

## Memories

Dedicated to the past generation – people of cruel fate

I was born on the estate of the Kamenetski, a god-forsaken place in the Dubrovka Uezd<sup>1</sup> of the Radichi Volost<sup>2</sup>, about one kilometer from the nearest village of Kokhonovo and eight kilometers from the Uezd center Dubrovka (currently in the Bryansk Oblast<sup>3</sup>, Russia).

The big one-storied house was located on the bank of an artificial lake. There were several outbuildings nearby for two or three horses, a few cows and other farm animals.

The brook dammed with an earth levee filled up the long valley with water so that an outsider could never guess that the far-stretching mirror-like surface of the lake with the reed-covered opposite bank owed it its existence.



In the picture made in 1914 we can see the lake viewed from the Kamenetski estate. Further on the left there was a mill.

The garden was bordered by a linden alley. It had fruit trees that were still young: apple and pear trees surrounded by cherry trees.

Below the dam sat a squat wooden mill with two large wheels. As its numerous buckets were being filled with water, one could watch for hours on end the water flow and the wheels turn. Mother said that flour was made there. That Mother made bread from flour was something that our eldest brother knew

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<sup>1</sup> District (old)

<sup>2</sup> Region (old)

<sup>3</sup> Region

quite well.

I remember that day vividly. The grownups were all busy working at the mill or in the field. Mother was gone to milk the cows. Our eldest brother Vechik, as we called him (the full name Vyacheslav), was five, I, the middle brother, was three, and the youngest, Guennadi, or Guenia, was one year old. A serious and independent boy, Vechik was to see to it that his brothers would not get into trouble. The youngest required the most attention: he would keep crawling towards the door to get outside and then to the lake. And I was hungry and weeping. Not daring to get into the oven, Vechik decided to give me some bread. He got a hunk of round bread and a big kitchen knife from the sideboard, pressed the bread to his naked belly and cut. But it was of no avail. The bread was stale and hard. Vechik made another attempt pressing the knife harder. Another cut – and to my utter amazement I saw a white line across my brother's belly, which would suddenly become redder and redder until rivulets of blood started flowing from it.

Vechik held the slash with his hands. The last thing I remember was me yelling: “Hold it tight, or the guts will get out! We'll apply plantain now!”

It was 1929.

From that time and that life I also remember: the spacious house, the unpainted floor boards, which were warm and light-colored, the dining room and the massive table with carved legs and a green cloth top bordered by carved dark brown wood. There were two cabinets that were always locked. By the table and along the walls there were elegant chairs upholstered in green cloth. A light wicker rocking chair stood by the window. There were numerous pots with flowers on the window sills and on the small table. The biggest attraction was the rubber plant sitting in a big barrel. It had reached the ceiling and was creeping by it to the next room. The bedroom doorway was covered with fine drapery.

The most exciting stuff was inside the chest: letters with calligraphy flourishes, postcards picturing doves, candles, Christmas trees and winged babies, and at the very bottom – feathers of all the colors of the rainbow, maybe of the fairy-tale Fire Bird itself. It was not often, however, that Mother opened the coveted chest.

In the winter of 1929 it was just us and the parents who lived in that house. How did it happen that there were so few people on such a large estate?

### The Kamenetski Family

My mother, Maria Matveevna Kamenetskaya, was born on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1896, on the day of the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to her, the Kamenetskis were members of the gentry, albeit impoverished. They may have moved from Poland to Belorussia at the time unknown to her where they settled in the village of Aleksandrovka (currently in the Schklov District of the Mogilev Oblast). Ethnically, the Kamenetskis were Poles and Catholics by faith. Whether they owned land is not known. What is certain is that prior to the revolution of 1917 the father, Matvei Iossifovich, rented land and farmed with the help of his family and hired workers. The landowner leased the land under the condition that the renter would keep a certain number of farm animals to maintain the fertility of the soil. My mother told me that on holidays and Sundays the entire family rode in a horse-drawn carriage to the church where they prayed sitting on benches<sup>4</sup>. Her brightest memory as a child (she left the family at the age of 7) was of a church wedding at which the trains of beautiful dresses were carried by children.

It was a big family: the parents Anna and Matvei, four sons – Yossif, Karl, Vladimir, Mikhail and Napoleon, and two daughters – Kazimira and Maria.

The father was a man of medium height, hard-working, caring, kind, soft-spoken and easy-tempered. As Maria remembered, her mother was a head taller than her husband. Being a buxom, strong, energetic and intelligent woman, she was in charge of the house and the farm.

The family was as one both at work and leisure. Love defined their relations. It was a happy and cheerful time. Maria was to see many holidays but none like the ones she saw in Aleksandrovka. For the rest of her life she would remember the preparations for Christmas and Easter, the Christmas decorations,

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<sup>4</sup> Unusual for the Russian Orthodox church which has no benches for believers

the presents, the trips to the church and the friendly visits. The girl would eagerly anticipate the holidays the preparations for which were made well in advance. All kinds of hors d'oeuvres and meals were made: roasted piglet on a bed of greens and vegetables, homemade sausages, meat with potatoes, porridge and cracklings, salceson, aspic, baked goose or duck, Olivier salad, salads with cabbage and garlic, smoked sausage, Napoleon cake, mousses, homemade ice cream, various sauces, rolls, sponge cake, and cookies. For Easter celebrations sweet farm cheese, painted eggs and paskhas<sup>5</sup> of various sizes were served. Happy family meals were followed by singing and recitals. And presents! Sometimes festivities lasted several days, and some of the food would remain on the table for anyone to have a snack at any time.

But everything has an end. The father's brother, Franz Iossifovich, came to visit, a tall, svelte, handsome, intelligent and well-educated man. At that time he worked as factory manager in the city of Krasni Sulin in Ukraine.

