the village of Radichi, five kilometers from Sesha and three from the Kamenetsky estate. He had a large family, but he alone provided for them, working at his brother Philipp's watermill and managing reasonably well. In January 1929, though, Philipp — my own father — was arrested for subversive activity against the Soviet government and agitation against the collective farms.

"Natasha, how many children were there in your family? Nine?"

"Misha was born first, in 1920. Then me, in 1922. Shurka in 1924 — he died of meningitis. Verka, who died at sixteen. Then Tolik, Grinka, Vitka, and finally Kolya and Afanasy."

²⁹ Diminutive for Gelena

"And how many children did you have when my mother came to live with you all?"

"Six."

"And how many are still alive today?"

"Just two — me, and Tolik. Here's a photo of Papa, you, and Verka. She was born in 1927 too. You're sitting on Father's lap — you were three and a half."

"Natasha, the Kamenetskys had a big farm. I know your father helped his brother Philipp there."

"Yes, he worked at the mill — fixing millstones, grinding grain, doing whatever else needed doing. They didn't just grind grain there, either; they fulled cloth as well. There were two working wheels — one for the mill, one for the fulling operation. Later on, your uncle Arseny moved his house and family onto your estate too."

"Natasha, what do you remember about the Kamenetsky estate itself?"

"I remember the big house, and the rubber plant that seemed to be in every room. And the lake. The outbuildings near the house, the garden stretching all around. A kilometer downriver from your house stood the village of Kokhonovo."

"Natasha, what became of the Kamenetsky estate, in the end?"

"The house was taken apart and moved to Dubrovka — it became a militia station. It had been a fine house."

"And the barns?"

"The people of Kokhonovo dismantled those themselves. That village isn't even there anymore, either."

"In 1937, I visited my birthplace. I stayed a few days with Uncle Arseny, my father's brother, and saw what remained of our family's estate — destroyed by then. My parents, by the way, never went back there again. When, and how, did Arseny build his own house?"

"Your father moved his house and family there too. He worked at the mill as well."

"When was that?"

"I was already old enough to remember it clearly — I must have been six or seven, so probably around 1928. His house stood close to yours."

"I visited that house myself. Uncle was away at the time, working at some mine. His wife, Aksyuta — I never liked that name, for some reason; I think her proper name was Aksinya — and their two young daughters, ten and twelve, were there. I helped them tend the herd, a cow

and a few sheep. They taught me how to play 'knives' — you'd throw a knife from different positions, trying to stick the blade upright in the ground. What surprised me most, as a boy, was being put to sleep in the same bed as the two girls — that struck me as strange at the time. I also saw the house and the garden where ours had once stood. Nothing of our old house remained — just an overgrown garden. No lake, no watermill, no outbuildings. I don't think even the river was still there. Only a thin, sparse row of trees hinted at where the house had once stood. The fields had grown over with birch saplings, two or three meters tall. In the distance, I could just make out the dark, crude huts of Kokhonovo.

"It seemed, in the end, that none of the gentry's or the kulaks' possessions had done anyone any real good. And this new reality hadn't brought the poor peasants much of substance either. But I had my balalaika with me, and I played it, singing patriotic songs — and somehow, standing there in that vast, empty stretch of land, free now of any kulak estates, I could almost feel the truth of it: 'Vast and grand is my beloved country, many are her forests, fields, and streams — I know not of any other country where a man can so freely breathe.'³⁰

"Natasha, after the arrest — how did we end up at your place, in Radichi?"

"Your mother came running to our house late one night, through the mud, crying: 'Pavel, what am I supposed to do now? Please, help me bring the children and some of our things!' Father harnessed two horses and drove out with her to fetch you all. By then, you had no cows, no horses left. They brought the three of you back. 'Pavel,' your mother said, 'go back to the estate early tomorrow morning and bring whatever's left, whatever the Kokhonovo villagers haven't already taken — but right now, take me to Sesha, to the train. I'm going to Leningrad.'

"Father drove her to the station, helped her onto the train, and off she went — with nothing but a handbag. The next day, he went back to your house and brought back what he could of your belongings, whatever the villagers hadn't managed to carry off. You and Vechik didn't cry, Tolik, but Gennadi did — 'Where's my Ma?' My father had spent so much time at your house by then that little Genya thought he was his own father, and started calling him 'Papa.'

"To which my younger brother Shurka would object: 'No — he's my Papa!' Father would calm them both down: 'Don't fight, now. You're all mine. Come here — sit on my lap, one on each knee.' Shurka, by the way, was a quick, brave little boy, but he died of meningitis after bathing in the bathhouse. Afanasy died at four, Nikolai at five, and my little sister died too.

"We children all got along well — no fighting, no real arguments among us. Whenever someone came to the door, Vechik would ask, 'Auntie, they're not coming for us, are they?' And Mother would say, 'Quick, get up on the stove! Stay behind the chimney, and don't make a sound!'

"Natasha, who worked in your household? Who helped out? You had nine children, one right after another."

³⁰ Popular song about the socialist Motherland

"Misha and I stayed home with the little ones whenever Mom and Dad went out to work. Mom always told me, 'Watch them closely, Natasha — don't let them fall and end up hunchbacked!' Mom did the bulk of the work, of course, but I helped where I could. Feeding that many children was one thing, but bathing the whole crowd every Saturday! Papa would heat up the stove, or the bathhouse, and we'd bathe them one after another until we'd gotten through them all. Father was the only one who worked the fields, though Mother could turn her hand to any job if he needed help. She actually gave birth to me out in the field, while tying sheaves — on St. Peter's Day, July 15th, 1922.

"Mother would rise early, light the stove, and head out to her chores, telling me, 'Go lie down with them, and make sure none of them falls.' If the children got too rowdy, I'd warn them, 'Quiet down, or the militia will hear you and come take you away!' That always settled them right down. I remember Father joking once, 'I'm off to the market — going to sell a few of the kids. Who wants to come along?' Vechik protested at once: 'I'm not going!' When Father came back later, Vechik asked him, 'Why didn't you sell them?' 'No buyers,' Father said. 'Nobody wanted them.' But he'd brought back a candy for every one of us — those long ones, with little tassels on the end."

"Natasha, did you ever see Uncle Franz — my mother's uncle?"

"I saw him once, when he came to visit us. Tall, slim, in a sheepskin coat with gathered pleats. He drove a light, well-sprung carriage, pulled by a fine white horse — its mane was white too. Her name was Devochka³¹. I don't remember Uncle Franz's face, though."

"How long did we live at your house?"

"The whole summer."

"Do you know where Arseny moved to, after that?"

"He lived in Kokhonovo for a few years. Then he had to move to Zatishye for work — they were mining phosphorites there. There was a mill too, for grinding the phosphorite. Nothing's left there now — not the mines, not the mill.

"Back in Kokhonovo, the spring after your father's arrest, the dam gave way in a flood. There was no one left to watch the rising water, especially after dark — no one to block the gullies, shore up the dam, or open the gates in time to drain it. No one left even to maintain what still worked, let alone repair what had failed. So the estate was lost, and the mill along with it, and plenty of the fields grew over with brush.

"The store closed, the road disappeared, and how were the two girls supposed to get to school? So Arseny had to move his house and barn once more, this time to the district center, Rognedino. It didn't happen all at once, though. I've remembered what happened to Aksyuta's mother for the rest of my life.

³¹ Russian for "girl"

"One day, she came to visit us with her granddaughter, Taisiya. We sat together under a willow tree — she'd brought sunflower seeds to share. I sat on one side of the tree, Taisiya on the other, and her grandmother right beneath it. Suddenly, a storm broke. Lightning struck the tree, splitting it apart, but we girls came through unharmed. Her grandmother, though, dropped dead on the spot. She'd had a long, beautiful braid — the lightning had even scorched her sarafan³². We screamed and ran to the barn. Our mother heard us and said, 'The girls are crying — something must have happened.' 'What happened?' 'The storm killed Aksyuta's mother!' Our parents dropped the flails they'd been threshing grain with and ran for spades. They dug a hole, laid her in it, and covered her with earth. I don't actually remember how they ended up digging her back out — but would you believe it, she came back to life! Afterward, she'd boast: 'Look, girls, how beautiful my hair's turned out — so wavy now!'"

"Natasha, our house in Ryabchi was struck by lightning too, you know — back in the summer of 1960. I was still a student then, and I'd rigged up a good antenna: thirty meters of copper wire, insulated at both ends. Despite the bitter cold, I climbed an old, tall linden tree and fastened one end near the top, running the other end to a tall wooden pole, with a separate wire carrying the signal from the antenna through the window into the house.

"All that effort went into the antenna because only a really good one could pull in multiple radio stations on a crystal-set receiver. There was no radio, no electricity in the village back then. And how thrilled we were once it actually worked! We could pick up all sorts of stations — including the BBC and Voice of America, both jammed mercilessly, though we still managed to listen through headphones. That's actually how we first heard the news of Stalin's death. A few years later, we upgraded to a battery-powered valve receiver with a real loudspeaker — the same antenna worked perfectly well with that, too.

"One morning, around eight o'clock, people waiting for the village store to open — about two hundred meters from our house — watched, in the middle of a thunderstorm, a column of fire come down right onto our roof. It looked, to them, as though the whole house had gone up in flames at once. Everyone expected it to burn down like a candle.

"But once the smoke cleared, in the pouring rain, the house was still standing, intact. My mother stood outside, badly shaken. The nettle leaves nearby were riddled with tiny scorch holes, and every window had shattered. The antenna itself had melted. The lightning had traveled inside, destroyed the radio receiver, and sent molten droplets of metal burning through the leaves of the rubber plant. It then shot across the room behind the stove, missing, by mere centimeters, Mother's brother Napoleon, who happened to be sleeping there during a visit — and killed our kittens instead.

"In our village, other houses were struck and burned by lightning too, and two shepherds were killed out in the field.

"Tell me, Natasha — how did your family manage to avoid joining the kolkhoz almost right up until the war started? How did you avoid arrest, avoid the camps?"

³² Long sleeveless gown

"They didn't arrest us because we had so many children. In a kolkhoz, we'd never have been able to feed them all. Father worked the fields, and Mother helped him — we couldn't have managed without our two horses. We only had the one cow, before the war. I couldn't tell you exactly how much land we had — some small plots here and there, chetki³³, we called them."

"Natasha, near your house, toward Kokhonovo — was there a brick factory there, or a grain barn? Back in 1935, we caught a baby hare and raised it ourselves. But one day, we forgot to latch the cage door, and right before our eyes, it slipped out, hopped past us slowly at first — always just out of reach — toward the backyard, and then off toward the grain barn. It picked up speed the farther it got, until we couldn't keep up at all. We were heartbroken — it had always been so tame whenever we let it out inside a closed space. You weren't in the kolkhoz yet, at that point, were you?"

"We had to join in 1936, after the final warning. Misha had finished tenth grade by then; I'd finished sixth.

"So I started working in the kolkhoz. For an entire month, my only assignment was harrowing the fields — but I'd never handled horses before, never worked the land at all. The other farm workers gloated: 'Well, finally, they've put you to work!' Mother had just given birth to Vitka and was unwell, and I still had to earn at least two hundred trudodni³⁴ that year. 'Don't gloat,' I told them, 'I'll learn.' One kind woman took me aside and said, 'I'll teach you how to harrow properly — how to cut corners a little, how to pick your horse before anyone else does, and how to harness it right.' Before that, I'd always had to ask someone else to harness my horse for me, then work the whole day without ever unharnessing it. 'Natasha, why don't you unharness him at lunchtime?' someone asked. 'No need,' I said. 'I'll eat quickly and get right back to it, or I won't make quota.' It didn't take long before everyone figured out the truth — she doesn't even know how to harness a horse!

"My friend told me, 'If we do everything by the book, we'll never make quota. So here's what we'll do — I'll go first and leave a strip of the field undone, a little gap, and you'll come along after me and harrow it. That way, it'll look like we've done twice the work.' I had to pull flax too, with no idea how — ended up with my fingers a bloody mess."

"Natasha, back then it was nearly impossible to leave a kolkhoz for the city, or even transfer to a different kind of work — farmers weren't issued passports. But later on, you worked in retail, and then at a sewing workshop. How did you manage that?"

"My mother's brother, Belugin, came by and offered me work at his store. I told him, 'I can't — I don't know how to use an abacus. I'd rather work at the sewing shop.' But my brother Misha talked me out of it: 'Better to be a salesclerk than ruin your eyesight as a seamstress.' 'I'll come up short on the till, and then you'll all have to sell the cow to cover it.' 'No, you won't — I'll teach you the abacus myself.' 'All right, then. Uncle's coming back tomorrow — I'll tell him I'll take the job.'

³³ Old unit of area, approx. 0,5 hectares

³⁴ Russian: literally "laborday", unit of quantity and quality of labor in a kolkhoz

"I mentioned the abacus problem to Misha, and he just said, 'You'll do the sums in your head.' And he was right — I learned to. At first, Uncle double-checked all my figures, and later, Misha finally sat me down and taught me the abacus properly.

"During my first month, I sold bread. I kept a price chart tucked under the scale for reference, and I always kept everything in order — never once came up short. I was grateful to Misha for that advice. He had a suggestion for our father, too: 'Why keep breaking your back at hard labor? You know mills inside and out — doesn't matter if it's diesel-powered now instead of water.' 'Misha, that kind of work means keeping records — I only had four years of parish school, not nearly enough education for that.' 'I'll help. I'll teach you.' And he did — taught Dad how to keep the books himself."

"Natasha, what time of year was it, when we stayed with you?"

"You spent the winter with us, and maybe part of the spring too, I think."

"So Mother must have left right after Father's arrest. But from the photograph of me, Shurka, and Uncle Pavel, it's clear we were still living with you once the weather had turned warm — spring or summer. It must have taken Mother half a year or more just to get settled in Leningrad. She couldn't get work without a residence permit at her brother Vladimir's address, and she couldn't get the permit without a job. That vicious circle finally broke when she found work as an orderly at a mental hospital — filling the position left vacant after the previous orderly had been killed by a patient.

"Before making the trip, she'd done everything she could to improve her chances: she 'lost' her old passport, the one that identified her as Polish, of noble descent, born in the Shklov District of the Mogilev Region — handing over some of her jewelry to the village council chairman to help make that happen. Her new passport listed her as Russian, born in the village of Aleksandrovka, Dubrovka District. So yes — I think we did leave your place in the spring.

"I remember the second day after our arrival in Leningrad very clearly, though the day of arrival itself has vanished from my memory entirely. Early that morning, my cousin Mechislav — Mechik, we called him, about ten years older than me — was sent to a nearby store to buy bread, and he took me along. The store, packed with goods and people, made an unforgettable impression on me. I wandered from one display case to the next, completely absorbed, and forgot all about my cousin — just as he forgot about me. Once I'd had my fill of gazing at buns and cookies, I looked around for Mechik, but he'd already gone. I was three and a half years old, and I burst into tears. A kind-hearted woman stopped to ask my name and address, and led me outside, where I told her we'd only arrived the day before. She took me to the nearest militia station, where they told me not to cry, that they'd find my mother. They sat me on the windowsill and gave me a handful of hard candies, all stuck together, wrapped in thick gray paper. Outside, it was a warm, sunny morning, sparrows chirping cheerfully in a blossoming cherry tree. I calmed down. I felt fine, actually. When I finally spotted Mechik in the doorway, I jumped up to run to him, but a militiaman stopped me cold: 'Sit still until your mother gets here!'"

"What a shock it must have been for my mother, when Mechik came home without me — her children had only just arrived, and already she'd lost one! Everyone rushed out to search, but it was Mechik who found me first. The militiamen finally handed me back to her, with a stern warning: 'Lose him again, and we won't be giving him back next time!'

"We walked home together after that, hand in hand, quite cheerfully. That day — or at least part of it — has stayed with me clearly ever since, while other memories from that time survive only in fragments: the courtyard, hemmed in on every side by five-story buildings; the street, and the yeast factory on it, where apples and apple peelings were delivered; the mechanized canteen where Mother would later go to work; the little kitchen we lived in for four years, from 1930 to 1935; the 'Hearth' — the kindergarten, with round-the-clock boarding six days a week, Sundays excepted; and the square by the Narva Gate, with its mock-up of the Chelyuskin expedition's ice camp.

"Six days a week, Gennadi and I lived at the Hearth. I still hold a warm memory of that place — its atmosphere, its thoughtful teachers, the fascinating books and fairy tales they read to us, the singing and drawing lessons. There were never any arguments or fights there. We loved going. Sundays, though, were a different story entirely. Mother's meals weren't nearly as substantial as what we got at the Hearth. I remember her handing me a glass of milk, telling me to crumble bread into it and eat it with a spoon, all the while saying, 'More bread, less milk.' She baked buns at the canteen where she worked and brought some home for us, and bought milk out of her meager dishwasher's wages. Sometimes, as a treat, she'd give us a slice of bread with half a meat patty on it — a rare luxury even at the Hearth.

"One night, I woke up, lay still and listened, and couldn't hear my own heartbeat. I was certain I'd died. Mother calmed me down: 'When a man's heart stops beating, he can't hear or listen to anything at all.'

"Mama didn't stay a dishwasher for long. She was calm, level-headed, and remarkably skilled in the kitchen, thanks to Aunt Natalia's training. Grown-up Manya was always ready to lend a hand wherever needed — filling in at the stove, working the food-service counter, even taking on back-to-back shifts as though she had no family waiting for her at home.

"Thanks to her character and her skill, she quickly earned the respect of everyone she worked with, and was eventually offered a cook's position. She became something of a local legend once she started making millet porridge — a dish that thousands of schoolchildren at the canteen had always left untouched before, since it had never tasted like much of anything. But once Mother took over, the once-hated porridge disappeared from every plate! I remember my first visit to that canteen clearly — rows of tables and chairs, schoolchildren of every age eating their lunches, leaving, and being replaced by fresh groups. Someone let Gennadi and me sit down at a table too. First came the soup, then the main course — millet porridge, topped with a whole meat patty! And to our astonishment, there was a second patty hidden inside the porridge itself! 'Manechka,' the serving woman said to our mother, who was busy at the stove, 'I've already fed your boys!'"

Many years later, my six-year-old son would say to his mother: "No offense, Mom, but Grandma's cooking is better than yours. Plus, you don't have that nice certificate of achievement like she does, the one with her photographed in the canteen with the three top bosses."

Below is a photograph of the canteen staff. Maria is fifth from the left, top row.





Maria's Certificate of Achievement, awarding her "the honorary title of Shock Worker on the front of socialist construction in the public foodservice industry, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to implementing the decisions of the Party and government."

I remember Mother taking Genya and me to the Hearth — her light-green, bell-bottomed dress swaying as she walked, holding Genya's hand. "Mama, will you carry me? My feet hurt," he'd say. She'd pick him up and ask whether he'd carry her, in turn, once she grew old. "I will," Genya answered, "but how am I supposed to manage that, with legs as long as yours?" I don't remember what she said back — but he did keep that promise, years later.

I liked the Hearth, but Sundays at home were good, too. My older brother would take me outside — he knew every child in the neighborhood, since he spent so much time on his own, with Mother often working late. Everyone counted him as a friend, even though most of the other kids were older than him.

From time to time, mothers and grandmothers would call their little ones inside — to practice an instrument, finish homework, or eat. Nobody ever seemed to keep track of what Vechik did. He and Mechik were the best of friends. Mechik was in fifth grade; Vechik, in first.

One time, it was almost time to go play outside, but Vechik was struggling through a whole page of handwriting strokes and hooks. "Here, let me show you," Mechik said — and a couple of minutes later, the page was filled with neat, even rows. "That's how it's done. Got it?" Vechik nodded, and Mechik shut the notebook. "Let's go!"

For a long time, Mother couldn't understand why Vechik's teacher kept marking his homework with a failing grade, since the actual work always looked perfectly fine.

Kurlyandskaya Street was paved with cobblestones. Wagons pulled by pairs of dray horses rattled past constantly, hooves clattering on the stones, trucks rumbling by. There was always something interesting happening.

Here came a pickup truck, turning toward the yeast factory, stopping to wait for the gate to open. A gaggle of kids would run up and grab handfuls of apple peelings straight off the back — good, thick, tasty ones. Occasionally, someone got lucky and found a whole apple. The older boys were kind to us little ones, always sharing what they found. Once, I watched a man hauling baskets on a flatbed cart — one basket, maybe from a pothole or just loose fastening, tumbled off and spilled a heap of cranberries across the ground. The man simply picked up the empty basket and drove off without a second glance. We all ate our fill right there, and stuffed the rest into our pockets besides!

"Natasha, do you remember our mother taking us to Leningrad?"

"No, I don't. What I do remember is her bringing you back from Leningrad, to live with us again. You were crying, 'We want potatoes!' Your mother had brought semolina and millet with her instead. That was a hard year. Your father came back from prison sometime after that. You spent the winter with us — we were lucky enough to have a cow at the time."

"You did have a cow, that's certain. I remember the table in the corner of the hut, under the icons. Uncle Pavel and my father sat together on one side, on a bench, and the children — so many of us — sat on the other sides. I don't remember what the first course was, but the second was

always bread and milk. We'd all crumble bread into one big bowl, and Aunt Anyuta would come around with a full pitcher and pour milk over it. The moment Uncle Pavel took his first spoonful, the rest of us dug in — and within a couple of minutes, the bowl was empty! That's how I learned to eat fast. Aunt would say, 'Crumble in some more,' and pour in more milk. We must have gone through at least five liters at a sitting.

"Neither Uncle nor Aunt ever scolded the children, not once. The whole of the 1930s was one hungry stretch after another. Uncle would often turn to his wife and say, 'Make the kids some potato pancakes, or something.'"

"Natasha, do you remember that little cart you had — the one with metal wheels, and a front axle with a pivot, so you could steer it with a handle? The kids would climb on, lift the handle, and go tearing down the property line between your house and the Platonovs', across the road, and on to the bathhouse. One of the first days after we arrived, Vechik rode it along with your kids. He was ten, dressed like a proper city boy — shorts, no shirt. Somehow the handle slipped out of whoever was steering, the cart tipped over, and everyone riding it landed in the nettles. Your kids were wearing sackcloth trousers and long sleeves, so they came away fine. But Vechik got badly burned. We spent the whole night trying to ease his pain. Still — what a cart that was!"

"Tolya, that cart's still around, believe it or not. My brother Tolik spotted it lying in the weeds, back in Radichi, and picked it up. 'What a shame,' he said, 'letting it rot out here.' All the metal parts had survived fine — only the wooden ones had rotted away. That cart proved useful, too, during and after the war — we hauled hay with it. I remember once, during the war, Vitka was out carting hay and said, 'Mom, promise you'll never give milk away to anyone else! We work ourselves half to death, and no one lifts a finger to help us!' And Mom just said, 'We drink our fill of milk, while other people are starving.'"

"Natasha, when our father finally got out of prison, and Mother brought us back from Leningrad, we turned to your family for help. You hadn't yet been forced into the kolkhoz, and Uncle Pavel lent us a horse and wagon so our parents could earn a living. Mom and Dad took up day labor — hauling phosphorite stone and gravel for road construction. That work left my mother with an ailment that troubled her for the rest of her life. But within three months, they'd earned enough to buy a cow."

Genya was only six then, and every evening he'd run out to meet our parents on their way home from work. Aunt Anyuta would warn him: "Careful now, don't get run over!" "That's Papa and Mama coming — they'd never run me over!" They'd stop the horse for him. "Climb up — one day, you'll be the one feeding us!" "Aunt Anyuta's already fed us plenty — we've had our fill!"

"In the fall of 1935, you moved out from our place to Aunt Gasha's. It was Mother's idea — our family already had so many children, the older ones grown by then, and yours had five people besides. Too many under one roof; we'd have been overrun with lice before we knew it. 'Go stay with Aunt Gasha,' she said. 'She lives alone, and we'll help you out with potatoes and other food.'"

"I remember that winter clearly, Natasha. The houses in the village sat on hillocks along both banks of the river — steep slopes, perfect for skiing and sledding. None of the boys owned real skis, though. Dad made me a pair out of barrel staves — oddly shaped, curved upward at both ends, which made them wobble constantly. No one else could ride them, but somehow I managed. I actually liked how easily I could turn, thanks to that very defect. Still, real skis remained a dream of mine for another seven long years. Dad also came up with — or borrowed from someone — a design for skates made of wooden blocks with a strip of wire fastened underneath, strapped onto felt boots. You could only really use them on packed snow roads, since there was no skating rink anywhere in the village.

"Even more fun was sliding down the hill on a big sheet of plywood. A whole crowd of us would pile onto it, bend one edge up, and go flying down the slope. It didn't always go the way we planned, and the whole gang would tumble headfirst into the snow. By Easter, Dad had built us a bench, lined the underside with manure, and poured water over it so it froze smooth as glass. Two of us could sit on it and ride the hill together. Dad's attentiveness to us during that stretch was really exceptional — he didn't have to go out to work every day then, and would spend time mending other people's shoes instead, putting to use the trade he'd learned as a young shoemaker's apprentice.

"That fall, I started first grade. All I really remember is the garden surrounding the school — not a single actual school day, not my first teacher, not any teacher at all, really. What I do remember is that Uncle's children, older than me, had received a great many books, and I read every story and novel in them cover to cover. By then, I could already read well, and draw too, thanks to my training back at the Hearth, in Leningrad."

"Natasha, how long did you work as a salesgirl?"

"Right up until the war started. I worked there a year, then was sent off for training courses — I still have the completion certificate somewhere. I wasn't even nineteen yet, and I worried I wouldn't manage. But the head of the second department³⁵ told me, 'You'll be fine — plenty of people here only finished four years of school, and you've finished six!'

"Every day, I walked to Sesha for work, then hurried home in the evening, carrying bread, or groats, or whatever else I could get — there was no store at all in Radichi. And I still had to help Mother, not just on my days off, but every evening after work too. I managed it thanks to a bicycle — the ride home, at least, was all downhill."

That young girl had become a genuinely valuable, respected member of her family — tireless in her work, and with access to bread that ordinary farmers simply couldn't buy.

Teachers, doctors, and civil servants in the village each received a sack of flour, while farmers only received flour at year's end, once the state quota had been met — anywhere from fifty to a hundred fifty grams per trudoden. An ordinary farmer needed to earn at least two hundred trudodni over the course of a year. Which is why, whenever flour was handed out to state

³⁵ Probably HR

employees at the cooperative store, farmers would grumble bitterly: "Look at these parasites — they're the ones eating our bread!"

Older brother Misha didn't stay their father's helper for long — he finished tenth grade and left for military school. It was Natasha alone who remained, working the house and garden, making hay in the ravines and thickets, chopping and hauling wood. That was simply her lot in life.