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<sup>5</sup> Russian Easter cake



*The photo shows Franz standing by the house on the Kamenetski estate.*

His visit took place in 1902 when little Maria was not yet seven years old. Her eldest brother was not older than 20, and the youngest, Napoleon, was one or two years old.

The family worked hard but could not cope with all the work. Day workers had to be hired, and there was never enough money.

Franz came with an unusual request. He, a bachelor, asked permission for Maria to reside with him promising her good education and comfortable living. He was making good money and had some

savings, and wanted to leave them, when the time came, to someone in the family.

The father did not want to part with his daughter. But practical Anna, having weighed all cons and pros, agreed. There was one thing, though, that bothered her: how can a young and busy man provide a little girl with something that only a mother or a woman can give? Franz reassured her: a woman, and a very good woman at that, his best friend's wife, also of Polish noble origin, would be by her side all the time, for he and his friend always worked together.

Natalia Pavlovna, the friend's wife, was childless. Anna, being an intelligent and perspicacious woman, had a suspicion that Natalia might be the reason why Franz, such an eligible bachelor, was not yet married. But however dearly she loved her daughter, having thought over all the circumstances and possibilities, she gave her consent.

Manechka<sup>6</sup> shed bitter tears when she learned that Uncle Franz would take her away from home. She did not want to part with her close-knit and happy family, her father and mother, sister and brothers. Would she never again go to the nearby young forest to pick mushrooms and berries? Suddenly, all the expensive presents that Uncle Franz had brought for everyone in the family did not make her happy any more.

Seeing the little girl's tears and being afraid that her parents could change their mind, Franz expedited his departure for far-away Krasni Sulin though initially he had planned to stay for a week or two. The father wept furtively but the mother seemed cheerful and confident that it was all for her daughter's own good. There is nothing that a loving mother would not do for her children! She has only to believe that she is doing the right thing.

But it's not without reason that it is said that man supposes and God disposes! Less than a year would pass, and Maria's childhood would be over, and her working life would begin. And only one more time she would return home to Aleksandrovka for a family reunion, which would be recorded in a photograph.

In Sulin, Maria was admitted to the first grade of primary school. Her teacher was very nice to her. Past her prime but quite good looking, she took liking to the diligent, disciplined and intelligent girl from the moment she first saw her. The sympathy grew when she learnt that she was being brought up by a single man.

Mania<sup>7</sup> had learnt how to read while she was living with her parents, both in Russian and Polish. Reading became a source of joy for her: books told her about a different life filled with beautiful love, exotic countries and exciting adventures.

Uncle Franz introduced the little girl to his friend and his friend's wife, Natalia Pavlovna. The men were usually busy at work during the day, so Mania was entrusted to the care of "Aunt Natalia". Uncle Franz had complete confidence in her and considered her a wonderful woman and housewife. And if during the first year Mania's education was no different from a regular one, it changed drastically in the second year. Aunt, as Mania was instructed to call her, began to teach her how to do household chores.

As there would be a lot of dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen in the mornings after the previous night reception, they needed to be washed before school. All the dishes, silverware, glasses and cups had to be washed, wiped dry and put back in their proper place. The aunt would explain that tidiness and cleanliness is a guarantee of not only health but also happiness in a future marriage. She also showed how to wash clothes, including her own batiste panties and drawers.

The little girl would frequently be late for school. Having learnt the reason of the tardiness, the schoolmistress did not punish her as she continued to be a good student.

The aunt did not like physical activity and was fond of sweets and pastry. That could have been the reason why she, once slim and good looking, became plump as a partridge and had difficulty standing on her feet for a long time. So it came as no surprise that the amount of household work for Mania would increase, and the requirements would grow stricter. The aunt was a disciplinarian and did not like to repeat anything twice. So, Manechka would remember for the rest of her life that the aunt's panties had to be washed particularly thoroughly because the aunt would inspect them against the bright light.

Before long, Mania would be late for school more and more often, and before and after holidays,

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<sup>6</sup> Diminutive for Maria

<sup>7</sup> Informal for Maria

when there was a lot of work at home, she would not go to school at all.

When Uncle Franz was offered a position of chief assistant director at the engineering plant “Red Profinter” in Bezhitsa (now a part of the city Bryansk), his friend and Natalia Pavlovna moved there, too. The friend, however, got sick and died shortly afterwards.

Before his death he asked Franz not to abandon his wife in the land that was foreign to her. Uncle Franz made the promise and kept it. In 1902 he and the aunt moved in together. They bought a farmstead near the village of Kokhonovo with a big house and outbuildings, arable land and a meadow, as well as an orchard on the bank of a lake. Jointly with other landowners they bought a water mill.

Maria barely finished her second year at school. She never went to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade: the weather was still good and warm in September, and the aunt did not want to leave the estate. How could anyone be expected to leave the still beautiful countryside and move to the city just because of school? She would not stop saying: “A woman should not fill her head with school stuff. She must be a good wife and a good housekeeper. Her purpose is to serve her husband and take care of household work. I will teach you all this”.

As usual, Uncle Franz did not contradict Natalia Pavlovna, and Manechka’s school issue was settled once and for all. It is impossible to know now whether this well-educated and cultured man, who failed to keep his promise, felt any remorse. There was one more reason for quitting school: the new property that required more work and care. And then there were always guests to entertain: the aunt’s friends and the uncle’s colleagues. They came when the weather was warm to enjoy the outdoors bringing along their children and elderly to improve their health. Be it breakfast or dinner, there would be piles of dirty dishes, spoons, forks, glasses and tumblers beyond count. The lady of the house would lead the guests to the lake or the orchard, while Maria would have to clean up, wash, wipe dry and put the dishes and silverware back into the cupboard. The aunt had already taught her all this the year before. She had had the same training herself. There is no time or reason for a little girl to be idle! And there is so much yet to learn! How to boil, bake and fry! How to trim meat from a carcass, how to wash intestines and stuff them with ground meat, how to salt lard, how to pluck, singe and cut a bird, how to make borsch and soups! And she needs to know all the recipes of porridges, sausages, salcesons, pies and rolls, cakes and cookies, jellies and mousses, sour cream and cottage cheese, butter and ice cream. It’s hard on the little girl now, but she will thank her later! She will cope with any work easily! As to her work for the uncle and the aunt, it will be generously repaid: all their real and movable property will someday become hers!

Before leaving for the city it was necessary to ensure that someone would look after the estate. Natalia’s brother was offered to live at the house permanently. He was an elderly man who was sick with tuberculosis. Manechka was left with him for the winter to help. The aunt only wished that she grew up sooner. Until then peasants from the neighboring villages of Kokhonovo and Radichi had to be hired to work in the field and at the mill, in the stable and cow house, and in the garden. Natalia Pavlovna was a methodical, thorough and consistent teacher. First, she taught Maria how to wash the dishes, set and clear the table; what tableware to serve for the first course, main course and desert; how to set glassware on the table; where to place soup, desert and tea spoons, and dinner, salad and dessert forks, and napkins; in what order to serve dishes and when to clear them.

The aunt kept reminding her that observing the etiquette was a necessary attribute of a noble family.

Then she taught Maria how to clean the rooms and look after the flowers. Her corpulence made washing the floors difficult for her, and for this reason special attention was paid to this chore. The wooden floors were unpainted and had to be clean and pleasant to look at. Washing and ironing were also important skills to acquire since Uncle Franz needed to wear clean ironed shirts and trousers to his office.

In the time left after the above mentioned chores Maria would be learning diverse skills in culinary art. The learning required a step-by-step approach. Everyday cooking is one thing but cooking for a holiday is quite different.

The aunt would underscore that Polish cuisine was the best in the world both in taste and in the size of helpings. And a noble Pole could not eat what commoners do.

Culinary art was not easy to master. It took years to learn all the intricacies of cooking. The training included primary processing of food products, methods of thermal processing, as well as details

of making each and every meal: cold appetizers, soups (milk, meat, fish, etc.), sauces, fish and meat dishes, porridges and macaroni, homemade cold- and hot-smoked sausages, butchering, etc. The aunt's favorite pastry, fruit and cheese recipes were not forgotten, either: cakes and cookies, sponge cakes and buns, pies with meat, liver, cabbage and potatoes, stewed fruit and puddings.

There was so much to do in the house that attending school every day became out of the question. There was no time left for Maria to read. Still, when leaving the house, the aunt would say to the girl: "When you are done with the chores, have some rest, read a book in Polish not to forget the mother tongue".

Around that time the Novikovs, peasants from the neighboring village of Radichi started to work at the estate as hired hands.

### The Novikov Family

Kirill Ustinovich Novikov was a land-poor peasant. His house and a barn for the cattle were in the middle of the village of Radichi, three kilometers from the Kamenetski estate and five kilometers from the railway station of Seshenskaya (Sesha). Once in a year or two his wife Anna would bear a baby boy for him – future assistants in peasant's business. Eventually, there would be five of them: Rodion, Mikhail, Pavel, Philipp, and Arseni. Due to frequent births or hard peasant labor Anna died in 1900 when the youngest child was two years old. Philipp was four at that time but he would not remember his mother. In the village she was called Anyushka, and she was from the Platonov family.

Kirill was of medium height and had a face of a typical Russian peasant which is usually pictured in Russian fairytales. He was not a rich man. It was hard to become one with five little children on his hands. But he was independent, hardworking and loved his wife. He cherished her memory and would not remarry until the children grew up and became independent.

Kirill was of sound health and remarried when he was 60. His new wife had two children of her own: a girl and a boy. He raised those children, too. His own sons and his step children became very close and got together for all family reunions.

The children started working in their early childhood and learnt all the jobs peasants were supposed to do. They were all hardworking and earned their co-villagers' respect. Most importantly, Kirill raised them as kind and courteous people who treated others with respect and were always ready to give a helping hand in those of need.

When the time came for the older brothers – Rodion, Mikhail and Pavel – to get married, Kirill released them to become independent. He had little land, and Rodion left to Chernetovo to work at a factory. On his land Kirill built two houses for the other two sons. The only property he kept for himself was a big solid chest. The bachelors Arseni and Philipp got nothing. Philipp asked for nothing as he was already working at the Kamenetski estate. Arseni asked the father to give him at least some new cloth for bast shoes and a towel.

At the end of a workday or on a holiday Kirill would be seen standing on a hillock near his house wearing clean clothes and a black hat.

Philipp had been working around the house and the farm since he was little but his father decided that he needed to learn a trade for a living since there was too little land. He sent him to a shoemaker to be an apprentice – to run on errands, twist thread and wax it, make wooden nails. The smart boy watched and tried to learn everything the master did, and soon began to get shoe repair jobs. However, the father interrupted the training as he – on Pavel's advice – decided that to work at for the Kamenetski, at whose mill the older brother was already working, would be more useful. Philipp was first hired as a shepherd boy. He was a quiet, diligent, respectful and hardworking boy. In the midday heat when the cattle was taken to the barn to give it a break from the gadfly, Philipp would not lie down to rest but go and help the young mistress Maria to wash dishes or do something else around the house. She was three years older than him. It was no wonder that she often treated the boy to something tasty from the master's table.

The father gave his son an education. Philipp graduated from parochial primary school with excellent grades in all subjects except reading and writing. Despite Maria's attempts to inure him to reading books, he would never develop a liking for them preferring to do things which, in his peasant's

view, were more useful. His speech, too, despite the everyday communication with the estate owners who spoke educated Russian with no accent, would remain largely the one of the countryside.