"Natasha, what do you remember about the Novikov family, back when all five of Grandfather Kirill Ustinovich's sons still lived together?"

"I know the eldest was Rodion, then Mikhail and Pavel, then your father, Philipp, and Arseny. Philipp and Arseny never even remembered their mother — she died young — and Grandfather raised them alone, refusing to remarry until his children were grown and independent."

"In 1937, I visited the place where the Kamenetsky estate had still stood back in early 1930-s. Uncle Arseny's house was still there, where he lived with his family — I stayed three days, which I've already described. Then I walked three kilometers to Radichi, to Uncle Misha's, where I met my grandfather, Kirill Ustinovich, for the first time. He was already past eighty by then — medium height, spry, rather thin, with a large bald patch framed by gray hair, an almost round face, and a slightly hooked nose. His pale gray eyes were kind and warm, despite the shaggy white brows hanging over them. He looked every bit the wise old man from a fairy tale, right down to his clothing — homemade white burlap trousers, a shirt with the collar left unbuttoned, and bare feet.

"I found him making bast rope for the kolkhoz. Beside him sat a tub of soaking linden bark, its outer layer already peeled away with a knife. Freshly made bast shoes hung on the wall of the entryway — one pair still unfinished. The kolkhoz credited his labor as *trudodni*, added onto what his son Mikhail's family earned. Mikhail had three daughters, one of them disabled, and had never learned a trade himself — which meant his family was poorer than ours, though smaller, and lived more simply. Aunt Arina wasn't especially particular about cleanliness, and didn't mind the occasional drink, either.

"In the end, Grandfather Kirill lived with his poorest son. While Pavel's family looked after him — inviting him for holiday meals, bringing him food — his other sons, living farther from Radichi, visited only once or twice a year, usually with some small gift.

"Not many people realize this today, but kolkhoz farmers received no pension at all.

"So Uncle Pavel came up with an idea — he suggested Kirill take his own sons to court. The court ruled that each son had to pay him between thirty-five and fifty rubles a month.

"When I saw him again after that, Grandfather seemed genuinely pleased with how the Party and government had looked after him — not just as a working man now, but as someone with real money coming in. He was no longer a burden to just one son alone, and he could even afford a shot or two of vodka on Sundays and holidays."

"Your mother, Natasha, always thought Arina wasn't much of a housewife — too soft with her daughters, and not particularly concerned with keeping the house and yard tidy. Our own yard stayed dry and clean, but at Mikhail's, you couldn't get anywhere near the cow without galoshes on. Still, life there was simpler, less burdened by worry — and Kirill always seemed more at home there than anywhere else. I remember, in fact, when I sang for him once, accompanying myself on the balalaika — 'Vast and grand is my beloved country, many are her forests, fields, and streams, I know not of any other country where a man can so freely breathe,' and then, 'every path lies open to our youngsters, while the old are treated with respect' — tears streamed down his face. I think he was remembering how well the Party and government had cared for him; those were tears of real gratitude.

"After all, what had he really known in life, besides work? And yet he remained a sober, dignified, even good-looking man his whole life. Only after his sons had all left home to live on their own did he remarry, at sixty. His second wife brought a seventeen-year-old son and a daughter of her own into the marriage, and he raised them as his own, too — his stepchildren became as much a part of the family as his own sons.

"Natasha, what else do you remember about their family?"

"They had little land. Rodion left first. As the others grew up, Kirill let them go their own ways, too — though only the married ones got houses built for them: Pavel and Mikhail, side by side, on the same plot. Arseny and Philipp got nothing at all. Arseny only asked for a towel and a bit of cloth for bast shoes. Philya³⁶ was already working for the Kamenetskys by then, and told his father, 'I don't want anything.'

"Here, Tolya — this is a picture of my father in his black hat. We used to say to him, 'You know who you take after? Your father, Kirill.' He used to stand on the hill in a black hat just like that, too. He died suddenly — never even fell ill beforehand."

"Natasha, I saw him and spoke with him myself, back in 1937. Only my father made it to the funeral, though — it was he who told me about Grandfather Kirill's final hours. Old age, as they say, is no blessing. His blood no longer kept him warm enough at night, and Kirill liked to sleep up on the stove.

"One night, around three in the morning, he woke and said to Arina, 'Pour me a shot of vodka.' She told him, 'What's gotten into you, old man? Light the lamp at this hour? Go back to sleep — you'll have your drink at breakfast.'

"Come morning, she offered him one, but he waved it off.' Eat and drink while your mouth is still fresh, as they say,' he told her. 'I don't want it anymore.'

""Are you feeling ill? What's wrong?"

³⁶ Diminutive for Philipp

"Nothing's wrong. I just had a dream — men digging a grave. I asked them, 'Who's this grave for?' They told me, 'For you.' I'm going to die, Arinushka. Call my sons.'

"He lay down, and died. Everyone who knew him remembered him as a good man. He raised five sons almost entirely on his own. They grew up poor, all of them put to work from early childhood — yet every one of them turned out hardworking, kind, compassionate, and skilled in his trade. People respected them. Kirill Ustinovich died at eighty years old."

"Natasha, what do you remember, or what have you heard, about my father?"

"Kirill Ustinovich had many children and little land, which is why young Philipp was sent off to a shoemaker — waxing thread, whittling wooden pegs, running errands, and eventually learning to repair shoes himself. Once he was a bit older, 'the gentry' at the Kamenetsky estate hired him on as a shepherd boy. He was quiet and hardworking — while the cattle rested in the barn at midday, he'd go help Uncle Franz's young niece, Maria, in the kitchen or around the house. He didn't touch alcohol until he was twenty-six. Years passed, and eventually Maria's aunt, Natalia — who ran the estate, and her husband and niece along with it — passed away. Uncle Franz followed not long after. Left on her own, your mother married Philipp — that was in 1924. A year later, the family began growing quickly: Vyacheslav was born in 1925, you in 1927, and Gennadi in 1929. All three of you were born right at the start of January."

"What became of the Novikov brothers during the war? Where were they?"

"Pavel wasn't drafted, and stayed in the village. Uncle Misha wasn't so fortunate. When the war broke out, the kolkhoz administration assigned him to help transport military equipment alongside the retreating army. After that, deemed unfit for combat duty, he was sent to serve in an engineering battalion instead — laying pontoon bridges in the bitter cold and rain. He was finally discharged and sent home in 1943, once his legs had given out entirely and he could no longer walk. He didn't live to see the war's end. I remember visiting their house once, and Uncle Misha said to me, 'Natasha, take a look at my leg — I didn't even notice how I got this burn on the stove.' There was a red mark on his leg. I went home afterward and told everyone, 'I think Uncle has gangrene.'"

And that's exactly what happened. Laying bridges in icy water had wrecked his legs. He really did have terrible luck — an unlucky man could drown in a teacup, as they say. He was older than Pavel, yet he was the one drafted. All his children were daughters. The youngest, Nina, had bandy legs, curved like a wheel — and bravely endured surgery after surgery, her legs broken and reset again and again by the doctors trying to correct it.

But let's return now to our conversation with Natasha.

"Tolik, here's a photograph of my father, Pavel, with his sons Misha — about ten at the time — and Shurka, who was six, taken at the marketplace. And here you are, with Vechik. It was 1930. Everyone's in shirts and trousers — it was a hot day. Father's holding you in his arms, and Vechik's standing between them."



"Natasha, tell me — how did your brother Mikhail come back from the prison camp?"

"It was shortly after the liberation, at the end of September. Cold, raining every day. The farmers were out digging potatoes. A stranger, not far from our house, was asking the women, 'Is anyone still alive in the Novikov family?' They told him, 'They're right over there — Natasha and her mother, digging potatoes.' We watched this person approach our garden — a poor, thin, elderly-looking wretch in a long, worn coat, bare legs wrapped in cloth, wearing a decent pair of German boots. He stopped in front of Mother. She looked at him and thought to herself, 'We ought to give the poor man something.' And then, all at once, I recognized him — it was Misha! I ran toward him, Mother right behind me. But he stopped us: 'Don't come any closer. Look at what I've got.' He opened his coat — there was nothing underneath but underwear and a filthy undershirt. 'Please, bring me some warm water and clean clothes,' he said. 'I need to strip and wash right here. Pour gasoline over these rags and burn them — they're crawling with lice.'

"He took off the coat. It was black, but the inside was completely white — covered in enormous white lice. Then he removed his underwear, and it was almost unbearable to look at: a solid layer of lice coated the fabric so thickly you couldn't even tell what color it had originally been. Tears streamed down Mother's face at the sight of him — this walking skeleton, all sharp angles and jutting bone, who two years earlier had been a strong, healthy young man. Her own son. He still had his hair, though it had thinned considerably, and he stood there combing through it carefully with a fine-toothed comb.

"He came inside. Neighbors crowded in, asking questions — 'Did you see anyone else from the village out there?' 'Please, forgive me,' he told them, 'I can't talk right now. I need to sleep.' He was also starting to come down with a malaria attack. He fell asleep almost instantly and began talking in his sleep, feverishly: 'We're running the wrong way! We need to go that way!' The next day, I walked all the way to Dubrovka to get him quinine. He took two packets and refused any more — 'I'll recover without it,' he said. And he was right.

"Mother would boil potatoes for him, and he'd tell her, 'Don't mash them — give them to me whole.' She'd warn him, 'Misha, go easy — after starving so long, eating too much too fast could make you sick.'

"He was given two weeks to rest. Mother fed him sour cream and small portions of meat, and slowly, he began to recover. We asked him what had happened to him. He'd served in the border guards, and for a month they'd held off German attacks, but they were badly outnumbered and eventually surrounded. Misha suffered a concussion and was taken prisoner. He tried to escape twice, but the Romanians caught him both times, beat him, and punished him severely. The third attempt worked — he escaped, crossed the front line, dodged the units meant to stop deserters and stragglers, and made his way home on foot and by hopping freight trains, finally reaching

our village several days after the liberation of the Bryansk region, in September 1943. Along the way, he'd stopped in Bezhitsa to see a cousin of Uncle Rodion's, but only the cousin's wife was home, and she refused to even acknowledge him as family — this filthy, ragged stranger at her door. He told her who he was and asked for something to eat. She gave him a piece of bread, but offered him no clothing.

"He left us on the Feast of the Protection of the Virgin, carrying a sealed envelope. He was killed on February 23rd, 1944. He was twenty-four years old — such a short life. A friend of his wrote to tell us of his death, and promised that if we gave permission, and if he himself survived the war, he'd come visit us and tell us more about Misha. I wrote back giving my permission. But the war ended, and he never came."

"How could he have? For ten more months, right up to the war's end, he'd have been sent to the most dangerous places imaginable, to near-certain death, as a shtrafnik³⁷ — his life already written off long before by the Party and government, under the leadership of the Father of the Peoples³⁸."

"Natasha, what was life like under the occupation, living just five kilometers from a major airfield, at Sesha?"

"The Germans didn't tax us — whatever we managed to grow was ours to keep. But there wasn't much we could plant, since we had no horses. I lived in Radichi with my parents and brothers — Vitka, Grinka, and Tolik. Every able-bodied person was called out from time to time to work on the roads or the airfield, whenever the foreman ordered it. (Kolkhozes actually suited German purposes quite well — they were run by appointed administrators who could be held responsible for delivering a set amount of work, or a set number of laborers.) There was a lot of snow to clear from the roads in winter, bomb craters to fill in with earth after air raids, graves to dig, meals to cook. The Germans paid us in food for the labor — a liter jar of pea or potato soup, sometimes with a bit of meat in it, and a piece of tasteless bread."

"Was the airfield bombed often?"

"Yes. At first, single planes came at night; later, they started coming during the day, too. By 1943, whole groups of planes would attack at once."

I, having lived eighteen kilometers from Sesha myself, remembered it a little differently.

Before the war, from early morning until late evening, we constantly heard the roar of fighter planes and TB-3 heavy bombers overhead. At night, they usually bombed practice targets at the artillery range near the village of Soplyovka — home to the kolkhoz "Krasnaya Moskva"³⁹ — about five kilometers from our own village, Ryabchi.

³⁷ A serviceman serving in a penal unit as a punishment for desertion or cowardice. Those who escaped from POW camps were sent to these units as well.

³⁸ Stalin

³⁹ Red Moscow (rus)

Our kolkhoz, incidentally, had gone through quite a journey before landing on its final name. It started out as "The Poor Man." But how long could anyone stay poor, officially? People might start to think our little corner of the country wasn't thriving! So it was renamed after Bukharin⁴⁰ — until, a few years later, we schoolchildren had to scratch his eyes out of our textbooks. The kolkhoz needed renaming again, this time after Yezhov.⁴¹ Another misstep! Stalin seemed like the safest bet after that — but even that didn't last. Finally, they landed on a name that stuck: "The Ilyich"⁴² Kolkhoz," complete with a solid new sign erected at the crossroads. Years later, the kolkhoz itself was disbanded and the sign smashed — though not entirely. The word "Ilyich" survived, so eventually someone repainted it fresh, and there it still stands today, our little beauty.

But back to the Sesha airfield. Every morning, we'd hear the cheerful roar of aircraft engines warming up on the tarmac, followed by training flights and bombing runs over the firing range. Massive four-engine planes would bank in wide turns above our village — our pride and joy, the TB-3 heavy bombers. Occasional bomb blasts rattled our windows and seemed to make the whole house jump, making us afraid it might collapse. During haymaking season, when the range closed temporarily, we'd find craters five to ten meters wide and three or four meters deep out there. The bombing runs were usually flown low, maybe one or two kilometers up. Blunt-nosed fighters and old biplanes also circled overhead sometimes, though they never interested us much. The TB-3, though — now that was something else entirely.

We only learned its crew numbered seven after witnessing an accident firsthand. On a warm summer night, a TB-3 crashed just two kilometers from our village — likely engine failure. The crew had bailed out, but their parachutes hadn't opened in time; the altitude, people said, had simply been too low. The captain died still inside the aircraft, never having made it out. The crash site was cordoned off, and the wreckage hauled away — but plenty of shiny fragments were left scattered around for us boys to find and treasure.

That accident did nothing to dent our pride in Soviet aviation. If anything, our confidence in our brave airmen only grew stronger after we watched the film *If War Comes Tomorrow*. Before that, we'd already heard of our troops bravely repelling the Japanese at Lake Khasan. It was well worth the walk to the firing range to see that film, brought in specially for the garrison stationed there. The black-and-white picture depicted the outbreak of war — everyone understood it meant war with Germany. From our own Sesha airfield, the legendary TB-3s took off, while squadrons of fighters emerged from an underground hangar. The bombing, and the whole war along with it, was over in three days. The five kilometers we walked home afterward weren't nearly enough time to relive, in our imaginations, all the heroic deeds of our aviators.

Bitter disillusionment came on the very first day of the real war — June 22nd, 1941.

Early that warm summer morning, I saw three twin-engine bombers, their wings tipped in yellow, black swastikas on their sides. They'd already flown clean over the airfield, completely unopposed. We hadn't heard our own planes in a long while by then — we knew they'd been

⁴⁰ Revolutionary and Soviet leader persecuted by Stalin

⁴¹ Head of the NKVD from 1936 to 1938; executed in 1940

⁴² Lenin's patronymic

moved closer to the border — but surely, we thought, there had to be some kind of air defense in place! Somewhere to the east, near Bryansk, explosions sounded. We later learned that the village of Kletnya had been bombed as well. The next day, without a single cloud in the sky, three German planes flew east again, higher this time — around three kilometers up. Then, some distance from the aircraft, we watched fifteen or twenty bursts of flak explode — one volley, then another, then another, all missing by the same margin, with the same delay each time. Not one plane was hit.

Later, during the occupation, our own lone planes made occasional attempts to bomb the airfield at night, though they did little real damage. And throughout the entire war, I never once saw, in the air or on the ground, the pride of our childhood — the four-engine TB-3 heavy bombers. Nearly all of them, along with thousands of other aircraft, had been destroyed on airfields along the western border within the very first days of the war.

So — what became of the rest of the Novikov family, in the years that followed?

Uncle Pavel and Aunt Anyuta raised three sons — Anatoli, Viktor, and Grigory — and a daughter, Natalia, the same Natasha with whom I've been reminiscing here. The boys all became tractor operators, working first in the kolkhoz, then later moving to Karaganda to help develop the "virgin lands," and eventually on to work at the Novokuznetsk metallurgical plant.

Of the three, only Anatoli kept up real ties with his birthplace, and with his sister. Every year, he'd visit Natasha, who always looked forward to seeing him. He'd help her prepare for winter — starting with firewood, which they never bought outright but instead salvaged from the remains of the old barns and house on their parents' original lot. Some pieces they cut for firewood; the rest they stacked in the garden by the house. All of it done entirely by hand. Even once Natasha turned eighty, she kept working hard. Before Anatoli's visits ended each year, she'd always scrape together a bit of money and prepare a ham for his journey home. Before the weather turned hot, she'd mail off packages of lard to both Anatoli and Grigory, as well as to her grandson Yuri, her clear favorite, who spent his summers staying with her.

Yuri turned out to be a steady, independent man, working as an agronomist in a large kolkhoz. Unlike his uncles and cousins, he never touched alcohol. Anatoli, by contrast, would have a drink or two after work and smoked heavily — thin, gaunt, worn down. His sudden death hit Natasha hard, as though the last real light had gone out of her life.

I tried to visit her in Sesha around the holidays whenever I could, bringing treats my wife had baked or bought for the occasion. I never once saw any real holiday preparation in her house, though — she'd just boil some potatoes, or make tea with a bit of ham or lard, maybe fry some eggs. And she'd always be watching for the train arriving from Dubrovka, hoping to spot me coming.

Her television set broke down at one point, but she refused to have it repaired. "I don't have time to watch it anyway," she told me. "I've got the chickens, the pig, two stoves to keep going, the vegetable garden (eight or nine hundred square meters, not a single weed in it). And I still have to haul water from the well, stock up on coal, sew trousers for a customer. I've got the radio —

that's plenty. I listen to it when I go to bed. Tolik, do you need a padded jacket, or anything else? No? Shame — my brother brought me a few extra. And look at my pig! A meter and a half long, takes up the whole length of the shed! Maybe you could use some potatoes? I've got plenty to spare."

I'm glad I stayed the night that particular visit — we spent it remembering things only the two of us still knew, things no one else could tell. Of all her brothers, only one had kept alive any real memory of home, returning every year without fail, always ready to lend his sister a hand, working with whatever their parents had left behind. How could he possibly let that little cart lie abandoned near their parents' crumbling old house, once he realized only the wooden parts had rotted, while the metal ones remained perfectly sound?

Natasha and Anatoli both remembered how useful that cart had once been for hauling hay home, over distances of three kilometers or more. It hadn't taken much to repair it. And the old logs from the ruined house — could he really just let them rot away, when they could be cut up and brought over to Natasha instead? But then, one summer — the very month he usually came to spend working alongside his sister — he simply didn't arrive. Sudden death. Being left alone in the world after that proved terribly hard.

But what became of the others? The family had once been so large! Their father, Pavel Kirillovich, and their mother, Anna Pavlovna — Anyuta, as everyone called her — both died eventually in Natasha's house, in the village of Sessa. The last time all three brothers — Tolik, Vitka, and Grinka — gathered together in one place was at their mother's funeral. The reunion turned into days of heavy drinking. Sober Natasha was horrified by it. Viktor drank more than the others and slid into full-blown delirium tremens. No one knew quite who to turn to for help, until Natasha finally called my brother Gennadi, who happened to be in Ryabchi at the time: "Please, come and take him away, before this ends badly." My wife, Vladlena, remembered him as pale, weak, shaking uncontrollably. She washed his clothes for him, and Gennadi gradually helped ease him through the worst of the withdrawal — not with more alcohol, but simply by putting him to work. In time, my wife came to genuinely appreciate Viktor's willingness to work, his initiative. Not long after, though, he divorced his wife, locked his car away in the garage, and left to work up north. No one ever heard from him again.

His son, Yuri, stayed behind with his mother. At eight years old, his parents put him on a train from Novokuznetsk to Moscow, and from there — with the help of some kind strangers along the way — on to Bryansk, where Natasha met him at the station. From then on, he spent every summer with her. He grew up to become an agronomist in a large kolkhoz, built himself a house, and got married. But he never visited Natasha again after that, never once wrote her a letter. Every winter, without fail, she kept sending him parcels of ham, lard, or whatever else her labor had produced, always waiting for some confirmation that they'd arrived. She'd sigh, sometimes, and say quietly: "Is it really so hard to write back, just once?"

In far-away Novokuznetsk, she had three grandsons — one from each of her brothers. I met one of them at Natasha's funeral.

One Easter, we decided to visit her family's graves together. I drove her out in my car. She didn't remember the way to the old cemetery very well, but we managed to find it. The place had grown wild with young bushes, and it took her a while to locate her parents' graves. We pulled up the weeds, sat for a time, and prayed for her parents, and for her brother and sister, buried there as well. She couldn't find our grandfather Kirill Ustinovich's grave, though — she hadn't been able to walk that far in years. On the way, we also passed the site where the village of Radichi had once stood. Only a single hut remained, belonging to Uncle Misha's daughter. Where their house — and ours — had once stood, nothing was left at all, except for a few plum trees.

That turned out to be her last visit to her family's graves. The following spring, we'd planned to take her sewing machine in for repair — Natasha still picked up occasional work sewing trousers and jackets for servicemen. Before I arrived that day, though, some surplus coal had been dumped near the railway line across from her house, and she'd been given permission to take some. She could hardly believe her luck. She put on her padded jacket, locked the house, and began hauling coal home bucket by bucket — she needed plenty, with two stoves to keep fed. She'd carried several loads home already when she suddenly collapsed and lost consciousness, as though she'd simply fallen asleep. A ticket agent at the station called an ambulance, but the medics initially refused to take her, since she had no passport or proof of insurance on her. Eventually, they were persuaded to take her anyway. The ticket agent called me, and I arrived at the hospital the next day. Natasha was asleep. I spoke to her, but she never woke. After paying for the medications she'd already received, and whatever else she'd need, I went to her house with a friend of hers to look for the key — it wasn't in her clothing. We eventually found it tucked in the mailbox. Inside the house, we found addresses for her relatives, and I sent telegrams to each of them.

Natasha slept in the hospital for three days and died without ever regaining consciousness. In a strange way, God granted her the gentlest possible way to leave a world that had never given her much beyond work, and caring for others. Was she ever truly happy? Her own mother had given birth to her while she was working out in the field. After her brother Mikhail, she was the eldest child, and she spent her childhood looking after the rest of us — the younger children, her own brothers and sister. She was the first in the family to escape the kolkhoz's grip, walking five kilometers to Sesha every single day to start work by eight, putting in a full shift, buying food at the garrison store — the only place anything was actually available — carrying it home, and then working around the house and farm until dark.

Just once in her life, it seemed, happiness had found her: she fell in love and married. But soon after, she fell ill and needed a hysterectomy — and her husband left her almost immediately afterward. She kept his surname, Polyakova, on her official papers, but to everyone who actually knew her, she remained simply Novikova.

Her nephew came to the funeral — a young man, around twenty-five, unkempt and already a bit oiled, as people say. He mentioned that his expensive suitcase had been stolen along the way, though thankfully he'd kept hold of his passport. He suggested I handle the official registration of the land and house, but since I already had my own similar paperwork to deal with, I thanked him and declined. Some loose, unfamiliar woman turned up out of nowhere at the wake, and the

wine flowed freely. My wife was waiting for me back home, so I left before long. Some time later, the local village administration called me, asking for the heirs' contact information, since people's behavior at the house had grown indecent. I gave them the address, and asked for no further details.

And now, whenever I remember those I've lost, I say a prayer for Natasha as well:

"Lord, grant rest to the soul of your servant Natasha, and forgive her all her sins, both those she meant and those she did not — and may the kingdom of heaven be hers."

Philipp's University

*"I thank you, sir, for coming here
For my confession. In your ear
Words are the medicine that best
Will ease the burden of my chest.
To others I have done no ill,
And so my actions for you will
Be profitless to hear about —
Or can a soul be detailed out?"⁴³*

— Mikhail Lermontov

There was neither trial nor real investigation in my father's "case." After the verdict, the authorities spent a full month simply deciding where to send him. In the end, they settled on Solovki⁴⁴.

I always wanted to know more about his life in the camps, but he brushed off every question. "What happened is in the past now. Done with."

I remember riding once from Radichi back to our village, Ryabchi — the horse climbing the hills at a walk, breaking into a run on the way down. An occasional truck passed us, and then we'd be alone again on the road, no one else in sight for a long stretch. It seemed like the perfect moment for a real conversation. Instead, we rode in silence. Father was lost in thought, probably reliving things he'd been through. His silence stung — it made me sullen, and I kept quiet too, out of spite almost. He was so unlike other fathers. He never lectured me, never offered advice, never warned me away from anything. When he needed help writing up a work report, or checking figures, he'd turn to me. When he wanted to know about some animal's illness, he'd ask me to read it aloud to him. He always listened closely but never cared to read for himself. And yet he could talk at length, in careful detail, when instructing a farmer on how to nurse a sick animal back to health. Surely, I thought, he must be hiding something about his conviction — after all, people always said: "In our country, innocent people don't get sent to prison."

⁴³ The fragment is from the poem "Mtsyri" translated from Russian by Charles Johnston. "Mtsyri" can be translated from Georgian as "novice".

⁴⁴ The Solovki special camp was set up in 1923 on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea as a place of detention, primarily intended for political opponents of the Soviet regime

I was already thirteen by then. I wrote the best compositions in my class — I'd read so many books already. It irritated me no end when adults insisted kids my age couldn't possibly understand certain things. I'd already read Maupassant, and understood every word of it! I was going to be a writer. I'd even started drafting a story modeled on *The Prince and the Pauper*. I was a devoted follower of Belinsky⁴⁵, teaching myself to analyze people's actions, to understand their characters, their circumstances, their true intentions. I tried hard to be objective about myself too — to see myself as my parents, teachers, and friends might see me. The whole village clearly admired my father, his work, his kindness toward people and animals alike. But I wasn't so easily satisfied.

It was only many years later that I came to understand what life had really been like for convicts in Soviet prisons and labor camps, through Solzhenitsyn's⁴⁶ *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *In the First Circle*, and other accounts written by former political prisoners.

In 1962, my father came to visit us in Donetsk⁴⁷, and we played him a cassette recording of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. He listened intently to the narrator's voice, tears streaming silently down his face — seemingly unaware he was even crying, listening straight through without a single interruption. His expression was mournful, as though he'd lost someone close to him. And still, he told us nothing at all about his own years in the camps.

It wasn't until perestroika and glasnost, decades later, that he finally gave his family a brief account of that period in his life.

He was the only member of the so-called "conspiracy" sent to Solovki — the others were scattered to different camps. He remembered little of that particular camp beyond hunger and cold. Soon after, he was transferred to one of the era's great construction projects: the building of the Belomorkanal, the White Sea–Baltic Canal.

The canal bed had to be cut directly through solid rock. Convicts drilled blast holes by hand, packed them with explosives, lit the fuse, and ran as far as they could before the charge went off, hoping to avoid being killed by the blast or flying rock fragments. Afterward, the shattered stone was loaded into wheelbarrows and hauled away from the future canal bed — single-wheeled barrows, meant to be easier to maneuver, needing only a single wooden plank to roll along. But if the load wasn't balanced properly, pushing one in a straight line became nearly impossible. Father wasn't a strong man — he'd always been somewhat frail, which was exactly why his own father, Kirill Ustinovich, had steered him toward trades that didn't demand much physical strength: shoemaking, herding cattle, caring for animals. The work he'd been assigned here, though, demanded exactly the strength and endurance he lacked.

Before long, Philipp was hospitalized, diagnosed with severe malnutrition. Once discharged, he was prescribed lighter duty — and light work was soon found for him: as a blaster. The job only

⁴⁵ Russian literary critic (1811-1848)

⁴⁶ Russian writer; a political prisoner himself, he helped to raise global awareness of the Soviet Gulag forced-labor system

⁴⁷ City in the Donbass District, Ukraine

required the strength needed to drill a hole in the rock; after that, one simply inserted the charge, attached the Bickford fuse, lit it, and got away as fast as possible.

The length of that fuse cord was set by the camp administration, guided strictly by considerations of cost — which meant the explosion typically followed within a matter of seconds. If a convict wasn't quick enough, he died.

The section of canal they were working on cut straight through solid rock, and the bed had to be deepened further and further. The blaster was lowered down on a rope, then hauled back up as fast as possible in the brief window before the fuse burned through. The odds of surviving that job for very long were slim. Fuse cord, after all, was something to be conserved — but "enemies of the people" were expendable. If more convicts were needed, more would be sent; Russia never lacked people, and women would always produce more. Human life, in Russia, had never carried much value.

Credit where it's due, though — my father was a sharp man, capable of real strategic thinking. "I understood right away," he recalled, "that I wouldn't last long at that job. There was always a chance the charge would go off while you were still carrying or setting it, or the rope might get sliced through by a sharp edge of rock, or the men up top would simply be too slow hauling you back up — and you'd end up dangling there on that rope like a hanged dog."

He who seeks, finds — and an opportunity soon presented itself.

More and more convicts kept arriving at the great construction site, and all of them needed clothing and footwear, which wore out fast. Supply couldn't keep pace, so repairs had to be done on-site, and seamstresses and shoemakers suddenly found themselves in high demand — Philipp among them. His old apprenticeship with the village shoemaker finally proved useful. "Shoemakers — two steps forward!"

Now he had himself a cushy indoor job, and for a while, Philipp felt genuinely lucky. But not for long. It soon became clear that even this position offered no real guarantee of survival. A convicted criminal would saunter over, toss down a pair of filthy, torn boots, and murmur softly: "If these are fixed in less than a week, consider yourself a dead man. And even if you live, you won't be back on your feet anytime soon." Meanwhile, the warden grew impatient: "This inmate hasn't reported for work in a week! Why is the repair taking so long?" He knew perfectly well why — but showed no sympathy whatsoever for Philipp's predicament. Philipp realized he was right back where he'd started. This job, too, wouldn't do. Wrong choice entirely.

Eventually, he hit on a new idea: get as far from other people as possible, and closer to animals instead. He found his way into the camp's veterinary unit. He already knew cattle inside and out — how to care for them, deliver a calf or a foal. The village vet back home had once taught him how to castrate livestock. He understood animal illnesses too, having spent years assisting the veterinarian at the Kamenetsky estate, watching closely, memorizing what to do in each situation. Dubrovka was too far to send for a vet every single time one was needed — and besides, the vet might already be out on another call. Say a cow had eaten too much alfalfa and its stomach had swollen up, its breathing labored — ordinarily, such a cow would simply be

slaughtered on the spot. But Philipp knew better by then: he'd puncture the belly carefully with a knife and save the animal instead. Skills like that weren't easy to come by.

He was eventually interviewed by the camp's chief veterinarian — a man said to hold a doctorate and to have been quite an important figure before his own conviction. That doctor spoke with the camp administration on Philipp's behalf, and his wish finally came true: it turned out the veterinary support section was being expanded, and more inmates were needed to staff it.

Philipp got lucky once more — he was sent almost immediately to veterinary assistant training. And luckier still, the camp happened to have assembled a remarkable concentration of expertise in veterinary medicine: university professors, seasoned practitioners, even academicians, doctors of science among them.

Among the visitors who came through the Belomorkanal construction site during that period was Maxim Gorky⁴⁸ himself. I don't know exactly what he was shown during his visit, but afterward, he offered a glowing assessment of the effort to "reform" the enemies of the people.

The situation, of course, was very different from the one described by the great writer. The authorities had no real interest in turning convicts into friends of the state. But Philipp was glad to have landed among decent people — skilled specialists in veterinary science, fellow inmates like himself, surrounded once again by the horses and cows he'd loved since childhood. His teachers there shared their knowledge and experience freely and willingly with the trainees.

It was there that Philipp finally found his true calling — a trade he loved, and one people badly needed.

Upon finishing the course, Father received a diploma and certificate that would later serve as the basis for his career as a veterinary assistant. After his release, he'd go on to become a genuinely skilled specialist, backed by real practical experience. More than once, he'd prove himself right even when his judgment contradicted the opinions of licensed doctors — veterinarians and physicians alike. I'll describe some of those instances later, ones I witnessed myself.

In 1939, while serving as head of a veterinary clinic, Father was sent for a refresher course at the Saratov Veterinary Institute. He must have been nervous going in — what education did he actually have, after all? Four years of parish school, and whatever training he'd picked up in prison! Latin would surely be required, and although some had been taught in the camp, he still had a great deal to relearn. Would he really measure up?

He came back from the course thrilled, practically glowing. Whenever guests visited afterward, he'd proudly show off his diploma, listing all the scientific subject names and his grades — mostly excellent. Every single time, he'd declare that "there wasn't a single one of the sixteen subjects he hadn't passed with flying colors." His country way of speaking would occasionally give away his peasant roots, of course — even all those years spent around the Kamenetskys,

⁴⁸ Russian and Soviet writer

around Maria and their children who all spoke correct Russian, hadn't been quite enough to smooth it out entirely.

Father also earned glowing references from both his camp instructors and the prison authorities, proof enough, apparently, that his "reeducation" had been successfully completed. As a result, he served only four years of his original eight-year sentence. In 1934, he returned to his home village, staying first with his brother, Pavel Kirillovich. The moment he wrote to tell Mother he'd come home, she quit her job in Leningrad and left with the children to join him.

And so ended what might be called Philipp's university years. The lessons he absorbed by the time he turned thirty-six shaped the rest of his life. He learned never to try to become wealthy. To live and work in such a way that people remained satisfied with what he gave them, sparing neither effort nor time to ensure it. To avoid making enemies, never to contradict anyone — least of all the authorities — and, when necessary, to curry favor with whoever held power. Never to insist he was right, even when he believed it; to defer, instead, to opposing views. Never to appear smarter or more capable than anyone else. To seem content, carefree, even a bit of a jester. To build the smallest house possible, so as not to invite envy, with no extra room for visitors or renters. Never to steal, and never to buy anything beyond bare necessity. To live modestly, without chasing any extra income on the side. To toughen his children early against life's hardships. To leave the actual raising of them to Maria — she was, after all, intelligent, hardworking, fair-minded, and far more level-headed than he was. Experience had shown, in fact, that she'd managed perfectly well without him already, reading to the children herself and continuing to do so. And finally: never to indulge his wife or children with anything beyond what was strictly needed — no extra clothes, no small luxuries.

A note: not everyone persecuted by the Soviet government was as fortunate as Philipp. According to published estimates — the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore, among others — Stalin bore responsibility for somewhere between twenty and twenty-five million deaths among the Soviet population, victims of his machinery of repression, not counting wartime losses.

1935. Dubrovka

In the spring of 1935, our family moved to the district center of Dubrovka, then part of the Western Region. The district veterinary hospital was headed by an experienced veterinarian nearing retirement, educated back in Tsarist Russia — a self-assured man who knew his own worth well. Cultured, of the old school, and of Kalmyk descent, he was a genuine expert in horse breeding. I don't know whether Dubrovka had ever had properly trained veterinarians before the revolution, or, if it had, how the government had managed to eliminate them all — but this particular doctor, at least, wasn't a local. I can only assume the earlier specialists had all been swept up in the purges, since kolkhoz livestock had been dying in droves by then, even after treatment and injections. Food was scarce, proper care rarer still, decent barns rarer yet. But "saboteurs" had been found and dealt with regardless, leaving the district, eventually, entirely without qualified specialists. This new doctor got lucky, at least, in having two assistants — one of them my father. Once he learned who Father's teachers had been, and the particular "school" where he'd trained, the doctor hired him despite his diploma falling somewhat short of the usual standards.

The doctor — a slim, spry old man of gentlemanly bearing, who bore more than a passing resemblance to Anton Chekhov — rarely stayed long at the clinic each morning. He trusted his young assistants completely, letting them examine the sick animals and administer whatever care was needed. He'd have his light, spring-mounted carriage brought around, dress in a fine suit, take up a small whip, and climb into the driver's seat himself. The moment he picked up the reins, his young stallion would break into a trot, heading uphill toward town. As head of the clinic, he considered it his duty to visit district officials regularly — to remind them about overdue equipment and medications, submit requests related to whatever new outbreak had emerged, and report, again and again, that the current staffing situation simply wasn't sustainable, given how impossible it was to properly service every village in the district with so few hands.

He'd return to the clinic around lunchtime, by which point most of the sick animals had already been taken home — though there were always farmers still waiting, begging someone to come out to their distant villages, since bringing an animal all the way to the clinic simply wasn't possible: a cow that couldn't stand, perhaps, or one struggling through a difficult birth. The doctor would weigh these requests and decide which of his two assistants should go. There was no shortage of work. Typically, one assistant handled patients at the clinic while the other rode out to one of the kolkhozes to administer vaccinations.

After the war, horses were scarce, and decent harnesses scarcer still. Overworked as they were, the horses' backs and shoulders developed open, swollen, infected sores. Most suffered from mange as well, their skin crusted over with scabs. Feed was never sufficient — by spring, cattle were reduced to eating straw pulled straight off barn roofs, chopped up and softened in hot water to make it slightly more edible. As a result, cows grew so weak they could barely stand, often needing to be hoisted upright with ropes just to get through the day. Their bodies had no strength left to fight off illness, let alone calve safely. And the moment cattle were driven out to pasture each spring, wolves attacked the calves and foals — with no one left to cull the wolf population during the war years, their numbers had grown far beyond control. Foals suffered the worst of it. Nearly every day, ones rescued from wolf attacks were brought into the clinic with terrible wounds torn into their necks and backs.

Not every animal survived the winter to see the long-awaited spring. And the horses that did make it through emerged emaciated, only to be immediately loaded with work well beyond what they could reasonably bear. While the ground was still frozen, they hauled manure out to the fields and carried back seed grain from the district granary — grain deliberately stored there by the government, so starving peasants couldn't eat it over the winter. Then came plowing, harrowing, sowing, and all the rest. And it was precisely during this same stretch, every spring, that epidemics tended to break out — encephalitis among the horses and cattle, hog cholera, erysipelas, and more.

The veterinary staff's workload grew accordingly, since every animal in every kolkhoz needed vaccinating — horses, cows, pigs, chickens — and there were only two specialists to cover the entire district. The two assistants, Romakin and my father, started work at six each morning. They'd see patients at the clinic until nine, then ride out to the kolkhozes and work there until dark. We children rarely saw our father at all during daylight hours.

Here's how Father later described a typical working day in Dubrovka:

In the morning, he examined whatever animals had been brought to the clinic. Then, around lunchtime, without even stopping home, he'd ride out to the village of Zatishye, twenty kilometers from Dubrovka, where a cow had been struggling to calve for two days straight.

It's winter. Inside the barn, it's freezing — around minus twenty — and the cow hangs suspended from ropes, too weak to stand on its own. Father calls for hot water, takes off his coat, and rolls up his sleeves, left wearing only his fur vest. The calf, it turns out, is positioned wrong and can't emerge on its own. Turning a fetus a full hundred and eighty degrees with just one hand is no easy task — but his experience serves him well. He barely notices the hours pass; two of them slip by before he's even aware of it.

He made it back to the clinic by nightfall. Outside the house, he spotted a sleigh and a horse standing with its head hanging low, having nothing left to eat. *Must have been waiting a good while*, Father thought. The driver turned out to be a woman, and she burst into tears the moment she saw him. She'd arrived long before, she explained, but the old doctor had told her no one could go out to her village that day. She began wailing about what she'd do, how she'd feed her six young children, if the cow — their only real source of food — died. The old doctor had suggested she wait, in case Philipp Kirillovich agreed to go once he returned. He couldn't order him to, though — a man couldn't be expected to work without any rest at all.

The moment Father climbed down from the sleigh, stretching his legs and clapping his hands together for warmth, the old doctor invited him inside. "Margarita," he called to his wife, "let's have supper together, the three of us. And bring the decanter — it's brutally cold out there, and Philipp must be half-frozen through, even if I know he's not much for drinking." They had a shot of diluted spirits each and ate unhurriedly while Father recounted the results of his trip. Once the meal was finished, the conversation turned back to the waiting woman. The doctor understood perfectly well how exhausted Father must be — it was bitterly cold outside, and the woman's kolkhoz, "Pervomai," lay deep in the forest, at least thirty kilometers away. Father had already been chilled through, first in the cowshed, then on the long sleigh ride back, and riding out on the woman's tired old horse would only be worse. A pity about the children, of course — the cow had been struggling to calve for three days now, and would surely die soon without help. "You'll go in the morning," the doctor said finally.

The room's warmth, the food, the alcohol — all of it was making Philipp drowsy. The doctor was a kind man, clearly no stranger to hard work himself, and he genuinely seemed to care about his assistant's welfare.

"Go on, Philipp Kirillovich, get some rest — tomorrow's another day." *Of course, I'll go tomorrow*, Father thought to himself. "Go out the back — I'll tell her to come again first thing in the morning." But Father lingered, his legs heavy, his whole body reluctant to step back out into the cold — he'd had more than enough of it for one day. He wanted nothing more than to stay right there, in the warm room. He sighed. He felt for the woman, and for her children — they wouldn't survive long without that cow. Not all of them, anyway. The old doctor sighed too, clearly thinking the very same thing. Philipp found himself remembering how hard it had been

for his own Maria, raising three children all by herself, how hard it had been for the two of them, just the previous year, scraping together enough money to buy their own cow. He fell quiet, lost in memory, chin resting on his hand, staring at nothing in particular. They'd been fortunate, at least, to have good people around them — his brother Pavel's family, who'd lent them a horse and cart, fed his children when they had nothing. He remembered how hard he and Maria had worked together at the phosphorite mine afterward, which had permanently damaged Maria's health.

This woman's situation was no better than theirs had been. He had to go. He simply had to. If something irreversible happened to that family, he'd never forgive himself. "I'm going now," he said aloud. "My good fellow, Philipp Kirillovich — I won't have you freezing to death out there on that old nag of hers. Take my own colt instead, along with this" — he handed over an elegant, braided whip — "just one request: don't spoil him. Keep him moving the whole way, not necessarily fast, but steady, uphill and down alike. If he starts slacking, remind him with the whip. Please, don't forget that part — your kindness toward the animal could end up doing more harm than good. You know the way already; you'll find her hut without needing her along. God willing, you'll be finished there before she even makes it home herself. Now go — you'd better hurry."

And off Father went, comforted by the thought that even among men in positions of authority, there were still genuinely good people out there. Strangely enough, he'd found far more of them in the places that had served as his own "universities" and very rarely, it seemed, among people who actually held power.

The cold deepened as night fell — trees cracked now and then in the frost, and the dogs in every village Father passed through barked louder and more urgently than usual, clearly on edge about wolves themselves. Snowfields stretched out under a cold light of the full moon with an almost menacing glow. Philipp had had the good sense to wrap himself in a long-fleeced sheepskin coat — one of the few remaining possessions from Uncle Franz's estate.

The colt trotted along steadily: clip-clop, clip-clop. It seemed hard to believe he could manage the entire climb up the hill just outside Dubrovka without slowing down — two or three kilometers of steep ascent, followed by another couple of kilometers of gentler, steady rise, all the way up to the highest point of the Central Russian Upland. Almost to the village of Aleshnya, after which the road finally sloped downward again, passing through Lyubimovka, Ryabchi, Bolotnya, and finally, far off in the depths of the forest, Pervomai itself. That stretch of woods was exactly where the wolf packs tended to gather...

In Dubrovka, we lived in a state-owned apartment on the main street, not far from the railway crossing. My time in second grade left almost no impression at all — the only trace of it now is the certificate of achievement I received at year's end. One episode, though, has stayed with me for the rest of my life.

On a warm April day, a group of boys got together, my brother Vyacheslav and one of his classmates the oldest among us. I tagged along too. The older boys decided we should hike out of town, along the railroad tracks to the railway bridge, a couple of kilometers from home. Our

"experienced leaders" — practiced, like my brother, in the ways of independent boyhood — had gathered up a batch of empty bottles beforehand, cashed them in for the deposit, and used the money to buy a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches.

We walked to the bridge in high spirits, ducked underneath it, and lit up right away — no one could see us there. After I'd smoked to my heart's content, I felt violently ill. The rest of the group didn't look much better. We decided to head home. Just then, one of the younger boys fell through the ice. Luckily, the water wasn't deep, and my brother and his friend hauled him out onto the bank. He was cold, frightened, and burst into tears. That scared the rest of us, too.

We all ran home. The boy's parents changed him into dry clothes and immediately smelled tobacco on him. He told them everything that had happened, and our mother gave Vyacheslav a proper scolding. I got my share of it too. The other family demanded she punish my brother physically, but she refused outright.

Mother's reproach, though, had far less effect on me than the nicotine itself. I'd never felt so sick in my life — and that one experience was enough smoking to last me the rest of it. A year later, I tried a single drag of dried alder leaves and hemp — just the one puff, nothing more — and never smoked again after that, despite my classmates at the institute teasing me later for not being "man enough." Once I simply agreed with them, they lost interest and stopped offering me cigarettes altogether.

The school year ended, and I moved up to third grade. One summer day, Father came home from work in an unusually good mood. Normally, he looked preoccupied, always rushing somewhere. When he did make conversation, it was almost always with Mother — he learned everything about us, our schoolwork and the rest, through her. He never pestered us directly with questions or instructions, except for that one year we'd lived in Radichi, when he'd devoted so much of his time to making things for us.

At dinner that evening, he announced we were moving to the village of Ryabchi, and went on describing the place and its surroundings in detail. Our new house, he told us, stood near a lake. The lake's northern bank was thick with reeds and dense vegetation, climbing a steep hillside. It was especially beautiful in the mornings, when the water lay perfectly still, reflecting the trees and the white stone church with its domes and bell tower. The reeds sheltered plenty of waterfowl — herons, wild ducks, geese, moorhens, and more. The water itself was clean and clear, fed by a stream deep enough to have earned the name Belizna⁴⁹. The lake teemed with fish, too — pike, perch, roach, chub, ruffe — caught by local children with fishing rods, woven traps, or sometimes just bare hands. There was a mill there, and a fulling operation as well. The former landowner had once maintained a second artificial lake, complete with a sawmill, though nothing remained of that now. Crayfish, too, were plentiful, both in the lake and in the river running down from the dam — caught by hand, even by the youngest children. Below the dam lay a meadow and a wooded swamp, home to ducks, woodcocks, and partridges. In the evenings, snipes could be heard bleating, swifts screeching overhead, bats circling in the darkening sky. That last detail we didn't much care for — we'd heard stories about bats getting tangled in people's hair. "There are foxes and hares in the woods," Father added, "badgers in the ravines,

⁴⁹ Formed from the Russian word "beli" which means "white".

even the occasional wolf." We'd be living in the house of a former miller, one who'd been dispossessed — a big, solidly built house. We'd be moving soon.

Hearing all this, Gennadi and I immediately started scheming — what we'd do first, what we'd catch, and how. With so many wild ducks around, surely we'd finally get the chance to try Baron Munchausen's famous trick of catching several ducks at once, using a single hook.

Goodbye, Dubrovka! Hello, Ryabchi! We couldn't wait to move!

The Occupation

The war burst into our village not through combat, but through a sudden inrush of misfortunes. A week into the war, women wept, saying goodbye to their young husbands who had been drafted into the army. The men headed for the front looked distraught too. They knew, from the news broadcast over the village's one loudspeaker mounted on a telephone pole in the center, that the front was moving in the wrong direction. The fascists were suffering great losses all right but, far from retreating toward Berlin, were advancing toward Minsk and other towns with Russian names. Only kids like me still believed things would turn out just like in the songs we sang — "our armor is strong, and our tanks are swift, and the First Marshal will lead us into battle" — and that our heavy TB-3 bombers would yet show the Germans what was what.

Bitter disillusionment came on the very first day of the war – June 22, 1941.

Just the day before, I had been raking dry hay, and Dad, with other men, had been making a haystack. Early in the morning of that warm summer day, while I was harnessing the horse, I saw, amid beautiful white clouds, three twin-engine bombers with yellow-tipped wings and black swastikas. They had already flown over the airfield, completely unimpeded. We hadn't heard our own aircraft for a long time by then — we knew they'd been relocated closer to the border — but surely there had to be some air defense! Somewhere to the east, around Bryansk, explosions were heard. We later learned that the village of Kletnya had also been bombed.

The next day there wasn't a single cloud in the sky, and three German planes, flying higher than the day before (about 3 km up), headed eastward again. Then, at a considerable distance from the aircraft, we saw fifteen to twenty bursts of flak fire. A volley, followed by another. And another. Always with the same result. The same delay. Ignoring the airfield and its air defense, the planes flew on. The airfield was not bombed. I concluded that our air defense was ineffective and couldn't do the enemy any harm. (Two years would pass before I'd have to change that opinion.)

But we believed that the war would end — as we'd seen in the movies — if not in three days, then in a couple of weeks. It was upsetting that the newspapers arriving at the village council held no stories of adventure or heroic deeds. Only brief, vague reports from the Soviet Informbureau. They only indicated the directions of the advance, where the Germans were said to be sustaining heavy losses of manpower and materiel. It was alarming that those directions

had Russian names. And it was hard to believe that our peasants, even with the best kolkhoz wagons and horses available, could reverse the situation at the front. The horses, worn out by hard work and beatings, were not much to look at. And along the Smolensk-bound Ekaterina's Tract, trucks carrying soldiers were a rare sight. But we knew the soldiers were armed not with outdated rifles but with new five-round carbines — and that they could fire in bursts!

The illusions dissipated, though, on July 17, when district officials had dinner at our house for the last time. They had come to arrange the evacuation of the kolkhoz livestock (primarily cattle) to the east, so that it wouldn't fall into German hands. Dad had a horse at the clinic. He was supposed to take all the medications available there and accompany the herds of every collective farm in the area he served. Dad asked to be allowed to take his wife and three children with him. The officials denied the request, saying: "This could cause panic. If circumstances necessitate evacuation, the administration will issue an order and carry it out in an organized manner."

Meanwhile, trucks were already seen heading east carrying officials' families, though the official explanation was that they were transporting archives. Fear of the Germans, and the atrocities being reported, drove people to abandon their property and livestock. My parents were prepared to take only their cow with them, along with the bedding, and to leave behind the heifer, the pig, thirty-three adult geese, and the chickens.

But the departure never took place — for better or for worse. The future of the country, and our own future, seemed completely unpredictable. Our very existence was no longer secure. Even the hay stacked on June 21 was stolen three days later. People understood that they could rely only on themselves. There was no salary, no bread — one couldn't even buy salt. But I never saw my mother crying or sitting idle. We still had our livestock and our garden.

Meanwhile, by the end of June 1941, we started hearing a continuous rumble and occasional powerful thunderclaps. But the thunderstorm never came, though it wouldn't stop being heard for days. We understood that this was the war: somewhere around Smolensk, a fierce battle was raging. What would happen the next day?

But the next day was no different from the one before. My older brother did not come back from "the trenches." He had been sent with other sixteen-year-old kids to dig trenches and tank ditches on the far bank of the Desna River. Maria Akulenкова was upset — she hadn't been sent there because she came from a kulak family. Her father had been arrested for the second time as an enemy of the people. Later, though, she was entrusted with driving the kolkhoz cattle east.

We got used to the overflights of reconnaissance planes, which dropped leaflets bearing the rhymed (in Russian) message: "Dear ladies, stop digging your holes. Our tanks will come and fill them up with dirt."

But our army is strong, it has stopped the Germans. In a day or two the enemy will be driven back across the border!

The rumble lasted more than a month, and then... it went quiet. Our hopes seemed to have come true. There was no more movement of troops in any direction. It was quiet in the district center, Dubrovka, too. On August 7th, Mom received her salary (she worked as an orderly at the vet clinic). No one was being evacuated; the administration officials were working as usual. All the Jews in town were working, too: barbers, salesmen, doctors, heads of stores and warehouses. Only a dozen years earlier, the Jews' occupations had mainly been artisans, first-class tailors, tinsmiths. One of them even used to ride around collecting bones, rags, and skins. But in recent years, young Jewish people had gotten an education and advanced in their careers — intelligent, talented people. Many of them did not believe the reports about the Germans exterminating all the Jews. One Jew, who was transporting archives by truck, made a stop in our village and said it was impossible that a civilized nation would annihilate another educated and talented nation. Intelligent people can always come to an agreement.

One day, before sunset, as we were returning from the district center, we came to the village of Lubimovka, which lay near the highway. There was no traffic. Still, people were gathered by the last house, looking toward the highway. "Was it the Germans you saw?" I asked jokingly. "Honey," said one of them, addressing Mom, "hurry back to your Ryabchi, or else you won't be able to cross the road — German tanks with crosses on them were just here, stopped for a while, then turned back toward Sesha."

That was how the German army — not the front — came to us. Again, not the way I had imagined: our Red Army soldiers retreating while facing the enemy and shooting at the Germans.