A memorable event for Philipp was a trip with his father to the Uezd town of Roslavl. This is how remembered that trip:

“I was ten at the time, in the long gone year of 1908. Father went to Roslavl to sell a cartload of hay and took me along with him. In case he needed to step away from our merchandise, I had to see to it that the horse or the sled would not be stolen. One had to be on guard in the market place. We were told a story which, purportedly, had happened there. A peasant’s horse died. How can one live without it? The peasant gathered some cash, borrowed some, too, and came to the market to buy a horse. There were good horses, but too expensive for him. A gipsy man was selling the cheapest one but his mare looked somewhat sad. The peasant approached him and asked why it looked so sad. “Thinking about something”, said the Gypsy and surreptitiously tapped the horse’s belly with a little whip.

That enlivened the mare. It started shaking its head, moving its feet and would not stay in one place. The peasant took a long time walking around the horse, examining its teeth, slapping its neck. All that time the Gypsy would say again and again: “See for yourself! The mare will not see for you!” The peasant bought the horse and headed for home. The horse went in a straight line and soon walked into a wall. The peasant waved his hand in front of the mare’s eyes but it did not even wink. “The Gypsy has cheated! He has sold me a blind horse!” The peasant took the Gypsy to a justice of the peace. The Gypsy said to the judge: “I did not cheat! I warned more than once: See for yourself! The mare will not see for you!” In the end, the peasant left home with the blind horse.”

Father did not remember how they sold the hay. But he remembered that they dropped into a tea house after that and ordered a 3-liter kettle of tea with lump sugar.

“Father ordered 100 grams of vodka for himself and some big-size bonbons and a handful of lollipops for me. He drank his 100 grams and we sat there for a long time drinking tea. He did not indulge in alcohol often and lived his life without illnesses. Till the end he had his teeth intact, as well as memory and working hands. But he never got out of poverty.”

Philip preserved his love for drinking tea with lump sugar: he would nip off a little piece of sugar with tongs or a knife and drink tea holding it in his mouth like he did in his childhood.

For years Philippok<sup>8</sup> would come to the estate. Besides tending a herd, he would do new, more complicated jobs. In the summer, when the workday began at sunrise, the shepherd boy did not leave for his village but lived permanently on the estate. In the winter he came to work later in the morning and went home for the night.

And God really works in mysterious ways! Who would have thought that this shepherd boy, this Philippok, would bind his destiny forever with one of the Polish nobles Kamenetski.

#### Maria earns her inheritance

Other peasants hired from the neighboring village of Kokhonovo would leave home for the night, too. In the gray and dull winter Uncle Franz and the aunt stayed in the city, and Maria and Natalia Pavlovna’s brother would be the only ones left on the estate.

This is how Maria remembered that time:

“Snowdrifts on the estate, the road buried under the snow, cold and windy. It is dark outside, the wind is howling in the chimney, and the trees are creaking alarmingly. I am wearing a sheepskin jacket, sitting on a chair in the kitchen and dozing off with my head laid on my arms. I want to sleep but I must not. Every half hour I go the barn not to miss the calving: another cow is about to give birth. The newly born calf must be brought into the house immediately; otherwise it can freeze to death. One cannot wait till morning when the workers come! And the second cow needs to be milked often lest its udder gets enflamed. It must be milked and massaged. How hard it is for a teenage girl who cannot count on help from the aunt’s sick elderly brother to carry the calf! And then there will be a lot of work with both the cow and the calf”.

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<sup>8</sup> Diminutive for Philipp



This is the reason why Maria does not put out the Fledermaus kerosene lantern. Not that it produces much light. It is pitch dark outside, and it seems that the night will never end. “It is scary to be alone in the house. What if bandits come? You can cry for help all you want - no one will hear. You begin to listen to the sounds outside. In the wailing of the wind you suddenly hear a baby cry and then something that sounds like laughter. You feel goosebumps rise on your skin, and your hair seems to stand on end.”

No, it is not a baby, Maria tries to calm herself down, it must be an owl. But the sleep is gone. She hears wolves howl nearby. Yesterday peasants from Kokhonovo told her that they had already stolen quite a few dogs. One peasant riding home in a sled late in the evening was chased by wolves. Yesterday she herself saw big footmarks near the barn. Is it safe to go the barn? And the dog has been barking itself hoarse. Now, she must wake up the only adult in the house!

The old man steps out of the house and fires into the darkness from the gun thoughtfully purchased by Uncle Franz.

At such times Maria would remember her happy childhood with the beloved father and mother, brothers and sister. She feels bitter and cheated: she was sent away for a better life in the city, and here she is in the country again, alone and burdened with work that has no end, having to please her uncle and the aunt whom she did not love. Tomorrow morning she will again have to wash potatoes, cut beets for the cattle, start a fire in the stove and make food for herself and the cows, the pigs, the dogs, the chickens, the turkeys, and the two peacocks all of whom will be clucking, quacking, cackling, demanding food, water, attention, cleaning and walking.

No, she does not want all this wealth! How willingly she would go back to her family!

But then comes the day when a letter arrives from the aunt: she and her friends need to be met at the station. In such cases a sleigh needs to be sent by a certain time in the winter or a carriage in the summer. This time the uncle and the aunt are coming for the New Year’s Eve and Christmas. And though there will be more work for Maria and no time for reading, there is going to be some welcome diversion in her life. For the holidays a pig will be butchered, and diverse delicacies will be made. Now only Maria can be entrusted with washing and thoroughly cleansing large and small intestines and a stomach so that they can be stuffed with ground meat, buckwheat or potatoes with cracklings; to cut lard into small pieces (no grinding!), innards, particularly liver, and make a delicious salceson. But then there will be the putting up of a beautiful fir tree (they are plenty around here!), the hanging of decorations, glittering tinsel and candles. And then there will be guests, their children and presents. It is so exiting: games and dances, and sleigh rides! Only it is a pity that this happy time passes so quickly...