Late in the evening, two of our soldiers dropped by our house. They drank some milk, took some bread, and said there were no Soviet troops behind them. They went to blow up the little bridge on the highway and turned toward the woods. In their backpacks we'd seen bars of soap, which surprised us, and we asked why they needed so much soap. "This isn't soap — these are TNT blocks, for blowing up installations."

Mom was scared and ran to the kolkhoz chairman, Andrey Ivanovich Yakutov, who was a good friend of ours, to ask him for a horse and wagon to evacuate us children immediately. But he was of no help. The district administration hadn't given any instructions; he said he'd call them from the village council. Besides, there were no horses to be had. The stableman, Sidor, had driven them off so they wouldn't be taken east like the cows. He said: "They'll take the horses, the authorities will be gone, and how are we supposed to plow?" Sidor, it seemed, wasn't afraid of staying under the Germans — he had already worked for them as a prisoner of war and knew their language.

Throughout the night, the leaders of the village council kept calling the district center but received no instructions: should they evacuate the people and mobilize those of draft age, of whom there still remained quite a few? What should be done with the party cell? What should the communists do? We had eight of them.

We, the teenagers, didn't sleep either. We listened to what the adults at the village council were talking about. Every half hour they would feverishly turn the crank of the village's one telephone, calling Dubrovka, but the only reply was silence. Just before dawn, the receiver answered in German. That was it.

Like a winter that comes suddenly to the village, the party and the government, without leaving any instructions, abandoned the villagers to their own devices. The Great Helmsman gathered his senses only two weeks later and gave the order over the radio to burn the crops and houses rather than leave them to the aggressor. But in our district, there were no madmen to do that.

The morning of August 8th was bright, warm, and sunny. Light white clouds drifted across the sky, and, as on June 22nd, a gentle wind barely stirred the leaves. As usual, the villagers had taken their cattle out to graze. I, together with other kids, crossed the dam, went past the mill and the store, and across the little bridge over the Khoperenka brook, intending to climb the hill past the age-old larch trees — planted long ago by the lords of the manor, the Demidovs — and up the church bell tower. From there, a view opening over many kilometers would let us see the Germans. We didn't have to go that far: German scouts came riding down the hill on bicycles, without slowing. Their shirt sleeves were rolled up, submachine guns slung across their chests, leather bags attached to the bikes. We froze in fear. Our path back was cut off. We were certain they'd start firing at us. But the riders paid us no attention. They stopped at the store; the guard opened the door for them, and they went in. We stood there still, as if rooted to the ground.

A few minutes later, they came out laughing loudly at someone's joke. One of them started playing a harmonica, rather unskillfully, while the others ate candies. We couldn't hear what they'd been asking the guard about.

We sighed with relief only after they rode back the way they'd come, paying us no attention. We were surprised to see, five or ten minutes later, the villagers running to the store. They rushed inside to take whatever was still left. We saw an even greater commotion near the shed next to the store, where there was a rather dirty pile of salt for the cattle. People scooped up the salt with their hands and stuffed it into the folds of their shirts and dresses, or into their undershirts. Some, more forethoughtful, had come with sacks. I didn't dare take part in that undertaking, since Mother had always forbidden us to take other people's things. I couldn't foresee then that salt would soon be worth its weight in gold — that we'd eventually have to trade away our few belongings just to get it.

All the goods in the store were taken away with lightning speed. The guard had time only to say to the first daredevil who ran in: "Our army will come back one day and hold you to account!" But the SS, following close behind the Wehrmacht, came first — and shot the guard for his faith in the might of our army.

We hadn't gotten far from the store when a column of German soldiers on foot, four men to a rank, appeared. They were singing a cheerful marching song in time with their steps. We had the feeling we were seeing the victors, who believed their job had been done, and done well.

Our villagers had barely finished looting the store and salt shed when a second German column appeared. *I need to get home quickly! How is my mother? She must be scared — and worried about me!* I ran home ahead of the soldiers. Mother was happy to see me back, but the anxiety kept growing.

The front ranks of the column were drawing closer. The stretch of road that ran through a ravine past our house was a hard one to travel — feet and wheels sank into deep sand there. It climbed steeply uphill at that spot, and about a hundred meters on, it leveled off again, becoming flat and firm, with houses standing on both sides. Because of this, anyone on foot or on horseback tried to take the climb at full speed, leaving our house behind — not worth the bother, as they say. Who would want to climb the hill just to reach our house?

Still, a young, thuggish-looking soldier from the forward ranks ran up into our house, pistol in hand. He gave us, and the room, a once-over, then suddenly yelled: "Kommunistische!" Whether it was a question or a statement wasn't clear. He was pointing at the tear-off calendar, its cardboard backing bearing an image of Stalin. That was the first time I spoke German: "We bought this calendar because it was the only one for sale." My words seemed to satisfy him, and he holstered the gun. He also seemed startled to hear a teenager speaking his mother tongue. But he had no time for talk — he needed to catch up with the column — and he turned to our mother: "Matka, eier!" Mother said, "I don't understand," and looked at me helplessly. This angered the soldier: "No understand, no understand!" "Mom, give him some eggs."

He put the eggs into his field cap and ran out to catch up with the column. We breathed a sigh of relief. *Maybe they're not going to kill us?*

Meanwhile, our house was already trembling, the window glass rattling, as tanks and half-track trucks carrying soldiers and towing guns negotiated the steep climb below our house. The troops marched along our rural road at a moderate pace — not westward, where the Desna River lay ten kilometers down the highway, and Bryansk seventy kilometers beyond that, but southward, toward Kletnya.

My brother Vyacheslav and other kids his age had dug two-meter tank ditches across the Desna, but the Germans never went there. Their leaflets had advised against digging "holes," saying that "when their tanks come, they'll fill them back up." We heard occasional exchanges of fire in that direction, but no significant combat took place there.

For days on end, mechanized units moved through our village, stopping only for the night. Only the emblems on the armor changed — crisscrossed bones, a human skull, a turtle, a panther, a monkey. I can't remember all of them. It seemed obvious to us that such a target would soon draw an attack from our "falcons," and that ten kilometers was no obstacle for our artillery to deliver a precise strike. But weeks passed, convoy after convoy rolled through, and there were no air raids — the artillery stayed silent.

For several days at the beginning of the invasion, we saw ten to fifteen single-engine dive bombers with non-retractable landing gear — nicknamed "bast-shoe wearers" — forming a line and diving over the Desna one after another, with an abhorrent, terrifying howl of sirens and bombs. No one fired at them, including with anti-aircraft guns, and they carried out their merry-go-round methodically and without haste. But that was only at the beginning. The attacks stopped soon after.

It was strange, and somewhat bitter, to see the movement of German troops halt to make way for a column of POWs heading in the opposite direction — without belts or trench coats — numbering four to five hundred men, escorted by three submachine gunners. They didn't look downcast. "Are there any of ours, from Bryansk Region, among you?" one of our villagers shouted. "No — your people are still fighting. We're from Chernigov!"

They were glad the war was over for them, and that they had survived. But grief and suffering awaited them. Neither the prisoners nor we could have imagined what would happen to them in the days ahead.

Where was this armada headed? And where was the infantry? We had seen units on bicycles, and many motorcycles with sidecars, probably for communication. Why had they turned off the highway — damaged as it was — onto an even worse dirt road, though at least not yet washed out by rain? A month later, we learned from the Germans themselves that they had gone around Bryansk from the south, taken Orel first and Bryansk only after that. Where was our aviation, we wondered.

What great joy we felt the day our plane flew low over a moving column of troops. It fired its machine guns from both sides, and... that was it. We expected it to come back and strafe the column again. But it never returned. Several days later, two high-speed bombers, flying high along the same route, dropped a dozen small bombs. They missed the target — about three hundred meters off, a house was destroyed, a goat was killed, and a woman wounded. After that, I didn't see our planes again in 1941. Only German ones. What frustration and disappointment we felt — we had so naively believed in the might of our armed forces, in our First Marshal, in the father of all times and peoples, in the wisdom of the party and government! It had all turned out to be a fake, a lie.

Unwittingly, I found myself comparing German equipment with ours: tarpaulin boots and puttees against solid, leather, studded boots; our ton-and-a-half and five-ton trucks against their half-tracked personnel carriers; a burlap sack against a leather backpack; a shapeless loaf of bread that went stale in two days against a vacuum-sealed, compact loaf that could be stored for a long time; our communication equipment against theirs. At the same time, we saw plenty of outdated German equipment too — short-barreled tanks, short-barreled artillery pieces, and so on.

Villagers made their own assessment of the enemy's superiority and concluded that the hour of Soviet power had struck. Surely, there would be no more hateful kolkhozes, where all the grain was hauled off to the elevator to be stored for the Motherland, and she, the beloved one, would

dole some of it back in the spring for sowing. And the worn-out nags would no longer stagger below our hill in torment, lurching out from their harness under a hail of blows delivered not by cane or whip, but by club. And we children would no longer have to yell: "Why are you beating the horse? Can't you see it has no strength left to pull the loaded wagon through the sand and up the hill?" A full day's work earned just fifty grams of grain received at year's end. Is that a fair wage? And you couldn't move elsewhere, since peasants weren't issued passports. There was no pension, either. No meadow, no hay for the family cow, the household's food provider. You could gather the rye ears left over in the field, but even that was forbidden — long prison sentences awaited, and not even children were spared! If you failed to show up for work, your garden plot would be cut down to the size of your house, and then, of course, there'd be no need for the annual survey to make sure you hadn't crept past your boundary and enlarged your plot! And there was no way out of the kolkhoz yoke except by getting recruited to Stalin's construction projects or being sent to settle some distant, uninhabited place. Entire families left their home villages for the Far East, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Donbass mines...

Now a new opportunity had arisen: the war. And with it, no more Soviets — just one problem now: the Germans. They might shoot a cow in a field and truck it off somewhere, or take a horse to haul something and then simply abandon it. War or not, people had to eat. The crops, still in sheaves and rows, were divided among the villagers. So were the horses that remained — the ones that hadn't been driven east. Three or four households received a horse apiece. The stubble fields were likewise divided into shares, good plots and bad allotted evenly according to family size. We, though not kolkhoz members ourselves, got our share too. Just shortly before, the kolkhoz members had been shouting at the store entrance at the teachers and other state employees who'd each been issued a sack of rye flour: "Look at these parasites! They get all the bread, while we don't even know if we'll see a few grams per workday! We grow the crops, but it's others who eat them!"

Harvesting, bringing the crops home, threshing the sheaves of barley and rye, feeding the cow — all of this fell to my older brother, Vechik. My job was to defend the house and property from the Germans by means of the German language. My youngest brother, Gennadi, was assigned no task at all. He was twelve, I was fourteen, and our oldest brother was sixteen.

Meanwhile, the troops continued to move through our village. At times, a group of soldiers would stop for the night, or just to rest, driving their vehicles into our garden and camouflaging them with apple-tree branches. It seemed they were still expecting attacks from our aviation. If they stayed the night, they'd drive us out of the bedroom and living room and into the entryway, laying down a thick layer of straw on the floor to sleep on. We teenagers waited impatiently for them to leave. Once they were gone, we'd rummage through the straw and often find a penknife, or a fountain pen with a picture of a pretty naked woman on it. I pored over German newspapers with interest, trying to read everything printed in them. The photos and the print quality were better than in our own newspapers.

Vechik's friend, Sergei Baranov, got lucky too: he found a bicycle the Germans had abandoned. It had a small defect, which he repaired. No one in our village owned a bicycle — it was every

boy's dream. I was eager to try riding it. I was certain I'd manage on the very first try! In my dreams, I rode it confidently, over even ground and downhill. I wished I could try it as soon as possible! But where? The Germans were moving not only along the Dubrovka road but also out of the woods, from the direction of the village of Soplevka (kolkhoz "Red Moscow")! We had to hide the bicycle in the hay. Surely the troops would be gone one day.

The bicycle waited for its ride until the spring of 1942. But it wasn't me who rode it. As soon as it appeared on the road, a partisan from our village took it. He needed it more than we did.

A German soldier abandoned a Soviet-made radio receiver, and we found it and hid it in the attic, not knowing that if it was discovered in our house, we would be shot. We had been required to turn in all radio receivers back in July. We also hid, beneath our bathhouse floor, a device that looked like a radio transmitter. The capacitors, valves, and speakers looked so fine that we couldn't bring ourselves to just throw it away. When we returned from Dubrovka in 1945, it was gone. Another of our finds, however, nearly became our undoing — but I'll come to that later.

The road, with its marching troops, went on living its own life, and the village needed to live its own as well. Every morning we took the cattle out to pasture. There was no guarantee they'd all come back, since from time to time the Germans would drive into the field, shoot a cow or some other animal that caught their fancy, gut it, and haul it away — ignoring the woman who owned it, crying as she watched. Once, a poor woman from our village clutched at her cow's neck and wouldn't let go. One of the soldiers shot her. But such things happened rarely; usually, the first method was used. Even that wasn't especially common — there seemed to be a kind of unspoken ban on such acts, so as not to turn the locals against the soldiers. Besides, the Germans were well provided for: bread, canned goods with labels from all over Europe, chocolate, candies, and so on. It was surprising how the rear units and field kitchens managed to keep pace with troops that had advanced 400 kilometers. In any case, during that first year of the war, there were no requisitions. There were times when we, too, got a taste of German provisions — especially when the Germans were in a hurry to move out. There were chances to steal their canned food, but we were too afraid to try. In our presence, the Germans never touched our valuables. But when they forced us to leave the house for a couple of weeks, we came back to find our accordion, gramophone, and records missing.

But let us return to our muttons, or rather to our cow and calf. Like everybody else, we drove them out to pasture in the morning. It was only during the first days of the war that we kept them at home, hoping that within a day or two the troops would pass and we could take them out to graze. Now, every evening, we wondered whether they'd come back home at all. Another challenge we faced each morning was driving our thirty-three geese across the road — packed with moving troops — to the lake beyond it. Whatever bans on marauding may have existed, who would say no to a fried goose in wartime, when it was practically walking under their wheels?

The house was no castle, either. I was home alone once when a group of soldiers surrounded our chickens, threw some grain on the ground, and tried to catch them — unsuccessfully. I came out

and asked them in German: "Are you hungry?" Astonished, they stared at me. They stopped their hunt and started asking questions: Was I German? Who were my parents? Where had I learned German? They seemed to look at me with a kind of respect, seeing that my conduct differed from that of my peers — but it was my knowledge of the German language that impressed them most. I told them my parents were Russian, and that I'd studied the language at our secondary school.

My teacher must have been a fine professional. She encouraged me to study material not only for grades five through seven, but also for grades eight through ten. I loved the German language. My ear for music helped too — I could play any song by ear on the concertina, mandolin, or balalaika.

"My parents were landed gentry before the revolution," I said. "They were persecuted. My father is still somewhere in a concentration camp." A lie for the sake of survival! Or a half-lie, really. We were not, of course, gentry, but kulaks — and Dad had indeed been in a concentration camp, though he wasn't there at that moment, and my mother hardly looked the part of a peasant. Was I supposed to tell them that my father had driven the cattle east, away from the Germans, and quite possibly was already fighting against them?

From then on, I began using my knowledge of German without any hesitation. Every time soldiers approached, Mom called me, and I went out to meet them. My older brother tried to avoid them — he was sixteen at the time. The youngest, Gennadi, was twelve, and nobody paid him much attention. He was an avid fisherman, and as soon as the situation stabilized — that is, stopped changing every day — he resumed fishing, using his rod or sometimes just his hands. I remember one-kilogram tench caught with a fish trap in our pond. You'd lift the trap, and just as its upper part broke the surface, you'd get splashed by a fountain of water — the tench's powerful protest at being caught. I've never seen anything quite like it since.

Before the war, I'd had pneumonia twice and was physically weak, unlike my older brother. That's why our father used to send him to do all the chores requiring strength. Vechik was a healthy kid with many good friends he liked spending time with. He was kind and always ready to help. But in his early childhood in Leningrad, where he was often left to his own devices, he'd taken up smoking — hiding it from our parents. Only once he was sent to build fortifications and dig trenches did our parents allow him to smoke openly. He wasn't a particularly good student, a result of his lax attitude toward schoolwork in his early years. From the age of five, his real education had taken place in the courtyard, ringed by five-story buildings. When Gennadi and I weren't around, he'd show off his hidden treasures, stashed in the woodpile: matches with green and red heads, and long-mouthpieced cigarettes in bright packets. There was a penknife, too. Eighty years have passed, and I've forgotten many things, but I still remember that.

Like most sickly kids, I was aggressive and hot-tempered, always ready to answer in kind anyone who tried to bully me. My constant academic success, achieved without much effort, only bolstered my self-esteem and sense of independence. I read avidly, devouring every book I could get my hands on. I was drawn to literature, especially literary criticism, biographies of famous people, travel writing, and the mechanics of automobiles, radio receivers, and the U-2

plane. I could spend hours playing my musical instruments. I liked drawing, too, and dreamed of becoming an artist. I even took one lesson on perspective from a Red Army soldier stationed at our firing range in Soplevka — but the war put an end to those studies before they could continue.

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At that time, there was a portrait of Pushkin, and of a heroic woman with a rifle from Granada, that I had copied. I also drew Lenin sitting in a tent in Razliv⁵⁰.

Starting in the fifth grade, I wanted to become a writer. I took an active part in the school's music and drama clubs, reciting poetry and prose. I liked reading fragments — even whole books — aloud to anyone who would listen. Mother could only listen to my reading in the evenings during

⁵⁰ Lenin's hiding place near St Petersburg from where he coordinated revolutionary activities in the summer 1917.

winter, since in summer she worked in the garden and tended the house and animals. She also read on her own, or together with me.

I remember well our reading of Shakespeare's plays. I didn't care for many of them. "The Merry Wives of Windsor" was the exception, though I don't recall why. At the end of the book, I read Tolstoy's critique of Shakespeare's plays. My opinion matched his: I disliked the unnaturally stilted monologues. I also shared his views on ballet.

My steady audience was Mother's friend, Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova. She'd sit sewing while I read. I had no friends — I had no time for them. I was self-sufficient. My only companion was my younger brother. For years, I had been an authority to him, and until he got married he'd listen to my advice on everything.

My fondest wish was to be able to write stories like the ones in *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Mysterious Island*, or *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Around that time, I came across the works of V. Belinsky⁵¹. From him I learned what qualities one needed to become a writer: to observe closely the actions and personalities of characters, and of oneself; to analyze and draw conclusions from a character's attitude, behavior, and circumstances; to anticipate coming events. As a result, I began critically assessing my own character, behavior, and relationships — with my family, my schoolmates, and, eventually, the structure and actions of the authorities.

I loved books about famous people. I was fascinated by all of them: Louis Pasteur, Diesel, Miklouho-Maclay, military leaders, writers... I wanted to understand the design and workings of an automobile differential gear, of gasoline and diesel engines, and to know what the newspapers had to say. But we subscribed only to our district newspaper, and that wasn't enough for me. I had to run to the village reading room, where one could read the national papers, *Pravda* and *Izvestia*.

Before the war, at school, we were given a copy of the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*⁵². We read it aloud after classes. It was very engaging, but by the end I had the feeling that Korchagin had laid his health on the altar of the Motherland in vain: petty bourgeois elements had crept into the government, and the fight against them, as a result, would still take a long time.

But how interesting, how easy to understand — with pictures! — was the description of the U-2 plane's design. Even the number of propeller rotations was given. One could build a plane like this oneself: if you took a spinning wheel, it wouldn't be hard to calculate what kind of pulley to attach to the propeller so the homemade plane could take off! The calculations were made — all that was needed now was plywood and a few other materials. My assistant, loyal listener, and

⁵¹ Russian literary critic of the 19th century

⁵² Socialist realist novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky reflecting the author's experience of fighting for the Bolsheviks in the Civil War.

would-be co-pilot was Gennadi, my younger brother. There were some doubts, though: turning the propeller wouldn't be difficult, but his arm might go numb — he was only twelve at the time.

The war never let that dream come true. But in our dreams, we flew among the clouds for another three years, unafraid of crashing, since the plane was light and could land on any small, flat spot! And somewhere in the middle of the taiga, we'd find an orchard with apples unlike any we knew, and a beautiful house — and no one around! How could I have known that sixty-five or seventy years later, that dream would partly come true, in the most unexpected way. For about a decade now, our area has had orchards overflowing with apples, and houses — some good, some not — and no people at all! But this wasn't the war's doing, or not entirely: it was the result of the government's merciless policies, before and during the war, and especially the current one, which has emptied the land of its people. There are no jobs, no roads, no prospects for making a living. Villages disappear; people flee to the cities, or abroad.

To understand my attitude toward the events of those years, I should try to identify what shaped the building of my character, as a person and as a citizen. My early childhood was overshadowed by the pillaging of our family's estate and the arrest and conviction of my father, sentenced as an enemy of the people to eight years in labor camps. The family of my father's brother, Pavel Kirillovich Novikov, took in our mother and the three of us — at the time, aged one and a half, three and a half, and five and a half — despite already having six young children of their own, the oldest just ten.

Later, in Leningrad, we were sheltered by our mother's brother, Vladimir Matveevich Kamenetsky, and his wife, Gelena. They had two sons, thirteen and sixteen. Their daughter, Stanislava, had already been arrested.

We lived in the kitchen, with no amenities — the stove fueled by firewood, the walls painted bright green and damp from the high humidity. My uncle's wife, Gelya (Gelena), made her displeasure known whenever Mother hung our laundry to dry in the kitchen. Because of this, Mother had to dry our laundry under her bedsheets, warming it with her own body. An iron bed and a bedside table were the only furniture. But my younger brother and I slept there only on Sundays. On those days, Mother would feed us each a sandwich with half a meat patty, brought home from the mechanized canteen where she worked, first as a dishwasher and later as a cook. Milk was scarce. Mother would suggest we drop bread crumbs into our glass, saying: "More bread, less milk."

On all other days, my brother and I lived around the clock at a good kindergarten called the Hearth. Our teachers were fine specialists. Over three years, they taught us how to sleep and eat properly, how to be friends with one another, how to play, draw, recite poems, and read. They instilled in us a love of books and paintings, of drawing and singing.

The photograph shows all the teachers with the senior group. Gennadi, from the junior group, is sitting beside me — an exception made so Mother wouldn't have to pay for two photographs. My face already wears a mature expression: serious, pensive, as if burdened by a great secret. I

wasn't supposed to tell anyone that we had a father, or that he'd been arrested as an enemy of the people; instead, I was to say that he'd left us, and we didn't know where he was — that perhaps he was serving a prison sentence somewhere.



My awareness, my sense of the country, its people, and life itself, broadened once we moved from that civilized environment — from the best city in the country — back to the godforsaken village of Radichi, in the Dubrovka District, to the same house belonging to Uncle Pavel. I started first grade in that village. I have no memory of that milestone, good or bad. Who was my first teacher? I don't remember. A man or a woman? I do remember that the school stood in the middle of a garden.

At that time, I was already inclined to think teachers weren't really necessary — that all one needed were good textbooks. I would read, memorize, and recite word for word. Nihilism!

I remember that period very well, and I'll return to it later. By the start of the school year, Uncle Pavel's family — which had grown larger while we were away — received a great many textbooks for grades one through eight (they were distributed free of charge back then; the country was poor, but it found the money for that, and even as it was declared that life had gotten better, buying that many books would have been well beyond a mere peasant's means!). Before

school began and the rightful owners claimed their books, I'd already read everything that interested me on history and literature.

There, I saw the squalor in which the countryside lived, and the hard, physically demanding work my parents had to take on just to feed the family and stand on their own two feet. Once again, good people helped — there were many of them. I thought, later, that I would write about life and about good people, and that as long as someone remembered them, they would go on being happy in another, possibly better, world.

To supplement our own practical experience, we were taught — at school, in political information classes, in the books of contemporary writers, and in the newspapers — to love the socialist Motherland, the hope of all the world's working people; to hate enemies of every stripe; to know our military hardware, the design of a rifle, a gas mask; and to be ready to fight the evils of capitalism. To do that, we had to learn how to run, jump, throw a grenade, and administer first aid.

We loved the Motherland, but we were uneasy about Pavlik Morozov⁵³, who had denounced his own father. We hadn't yet shaken off the old ways: it was still considered bad form to tattle on a schoolmate, let alone a parent. Besides, we knew real-life "enemies of the people," and they never seemed genuine. They were priests, millers, or — more often than not — simply good farmers who didn't want to hand their property over to the kolkhoz. It was fair enough that the landlords had been swept away. But how could anyone call my father an enemy of the people? He'd completed only four years of school and had worked as a hired hand since early childhood on the Kamenetsky estate. He was afraid of everyone and worked hard. He wouldn't leave the big farm, even though his wife — a noblewoman — tried to talk him into abandoning everything and getting away from the property. Easy enough for someone of noble birth to walk away, perhaps, but he had worked there for two decades — how could he simply give it all up now?

At first, the government tried to squeeze as much as it could out of them through taxes. Mother and Father wore themselves out working, but they paid. Eventually, the authorities invented trumped-up charges against Father, accusing him of being a dangerous political enemy. He was sent to a concentration camp for eight years of corrective labor. Our cows and horses — including our prized stud ambler — were taken to the nearby kolkhoz. The farm buildings were hauled off to the district center and converted into a militia station.

Quite different were the cases of Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev⁵⁴, and, later, many others who were executed. We, too, jabbed our pens through their eyes in our history textbooks! They were the ones, we were told, who'd wanted to seize power and sell the Motherland to the capitalists! But we believed our army and navy were the best in the world. In the film *If War Comes Tomorrow*, TB-3 bombers from the Sesha airfield defeated the enemy in three days! There was no radio in our village — only a loudspeaker at the village council and a record player at school — but we knew all the songs, and they were all cheerful and spirited: "Ever higher, and higher,

⁵³ A 13-year-old boy who denounced his father to the authorities and was in turn killed by his own family.

⁵⁴ Revolutionary and Soviet leaders persecuted by Stalin.

and higher we lift our wings toward the sky, and in every propeller's hum we hear that our borders stand safe," and about "the First Marshal who will lead us into battle," and "our armor is strong, and our tanks are swift"...

But by 1939, I'd already begun to feel a certain disappointment: tiny Finland had attacked our vast country. It clearly hadn't read our newspapers, hadn't seen our films, hadn't heard our victory songs! Still, our army suffered casualties, men were killed and wounded, froze to death in the snow, and the war dragged on for months. Every day I ran to the village council to read the papers, but only one heroic deed stuck in my memory: our mighty tractor, carrying a machine gunner and a driver, was surrounded and attacked by the Finns. The driver yanked the lever, and the tractor began to spin in place while the gunner kept firing — and naturally, he killed every enemy soldier.

(We learned the truth about that war against Finland only recently. The fortified Mannerheim Line was never breached, and our losses were ten times greater than Finland's.)

That was the first blow to our patriotic upbringing. Our might turned out to be a soap bubble. The first elections in 1937 had also been a sham. Even the peasants understood that choosing from a single candidate was no choice at all. The claim that life in the kolkhoz had grown better and merrier was a brazen lie. Receiving fifty grams of rye grain for a day's work was as bad an exploitation as any that had ever existed. The tiny plot of land beside the house — a peasant's only real source of livelihood — was measured out again every year, lest its owner, God forbid, enlarge it by plowing a strip of virgin soil. One couldn't refuse to work, either. For any misconduct, the authorities could seize the plot of land — cut it down to the house's very corners, as the saying went. Nor could one leave the village, since peasants weren't allowed to hold passports.

Life was hard, to be sure. Everything for the army, everything for defense! One had to tighten one's belt. And even the most ignorant old woman knew that while everyone else slept, one window in the Kremlin stayed lit — Comrade Stalin, working, thinking of us! And when the time came for him to die, even our good friend Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkovna — who had been dispossessed twice and raised three children in extreme poverty — burst into tears: now war would surely break out! Everyone feared him.

But then, all at once, Soviet authority in our area simply ceased to exist — on a single day, August 8th, 1941. Communists, Komsomol members, and non-party members alike were abandoned by the government, left with no guidance on what to do or how to live. Could anyone truly believe the order given by the once most powerful and wisest of leaders — to burn the crops and houses so that only scorched earth would be left to the enemy? Or was he simply so certain of the boundless love the people, whom he'd made so happy, felt for him — a love that would make them sacrifice their very lives? In my long life, I have never met anyone willing to do that.

As they say, there is but one step from love to hatred. Comrade Stalin took quite a few such steps. The last one was the bluff about our mighty army and its brilliant leaders. People had always complained about their lives — just never out loud. Once the Germans arrived, they began doing so openly. And among them, there was no belief whatsoever in a good outcome for our country in this war. Our communists had none either. Among them were the kolkhoz chairman, the school principal, the teachers, the village council chairman, and his secretary — eight people in all.

During the first days of the occupation, we saw only army units; there was no SS. That explains why, although I saw our prisoners of war being interrogated, there were no executions. Our communists were ordered to report daily, so the Germans could confirm they remained loyal and hadn't slipped off to join the partisans — whom the Germans had heard about via Moscow radio, though at the time we knew nothing of them ourselves.

The Germans' arrival was so sudden that it's safe to assume the district administration never had time to issue any instructions. The night before, everyone at the village council waited by the telephone for word from above, but the communists' vigil was for nothing — the authorities had more pressing matters to attend to. There had only been time to prepare partisan resistance in Bryansk, across the Desna, which wouldn't be occupied until more than a month later.

The situation changed once the black shirts appeared. The interrogations of the communists grew more intense — they were grilled about what orders they'd received, where supplies for the partisans were being stored, and who was meant to assist them. Each time, they were released, only to be summoned again for further questioning shortly after. The communists understood they'd need to abandon their families and flee to the woods to wait it out, hoping our army might return soon.

To head off any partisan resistance before it could take shape, the Germans decided to eliminate young, non-local men who had served in the Red Army. The stories I heard went something like this: a young man walks down the street, the Germans stop him, ask where he lives, then call the village elder to confirm it — but if his underwear turns out to be army issue, they shoot him on the spot.

Some villagers used the occupation as an opportunity to settle old scores. The store guard had threatened the man who'd been first to start the looting, warning him he'd be severely punished once our army returned. Someone reported this to the Germans, and the guard was shot. As soon as Soviet authority was gone, people began dismantling the unfinished building of a communal services center. Women from a nearby house couldn't stand by and watch — they said it was public property and that whoever was responsible would be held to account. The poor women were executed in the church, which was being used as a warehouse.

It seemed the village council building had been chosen to house the headquarters of the army advancing toward Bryansk. Prisoners of war were brought there for interrogation. Once, I saw a

German soldier saying something to a prisoner, pointing at his own wrist. The prisoner didn't understand, and the German struck him across the face. Only then did the prisoner grasp the command — he took off his watch and handed it over.

Our house was the finest in the village, standing right across from the village council. Staff officers inspected it and drove us out, along with the soldiers who'd been quartered there. They brought in bedroom furniture and two large, handsome chests. A pair of guards and a batman stayed on in the house. A general arrived while we were still standing outside with our belongings. I said something to him in German, and he, growing curious, invited me into the house — interested, it seemed, in talking with a local who spoke his mother tongue. I had to repeat the story about myself and my parents, especially my father, and our supposedly more prosperous past — a claim seemingly borne out by the two-pedestal table upholstered in green cloth, the openwork rocking chair, and the gramophone with its big horn.

Our family's composure, and its general bearing, seemed to satisfy him as well, and he ordered our belongings brought into the front room, where Father used to see his patients. Part of the room was partitioned off with a railing, giving us a place to sleep without getting in the general's way.

The general was a slim, lean man of medium height, with graying hair — about sixty years old. He had a pleasant face, typical of educated men his age, but without the superciliousness so common among high-ranking officers of the Prussian school. Every morning, early, while my brothers and I still slept on a feather mattress laid out on the floor, the general — on his way to headquarters — would leave three round packets of mint candies for us children on the railing. For the first few days, he was guarded by submachine gunners; after that, only his batman, also an elderly officer, remained at the house.

We began to feel safer. The batman chased off anyone who tried to move into our house. In our garden, he warmed the general's dinners. He was friendly and generous, treating us to thick, tasty black bread that stayed fresh for a long time. We also tried canned fish from various countries across Europe. In return, we shared our fried goose with him.

Our POWs would be brought to headquarters; motorcyclists came and went; and sometimes a plane would land on the narrow strip below the hill near our house. Troops kept passing through. We understood we wouldn't be able to keep our many geese safe much longer.

Someone told us that eight wounded Red Army soldiers had been brought to the warehouse near the store. I went to see who they were, and how they'd been captured.

Inside the warehouse, where salt had been stored just days before, eight men lay. One, wearing a commander's shirt and with a distinctly Semitic face, had been wounded in the arm — he wore no insignia. Another, who looked Georgian, had a head wound. A man who looked like a peasant had been shot through the chest. The rest were wounded as well. They told me they'd crossed the Desna to capture a German for interrogation, but the Germans had spotted them hiding in the

reeds. Some had been killed. The rest had been wounded and taken prisoner, interrogated, brought here, and left. They thought they'd probably be taken to a hospital next. We thought so, too.

Villagers came in droves to see them, hoping to recognize someone of their own. Everyone brought what they could — milk, boiled potatoes, apples.

Three days passed, and the pilgrimage stopped. The Germans did not come, either. The weather was very hot. Mother went to give them food and saw that they needed a change of dressing. The wounds were festering, and the smell was horrible. There was only one doctor's assistant in the village by the name of Portnov. Mother went to see him and asked him to go and dress the soldiers' wounds. "I am not going, and you should not go, either, - he said. – This is a military matter, and the Germans can shoot us."

But mother was not of the timid sort. Every day she changed the dressings for all the eight men. I was assisting her. She did not know what to do with the guy with the shot-through wound. He would lean on me, cough, and foul puss would splash out of the wound. Mother would treat the wound in the front and in the back and bandage it again.

Every day we hoped that they would be taken to a hospital. But days passed, and they were still lying there being of no interest any longer to either the Germans who drove on and on, or the villagers. The latter tried not to get far from their houses hoping that in their presence the Germans would hesitate to take their last belongings. Most of them lived further from the store than we did and did not see that no one was bringing food to the wounded any more. But we saw both the road and the warehouse. Mother said that we had to feed them. So every day Vyacheslav caught a goose and held it above the log. My task was to hold the goose by the beak and separate its head with a single strike of an ax. Mother boiled and fried it.

Soon after that the doctor's assistant accompanied by a German officer came to us to take all the medications that we had left. Mother said that we only had a barrel of glauber salt. At that moment the batman approached the officer, said something to him, and the visitors left empty handed.

One day our beloved heifer did not return from the pasture. The shepherd said that a covered truck drove up, three soldiers jumped out from the back and shot the heifer. Without butchering the corpse, they threw it into the back of the truck and left. The shepherd did not even approach them: he was afraid. Mother asked me to talk to the general. Having heard me out, he said that that was a violation of the order but war is war, and to find out who had done it was not deemed possible since the shepherd had not even looked at the truck plates. And we should be thankful that our cow was still safe and sound.

I was not afraid to get into the headquarters to talk to the general since on numerous occasions he himself had invited me to his rooms to talk about the things that were of interest to him. From me had learnt about our family's history and the life of the village. In his turn, he would say that the

war was unfair since the partisans, laying ambushes, were fighting like bandits. To which I responded that there were no partisans in our area. And that was true.

In his spare time, he would open one of his trunks — a big, fine one, its lid engraved with an intricate ornament. Inside was a staggering assortment of fishing tackle: gear for angling, fly-fishing, ice fishing; lures, bait, and more. I was especially struck by a fishing rod made by a Finnish craftsman, built entirely from matchsticks glued together.

More than once he said he'd like to fish in our lake, but that wish never came true.

Once, the batman asked Mother to bake buns using wheat flour he'd provided. The buns turned out delicious, as we ourselves had the chance to confirm. I asked the general whether he could help arrange medical care for our wounded soldiers, since a week had passed — our dressings seemed to be working, but we feared gangrene might still set in. He refused, saying POWs were outside his authority.

It was an early, sunny morning. That whole summer, in fact, had been sunny and warm — June, July, and August alike. Everything on the road was as usual: troops going and going. On the path leading from the dam to our house, along the gully, I saw one of our soldiers, in uniform, a trench coat slung over his shoulder. We hadn't yet brought breakfast to the wounded men. How astonished we were to recognize, in this man, the very soldier with the chest wound. He told us his comrades had been sent to a hospital, but he'd been set free. "You showed me where you live," he said. "So I decided to come to your house. You won't turn me away, will you?"

Below our house stood a hut where the mother and son of the dispossessed Byrdikov family had once lived. We put him up there — no German wanted the place. We continued his treatment as before. Only the smell of the pus oozing from his lung kept getting worse; I could barely stand it and tried hard not to throw up. When I wasn't there, my brothers couldn't bring themselves to help Mother with the dressing. Still, the soldier was improving. "My family will get word that I've died," he said, "but I might yet make it home alive! Thank you!"

Meanwhile, the Germans — sensing the Blitzkrieg was nearing victory — were, without meaning to, doing everything possible to spark a partisan movement. Harsh interrogations of our communists, roadside executions of Red Army soldiers caught in civilian clothes, house-to-house searches of young men posing as the sons-in-law of young married women, and the inhumane treatment of POWs — all of it drove many men to flee to remote places beyond German reach. Our Bryansk forest, and the villages near it, were just such places.

In our village, only the school principal, Fomushkin — a former inmate of a Children's Home — began collaborating with the Germans. Our communists, after third-degree interrogations, and young men fearing for their lives, fled to the woods. Still, they weren't carrying out any operations.

For a short while, we had a "polizei" in our village — a young local lad, handsome, a well-known womanizer, and lover of the young wife of our most zealous communist. That

communist, having had enough of the interrogations and the polizei's insolence, ambushed him while he was crossing the Svinka brook and shot him. Later, thanks to his political zeal and his success in rooting out enemies of the people, he became a commissar in a partisan detachment. It was he who aggressively hunted down and denounced both open and hidden "enemies of the people." More than once, he reported to the NKVD chief about my father's supposedly hostile activity — for instance, when animals died after mass vaccinations (he said as much to Father directly, even while asking him, as the local specialist, to help him buy a piglet). But Father, having been through the "school" of the Belomorkanal, always accounted for such animal deaths using reports from the Zhukovka laboratory.

In the village of Zarosha, I got to know a young lad who, having broken out of encirclement, had found shelter there before he too had to flee to the woods. He played the mandolin well and taught me the basics. Before he left, he gave me the mandolin, and I began playing, by ear, all the songs I knew. Before the war, we used to listen to a handful of old records, since new ones weren't available — and we couldn't have afforded them anyway. Among them were "Rio Rita," Lensky's aria, the romance "A Pair of Bay Horses," and a few others. I enjoyed playing the balalaika, mandolin, and concertina. The balalaika had been handmade for me by a wonderful craftsman — a kind, intelligent man named Osip Efremovich Sergeev. Father of eleven children, he not only fed, raised, and educated them, but also crafted many fine things that outlived him and are still cherished by their owners today.

A man who became a local authority, thanks to his knowledge of German, was the stableman, Sidorovich. The Germans turned to him for help and made him village chief.

August passed, and our general asked Mother whether she could clean his uniform, since he'd been recalled back to Germany. Could she also give him a smoked leg of pork? His batman would help slaughter and butcher our pig — he hinted that once the general left, the pig wouldn't live long anyway. Mother agreed. We salted the remaining pork in a barrel and buried it behind the shed, in the hollow of a collapsed cellar, covering it with planks and dirt. We threw some dry branches on top for good measure.

As soon as the general left, soldiers settled into our garden, camouflaging their vehicles with apple-tree branches. Such pedants! Had they ever been bombed? Had they ever even seen a Soviet plane? It was war, after all, and we wouldn't have minded being bombed only if the Germans were, too!

A kind of foreboding drew me closer to the Germans: were they planning to stay long, or just stopping to rest? One of them, apparently needing to relieve himself, jumped into the very hole where our barrel of lard was buried. Then I heard his joyful shout: "Guys, I've found a treasure here!" He scrambled back out, forgetting entirely why he'd gone in — it was clear he'd stumbled onto something. The excited soldiers gathered around the hole, speculating about what might be buried there. How could we have failed to see how easily our hiding place would be found? What were we supposed to do now? Should we go and dig up the lard ourselves, hoping they

might leave it be? Or wait and let things play out as they would? Either way, it would be a terrible loss! What could we do? There was no time to lose — and Mother had no answer either.

God must have heard us. Help came in the form of motorcycle riders bringing an order to move out at once — mount up, everyone! The soldiers, skipping their rest, left the garden. We waited until dark, dug up the barrel, and reburied it far from the house, in the vegetable patch where the potatoes had already been dug up long before. What a scare that had been!

The next day, we understood why our "guests" had left so quickly: our house had been chosen for another general. His men threw out our belongings, leaving only the gramophone and some furniture, including the rocking chair. They also threw out the big rubber plant and the orange tree — grown from the seeds of three oranges Father had brought back from Moscow. (He'd completed a refresher course for veterinary assistants in Saratov, passed exams in sixteen subjects with marks of "good" and "excellent," and on his way back through Moscow, bought three oranges. How to divide three oranges among four people wasn't something he'd thought through. Mother said nothing, but it never quite sat right with me.)

Where we should move to was none of the Germans' concern. We brought our belongings to our friends who had also been dispossessed back in 1930, and whose head of household, Egor Akulenkoy, had been arrested for the second time in 1937. His wife, Antonina Sergeevna, had two sons: Vladimir, a friend and age-mate of Vyacheslav's, and his younger brother, Vasili. Her daughter, the eldest of the siblings, was away — she'd been sent to drive the kolkhoz cows east. Before that, she hadn't been allowed to dig trenches, probably out of fear she might pass secrets to the enemy. And then, surprisingly, she'd been entrusted with the entire kolkhoz herd! Just far from the enemy, that's all.

There were soldiers staying in their house, too, and both our families had to sleep on the boards behind the stove, the so-called "shelf." We were cooped up together for a couple of weeks. I remember seeing many different canned goods that the Germans kept in an untied sack. Probably, we kids furtively took some. Later, when we read about the exploits of the Young Guard members⁵⁵, who'd also stolen things, we told ourselves it wasn't really stealing — we were just disrupting the German army's supply lines.

We weren't allowed near our own house. The morning frosts came early that year, and our flowers withered. In the first days of September, our army launched something like a counterattack across the Desna — if not a full counteroffensive: artillery shells went hissing and exploding behind our house, out in the swamp. At times we heard exchanges of small-arms fire. In the glen along the Belizna, German guns stood in the thickening autumn fog, firing every so often. The shells hissed overhead, as if straining to tear through the air, and flew on across the Desna. It lasted several days.

⁵⁵ Youthful guerrilla fighters in German-occupied Ukraine.

Our wounded soldier grew cheerful: "Our troops will liberate us soon, and I'll be able to go home. My family will be overjoyed — they think I'm dead, and here I am, alive and kicking." It seemed the miracle he'd hoped for might really happen. But one early morning, Mother went to check on him and found the window open, his lifeless head resting on the sill. He had choked on an excess of phlegm. He had given us his address and last name, but all his papers later burned along with the house. My brother Vyacheslav and Vladimir Akulenkov buried him in his trench coat.

After the front moved beyond Orel, the soldiers billeted with us left, and we returned home. The gramophone, the records, the musical instruments, and a few other things were gone. In September, we mostly saw covered wagons pulled by pairs of strong horses — we were told these belonged to Romanians. Groups of soldiers would stay at our house briefly; some were Poles, too. Rumors circulated about the cruelty of the Finns, who, it seemed, hadn't forgotten the war of 1939 — though I never actually encountered any myself. The cold was setting in, but the Germans were still in summer uniforms. The motorcyclists suffered the worst. Once, a group of soldiers had barely settled in for the night when a messenger arrived with orders to leave at once. The officer was the last to go. He touched Mother's shoulder and tossed a pair of new army boots onto the stove. He seemed preoccupied, and sad. The boots were a royal gift! Neither Vyacheslav nor I had any decent boots — our feet were perpetually wet. Naturally, we hid them well, since being caught with stolen army property could get us shot.

After that, soldiers only came through from the front to rest. No more songs were heard, not even on the radio. Military transport now moved along the concrete-paved highway. About fifteen soldiers remained stationed in the kolkhoz yard, and roughly the same number guarded the bridge over the Khoperenka on the highway. At last, the village had a chance to breathe.

There was a great deal of work to be done in September — harvesting the crops, threshing the wheat, cutting the stubble and the frost-bitten grass. My older brother took charge of it all. Within days, he seemed to have grown older, more responsible, more careful — and stricter, too. We helped him as best we could. We ground barley in a mortar he'd made himself. We still had a little flour left from before the war. Mother would drop a small piece of lard and a scrap of meat into a pot and grind them down to fibers — mostly just for the smell. We ate pancakes with sour cream mixed with bits of fried lard.

Sometimes a young German, a little older than Vyacheslav, would visit us. The two of them became friends, though I never knew quite how they managed to communicate when I wasn't around. Once, he brought some wheat flour and, on behalf of his commanding officer, asked Mother to bake bread. She baked a dozen small loaves; we were given one for our trouble. How wonderful it tasted! Heini — that was our new acquaintance's name — would bring us bread and canned food, and we, in turn, gave him milk and shared our meals with him.

During all that time, I never heard of a single incident of rape. In some houses, though — including one near ours — there were dance parties with women, schnapps, or moonshine. Some

women didn't want to wait for their husbands' return, and as a result, quite a few "half-breed" children were born. It was almost comic to hear women who'd given birth without their husbands around insist: "The child's father is my husband. I just gave birth a month past my due date — that's simply how my body works."

I remember New Year's Eve well. A group of soldiers were resting at our house after fighting near Sukhinichi. They seemed excited about something, listening to the radio — the volume low, and it wasn't music. When I asked what was going on, they said they were waiting for important news. "About what?" I asked. "Moscow is about to fall." Hours passed in agonizing suspense, but the news never came. Their anxiety curdled into despondency. The soldiers suddenly looked older, staring into the distance, no jokes, no conversation. I understood that Moscow hadn't fallen, and that everyone now realized there was no escaping the horrors awaiting them at the front, in that merciless winter — still dressed in summer uniforms, no less. Some already had frostbitten ears and feet. The lucky ones had gotten hold of felt boots, which they cut down to wear like galoshes when their commanders allowed it.

How different they looked that winter of 1941 — aged, exhausted, poorly dressed, badly frostbitten — from the young men full of enthusiasm we'd seen back in August! I asked one of the soldiers, and he confirmed that Moscow hadn't been taken because the motor oil and fuel had frozen solid, and the Russians had launched a counteroffensive.

The Blitzkrieg was over. A long war, with no certain end, was just beginning. Each of them understood his chances of survival were close to nil — and only a few hours earlier, they'd still believed the war might soon be over. They had no time to sleep: a motorcyclist, his head wrapped in a shawl, arrived with their marching orders. The last soldier to leave gave us his cut-down felt boots, too small for him. We were glad to have them. Mother sewed broadcloth tops onto them and began wearing them without a second thought.

No one troubled us during the first months of 1942. Only Heini would stop by, bringing laundry to be washed in exchange for food, or to talk with my brother. Since summer, the Germans had been housing our POWs in the kolkhoz cattle yards, fenced in with barbed wire. Beyond the fences lay fields where most of the crops had already been harvested. One field still held cabbage — there hadn't been time to tend it properly, and the crop had come in poor, mostly leaves, with small heads. Some villagers wanted to harvest it for their cattle, but the guards wouldn't let anyone near the field.

These were possibly the same prisoners from Chernigov. At first, they weren't fed at all, or fed so poorly that some crawled under the barbed wire to reach the cabbage. The guards shot them without warning. By February, the POWs had been moved to the village of Peklino.

Our local partisans began visiting us. At night, they'd knock on the window to ask Mother for medicine. Mostly, though, they came to see the village chief, Sidor. Sidor found himself caught between a rock and a hard place: on one hand, he dealt with passing Germans who needed help pulling a vehicle back onto the road, or with some other task; on the other, he had to meet with

partisans from our village, placating them with moonshine and arranging collections of supplies, meat, and the like.

But everything stayed quiet. The Germans made no effort to hunt the partisans down, and the partisans left the Germans alone in turn. Meanwhile, cows, bread, potatoes, cabbage, and moonshine kept getting requisitioned. People from Soplevka, Buda, and Bolotnya said that partisan units led by a man named Kovpak had passed through their villages, heading west. Many of these partisans wore our army's uniform and carried weapons; they even had a cannon. And they didn't rob the peasants — they simply requested that the kolkhoz chairman supply certain provisions, and they even issued receipts for them. Those were genuine partisans!

On long winter evenings, under the bright light of our twenty-candlepower lamp, at the old table covered with green cloth, Mother and I would read aloud, in turns, from a thick, large-format book collecting the plays of Shakespeare. Each play was richly illustrated — King Lear tearing at his gray, disheveled hair; Hamlet holding a human skull in his hand, and so on. I don't recall how we came to own such a rare book. To my great regret, I've never seen a copy of it since. Mother had a pleasant voice and read with real feeling. I liked to think my own reading was no worse.

From the very first lines of *King Lear*, I disliked the unnaturally pompous language of the characters, their flowery invectives, their garish turns of phrase. By then I'd read enough Belinsky not to take any authority's word for granted. At the back of the book, I found a finely printed essay by Tolstoy on Shakespeare and other playwrights — and, for some reason, on ballet as well. Never having seen a ballet performance myself, I agreed with him completely.

There was no library in our village, only a small one at school. I was delighted by Gogol, especially *Dead Souls*, a book most students disliked. I pestered not only my own family but our neighbors as well, reading them excerpts about Nozdryov, Sobakevich, and Plyushkin⁵⁶. When Mother was busy, my faithful listener was Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova, who was always home, sewing something for a customer.

In the middle of that winter, the Germans decided to secure their rear. By then, the Bryansk region held many partisan units — some blew up railroads, others mined the highways. We, too, had heard of railway sabotage, though there had been no actual combat in our own area. Still, during the day, we'd see German and police punitive units passing through our village. They would head into the woods, but never very far. A plane would fly over now and then, for reconnaissance or a bombing run. A relative of ours from the hamlet of Mikheyevka, near the village of Soplevka, told us: "Whenever boys from our village, who had joined the partisans, learned that a partisan raid was planned to requisition our cows and food, they'd warn us. We'd go straight to Zhukovka, near the highway, and tell the Germans. The Germans would oblige us and move into our area, and the partisans, learning of it in time, would slip back into the woods."

⁵⁶ Characters of Gogol's "Dead Souls"

And the forests in our region were vast, stretching all the way to Kletnya, Zhukovka, Bryansk, and further south still.

The Germans eventually decided to put an end to this game: despite everything, the partisans kept getting food — including cattle — from villages near the forest. So the Germans resolved to relocate all such villagers elsewhere or, if a village was suspected of aiding the partisans, to send its people to concentration camps and burn the village to the ground. That same relative told me how it happened: "Early one morning, before the women had even lit the stoves, Germans surrounded the village. They ordered everyone to pack their most essential belongings and gather in the center; the men were told to harness their horses and bring them to the same spot. My neighbor and I loaded up our sled and put our children in it. We noticed the Germans were busy rounding up the villagers, with no soldiers nearby watching us. We had a good horse, so we made a run for the village of Grabovka. We and a handful of others got away. The rest were marched along the highway to the camp at Zhukovka. They were held there for about a month; some were later sent to Germany, while the children and the disabled were released."

(Later, these children would receive a special pension; some were even given automobiles. One man I knew, wounded at the front and decorated for valor, who hadn't received a car himself, had some harsh things to say about those former prisoners.)

At the beginning of the year, the group of German soldiers quartered at the kolkhoz yard left. At night, partisans began visiting our village frequently, and without fear. Only near the village of Susnyag, on the highway, did German guards remain, manning a simple earthen pillbox. Around the same time, volunteers were being recruited for work in Germany. We had seen the might of the German army by then and were fairly certain the war would end in our defeat. Men of conscription age believed that even if a miracle happened and the Soviet government returned, they'd be executed — or, at best, sent to a labor camp — for failing to follow the Party's and government's orders. It was common knowledge, from the leaflets, that Stalin had shown no mercy even toward his own son, taken prisoner by the Germans: he'd refused to exchange him for German POWs. So the Red Army's return boded poorly for such men, and some volunteered to work in Germany instead. It came as a surprise to us when my older brother's best friend, Sergei Baranov, nicknamed Buglai, agreed to go. I never learned the details of how he was recruited. But we never heard of anyone being forcibly relocated to Germany from our area — that practice, if it existed, was probably confined to the concentration camps.

Sergei was tall and brawny, the most handsome lad in the village. When he went swimming, his torso rose almost to the waist above the water. Before the war, he'd built a pedal-driven car from a design printed in *Pionerskaya Pravda*⁵⁷. The hardest part had been connecting the crankshaft to the wooden wheels, so in the end we all had to push the thing along the dusty country road. He was also the first to jump off his house's roof with a parachute he'd made from a bedsheet, and he limped for a long time afterward, having injured his leg on landing. His leaving saddened me — it happened so quickly that I never got the chance to talk to him about it.