#### Maria’s adolescence

My mother did receive a good training to meet life challenges. However, this training was not what her origin and the material status of her guardians required. The latter, the aunt in particular, seemed to care about their own well-being more than about her future and thought that the inheritance that she would get after their death needed to be earned. For several years after her move, the girl cried and even wrote letters to her parents asking them to take her back to Aleksandrovka. The father did come – quiet, undemanding and averse to conflict – calmed the little girl down and convinced her to stay: the education would serve her well in her life, and the property should not get into a stranger’s hands. She would grow up and keep her own household. At the parents’ home there is also a lot of work and not much to go around. Things should get better when her brothers and sister Kazimira grew up.

So, Maria went on working. The isolation and the lack of children of her age, constant training and work – all this helped her to master all kinds of household jobs, except for sowing which was so necessary for everyday life. Reading and socializing with her peers were possible only on holidays and in the summer. Those were, probably, the only joys of her short periods of rest.



*In the photo one can see young Manechka on a picnic with the guests. She is sitting, second on the left, and hugging her friend. In the next picture she is seen under an apple tree with the aunt and, possibly, the aunt's brother. She is looking into the camera and seems somewhat vexed.*



Another couple of years passed, and Manechka became Maria, a good looking young lady. Now the Kamenetski were frequently visited by her peers.

*Here she is in the center surrounded by her friends:*



Among them are the sons of the landowner Tsatsurin and the rich entrepreneur Orekhov, the daughter and son of the priest Fomin, Laricheva and Makarova.

The Orekhov brothers are passionate hunters but hardworking boys, too. In haymaking time they cut grass together with hired workers. Now comes the time to rake up the hay in the windrows and make haycocks as a thunderstorm is coming. The workers hurry, the heat and the humid wind make it hard for them to breathe. All of a sudden, somewhere in the distance, near the forest, in the bushes, a dog is making rapid and high pitched barks that turn into a shrill yelp. And now the barks are more like exhalations made in time with a furious run: ah, ah..., and another dog joins the chase. The sounds move quickly: the dogs are chasing a beast or a hare and will not stop until they lose the scent or the hunter kills the animal.

The hunter's heart pumps hard at this moment, the blood rushes to his face, and he no longer hears the cries to hurry with the work and does not feel the starting rain. He is already there where his dogs are. He knows where to run to intercept the hare. He is certain that he hasn't fed and trained his dog for nothing, the dog that he gave a cow for. The hound will drive the hare to him, if not at the first then at the second circle. There are no more urgent matters for the Orekhovs. They grab their rifles and off they run after the hunter's luck!

#### With the family

At around that time – evidently, for some important occasion – the entire Kamenetski family had a reunion in Aleksandrovka, except for Vladimir who worked in Petersburg as a turner and lived there with his wife Gelena, also a Pole. In the group photo one can see the father and mother in the middle surrounded by their sons and daughters.



*From the left to the right: the oldest son Iossif, Kazimira, Karl, Maria. Below are Mikhail and Napoleon, the youngest son.*

That was Maria's first visit to Aleksandrovka since the time Uncle Franz had taken her away. What a beautiful family! It is clear, considering that they live in a poor Belorussian village, that they are quite different from their co-villagers. The way they look, the dignity with which every member of the family poses in the picture, their open and earnest countenances, and, finally their clothes – all points to the fact that they remember their noble origin and are proud of it.

The picture confirms what Maria told about her mother Anna being the head of the family, a woman strong in spirit and body, an active, enterprising and demanding person. Anna did not need jewelry for the picture: either rings, or pendants. Her thick hair is done so that it would not interfere with work: one can say a short haircut of a working person. A most simple blouse with a white jabot. The thin lips are tightly pressed together.

Her husband Matvei, on the other hand, presents all the attributes of a gentleman: his jacket is clasped with a golden link; he is wearing a ring, a Paul Buhre watch, a vest and a tie. A short mustache and a neat beard; a high forehead transiting to a bald patch; thick lips that seem to be about to smile; earnest and kind eyes. He is not as tall as his wife. Maria is leaning on her father's shoulder. She would always remember him with tenderness.

The eldest son Iossif looks tense and somewhat defiant. He seems to be of quite a stubborn character. His mother tried to convince him out of marrying a simple peasant girl. Still, he loved her and married her, and she bore him a son, Guennadi. Later this fact would do him a good service: his family would not be dispossessed and sent to the North. Kasimira, long of marriage age at that time (she was born in 1889), would never get married, first because of her noble descent and later on the account of her pariah status: she would become "an enemy of the people".

Karl, an enterprising man, was the main source of support for the family. He served in the navy and then sailed on commercial vessels. It was with his money that the family bought the farming equipment: a horse driven threshing machine, a winnower, etc.. Among other countries he traveled to America. His friend stayed there. It was through him that Maria got acquainted with a young engineer,

Andrei. They fell in love and decided to leave for America to work. But this would be later, several years later.

In the picture Maria is wearing a dress traditional for a high school student. It is 1911. The time is flying fast, and as fast grows Maria.

The plan to change her life in a radical way seems to be realistic as her love for Andrei is approved by all and their marriage is considered as all but settled. He is already waiting for her in America. Her two best friends have also left with their families and are looking forward to her arrival. Maria has received beautiful postcards with little angels from them and a photograph of them at a skating rink dressed in identical pretty white fur coats with their hands hidden in fluffy white muffs.

Maria is now waiting for the papers to leave the country. She has already received an ocean liner ticket from her fiancé. Still, the transatlantic journey frightens her: Germany and Austro-Hungary are in the state of war against France and Britain, and according to newspapers German submarines are sinking ships, though only military ones for now.