⁵⁷ Soviet newspapers for teenagers

After the war, I met him again in our village and asked what he'd been doing in Germany. He'd worked as an electrician in the countryside, climbing electric power poles — once he'd fallen and injured his kidneys. He told me his boss in Germany raised pigs, slaughtered them, and turned them all over to the State, receiving a ration for his labor, the same as any worker or factory owner. We reminisced about my brother, his pedal car, the parachute jump, and the bicycle he'd found — the one later taken by a partisan, which we'd never gotten the chance to ride ourselves. Not long after that, Sergei died; those were the years of famine.

Then came the spring of 1942. Thanks to my brother's and Mother's efforts, the cow had survived the winter — and it was an extraordinary stroke of luck, too, that it hadn't been shot in the field, since it was now our most precious source of food. As always, Mother had raised a beautiful heifer, which she decided to give to one of her two close friends, Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova, whose own cow had been shot and taken the previous summer. It was a tremendous gift. Mother's other friend, the wife of kolkhoz chairman Yakutov, had been sent to a camp along with her children, since her husband — a communist — had fled to the woods after his first interrogation.

Antonina's son, Volodya, and our Vyacheslav worked to keep us supplied with firewood, hay, straw, barley, and more. They tilled the land, planted potatoes, helped others in exchange for the use of a horse, and took on many other tasks once handled by our father and by Antonina's daughter, Maria.

Spring finally arrived. Few horses remained, but we were lucky — we managed to catch a few abandoned by the Germans. Most were sick with mange, or had wounds on their shoulders and withers from ill-fitting collars. Mother provided medicine and advice on treating them. I have to credit the mutual support among the villagers, and the help we received — not just from our own neighbors, but from people in other villages that our father had once served. They'd bring us firewood, hay, or straw, or till our land and plant potatoes for us. Everyone held warm memories of Kirillovich — a testament to his work and his humane character, which had spared many people from prison. If your animal died, after all, you were held accountable to the NKVD. And it wasn't uncommon for a cow to struggle giving birth, since by midwinter it had had nothing to eat but steamed, chopped straw pulled from the cattle shed's roof. Some cows had to be held up with ropes, too weak to stand on their own. And when spring came and the cows were finally taken out to pasture, disease would break out — bovine piroplasmiasis. Mass vaccinations were needed across all twenty-six kolkhozes. How could one lone veterinary assistant possibly manage? He'd have to see the animals brought to the clinic starting at six in the morning. At the same time, foals arrived daily with wounds inflicted by wolves, whose numbers had grown out of control — wounds that needed treating and stitching! But where was one to find hot water? There was no gas, no electricity. "Maria, where's the water? Why haven't you lit the stove like all the other women?"

Mother would light the kerosene stove. She'd wash the wounds and apply medicine to them, working quietly, ignoring her husband's shouting. She'd get the stove going by nine, when Father would harness the horse to make his rounds of his numerous kolkhozes. Neither his reproaches

nor the impatient "supervisor's" threatening shouts could disturb her focused calm. She was certain she was doing everything properly, and rushing her was pointless — futile, even. Yet the same scene would repeat itself the next day, unchanged.

Another memorable event could easily have ended in tragedy. After spending a night in the village, the Germans left behind a large automobile or tank battery with a crack in its casing. We brought it home, wired up a lighting circuit with a 12-volt bulb, and began turning on electric light in the evenings. The light was bright, faintly bluish — nothing like a kerosene lamp could match — the first electric light our village had ever seen! It felt incredibly modern, and wonderful to read by. But one night, a loud, insistent knock at the door jolted us awake. Mother went out into the hallway, assuming it was partisans from our village come for medicine. "Who's there?" Someone shouted back in German. That was my cue. I got up and, wearing only my underpants and undershirt, went to meet a German officer stepping into the living room, a flashlight in one hand and a pistol in the other. He swept the beam around the room, then into my face, then onto the large bureau, and bellowed: "Sie helfen Partisanen!" I could smell alcohol on his breath. In a quiet voice, I explained that it was our custom to keep bread on the table, covered with a towel. "You see — there's not just the end of one loaf, but two whole ones. Bread keeps better this way." That seemed to satisfy him, and he asked who else was in the house. I told him I had two brothers. "Where are they?" We went into the bedroom, where my brothers lay on a makeshift bed — Vyacheslav curled into a ball, Gennadi fast asleep. Then the flashlight beam caught the battery and the wires. The shouting started again: "Partisans! Radio transmitter!" — and I felt the gun press against my chest. I switched on the light and explained that German soldiers had left the damaged battery behind, and we'd simply wired up a bulb to it. He said it was German property, and that he'd send men the next day to collect it.

That upset me, of course. From what he said, I gathered he'd driven his motorcycle into a hole and needed to find the village chief, so someone could bring a horse to pull it back onto the highway. He ordered me to walk ahead and lead him there. It was a warm night, the stars bright, though there was no moon. Knowing from experience that a drunk man was not to be argued with — and this one was not only drunk, but aggressive — I didn't bother dressing. In just my underpants and undershirt, I led him through the sleeping village. I walked in front, the officer following with his gun raised, and, a few meters behind him, my mother. Why had she come? What could she possibly do? What would happen in the next five minutes? And what was I supposed to do? I knew that some of our village partisans came to see the chief nearly every night — and those visits always involved drinking.

There was his house, up ahead, a light glowing in the window. So the partisans were there, as usual. The German would make me go first. I'd need to move quickly to the door, open it, slip inside, and shut it right in the German's face — then step aside at once, since there'd likely be shooting, and I could easily be killed. So that's what I did. I rushed into the house, and — a miracle! — the chief was alone, taking off his boots. "Here's the village chief!" Sidor spoke German. I hurried home. But the battery was taken from us the next morning all the same.

The cherry trees in our garden had shed their blossoms. A narrow strip, thick with their dense growth, ran along one edge of the garden, end to end. In that thicket, some distance from the house, we decided to dig a slit trench — somewhere to hide so that overflying aircraft wouldn't spot us. In the end, German planes never paid us any mind as they flew east toward Bryansk. We thought the trench might come in useful once our own aviation began bombing the Germans. But we never did use it.

On a dark spring night, we were woken by submachine-gun fire coming from the direction of the village of Buda, two or three kilometers away. We all went out into the garden and stood looking toward Buda. The gunfire soon stopped, and we saw the glow of a growing fire. There was no doubt — Buda was burning. We didn't know what to do, or where to run. To the forest? But we might run into Germans on the way there. Finally, in the predawn mist, on the slope of the hill across from our house, we saw a line of dark figures — soldiers — approaching our village. Where should we hide? "In the trench," said Mother. "Maybe they won't find us in the thicket." I objected: "If they see us in the trench, they'll shoot us on the spot. Better to sit on the porch and watch them. Whatever happens, happens."

And so we did. It was already light by then. Before reaching the first houses on our street, the line of submachine gunners formed into a column, four abreast. In the middle of the street, right across from our house, the column stopped, as if awaiting an order. We sat on the porch, watching in alarm, waiting to see what would happen next. Then a command rang out: "March!" — and the punitive unit left our village. What did we feel? Fear, probably. But not the kind of fear that empties your mind and sends you running blindly, as far as your legs can carry you from whatever threatens your life. No — what we felt was helplessness, in the face of that line of gunmen advancing on us. With no means, no way to defend ourselves, we simply felt doomed.

And yet, throughout the entire war, in every crisis, I held to the thought that whatever had been written in the Book of Destinies would come to pass regardless — that not a single hair would fall from my head unless it had already been determined. At the time, I knew nothing of Christ's teachings, though I wanted to understand why so many books spoke of their great importance in the lives of people and nations. Later, I read a great deal about the materialist view of the world and gave talks and lectures on the subject. Years afterward, when I had the chance to attend lectures by an American preacher in Donetsk, I didn't miss a single one, even though they ran every day after work for two months. For our perfect attendance, my wife, Vladlena, and I each received a copy of the Bible. Now I believe everything is God's will. And even back then, it seems, I already believed in a fate preordained by the Lord.

It was becoming clear that the Germans meant to wipe out not just the partisans, but the local civilian population as well — a population that was, in the eyes of both sides, always guilty of something. The partisans lived off the population; the Germans, by destroying that same population, struck a blow against the partisans. So it was that, in the village of Buda, someone reported to the Germans that crosses had been torn from the cemetery, helmets stolen, and graves defiled. I don't know whether that was true, but that night, a punitive unit surrounded a part of the village called Gora, near Setenka. The soldiers rounded up all the inhabitants and drove them

to the council building. There, they separated out the men — including babies and old men — and marched them to the edge of the village. They were ordered to lie down. One disabled man held up his withered arms, crying out that he was no partisan. A soldier kicked him from behind; another jabbed him with a submachine-gun butt. The man understood, then, that he'd been spared.

Beside every person on the ground stood a soldier. On the officer's order, the soldiers fired — each at his own victim. The women standing nearby screamed. Some ran to their executed sons and children. Their crying and wailing drew no response from the Germans. On command, the soldiers returned to the village and set fire to several houses in Setenka. After they left, two men were found still alive — two soldiers, at real risk to themselves, had fired beside their targets rather than at them. They hadn't wanted to kill old men and children.

So the soldiers had finished their task for the day — but whose turn would it be tomorrow? We, too, were feeding partisans, and some of our own young men had gone off to the woods. Could it be that the soldiers had simply grown tired, and put off the next operation until tomorrow?

Our Polish mother, unlike most Russians, was not one to leave things to chance. This wasn't the first time she'd made an important decision without consulting anyone. How could she keep the children safe? The partisans offered no protection, and neither did the Germans. Life in the village wasn't safe. Should she send us to the partisans? But they had no need for extra mouths to feed — they barely had enough for themselves. As for the Germans, they didn't care where we lived, and it was safer, for now, to be near them than with the partisans. So she decided to send us to Dubrovka, where the partisans were unlikely to appear until after the area was liberated.

The very next day, Mother made arrangements with a veterinarian we knew, who had recently been offered a position at the district clinic by the administration. We arrived there that same evening, bringing our cow, the chest, and the bedding. Mother stayed behind in the village to tend our half-acre garden, disregarding the danger — she needed to keep working to provide for the family.

A few weeks after, on a late afternoon, two partisans we didn't know rode into the village looking for supplies and spotted a column of Germans marching down the hill. The Germans were returning for a rest after heavy fighting near Sukhinichi. Knowing the road curved into the woods about fifty meters ahead, one of the partisans fired into the column and killed a soldier. Before the Germans realized what had happened, the two riders leapt onto their horses and vanished.

The German formation broke apart. Some tended to the wounded; the fastest ran after the mounted attackers. They had to climb the road beneath the hill our house stood on, their feet sinking into the loose sand. The pursuers ran past our house. One of them, mad with rage — probably a friend of the dead soldier — burst into the house next to ours and found Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova and her son, Vladimir, our brother's friend. He aimed his gun at the seventeen-year-old boy, but his mother threw herself in front of him, trying to shield her son with her own body. The soldier shoved her aside and fired. Vladimir was killed instantly.

Those Germans had just survived a battle. They'd been hoping for a moment's rest, and then some fool fired a single shot and disappeared. It might not have been so provoking if the partisan had kept firing — and they would have had the chance to, had they met the Germans outside the village instead. Even the most callous man understood that the price for one dead German would be wildly disproportionate. And it was: twelve people were killed, and many more wounded, by the enraged Germans, who kept running until they'd exhausted themselves — shooting every man they saw, and throwing grenades into the cellars where many villagers had taken shelter.

It seemed our mother must have been praying to her Matka Boska, the Virgin Mary: the shot had been fired right by our house, ours was the very first house on the road — and yet we came through unscathed. Though I never once heard her pray.

I had a great deal of spare time in those days. There was little to do in Dubrovka, so I took to reading anything I could get my hands on. By autumn, I'd made friends with two boys my age who owned complete sets of literary works that came as bonus additions to their newspaper subscriptions. Thanks to my new friends, I learned a new game: chess. They explained the rules and the basic strategy, and I was captivated. But no matter how many times I played, I always ended up checkmated. I couldn't accept that. I kept remembering — and believing — what our quick-tempered but excellent math teacher at the Ryabchi school had once said in class, pointing at me: "He'll always come out on top, whenever he sets his mind to studying!"

So I began taking the game seriously, and before long, I started winning. I'd slow the game down, think through my moves carefully, and come out ahead. This frustrated my friends, who kept challenging me to play again and again. But I was satisfied with the level I'd reached. New books interested me more, and my enthusiasm for chess faded, even though I'd read several books on openings and endgames by then. Besides, in October we learned that the administration had decided to reopen the school, and I was admitted to the eighth grade. History and Soviet literature were not taught.

Mother continued working alone. She wouldn't allow us to come visit her. Instead, she asked people from our village, or acquaintances heading to Dubrovka, to bring us vegetables from our garden. She had no money to pay them for it, but people agreed to do her the favor out of respect for her and for our father.

September came. The harvest was nearly finished. Mother had dug up the potatoes and sent most of them on to us. A few things still remained to be done. The situation was growing more tense. Punitive operations became more frequent, as the German command moved to secure its rear areas and lines of communication — which meant cutting off supplies to the partisans and drawing part of the local population into the fight against them. In July, the SS ordered all the men and boys of northern Ryabchi to gather near the highway, across from the village of Susnyag. The men were made to drive the cattle toward the village of Lyubimovka, while the boys were kept sitting along the roadside. The men returned the next day, and the boys were finally allowed to go home. Later, they admitted they'd been terrified the Germans would execute

them — but the soldiers had only fired a few wild bursts into the air, laughing merrily as they did it, and no one was hurt.

Near the highway, in the village of Susnyag, stood German artillery — 105mm and 150mm guns. They fired on our church three or four times, destroying the belfry, which the partisans might have used to signal the approach of SS punitive squads.

Around that time, a few young men volunteered for the police, though not many — mostly residents of Dubrovka and the surrounding villages. The Germans decided to press men into service against the partisans by force. On the village elder's orders, ten to twelve men were made to guard a wooden bridge near Susnyag. They were issued rifles for the duration of their duty, alongside no more than ten German soldiers. There was also a pillbox there, with a wooden roof.

Mother dug up the potatoes, harvested the cabbage and beets, and brought it all to Dubrovka. She would have liked to bring some of our belongings, too, since everything left behind would be lost once she moved on.

It was a cold, unwelcoming September. On the dark night of the 25th, partisans rode into our village on wagons, concentrating their fire on the small bridge across the Khoperenka brook, on the highway. The gunfire woke the villagers. Wagons trailed behind the attackers. Perhaps the partisans' firepower wasn't enough, or they couldn't get close enough to the bridge — in any case, the bridge survived intact, and no German was killed.

The partisans found help among the residents of the forest villages, including women. We heard they'd captured one policeman. In one village, around twelve people were killed — among them a woman and her child, because her husband served in the Dubrovka police; a seventy-year-old man; and a woman who'd cursed the partisans for taking her cow.

Ryabchi was a large village, and it became common to hear gunfire here and there, and to see partisans carrying off whatever they wanted from the houses, loading it onto wagons, and setting the houses ablaze. Most of those killed were ordinary villagers. After the war, articles appeared in the press claiming it was the partisans who'd destroyed the church belfry — with 45mm guns, supposedly — and that dozens of policemen and their collaborators had been killed, and that five hundred Polish POWs had been liberated in the village of Peklino. Later, still in Soviet times, I once spoke with Osip Yefimovich Sergeev, who quoted from a pamphlet describing these "heroic deeds" and offered his own account of what had actually happened. His son, Leonid, a veteran of the Patriotic War who had also witnessed the attack firsthand, told me how it unfolded in his own house, with his own family.

The Story of the Famous Partisan Operation, September 25th, 1942

Leonid was seventeen at the time. His father, Osip Yefimovich, was a respected, well-educated man and a skilled carpenter. The family numbered fourteen people, including eleven children — Leonid was the eldest. Their house stood exactly where it stands today: on the right bank of the Khoperenka brook, at the very edge of a deep ravine. Across the ravine lie numerous village

houses, and along it, up to the highway, stand the houses of Susnyag. Perpendicular to this part of Ryabchi, behind the large orchard, on the hill above the Belizna river and near the village of Peklino, is a neighborhood called Zarosha. North of the lake stood the church and the former priests' residences — which is why that area was called Popovka. A single footpath, crossing the Svinka (a tributary of the Belizna), connected Popovka to the village of Chot. Across the lake, to the southwest, stood most of the houses; that neighborhood was called Zaozero.

Now that I've laid out this geography, I can tell the story of that famous operation — the pride of our local partisan unit.

To commemorate those "heroic" days, in 2008 a rock was placed on the lawn near the House of Culture, painted with an inscription announcing that a monument to the attack would one day stand there. Leonid told me that whenever he walks past it on his way to the store, he feels the urge to stop and urinate on it. Here is his account:

"Father was woken by the sound of shooting coming from Zarosha and Popovka. He went outside and saw fires glowing in that direction. Partisans were firing at random, though there was no return fire — there was no one to fight, aside from the ten Germans stationed at the bridge. The men from our village who'd been assigned guard duty ran home the moment they heard the first shots. The burning houses were still some distance off, but we began carrying our belongings out into the garden or down into the cellar. Anything could happen now. Soon after, two partisans rode up, cursed at our women, calling them German whores, and ordered us out of the house. Only our grandmother and mother were still inside. Mother carried the samovar out, since the neighboring house was already ablaze. One of the partisans shouted that everything had to stay inside, and fired at her. The bullet passed through the samovar, but she was unharmed. Before the partisans arrived, all the children had gotten into the cellar, and Father and my younger brother had hidden in the nettle patch near the bathhouse. 'You, in the cellar — get out, or I'll throw in a grenade!' Everyone climbed out except me. I was seventeen, and afraid I'd be shot on sight. But I realized that if they did throw in a grenade, my best chance was to hide in the farthest corner, behind the pile of potatoes.

"With no regard for how many children lived there, the partisans set our house on fire. The porch above the cellar caught fire too. The cellar was packed with potatoes and other vegetables, and I began to run out of air. Luckily, there was a small hole in the cellar door — I managed to widen it and pressed my mouth to it to breathe. I heard one partisan shout across the ravine, apparently to his commander: 'Should I set the bathhouse on fire too?' 'Yes!' came the answer. How he failed to notice my father and brother hiding in the nettles right beside it, I don't know — maybe it was still too dark, or maybe God was watching over them. The two partisans were in a hurry; they still had houses left to burn, and the SS could arrive from Dubrovka or Peklino at any moment. The moment they left, my parents rushed to douse the collapsed porch boards with water, so I wouldn't be burned or suffocate."

And here is my mother's account of what happened in our part of Ryabchi — Zaozero:

"As soon as I heard the shots, I hurried to dress warmly — the glow of nearby fires didn't bode well. Armed men and women burst into the house, shouting every kind of profanity. I was ordered outside. At that moment, one of them noticed I was wearing the calfskin boots Philipp had bought me before the war. 'You, slut' — followed by a stream of obscenities — 'take off your boots!' 'Come on, now — my husband's fighting at the front, and you want to take my boots?' 'Take them off, or I'll shoot you! Women — load everything onto the wagons! Ivan — burn the house and the barns!' All our belongings and documents burned, including the address of the soldier we'd been trying to save — we couldn't even remember his last name anymore. After the fire, we didn't return to our village until 1945."

In September, we were all reunited at the house belonging to the district veterinary clinic. The house was divided into two halves. In the larger half lived our friend, the veterinarian Anton Danilovich, with his wife, Lyuda, and their newborn daughter. In the smaller half lived an elderly doctor's assistant and his wife, also an elderly woman. We had known Anton Danilovich since before the war, when he'd been a frequent guest at our house.

He was now the chief doctor at the veterinary clinic — a handsome, slender man somewhere between twenty-seven and thirty-five, open-faced and mild-tempered. His wife was younger than him, plump, round-faced, with straight blond hair and, more often than not, a discontented expression. She had the heavy gait common to stout women, and the floorboards creaked whenever she walked. She was forever picking arguments with her husband over trifles. I didn't care for that, and found myself sympathizing with him.

We shared the house. We were given one large room, while the doctor's family occupied the other two. In such a dangerous time, we were fortunate to have landlords who turned out to be genuinely good people. We grew close enough to share our meals together. The doctor received a ration from the administration, and we contributed milk and lard. He helped Mother get a job at the clinic as an orderly. It wasn't an enviable position. Animals were brought in with all sorts of common ailments requiring incisions, cleaning, and wound treatment, but the most frequent cases involved horses infected with mange. During the war, the disease spread everywhere — not just among animals, but among people too. Typically, the whole body, except the head, would be affected. Treatment involved fumigating the horse's entire body, head excluded, with the acrid smoke of burning sulfur — I believe the substance was called sulfuric anhydride. The horse would be led into a gas chamber with its head kept outside, sealed off from the fumes; the orderly would then enter, light the sulfur, and step back out. After a while, the orderly would go back in, retrieve the bucket of still-burning sulfur, untie the horse, and lead it out — without waiting for the chamber to air out, they'd bring the next horse straight in. The orderly ended up gas-poisoned, developing a chronic cough and damaged lungs. Mother suffered the effects of that poisoning for the rest of her life. But at the time, there was no other way to earn the ration. It was meager, and my brother Vyacheslav had to find work of his own — he was hired to deliver mail from Zhukovka, riding freight trains that ran either empty or loaded with cargo for German troops. He'd wait for a suitable train, then climb onto the gangway or platform without being spotted by the German guards. He carried a pass, of course, but the Germans might not always

bother to check it. Once, he was caught in a heavy bombing raid on the Zhukovka station by our own aircraft — and came out of it alive.

Vyacheslav had grown into a real adult, fulfilling the promise he'd made to our father — to look after the whole family. Beyond the ration, the job also exempted him from police duty, and gave me the chance to read the many newspapers and other publications that quietly dismantled the myths of the Great Helmsman, of Industrialization, of Collectivization, of our supposedly mighty and invincible army. It's little wonder, then, that during the war our leaders tried to eliminate as many people as possible who'd had the chance to learn the truth about them and their deeds — and later introduced special internal passports for anyone who had lived under occupation.

That same summer, we — the eighth-grade students — were summoned by the administration and told to report to a yard where horses and farm equipment were kept. We were to harrow the fields. The old kolkhoz customs still held: whoever arrived early got a good harness; latecomers were left with a shabby collar or backband, if that. A few days later, my friend Shurik Steplin and I, considered the "literate ones," were sent to measure the cultivated fields — a chance to put our theoretical knowledge of geometry into practice. At the Ryabchi school, we'd never had any hands-on instruction, whether in chemistry or physics. Hence my nihilism: what were teachers even for? All one needed was a good textbook. But our fieldwork was soon cut short. The administration decided to reopen the Dubrovka high school, staffed by the former teachers, with history banned from the curriculum. We finished out the school year and either sat for exams or were simply graded without them, since by then nearly all our teachers had been arrested and shot. That grim fact, oddly enough, worked in our favor. After liberation, a decision had to be made — whether to credit the year we'd studied and the knowledge we'd gained under occupation, or to discard it entirely, as if it had never happened. And the fact that our teachers had been executed tipped the scale in our favor. Every cloud has a silver lining, as they say: our school year was credited, on the grounds that we'd been taught properly — proper enough, in fact, that the Germans had shot the teachers for it.

At that time, I read a great deal, since there were more opportunities to get hold of books by various authors. I used to read aloud the fragments I liked best to anyone who'd agree to listen. I'd press my family into hearing excerpts from *Dead Souls*, early Gorky, or Belinsky. I read from Dickens, Mark Twain, Jules Verne, and many others. Chekhov never appealed to me — his characters' lives seemed too dull. I read *War and Peace*, skipping over the philosophical parts about the role of an individual in history. And during the war itself, I had no wish to read about war — I was sick of it already. Only afterward did I grow curious about events I hadn't witnessed myself: how patriotism had taken shape, say, in Stalingrad, something I'd never experienced firsthand. *In the Trenches of Stalingrad*, by Nekrasov, was the first book that showed me the real sources of the resistance and valor our leaders now boast about so proudly. Another book I read later was *Cursed and Slain*, by Viktor Astafyev.

1942 ended for us more or less quietly. Understandably, we worried whenever Vyacheslav left for Zhukovka to collect the mail — hanging around military trains was dangerous work in those days. At night, our few remaining bombers would occasionally try to reach the Sesha airfield.

"Try" is the word: the moment they neared Dubrovka, a dozen searchlight beams would rise from Sesha into the dark sky. Where the beams crossed, the pale silhouette of a small plane would flicker into view — and the instant explosions appeared near it, the aircraft would dive and bank away. Afterward came the sound of bombs dropped more or less at random, and then the drone of the retreating plane fading off to the east.

We learned from leaflets about the encirclement of German forces and the surrender of a hundred thousand men at Stalingrad. For the first time, we allowed ourselves to hope that Father might return, and that the Germans would be driven back. But after our army's defeat on the southern front that summer, a different mood took hold as well. Our neighbors in the house — an elderly Ukrainian couple waiting for their son to come home from the front — longed for a swift Soviet victory. But for our kind doctor, that same victory would mean serious trouble, possibly even imprisonment. Both he and we understood this. Though he'd worked not for the Germans but for our own people, he knew the ways of our leaders and of Comrade Stalin all too well. He had no illusions — he was certain he'd be found guilty of something, and punished for it.

Some mornings, walking to school along Lenin Street, I'd see, by the roadside or below the hill near the winery, the bodies of people who'd been shot during the night — lying there in vatniks⁵⁸, unclaimed, unknown to anyone.

At dusk, we'd hear again the drone of an approaching plane. The whole family would hurry down into the cellar, since it was usually Dubrovka itself, rather than Sesha, that got bombed. We'd lift the floorboards over the cellar opening as the plane drew near, then put them back once it flew off, mission accomplished or not. But an hour later, the drone of another plane would sound, and everyone would dive back down into the cellar again.

Everyone but me. I'd either watch the attempts to bomb the airfield, or just keep sleeping, or lie in bed and do nothing at all. Mother worried and begged me to get into the cellar too, but I kept insisting the bombs wouldn't touch me.

Once the intervals between raids grew shorter, we decided to stop covering the cellar opening in the floor — which eventually led to the accident that had been waiting to happen: one night, Mother got up in the dark, forgot about the opening, and fell through it, striking her chest. She most likely broke a rib or two, though there was no way to get an X-ray at the time. Her chest ached for months afterward. No one hid in the cellar again after that.