Her brothers Iossif and Mikhail and sister Kazimira come to the Kamenetski estate to say good bye. *The three of them are in the photo: Iossif and Kazimira are sitting in a light sleigh driven by a fair white filly with a fluffy tail and mane. Kazimira is looking straight into the camera. Mikhail is standing nearby in a long coat with a black collar. Behind is a house or rather an old house converted into a barn. The roof condition does not represent the owner – Uncle Franz – in a favorable light: the roof is damaged in many places, the windows are boarded from the inside. It is the year 1914.*



Maria the bride

In the three years that have passed after her visit to Aleksandrovka Maria has grown into a very good looking young woman: a fine oval face, her hair braided and arranged on the head, a short curly bang, a long neck, a slender figure, a kind and friendly look.

*In the picture she is with a handsome young man in a military uniform. This is her brother*

*Mikhail. The time has come for him to serve in the Army, and he is now on a short time leave. Sister Kazimira is also there. She is not as tall or as good looking as her siblings.*



There is another picture made at that time: uncle Franz's look into the camera is serene and pensive, the aunt beside him is staring into the distance as if trying to discern something there. Maria also looks serious as if she were already somewhere far away. Iossif is there, too.



*On the reverse side there is a writing:*

*“Dear Andryusha! I received your letter but I have not had time yet to answer it. I won’t be able to come to you by August since I will not have received the papers by that time, but by the end of August I may be able to come, although I am a little afraid to go. I am sending my picture, only it is of a group. I do not have a photograph of me alone. This picture was made on Easter. Yours faithfully, Mania.”*

Unexpectedly, the aunt died. It happened right after her guests had left. The uncle’s health started deteriorating rapidly after that; he became depressed. It may be that he was now afraid to lose his untiring adopted child and her valuable help and care. Or maybe he was deeply worried about the war. It was already affecting their lives. Young lads and men had been sent to the front. Villages became depopulated, and it was not easy to hire help. Taxes went up. And each day Maria’s move to America was becoming more and more dangerous. Still, the departure date determined by the ship ticket was getting closer.

At this critical juncture the ailing uncle behaved in an utterly unexpected manner: he cried and begged Maria “not to leave now, not to abandon him, a sick and lonely man; besides, it is very dangerous to travel now, and the war is about to end, for Germany will be surely defeated very soon, after which she can leave.”

And Maria stayed. Thus ended the period in her life that in hindsight could be described as almost happy. She did not know, as neither did anyone else, what awaited her in the very near future.

#### Maria stays on the estate

The aunt was long gone, the uncle was ill, but guests from the city still liked to spend time on the Kamenetski estate. Maria’s workload grew even more. Only the Novikov brothers continued to work. The others had been drafted to the army and sent to the front. Death notifications were coming back, as well as the wounded – grim and despondent. People were becoming hostile towards the well-to-



do and the rich. There were rumors about land seizures, estates plundered, forests illegally harvested and meadows mowed without permission, haystacks stolen. It was good that the uncle had a revolver! But it became scary to live far from other people.

The emotional state Maria was in was particularly bad. For the first time in her life she fell in love and felt loved, and almost left to meet her love, and bid farewell to her family and gave up the inheritance promised to her! Her dear fiancé Andryusha<sup>9</sup> left, her friends left and are writing that they are counting days to her arrival, they look so happy on their skates in the picture! But she has to put the yoke back on her herself since there is no one else to take care of the people and the animals. There is not much help around to hire!

Only a strong-spirited woman was able to carry on, survive, and preserve compassion for the sick and the old. To sacrifice her own life and destiny!

It is Philipp now who helps almost every day with the cattle and around the house. He has grown up but is still skinny and light on his feet. He feels sorry for the young lady who is exploited by anyone who feels like it. The guests from the city continue to come every year with their old and their young to stay for the entire summer. Their friend Natalia Pavlovna is long gone but they are still in the garden, or sunbathing at the lake from morning to lunch time. Then they lunch and have a nap. And no one will help Maria to make dinner or clean up. Were he the master, Philipp would not tolerate it!

Finally, Maria did what her fiancé Andryusha asked: she had her picture made. It is not known whether he ever received it. But we have this captured instant in her life left: an instant between her past and future! A beautiful slender young girl with fine features and a calm and independent look.

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<sup>9</sup> Diminutive for Andrei



It finally came to their backwoods, too: the revolution! Factories to the people! Land to the peasants! Power to the Soviets!<sup>10</sup> The war got close, too. Now it was Philipp who was drafted – to defend the Revolution! It was said that Denikin<sup>11</sup> was advancing. So, Philipp was issued a trench coat and a rifle.

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<sup>10</sup> Workers and Peasants Councils”

<sup>11</sup> A White Guard general who fought against the Red Army in South Russia

He had never fired a shot before, though. In front of Denikin's attacking troops he was put in a trench with his rifle on the parapet and ordered to shoot on the command "Fire!". No one explained how to aim. It was scary to look out, anyway. So he fired without looking. He may have killed someone. This was the story he would be telling school children later: how he defended the Soviet Government. But his favorite was the dramatized story about the way class consciousness on the front was inculcated: "A Menshevik makes a speech and promises: everything will be fine! We applaud. Then Trotsky steps us holding a bag. He asks the soldiers: "What is inside the bag?" No one knows. He takes out a big cat and asks: "What is this?" Everybody shouts: "A cat!" But Trotsky shows animal's back and turns up its tail. "It's not a cat! It's a tomcat! Do not believe the Mensheviks!" The soldiers roar with laughter. The Menshevik is defeated, no more proof is necessary.

Philipp forgot much of what had happened to him during the war but those two incidents stuck in his memory forever. Every year he would be invited to the village school classes on the history of the bolshevist party to share his reminiscences of his fight against general Denikin. And he would tell one and the same story.

Soon after that combat he was allowed to turn in his rifle and return home.

The Novikov brothers were a big help for the Kamenetski. The water mill was, too. Bread is needed at all times, revolution or not. The mill was the main source of income. The income, though, was well taken care of by the government. The income went to the revolution: food tax, local assessments, food requisition, etc..

The world war ended, and a civil war came in its stead. Dear Aleksandrovka would be beyond reach for many years, and America would remain a dream forever with the brightly lit skating rink and dear friends in pretty white fur coats. All that remained were the photographs, greeting postcards with the little angels and doves, and the memories!

Those were dreary, lonely and hopeless years. Estates had withdrawn into themselves. Many had been plundered, the owners fled or arrested. Maria's peers did not show up any more, as if they had vanished into thin air. Uncle Franz and Maria felt particularly lonely in the big cold house during dark autumn and winter evenings.

The Kamenetski had not yet been affected: they worked themselves and provided jobs for others. Uncle Franz resided on the estate permanently since he had nowhere else to go. There was no work and no apartment in Bezhitsa. He had grown weak and old in a very short time. He would often stare vacantly into the distance, and tears would start to well up in his unseeing eyes. This intelligent, well-educated man understood that Maria would never get to enjoy the inheritance. In early childhood she had been taken away from her loved ones: her father and mother, sister and brothers; she had lost her fiancé and now was about to lose what had been meant to become her reward for many years of hard work. He bore a great share of guilt for that. Having living parents, Maria had become an orphan, and now he was leaving her alone in this world surrounded by a hostile and ever-tightening circle of proletarians and those "who used to be nothing but now became everything"<sup>12</sup>.

The uncle passed away peacefully, probably in Bezhitsa. His death attracted no notice.

### Uncertain times

It is 1929. The Soviet government has had a lot of trouble dealing with peasants starting from 1917. Cities need bread but taking it from peasants without paying for it is not so easy. Poor peasants barely have it, and the well-to-do do not want to give it away. Food surplus requisitioning, food tax, and flat tax were tried without much success. And when the authorities attempted to appropriate "the surplus" by force, peasants resisted, buried their produce or hid it the best they could. Greedy people, these "kulaks"<sup>13</sup>. But the leaders of the revolution have known all along how to do it in a simpler way. They need to gather peasants in cooperatives, take away their farm implements and cattle, assign a production task to everyone, pay remuneration at the end of the year after the State plan of food supply has been fulfilled. Seeds for sowing have to be guarded by the State so that peasants would not eat them. If they

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<sup>12</sup> Words from "International", the revolutionary hymn

<sup>13</sup> Well-to-do peasants

work badly, they receive little. They cannot receive much, anyway, since in a developing country grain is needed not only for cities but also for export – to buy machinery. Cooperatives were named kolkhozes<sup>14</sup>. Poor peasants had almost nothing to contribute but well-to-do farmers understood that if they give away hard earned possessions, they will no longer be bosses of themselves, they will become slaves.

The Party and the government began to implement the “collectivization.” The poor enrolled of their own will, the kulaks resisted as long as they could.

The authorities attempted to force them into collective farms by means of taxes. They would pay one tax and be imposed another. For Vladimir Ilyich Lenin taught that peasants breed capitalism every single moment. Finally, the Party gave an order to annihilate “the class of kulaks”.

## The Dispossessed

The inheritance left by uncle Franz became a crushingly heavy burden for the young mistress of the Kamenetski estate: 8 desyatinas<sup>15</sup> of arable land, 2 meadows, a thoroughbred mare of white color, a cow, a house, a bathhouse, a yard with outbuildings, a water mill (co-owned with others), 2 purebred pigs, a bull calf, 5 sheep, 7 bee hives, 26 chickens, 30 poods<sup>16</sup> of rye grain, 30 poods of oats, 15 poods of barley, 4 poods of pork lard, 8 gammons, a summer horse-driven carriage, a pleasure sleigh, a working sleigh, farming tools, a cargo wagon with a metal suspension. And a wall striking clock!

It is a common view that in the winter farmers have little to do. It is not true. To clean the stalls and the cattle shed takes more than an hour. And how long does it take to brush the thoroughbred horse, wash the cow and the calf of the manure, warm up the water and give it to the cattle to drink, boil beets and potatoes to feed the pigs and the chickens, to milk the cow, to separate the newly born from the adults, to break the young cow to milk?

While there is snow on the ground, the farmer has to transport the manure and spread it on the soil to be tilled. He also needs to request timber from the forest warden, cut and bring it home from the forest, chop it for firewood but also use it to secure the functioning of the mill and ensure safety in the case of a flood; bring more soil and manure; service the farming equipment and tools; trim the fruit trees and whitewash them so that the spring sun would not burn the bark; slaughter the pigs and the sheep; cook for himself and the workers. For one cannot send men to the woods or the meadow without lard or ham. If they are not fed well, they won't do the work. And hard work requires proper nourishment.

Things would be easier if there was enough help. So, upon his return from the army, Philipp works day and night. He feels sympathy for the young lady of the house. Even to hire workers is an effort: one has to go to the neighboring village of Kokhonovo. And negotiating with men is no girl's business.

Philipp regards her mistress with admiration and helps her as much as he can. He does not curse or swear like other peasants. He is no Hercules, for sure; he is skinny but brawny, hardworking and respectful. A simple man, one of the lads. But nobody's fool, either: he only likes to pretend to be a simpleton making the interlocutor believe that he respects him, values his merits and even recognizes his superiority.

Maria cannot rid herself of the feeling of being abandoned in a hostile environment. She is afraid to stay alone not only at nighttime but during the day, too. Philipp knows it. He does not leave for Radichi any more: there is no taking care of the estate without him.

Being a farm hand is prestigious now, like being a nobleman before the revolution. It is a pass to a happy life. That's why Philipp is of good cheer and glad to see his mistress treat him with growing warmth. He is always there for her when she feels sad or fearful.