I remember how both families used to have breakfast together. Mother would fry lard, adding flour and sour cream to stretch it further, and everyone dipped their pancakes in the mixture. Once, Gennadi said something out of line, and Vyacheslav struck him on the forehead with a wooden spoon. Neither Mother nor I said a word, recognizing his right to do so as head of the family. But he didn't scold Gennadi any further, either. We all felt his sense of care and responsibility for the family. Without him, our lives would have been far harder.

⁵⁸ Padded jackets

Mother rationed our lard so carefully that it lasted us from August 1941 all the way to mid-1943. But what sustained both our family and the doctor's family more than anything else was the cow.

Watching the Sesha airfield, we came to understand just how vast the resources both sides were massing around Kursk and Belgorod. The deafening roar of hundreds of aircraft, eighteen kilometers away, would precede German planes taking off in an enormous formation, unlike anything we'd seen before. The first planes airborne would circle in a wide loop, waiting for the rest to join them. Then they'd head east.

By then, our own aviation had started getting through in daylight as well, dropping bombs of their own. The roar of exploding bombs and antiaircraft fire would last several minutes, and afterward we'd see smoke rising above the airfield — a sign that something had been hit.

In the earliest days of the war, I'd seen how utterly ineffective our antiaircraft guns were, and concluded that air defense in general simply couldn't harm aircraft. Two years later, though, I had to change my mind.

During the Battle of Kursk, hundreds of German bombers were based at Sesha. They'd circle above us in droves, gather into formations of a hundred planes or more, and fly east. Once, on a fine spring evening, our own twin-engine, high-speed bombers struck the airfield. Something caught fire. The bombers turned and began flying back in our direction. The lead plane was already over Dubrovka — eighteen kilometers from Sesha — directly above our heads, when something suddenly glinted or sparked along its fuselage. The plane began to smoke and went down. A second followed, then a third... The last, the twelfth, crashed just past Dubrovka. Rumor had it the pilot was a Hero of the Soviet Union, and the Germans buried him with full military honors.

Being a young optimist, I believed all through the war that our own bombs and bullets would never be the ones to kill me. German ones were another matter entirely.

The Battle of Kursk came to an end. The swarms of Junkers and Heinkels flew off, and the front line drew nearer. Every night, we'd hear the low, unmistakable rumble of an approaching U-2 — nicknamed the "Flying Bookcase" — flying low. The targets mattered less now, but the danger to us felt more real. A flare would drift down by parachute, and the engine noise would soften, a sign that a bomb or grenade was about to fall. I'd barely drift off to sleep before hearing that timid rumble again, another bookcase drawing near.

In all the years of the war, I never once saw — in the air or on the ground — the pride of our childhood, the TB-3 heavy four-engine bombers. Almost all of them, along with thousands of other aircraft, had been destroyed on the very first day of the war, caught on airfields near the western border. I learned this later from the memoir of the military pilot Yemelyanenko, *The Merciless Sky of War*, which recounts the history of the Il-2, the "Flying Tank." He wrote that the first batch of ninety Il-2s had been produced before the war began. But when the prototypes

came up for inspection ahead of mass production, Marshal Voroshilov, on learning their ceiling was only about two kilometers, ordered it raised — by removing the rear gunner.

In the first days of the war, an Il-2 unit was ordered to relocate to Orsha, since there were no aircraft left for reconnaissance and the commanders had no idea where the front line even was. On their very first flight, without fighter escort — there were no fighters to spare — flying at low altitude, the pilots were stunned to see German armored units crossing the Berezina completely unopposed. On that same flight from Kharkov to Orsha, incidentally, dozens of planes never reached their destination, for various reasons — differing fuel-tank capacities among them. Two planes made emergency landings in a plowed field near the village of Susnyag. We boys ran over to see — a monoplane with a sharp nose, its propeller blades bent. We were captivated by it.

But the fate of the early Il-2s was grim. They were shot down by Messerschmitt fighters attacking from the rear or the side. My patriotism — my faith in our might, and in the wisdom of Comrade Stalin and Marshal Voroshilov — had only just begun to crack by then. Every day, as a fourteen-year-old boy, I'd run to the village council to read the newspapers, hoping to find the promised victory-in-three-days, to learn where the front line actually stood, and how the pledge to crush the enemy on his own soil was being fulfilled. But there was never an answer.

Instead, there was only confused murmuring about "heavy fighting," about "the surprise attack of the treacherous enemy," vague talk of the "precise" direction of some offensive, and, of course, colossal enemy losses. Just a month later, we were giving milk to our own exhausted soldiers, passing through our village hundreds of kilometers from the front. There were no officers among them — they'd all turned out to be traitors, apparently — and the men carried no weapons at all. They told us stories that seemed impossible to believe: that all their commanders were traitors, that there were no rifles to be had, that they'd been issued a machine gun pulled straight from a museum, its barrel riddled with a hole. They walked in groups of twenty or thirty.

To sum up my memories tied to the airfield and its planes: I came to understand, early on, that the whole purpose of the myths drilled into us — at school, in the newspapers, in official reports — was to shape us into patriots ready to die for the Motherland, for the Party, embodied in leaders whose wisdom, we were told, no one on earth could surpass. As children, we believed our TB-3 bombers were the finest in the world, and that they'd end any war against an aggressor within three days, just as the grown-ups told us. Later, I saw in the film *The Living and the Dead* how pitifully helpless the surviving TB-3s actually were — massive, slow, with no fighter escort, easy prey for fast Messerschmitts.

So, in the autumn of 1942, Gennadi and I began attending the Dubrovka high school. Vyacheslav made trips once or twice a week by freight train to Zhukovka, to collect mail and newspapers from Bryansk — dangerous work, for which he received a food ration. Mother continued working at the veterinary clinic.

I still loved to watch the sky and the clouds, imagining myself flying some silent, fuel-less plane of my own invention. The sky always looked different, always beautiful. I think it was the wellspring of my optimism and my nerve. And yet, oddly, I never once had the luck to find a wallet or loose money lying in the street. Once, in Donetsk, I found myself without enough money for two streetcar fares home. I decided to walk instead, hoping I'd spot three kopecks along the way. It was a holiday, and the streets were crowded. But no matter how hard I searched the ground beneath my feet, I found nothing, and ended up walking all twenty kilometers home. As for nerve, I feared little in peacetime, too — in Krasnoyarsk, in 1951, I used to walk the streets at night carrying a knife, when the city was teeming with former prisoners released under the general amnesty, men who went on to rob and kill across the country, from Norilsk to Moscow. Another time, flying on a plane, I noticed through the window that one of the fuel tanks was leaking. I pointed it out to the flight attendant, warning that the pilots shouldn't bank that wing, since fuel could get drawn into the turbine exhaust. The pilot came to look, examined the wing, and nodded. The flight ended safely. But my friend refused to fly again after that and switched to traveling by train from then on.

I devoted more and more of my free time to reading — fiction, technical books, biographies of famous people, history, adventure stories, anything I could get. Spending time on much else felt wasteful to me. I had one dream: to become a writer. For that, I believed I needed to learn how to judge, critically and independently, the lives of ordinary people and the actions of the government — to work out the real motives behind whatever was happening.

Meanwhile, what was life like in our town? There weren't many Germans around. You might spot them on the roads at the town's edges, or at the railway station. I never even knew where their command post was. I never ran into them on my way to school or to friends' houses. Our own administration handled local affairs. The factories were shut down. I don't recall any real shops. There was a market, where people bartered whatever belongings they had. The chicken lovers who used to wait outside the market entrance were long gone — they'd vanished before we even moved to Dubrovka, back in 1941. We were told the entire Jewish population, some three hundred people, had been executed or sent to camps. Before the occupation, they had worked as barbers, shoemakers, tailors, and heads of government offices, including the NKVD.

My friend Sasha Steplin wrote an essay describing Germans taking a beautiful girl away for execution. It's possible he'd actually witnessed it — the piece was well written. Sasha was an excellent student, and he and I competed for top standing in our class. His mother was single, and he was the only child. I liked her a great deal — good-looking, around forty, with thick, wavy hair, cheerful and sociable. She was pleased that her son and I were friends.

I also became friends with the Kubekin brothers, who lived on their own without parents. Anatoly, who was my age, was a skilled worker who supported his younger brother, Viktor. With no help from anyone, he earned his living making and mending pails, fixing locks and kerosene stoves, and building potbelly stoves — mostly working in exchange for food. I never once heard him complain. Mother would send him milk or pancakes; we ate pancakes nearly every day, and I don't recall us ever buying bread. Factory workers received flour as part of their rations. Salt

was worth its weight in gold. City dwellers brought secondhand goods to the market to trade for food.

The older brother was always busy working. Gennadi spent his time with me — we went to school together, I in the eighth grade, he in the sixth. The town's population had grown considerably, swollen by an influx of people from the countryside, like us. Trains ran constantly, hauling weapons, ammunition, fuel, and troops. At night we'd hear the occasional lone U-2 overhead, but no one bothered hiding in the cellars anymore, and it didn't stop my friends and me from visiting classmates in the evenings. I liked one particular girl — serious, reserved, dark-haired, with brown eyes. But she wasn't the first girl I'd found attractive. That had been the daughter of the doctor's assistant who'd refused to bandage our soldiers' wounds. She was in seventh grade, an excellent student like me, good-looking and composed. I liked her very much, but showing it would have been a mistake — a fourteen-year-old caught falling in love back then would have been mercilessly teased: "Look, here come the bride and groom!" Even later, at the institute, only war veterans could really afford to marry; the rest of us — green boys of eighteen or twenty — couldn't. I myself didn't marry until I was twenty-two, right when I was assigned to work in Siberia after graduation.

Spring came. School let out a month early that year, because our teachers had been arrested by the Gestapo.

I've already described the defense of the Sesha airfield. We city dwellers, too, were being quietly corrupted by the newspapers. We learned things that would remain hidden for decades from people living in unoccupied territory — about Katyn, the assassinations of Stalin's old associates (Frunze, for one), collectivization, industrialization, the concentration camps. The population of the occupied territories grew more and more critical of the communist government. There were rumors, for instance, that during the battles for Moscow and Stalingrad, Zhukov⁵⁹ had promised there would be no more kolkhozes once the war was won...

I also remember a company of Azerbaijani soldiers who marched frequently through the streets of Dubrovka, wearing the uniform of the Russian Liberation Army. I never knew what they were doing there. They marched singing the same song, over and over. I still remember the words though I never understood them, except for "Kavkazus" and "Azərbaycan". There were rumors that all Ukrainian POWs had been released to go home — though, living in Ukraine later, I could not confirm whether that was true. Perhaps only those who'd agreed to fight for the Germans had actually been let go.

In mid-September 1943, our army broke through the front to the north, and suddenly — for us, and quite possibly for the Germans too — we began hearing explosions and the sounds of an approaching front line. It wasn't a steady rumble so much as scattered explosions and the occasional overflight of Il-2 attack planes. There were no major troop movements. The German front was being breached, much as ours had been near Smolensk. Rumors spread that the

⁵⁹ Soviet general and marshal; oversaw some of the Red Army's most decisive operations during the war.

Germans meant to drive the entire population west — on foot, of course. We were terrified. And yet nothing, at that point, suggested the next day would be any different from the one before.

Our house stood near the lowest point of a valley that ran along a small rivulet, a tributary of the Desna. About two or three hundred meters upstream stood a dam and a lake. Past the lake ran the road from Dubrovka to the village of Davidichi, and on to Aleshnya, near the Bryansk-to-Smolensk highway. Beyond the dam, the road climbed a steep hill.

On the evening of a sunny September day, somewhere to the east, we heard cries of "Hurrah!" — thin, faint voices, not unlike the ones we used to hear during military drills at school. Small-arms fire answered them. The setting autumn sun lit up the whole valley, and us along with it, as we watched anxiously to see what would happen next.

Suddenly, bullets whipped past, clipping leaves off the birch trees just above our heads — a burst from a German machine gun, reminding us it was far too soon to celebrate. The fire was coming from behind the hill, from the direction of Davidichi. Startled like a flock of partridges flushed from cover, we bolted for the trench nearby. Just then, we heard our old doctor's assistant cry out in pain. He was pressing his hand to his forearm — a bullet had passed through the soft tissue, missing the bone. As we gathered around him behind the house, we saw smoke rising from beneath the roof of the veterinary clinic, where the winter's hay had already been stored. The whole building went up in flames within minutes. Vyacheslav ran to get the cow out. Right after, a mortar shell exploded near us, followed by several more. The explosions crept closer, fragments shattering the grinding bowl. Though the trench was only a few meters away, Mother and I threw ourselves flat on the ground, and the shrapnel flew over us. Seven or eight shells landed in all. We assumed the Germans meant to punish us for being so eager to see our army return.

Then it went quiet again — no more "hurrahs," no more gunfire. The sun set, and the cold set in, nearly freezing. German tanks pulled up beside our house and stopped behind its western wall — five of them, one a Ferdinand. Even we civilians understood that once shooting started, our house, and we with it, would be finished. The soldiers went inside but didn't order us out. They ate a quick meal and returned to their tanks. Before dawn, they started their engines and drove off toward the hill — the high ground near Davidichi. We had no idea what we were supposed to do next.

At first light, we saw two tall figures walking through the fog in the valley — long coats, thin legs. As they came closer, we made out two Red Army soldiers, in greatcoats and boots, their legs wrapped in puttees, carrying an antitank rifle on their shoulders. We were overjoyed to see them and offered them milk, which they accepted gladly, stopping to rest a while. We told them about the tanks and which way they'd gone. None of us slept that night. Our kind doctor had left for the west the day before, with his wife and child. We felt genuinely sorry for him and hoped he wouldn't be arrested by the NKVD — after all, he hadn't worked for the Germans, and in any other country, under any government but the Soviet or the Nazi one, he'd have faced no danger at all.

Just after daybreak, we heard gunfire and an explosion near the dam. Water from the lake flooded the valley below our house, though the river soon settled back into its old bed. One of the soldiers who'd been carrying the antitank rifle came back to our house — wounded. Mother bandaged him. He told us they'd lain in wait near the dam. A Ferdinand had appeared, driving up the road from Davidichi. It stopped at the dam, and a tank crewman climbed out through the hatch. Our soldiers opened fire and killed him — but not before he'd managed to blow the dam. They fired on the tank as well, but it drove up the hill, turned its gun, and fired back, killing one soldier and wounding the other.

While Mother tended to his wound, we caught sight, through its jagged edges, of his lung pulsing beneath the torn flesh. After drinking some milk, he left, seeming not too troubled by his injury. A little later, we heard, just as the day before, a thin, distant "hurrah" — some scattered shooting behind the hill to the east, nothing serious. Just a few German soldiers running through the valley. One fell; the rest ran past our house. Finally, we saw our own soldiers — no more than ten of them, walking unhurried, spread out at a good distance from one another. One walked along the riverbank. When he was about fifty meters from a German soldier, he saw the man rise to his feet and raise his hands. Our soldier raised his rifle and fired anyway. The German fell face down. This group of soldiers walked past us without stopping.

So the liberation of our town, Dubrovka, from German occupation happened almost inconspicuously — again, not according to the scenario I'd imagined. There was no major battle. I'd pictured great masses of troops from both sides clashing head-on, our valiant partisans raining fire down on the enemy's rear. In truth, we'd simply been lucky: the front had been breached far from us, and the Germans were falling back to their "previously prepared positions." There had also never been a large German presence in our area to begin with, which is why there'd been so little shooting or bombing — only the occasional low-flying Il-2 attack plane passing overhead.

By the next day, the Germans were already in Roslavl. But where were our valiant partisans? Chasing after them? Or celebrating their victory? We got our answer a week after the liberation, from a relative of ours who'd been a partisan.

To reunite with the Red Army, the partisans marched into Dubrovka with flags and an orchestra. But there was no one left to reunite with — the army had moved west a week earlier, without waiting around for the reunion. Before that, we'd had a visit from some unnamed official, who wanted to know who we were, what we were doing, and where the veterinarian had gone. He suggested our oldest brother go speak with an NKVD representative, spotted the battered, German-made bicycle, and confiscated it as enemy military property. After he left, Vyacheslav said, with disgust: "I wish they'd just draft me already!" That way, at least, we could say what so many others said: "Our brother went off to the front as a volunteer!"

After the rally held in the town center to mark the partisans' reunion with the Red Army, we were visited by our relative Kolomonov, one of the partisans. Over dinner, he sighed heavily and said: "All the young partisans are being drafted and sent straight to the front. We'd have rather kept fighting as partisans for another three years!"

The weather turned foul — cold, and raining without end. The loudspeaker kept praising collective farming for feeding the army. Everyone understood by then that nothing would really change. The kolkhozes wouldn't be disbanded. The poor would go on working for empty *trudodni* — notional "labor-days" that, in practice, paid out almost nothing — with no way out from under the kolkhoz yoke: no passports, no leave, no pension. The rumors that Zhukov had promised soldiers at the front there'd be no more kolkhozes had apparently turned out to be false. The one good thing was that during the two years of occupation, people had managed to sow, harvest, and build up some reserves. But what would happen once those ran out? Once again, the ungreased wheels of wagons hauling the harvest to the Motherland's granaries would creak through the autumn. Once again, peasants would beat the wretched kolkhoz nags with heavy sticks below the hill by our house, where no horse had the strength to drag a loaded wagon through the deep, soft sand. And in the spring, grain would be handed back out from the granaries as a "loan" to the farmers. But the saddest fate of all would fall to the weak, emaciated horses, savagely beaten by furious farmers — not with a whip or switch, but with a thick club, and not on the rump, but across the ribs and skull. Everything would return to exactly how it had been three years before.

Barely a week passed before Vyacheslav was drafted. A group of eighteen-year-olds like him was sent on foot to catch up with the advancing army. What was he supposed to wear, in the autumn rain and cold? He had some clothes, but there was only a single pair of boots for the entire family — new, solid leather, waterproof, studded with metal, the ones the German officer had given Mother. He was unlikely to wear them for long, though, since he'd be issued standard Soviet tarpaulin boots soon enough. It seemed a shame — they'd have been so useful to his younger brothers. But in the end, we all agreed: Vyacheslav should take them. As for Gennadi and me, we could always dry our feet at home if they got wet.

On a gloomy day drawing to a close, walking through an autumn drizzle along the cobblestone road up the hill toward Davidovichi, Vyacheslav and I hurried to catch up with the group of draftees. I carried a rucksack with just a few of his things inside. Once we'd climbed the hill, we said our goodbyes, I handed him the rucksack, and he pressed on at a quick pace to catch up with the others.

We never saw him again. No letters came from him for many months. That was at the end of September 1941.

Mother kept working as an orderly at the veterinary clinic, earning a small salary. Our school was supposed to reopen in September, but a question arose over whether the previous school year could really count, given that it had taken place under occupation. After consultations, and after hearing our side of things — and taking into account that our teachers had been executed — the administration decided to let us move up to the ninth grade.

That whole stretch of time now blurs together in memory into one long, gray, uneventful autumn day. There were no letters from Father or my brother. School reopened, but there were no actual classes on the first day. The seventh, eighth, and ninth graders were marched out of the building

and led through the whole of Dubrovka, toward Sesha — someone had issued an urgent order to rebuild the runway there. We set out around midday, lightly dressed, in ragged shoes, walking a dirt road while shivering in the cold autumn wind. After about ten kilometers, we reached the Bryansk–Smolensk highway — once known as the Old Smolensk Road, the very route Napoleon's soldiers had taken on their retreat back to France.

When we reached the runway, we found bomb craters up to five meters across. We were exhausted. We waited for shovels to be brought, freezing the whole time, but none ever arrived. Dusk fell, and we were led to some building nearby. I decided to walk instead to the village of Radichi, where our father's brother lived — the family who had sheltered us after Father's arrest. Just as they had eight years before, Pavel's family welcomed us warmly. Aunt Anyuta told us to take off our shoes, gave us felt boots, and fed us. How wonderful that hot cabbage tasted, fresh from the Russian stove! It brought back memories of years before, when she'd pour milk into a bowl for us children, and we'd crumble bread into it and, once given the word, eat as fast as we could.

That had happened long ago, but I remembered it clearly in 1943, and I remember it still.

The next morning, Aunt Anyuta brought out a pair of homemade woolen socks and gave them to Gennadi. The night before, she'd looked at his ragged shoes and shaken her head in silence. We were deeply grateful for such a priceless gift. But the "march to support the Red Army" finished off what was left of Gennadi's shoes for good. There was nowhere to buy new ones, even if we'd had the money, which we didn't. Maybe the Kubekin brothers had given him the idea, or maybe he simply needed something to wear to school — either way, I had no hand in it — but Gennadi cut the soles and insoles off his ruined shoes and fashioned new ones. Using wooden pegs he'd whittled himself, he fastened the leather soles to the insoles, the same way Father used to do it after coming back from the Belomorkanal. I was amazed. It was the first of countless things Gennadi would go on to make with his own hands over the years. I myself remained, as it were, a "theoretician" for the rest of my life — lucky enough to always have skilled people nearby who could repair complicated equipment or build new tools. A friend of mine, a real jack-of-all-trades, used to call people like me "one-armed": good with words, not much good with our hands.

Nothing memorable happened at school that winter of 1943. Nothing interesting was taught — just whatever the textbooks contained. No lab classes, no equipment. What I remember most clearly are the evenings spent with two girls, my classmates — the earliest stirrings of my interest in girls. My friend and I used to visit their house just to talk. In the spring, we saw an announcement that the Bezhitsa Institute of Transport Machine-Building (BITM) was opening enrollment for ninth graders into a preparatory program, where they'd cover the entire tenth-grade curriculum in three months. The results of the entrance exams would count toward admission to the Institute itself. They offered free dormitory housing, three meals a day, and a stipend of 350 to 400 rubles. But what I really wanted was to study to become a writer, or an artist! For that, I probably needed to go to Moscow — and I couldn't even afford the train fare. Here, though, was a real opportunity to gain a solid profession.

Without sitting exams for ninth grade, my two friends, Shurik and Veniamin, and I set off for the preparatory courses at BITM's Steam-Locomotive Building Department. The institute building, and most of the private houses around it, had survived intact. The factories and the railway station had been demolished by our own retreating troops back in 1941, and the institute's dormitory had burned down as well. We were housed in private homes instead. Ours was a solid stone house belonging to a photographer who had just returned from evacuation. His wife, Sofia Moiseyevna, was a thin, tall, energetic woman with a real appetite for control. Besides holding absolute sway over her husband, Abram Yakovlevich, she also presided over the Street Committee — a duty she clearly relished, even though it paid nothing. Anyone needing paperwork from her had to visit several times before getting it.

She kept the house clean, though it always smelled faintly of fish and garlic. We lived quite comfortably there. There was a radio, and every broadcast from the Soviet Information Bureau ended with the same line: "Let the memory of those who perished for the Motherland live forever!" Every time, Sofia Moiseyevna would cry out: "Abram! I wonder where our Pima and Milya are now?"

In my spare time, I played chess with Shurik. He played fast, while I liked to think before each move — which annoyed him, and he lost most of the times. He'd insist we play again, but I usually refused: one game tired me out, and besides, I didn't want the outcome to change. This irritated him, and he'd try to prove his physical superiority instead, grabbing me by the wrists — no matter how hard I struggled, I could never break free. It put a real strain on our friendship. I was thin and weak; my limited exercise, and my preoccupation with reading, drawing, and playing the concertina, balalaika, and mandolin, weren't the only reasons. It was also the lingering effect of two bouts of pneumonia — one in my first year of life, another in second grade — and a case of dry pleurisy I'd suffered from later on.

Then, like a bolt from a clear sky, tragedy struck Shurik: his mother, a young and beautiful woman, died suddenly of a heart attack. I felt terrible for her. Shurik's family finances took a real hit afterward. Whenever she could, my mother shared food with both of us. At least we didn't have to pay for meals or lodging — we both had excellent grades at the institute, which earned us a 25 percent bonus on our stipends. Traveling home and back remained our biggest expense.

During the preparatory courses, we were sent several times to Netvinka station to help with the harvest. I worried about overexerting myself physically, but things went fine. Marching in columns from the station to the fields, we'd sing songs like this one: "Mom's not home, Pa's not home, no need to be afraid — come see me, student, and quick, you'll get lucky and get laid!"

By the end of the summer, Shurik and I both passed our exams with top marks and were admitted as first-year students at BITM, majoring in steam-locomotive design.

It was 1944. The war dragged on, demanding ever more reinforcements. It so happened that boys from the occupied territories had by then come of age — cheap cannon fodder, all of them. These were the very same boys who'd once cried "Hurrah!" in thin, high voices the day our town was

liberated. Those of us who were seventeen weren't overlooked either. We were summoned to the Military Commissariat for a medical exam and registration. The board found numerous dark spots on my lungs, remnants of the earlier pneumonia and pleurisy. I was issued a certificate exempting me from military service, harvest labor, and logging duty. The diagnosis was fibrous tuberculosis. I wasn't placed under medical observation, but I was given a recommendation: eat fatty foods, and take a spoonful of honey mixed with organ fat. In practice, all I could really count on was thin millet soup in the cafeteria, flecked with something resembling fat — possibly just grease — and sweet tea with salted butter. And Mother had managed to save some lard from that pig the German general's batman had once slaughtered for us.

Most boys my age were lucky — they never had to prove their patriotism by laying down their lives on the Motherland's altar. Most, but not all. One boy, born in 1926, who'd completed the preparatory courses alongside us, was drafted and never came back.

That summer, we finally received a letter from Father. It had been sent to his brother Pavel, since Father hadn't known where we'd gone after leaving our village. He'd written it from the front, near the Kursk salient, where he'd been awarded the medal "For Battle Merit" after fighting near Kalinkovich, close to Prokhorovka — site of the famous tank battle. He wrote that his cattle drive had ended in the Saratov region, where he'd been drafted despite having been convicted under Article 58 as "an enemy of the state." He'd been reassured, he later told us, with the words: "Here, every other man is an enemy just like you." That part wasn't in the letter, though — only that he was alive and well, and wished the same for us. As for the concern he'd raised with the authorities — that the Soviet Motherland ought to be defended by genuine patriots alone, and that the government shouldn't risk arming its own political enemies — that, too, he only told us after the war.

The second triangle-shaped letter⁶⁰ came from Radichi. It was from my brother, Vyacheslav, written from a hospital in Moscow. He'd written to us in Dubrovka too, but those letters never reached us — why, we never knew. Perhaps he'd mentioned being well fed there — canned meat, tinned goods, omelets, all of it American supplies. But before that, oddly, he'd been hospitalized just forty kilometers from our house, diagnosed with beriberi — he'd gone blind from a vitamin B deficiency. And what of our legendary kolkhoz farms, meant to provide for the defenders of the Motherland? The only real concern, it seemed, was keeping soldiers from writing anything unflattering. How many censors were there, after all? Could they possibly have had time to open every single one of those little triangle letters? No, they couldn't have. Far easier to simply destroy them and be done with it — no risk, then, of upsetting the patriots back home. And what if this letter turned out to be the last?

Between September 1943 and June 1944, we received exactly two letters each from Father and my brother — and even the two of them managed to exchange letters with one another. Father was stationed at the Kursk salient; his son, in Lithuania. Father served in the artillery, tending the horses; Vyacheslav worked as a spotter, directing artillery fire.

⁶⁰ A triangle was the standard shape of letters sent from and to the front.

In his book *Cursed and Slain*, Viktor Astafyev — himself a signalman — described the work of a forward observer, or spotter, and explained why killing one was always a priority for the enemy.

I'm holding a yellowed sheet of paper, folded into a triangle. On the front is an address: Oryol Region, Dubrovka District, Radichi Village Council, Village of Radichi — to Novikov Pavel Kirillovich. And the return address: Moscow 44, 4th Krutitsky Lane, House No. 5, School No. 608 — Novikov Vyacheslav P. Two stamps mark it: one from the Moscow Postal Office, dated 14.04.44, and another simply reading "REVIEWED." On the back: the state emblem, and "REVIEWED by Military Censorship, 21186."

The letter itself is written in pencil:

"8/04-44

Good day, dear Uncle Pavel, Aunt Anyuta, Natasha, Tolya, and Vitya.

Sending you my heartfelt Red Army greetings. I'm in a Moscow hospital now, feeling well, and expect to be discharged soon. I fell ill at the front near Vitebsk on January 23rd — the doctors say it was simple dystrophy, from a vitamin B deficiency. I've been in Moscow since February 18th. It's snowing here now, and cold. Please let me know where my family is. Any news of Misha, about Uncle Misha? How are all of you doing? I'll end my short letter here. Give my regards to Aunt Arina, Zhenya, Nina, and Maria.

Yours truly,
Novikov Vyacheslav"

We wrote back and gave him Father's address. He was overjoyed to learn Father was alive and well, and that I'd applied for admission to the institute. But what mattered most to him was simply getting a letter from Father at all. It was hard to accept, though, that he'd trained as an artillery spotter not far from us, near Roslavl, yet none of his letters from that time had ever reached us — otherwise, we might have gone to visit him.

In June, he wrote to us about heavy fighting along the approaches to East Prussia.

By July, students were sent out to help with the harvest, and that same month we were let out for summer break. Gennadi and I needed to make hay for the winter, so we borrowed bicycles and scythes from the neighbors. Mother packed some bread and lard into a rucksack, and we set off for our old home. We passed through Ryabchi and Soplyovka and stopped at a fork in the road. We couldn't tell whether the grass around us was good or poor, but we had to start somewhere. We soon found out exactly what kind of grass it was — thick, short, and brutally tough on our scythe blades. We managed to cut about ten square meters, swatting the whole time at gadflies biting us painfully. Exhausted and drenched in sweat, we sat down, ate a quick snack, and concluded that Mother had set us an impossible task. So we decided instead to ride over to our relatives, the Kolomonovs, who lived in the village of Soplyovka — recently renamed Krasnaya Moskva.

Evgraf Evgrafovich — a retirement-age man with a neat Russian beard — welcomed us warmly, and his wife Ustinya served us boiled potatoes. After looking over our scythes, he gave his verdict: there was no way we'd cut enough grass for winter with tools like these. Especially not the mat grass we'd planned on cutting, which, it turned out, cows wouldn't even eat. And if we kept commuting from Dubrovka every day, we'd have no time left to actually work. Better to just stay at his place.

"Head home today," he said. "I'll sharpen your scythes, and you come back tomorrow — I'll take you to the meadow myself. Bring some lard, too. We'll fry it up with onions, make a soup. We've got potatoes and milk."

An hour earlier we hadn't had a clue what to do, since haymaking had seemed an impossible task, and Mother couldn't afford to buy hay. Now we rode home buzzing with excitement.

Along the way, Evgraf Evgrafovich told us that back in 1905 he'd served aboard a naval ship — the *Koreets* or the *Varyag* — which was sunk at the Battle of Chimulpo. The Japanese picked him up afterward, and he spent time interned in Japan.

What struck me most was the way he talked — something distinctive in how he pronounced words and put sentences together. I never asked where he'd picked it up, but it gave his stories real weight. I still think of him and his family fondly. His oldest son, Vladimir, ran a kolkhoz; his younger son, Granya, became a prosecutor; his oldest daughter, Anna (Nyura), stayed in the village and married well — to a store manager; and his younger daughter, Katya, moved to Moscow to work in construction.

We came back the next day to find our scythes sharpened and tuned up. We headed to the old firing range, where TB-3 bombers used to practice runs before the war. Most of the haymaking had wrapped up in June and July, but there was still plenty of grass and hardly anyone around — few cows or horses left to feed, and way more grass than anyone needed.

Our "instructor" walked us through everything: how to adjust the scythe for an easier cut, how to move your body and arms, how to press down on the heel, how to hone the blade, how to fit it to the snath and set the hafting angle just right. As the older brother, I got the big one — a size 9 — while Gennadi worked with a 7.

"Tolya, just swing it to the right — it'll swing back left on its own, you just keep the heel down. There you go, you've got it. Gennadi — you need to mow smooth, not attack the grass like some young rooster. Looks like you've got wolf ribs, too stiff to let you turn properly."

Gennadi, frankly, didn't have the skill or the strength for it. The grass was tall, coarse, and tangled with dodder, which made cutting through it even harder. Understandably, the work wasn't for him. That evening he announced that school started September 1st and he needed to go. So I stayed on by myself and, within two weeks, had mowed enough grass to last us. Oddly enough — despite what the doctors had warned — I came out of it stronger. When classes started in October, a friend tried to mess with me during a break and grabbed my wrists. I shook him off

without any trouble and turned it right back on him. That felt like a real win — the high point of that whole "summer vacation."

Two events during my time in the preparatory courses turned out to be fateful.

The courses began in March. It was frosty out, and I was careful not to freeze while traveling — which I sometimes did by hopping freight trains. My outerwear was a worn-out cap with ear flaps and a short fur coat. The coat had a moleskin exterior that had lost a fight with a nail, leaving a tear I'd stitched up myself. It had been made a couple of years before the war and was already a bit short on me. For warmth — and a touch of style — I cinched it with a thin leather belt that had belonged to my father. My feet stayed warm in a solid pair of felt boots, their tops sewn on by my mother. I owed the cut felt boots themselves to a German officer who'd given them to us in 1942, right before heading to the front. Looking back, my mother and I were fifty years ahead of the trend for two-piece footwear. But at the time, anyone who saw that getup would, at best, smile. I hadn't seen such a ragamuffin among the other Institute applicants — the best-dressed ones were those who'd come back from evacuation.

Still, this ragamuffin didn't feel humiliated or shortchanged. I never held it against Mother that I had to go around dressed like that. She wasn't a tailor, though she'd worked herself to the bone on the Kamenetsky estate. She never complained, never grumbled, no matter what happened. Even knowing that I sometimes coughed up small drops of blood, she never objected to my working — including mowing grass with a scythe — trusting instead in her Matka Boska. She fed and cared for me as best she could. However poorly she herself was dressed, her straight posture, composed manner, and quiet self-respect gave away her Polish gentry roots. On winter evenings she liked to read to us and share warm memories of her noble relatives.

The day I arrived at the Institute, I went with a request to the facilities manager — also the Party cell leader — who'd just brought in some equipment from Krasnoyarsk. Instead of answering my question, he looked me up and down and said, "There's no place for people like you at this Institute. You should be out in a kolkhoz, rebuilding agriculture!" I told him to go back to his equipment and go to hell. That wasn't my noble blood talking — it was the other half, the Russian peasant blood. My Polish half was always ready to hold its ground too, no matter the circumstances. I never forgot what my high-strung math teacher back at the Ryabchi school used to say: "This boy will always come out on top, whatever he does." So far, she'd been right. But my successes weren't the product of hard work on my part — they were gifts from my parents, my ancestors' genes.

Another incident said something about how I got along with my peers. I was standing in line at the store to buy bread, with about ten people ahead of me. But I wasn't making any progress toward the counter — every so often someone, usually a girl, would dash in and cut the line to join a friend near the front. The disorder and nerve of it made me furious. Still, slowly and silently, I inched my way closer to the front.

Then a plump, pretty girl ran up — one I recognized from class. She was wearing a fashionable brimmed hat, a light coat to match, and a new pair of high boots. Girls like her usually sat up front, near the teacher, at the one desk with an inkwell, taking notes. My spot was in the back row, the highest one in the lecture hall. I had no use for an inkwell since I never took notes — I just listened.

No one usually sat near me. But one day this same elegantly dressed girl took the seat right next to mine. "Couldn't you find somewhere else to sit?" I asked her. "There are plenty of empty seats." I felt out of place next to someone so dolled up.

And now here she was, in the store, asking if I'd let her cut ahead of me. The nerve! I pointed her toward the back of the line and told her to learn some manners. She flushed and walked off to take her place at the end. *I don't need girls*, I thought, remembering my illness. *I won't have a wife. Or children.*

I came to regret that soon enough — she turned out to be our class monitor, the one who logged absences in the journal. And I was absent often. If I didn't like a professor, and the textbooks were available on the subject, I'd go to the library or reading room instead. But once I was in danger of losing my stipend over missed classes, I had no choice but to get to know her. Her name was Vladlena Ilyinichna Anikonova. She was from Kletnya, it turned out, and for a while we rode the same freight trains to Zhukovka station, before our paths split.

By summer, we got a letter from Father saying he was already in Poland and planned to send us a parcel. Mother didn't react to it at all. A little later he wrote that he'd sent the parcel with a man from our area who'd promised to deliver it on his way home. We never received it — though it would've been nice to get some clothes, even military ones.

For my academic achievements, I was awarded a pair of women's shoes with sharp, pointed toes. Since my prewar boots had completely fallen apart, I put them on, cursing the manufacturer for botching the job — my feet were killing me. I didn't care about my friends' mocking comments, but the girls' smiles stung.

Many families of men serving in the military received allotment notices entitling them to a monthly payment. Father probably thought he could help support us this way, too. But his hopes never panned out. Why not? Mother never said a word about it — not then, and not later, after he came home from the front. I kept up all the correspondence with Father and my brother, and no bad news from home was ever passed along to them. Letters were written on a single sheet, folded into a triangle, and left unsealed to make things easier for the censors.

One day, coming back from Bezhitsa, I found Gennadi carving a stock for an old muzzle-loading rifle he'd found somewhere. It was the kind loaded from the front end of the barrel: powder first, then a wad to keep it from spilling out, then shot or a bullet, followed by another wad. At the back of the barrel was a small hole where the powder ignited when the cock struck the cap. Gennadi had shaped the stock and now needed to attach the barrel to finish the job. My

contribution amounted to agreeing with his idea to weld a nut onto the barrel — an opinion he treated as though it came from an expert. The rear of the barrel, shaped like a sharp spearpoint, was meant to rest against a jut in the stock; we also used a bolt and a metal strip to fasten it in place.

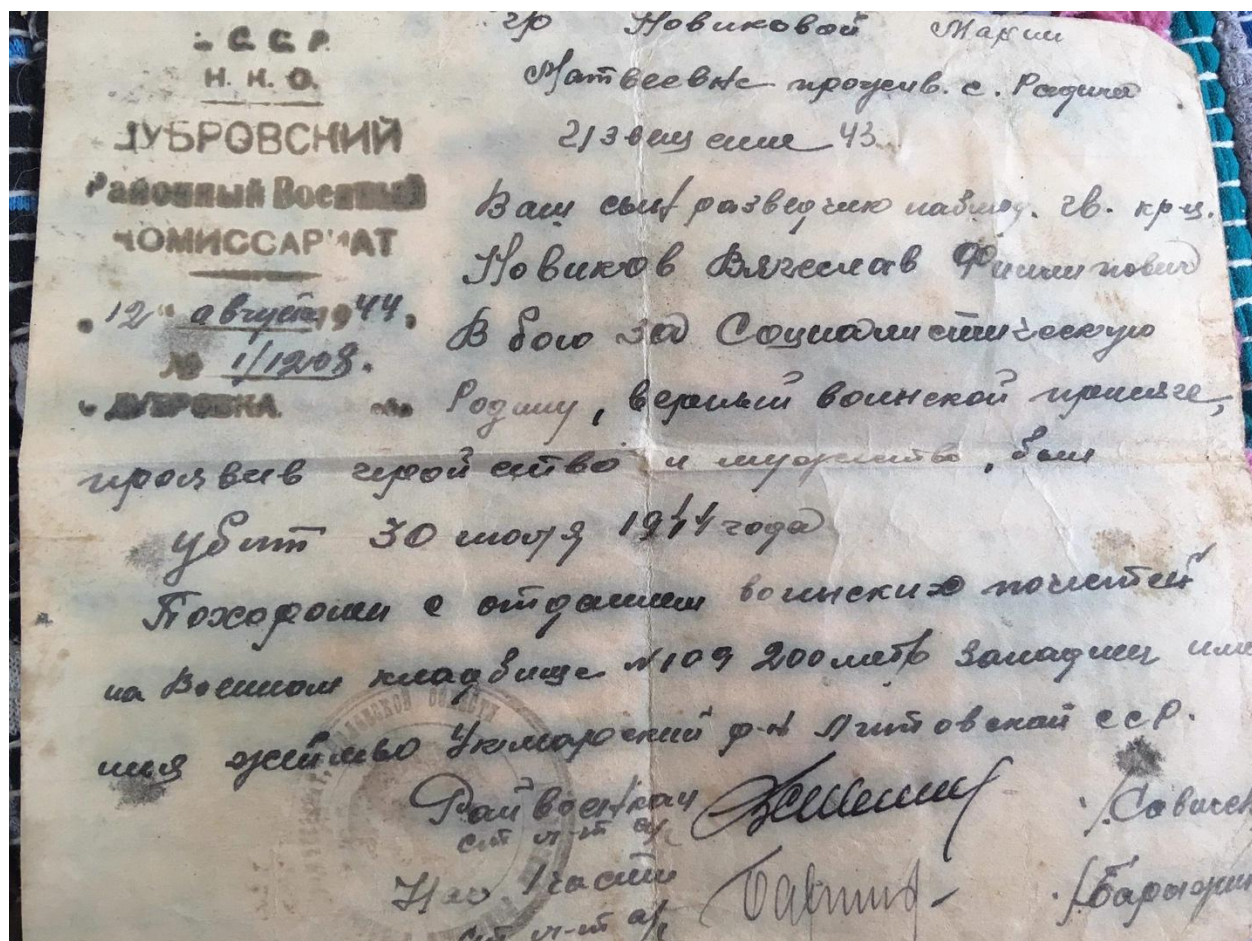
Gennadi tested it out in our vegetable garden, lying on the ground to aim. I stood beside him. He fired. The barrel tore loose from the stock, and its sharp end struck him on the forehead. He stayed down on the ground. When he finally lifted his head, I saw the gash and the blood. Mother heard the shot and came running out of the clinic. My brother was still lying there, hand pressed to the wound. "Get up," said the doctor, who'd come out with her. "Don't scare your mother." Gennadi got to his feet, swaying. He carried the scar for the rest of his life but never lost his fascination with guns.

Still, all these worries paled beside the grief that soon struck our family.

At the beginning of August, we got an envelope from Radichi — from Uncle Pavel — with a note inside written on a grease-stained half-sheet of paper. The pencil barely seemed to write, and the text was hard to make out. Maybe the officer who'd written it, a lieutenant, was worn down from writing so many letters like it:

"Hello, Novikov Anatoli. Novikov Vyacheslav received your letter but didn't have time to answer it. This is to inform you that your brother, artillery forward observer and Guards Red Army private Novikov Vyacheslav Philippovich, died a hero's death, having shown heroism and valor during our troops' advance into Eastern Prussia, in Lithuania. On June 30th he was buried in military cemetery No. 109, 200 meters west of the Zheistvo estate, Ukmerge District, Lithuanian SSR."

On August 13th, 1944, again from Radichi, we received the official notice of his death. The Dubrovka District Military Commissariat stated, more formally, on a quarter-page sheet, that in combat for the Socialist Motherland, faithful to his military oath, having shown "heroism and courage," my brother had been killed on July 30th, 1944.



As it happened, both notices arrived while Mother was away, and Gennadi and I decided not to tell her, at least for the time being. There still was hope he might have been wounded, or taken prisoner. She would find out eventually, anyway. The commissariat, at least, wouldn't be bothering us again, and neither would the government: there'd be no death benefit for the family. "Everything for the Motherland! The people and the Party are one!" the posters on every corner proclaimed.

What follows is a story told by our fellow villager, Leonid Osipovich Sergeev, about what happened to him after his army discharge.

"The village of Ryabchi was liberated on September 18, 1943; Bryansk on September 17th. Before the occupation, all men between 22 and 40 had already been drafted. But because the Germans broke through our defenses and entered our district and village on August 8, 1941, a significant number of men were still stuck in the occupied territory. On top of that, boys who'd been fifteen at the time had come of age by the time of liberation and were now eligible for service. On September 21st and 22nd, the district administration summoned all men between 17 and 50 to the Dubrovka District Military Commissariat.

"On September 27th, the NKVD interviewed everyone and assigned us to units operating in the Smolensk–Vitebsk and Nevel–Pskov directions. The 17- and 18-year-olds were kept separate from the rest. Partisans who'd just come out of the woods were drafted too. We were all ordered to march on foot. Our group headed toward Kletnya. We set out late, in the afternoon, and had to spend the night out in a field. Some of us barely had clothes to speak of — vatnicks or suit coats — and for footwear, some wore galoshes, or even bast shoes. The next morning, mounted men in uniform joined us, and we continued on toward Kletnya. But even there, no one gave us any food. We didn't have much in our packs either — a few shortcakes, some boiled potatoes. Almost no one had lard or sugar.

"It felt like we were being rushed forward without any clear destination. No one was expecting us in Kletnya, so we kept walking along the railway tracks toward Zhukovka. Why hadn't they just sent us there to begin with? Zhukovka was closer to Dubrovka, and the road was better. From there we walked on to Bryansk. In Bryansk we were issued uniforms and spent several days training — how to act under fire, during an offensive, in a bombing raid. Then the 'buyers' arrived from the front and picked me, along with several others from our village, for the artillery. I was assigned to a unit with 76-mm guns firing from indirect positions — not as dangerous as being on the front line. On November 7th we were loaded into heated freight cars and sent to the front near Nevel and Pskov. Before that, they'd given us some rusks, which we ate right away — and then went three days with nothing to eat at all. From the train we were loaded onto American Studebaker trucks and brought up to the firing positions. 'Here's where you'll learn to fight,' we were told. We could see Nevel burning. Pskov's turn was coming.

"The first thing I learned was how to dig a trench for the gun, then trenches for the ammunition, then one for myself. In combat, I carried shells to the gun, and after the gun layer was wounded, I was made gun layer myself, since I had some schooling — eight years. From November 11, 1943, to February 25, 1945, I was in action, until I was wounded. I made it home on June 25, 1945."

Here's another story, about the early days of a different group sent from Dubrovka toward Mogilev. That group included both young men and older ones — from 20–22 up to 40 — along with some former partisans. Most of them probably never saw combat directly; instead they cooked, set up bathhouses, dug, and helped build dugouts. Among them were boys from the village of Chot we knew — Vasili Pronichev, Ivan Saltykov, and others. After the war, they told us about their first experience of combat.

They were sent to the front on foot, given neither food nor clothing. When they arrived, they were issued rifles and a handful of bullets. "Get some rest," they were told. "Tomorrow at dawn we launch an offensive. The Pronya River is in front of you, the Germans on the opposite bank. You'll cross after the artillery barrage — don't fall too far behind the line of our shell bursts."

They went into the attack wearing worn-out vatnicks and civilian suit jackets; many had bast shoes or galoshes with foot wraps, and some were practically barefoot. Leonid Iossifovich, a war veteran himself, concluded from the story that they must have been assigned to a penal battalion.

Vasili Pronichev ended his account of that first battle with these words: "The Germans wiped us out. Out of 240 men in our company, only 12 survived — and every one of them wounded."

Was this treatment of draftees — men presumed to have been corrupted by German propaganda during the occupation — an isolated incident, or something more deliberate?

Here's a story told to me by a colleague, Alexander Volokhov, chief designer of mine-hoisting equipment at the Mining Machinery Research Institute of the Donetsk Machine-Building Plant. After the liberation of Donbas, in Ukraine, as in Russia, all young men were drafted. Alexander was eighteen. There was no training, no uniforms — just a handful of rifles issued among the draftees. Those who didn't get one were told to pick up the rifle of a fallen comrade.

"We were all ordered to mount the tanks and attack a well-fortified German position. We were down in a valley; the Germans held the hill above us. There was a solid wall of fire in front of our tanks. They caught fire one after another. *This is certain death*, I thought. Without a second thought, I jumped off the tank into a shell crater.

"The Germans repelled the attack. The tanks kept burning. I stayed in that crater the whole day, until dark, then crawled back to our lines at night. By the next morning, there was no one left to launch another attack — most of the men were dead."

The survivors were pulled back to the rear to be reinforced with fresh draftees from the newly liberated areas. *No — they won't let me live through this*, Alexander thought. But then a "buyer" came through and called out to the group: "Anyone who plays a musical instrument, step forward!"

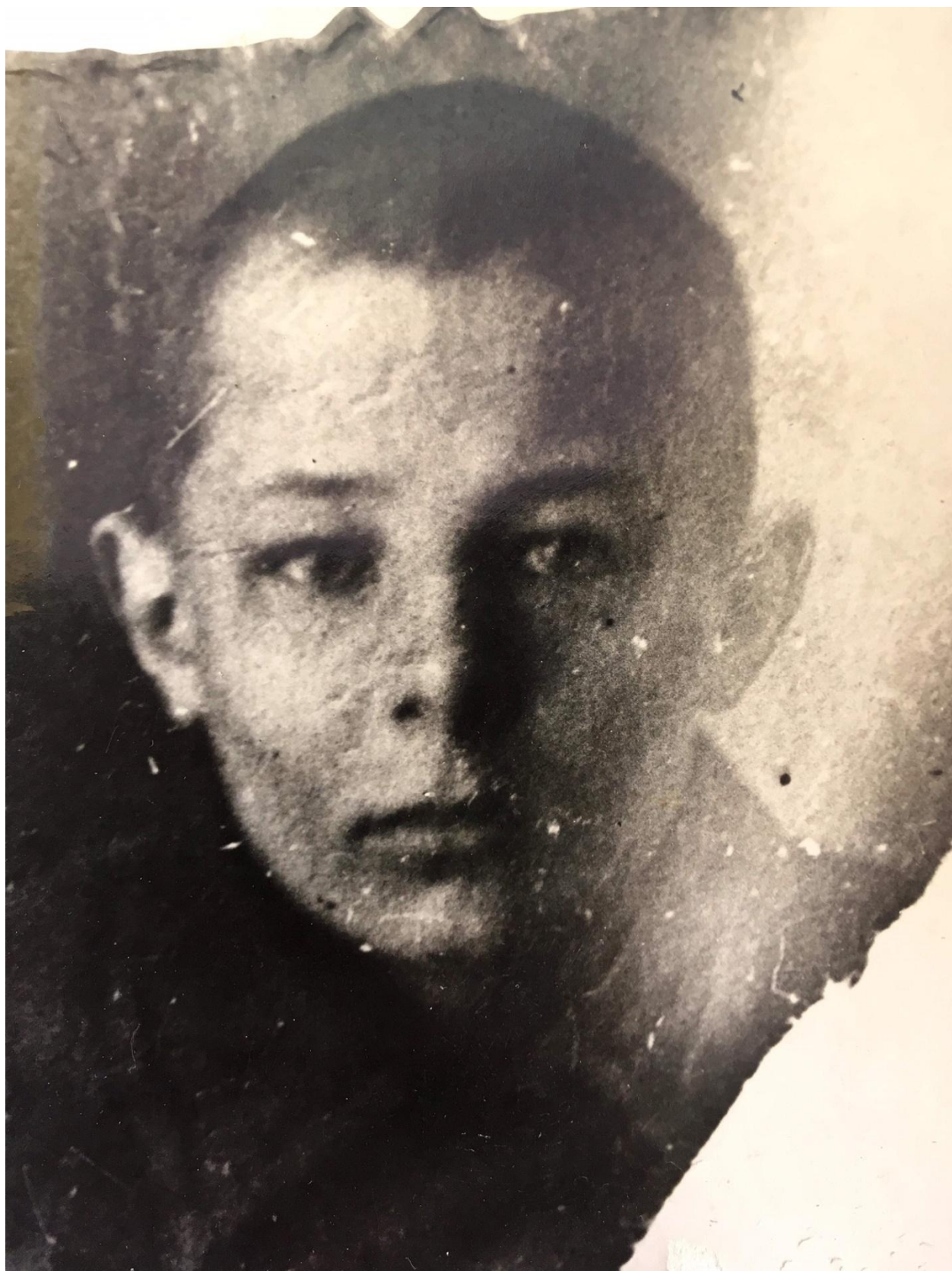
Alexander had never held an instrument in his life. But he understood at once: this was his chance to get out of that company — because there'd be no stopping otherwise. Tomorrow they'd put him back on a tank. Without hesitation, he stepped forward.

Later, in civilian life, he'd prove just as resourceful. He designed a mine-hoisting machine with special safety devices requiring two sets of keys. A prototype built to his exact design was accepted by the State Commission. For mass production, though, he redesigned the machine without the extra devices, using only a single set of keys — a change that saved the manufacturer money. He was given a bonus for the innovation, though a modest one.

And in this case, too, his choice after that first battle turned out to be the right one. He became a drummer in a military band and marched with it all the way to Berlin. A photograph shows him and the band in front of the Reichstag.

Given stories like these, it's no surprise that Viktor Astafiev — writer, Patriotic War veteran, and former signalman — wrote toward the end of his life that under Stalin, the Soviet Army had been the most incompetent army of slaves, built to breach enemy fortifications with the bodies of its soldiers.

The war was brutal, its catastrophic start unforeseen, the losses to army and country beyond repair. The people of that country had once taken pride in its might and the supposed wisdom of its leaders, believing them infallible. It was under occupation that they began to see the truth: it had all been a lie, a fraud — the work of incompetent experimenters.



My brother Vyacheslav