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<sup>14</sup> Collective farms

<sup>15</sup> One desyatina = approx. 2 ¾ acres

<sup>16</sup> One pood = approx. 16,38 kg

It is not known how their relationship evolved but in 1924 in the Radichi village council a civil marriage was recorded between Philipp Kirillovich Novikov and Maria Matveevna Kamenetskaya.

Nothing changed in their daily routine, their workaday life. There was no break from work, no honeymoon trip, no decrease or easing of the everyday labor for either Philipp, or Maria. There was not enough money to hire help. From time to time, peasants from the neighboring village worked for payment in kind when they were in dire need of food or had free time on their hands. Only the Novikov brothers worked on the estate on a permanent basis. Pavel operated the mill, worked in the field with his two horses, made hay, took grain or cattle to the market to sell in order to pay ever growing taxes. Mikhail and Arseni also helped with miscellaneous chores. By dusk the brothers left for home, and the care for the cattle was left entirely to Philipp and Maria.

But even this routine was to end soon: at the end of May Maria told her husband that they were going to have a baby. Philipp suggested a solution. It was decided that his younger brother with his wife Aksinya would move to the estate. A house was built for them, and land was allotted for a vegetable garden.

Seeing the amount of the inherited property and the numerous cattle one may be tempted to ask: why would they need so many cattle? Just the two of them? Were they into gluttony or something?

The livestock was needed to pay the workers in kind and pay taxes with money, as well as in kind, for instance, with grain. Besides being a source of food, it was used to fertilize the soil.

January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1925, was not only the joyful day of Christmas but also the birthday of their firstborn son. He was named Vyacheslav, as his mother wished. The child was healthy and quiet tempered. The parents were happy.

A year passed quickly, and Maria now wanted a daughter. But on the fourth day after Christmas in 1927 I was born. It happened to be very cold both outside and inside the house, and in the first days of my life I fell ill. The parents rubbed my chest with turpentine and goose grease. They hoped that the illness would pass soon but the coughing and the wheezes only grew worse.

It was only on January 20<sup>th</sup> that they came to believe that I would live and had my birth recorded in the church and had me baptized for good measure. I would feel the impact of the illness my entire life.

It is possible that not only the cold or the infection affected my health but also my mother's physical condition that had been undermined by all the hard work. This found its reflection in a photograph made by a not-so skilled traveling photographer.

*The picture was made without any special preparation at the background of a gaudily painted canvass with two swans that looked more like geese, a gazebo, and a puddle that was supposed to represent a pond. Philipp is sitting in a chair. Tall and thin, Maria is standing at his side. She is poorly dressed. Father is wearing a military uniform. He is also thin. I am sitting in his lap. My big head with snow-white hair attracts the eye. It seems to be inclined by no accident, so thin is the neck that barely can hold it. Also striking are my incredibly thin legs. I look sad and sort of pained. Vyacheslav (Vechik) is standing tall. His face is sunburnt. He is not holding onto his mother, an independent boy. The picture was made in the summer of 1928.*



How much Maria has changed in the past few years! Where is that beautiful girl that we see in the photos at the time when she was going to marry Andryusha who waited in vain for her in America? The children made Maria happy but her dream still remained a dream. And she decided to make another attempt. The third child must be a girl! And on the second day after Christmas in 1929 she gave birth to another boy – Gennadi.

Taxes were growing, and the price of cattle in the vicinity was low. To be able to pay new taxes Philipp decided to sell a one-year old bull calf. He learnt that prices in the city of Bezhitsa were much higher than at the Roslavl or Zhukovka markets. The trip for the calf would be a long one, though, about 70 km.

At daybreak Philipp harnessed the horse, tied the calf to the wagon and left for the city hoping to reach by dusk the house of Uncle Farnz's friends who continued to spend summers with their families at the Kamenetski estate. It was a tiresome trip but Philipp was glad to make it well before dark. However, instead of a warm welcome the hosts expressed great surprise at his arrival since he had never visited them before. They were surprised to learn that he had come in a horse-driven wagon and not by train. They believed it only when they came out to see for themselves. But when they saw a big bull calf tied to the wagon and learnt that Philipp wanted to spend the night, and when they pictured what their nice yard would look like the following morning, they were outraged. They could not understand how it was even possible to get this idea! No, absolutely not! They suggested that Philipp should go to an inn since the stench from the horse, the calf and the manure around the house was totally unacceptable. At first, Philipp was taken aback by such reception. Then he got angry. Where could he find an inn at this late hour! "Ok, if this is the way things are, said he shaking with rage, then I do not want to see you any more, either!"

He would hate "holiday makers" for the rest of his life. He would still be hospitable to those of them who would spend most of their "vacation" time helping him with his work.

The summer of 1929 came. The work left Maria with almost no time to spend with the children. It was then when the memorable incident with Vechik's cutting the bread and his belly took place

The year 1930 was declared the year of total collectivization. The poor, under the supervision of commissars, united in communes. Peasants of average means and the well-to-do refused to join kolkhozes and give away their equipment, horses and cows.

The Soviet government conducted active propaganda and information campaigns, increased taxes and emptied the barns to the last grain. Most peasants were certain that nothing good would come out of it: those who had not worked before would not work on collective farms, either. Some said it openly.

The Soviet government was determined to radically reform peasantry which, according to the leader of the international proletariat V. I. Lenin, "every day and every hour breeds capitalism". Many well-to-do farmers and priests sold their property and land, and left for cities. Some of the Kamenetskis' friends also left. In most cases, they did not leave their forwarding address.

It came as no surprise that Maria was not fond of her inheritance. More than that: she hated it! At times, she would suggest that they sell everything and leave for the city, for many had already been dispossessed and sent away – with their families. But the young master would not even listen. He had never had any property of his own before, and finally he lucked out! Sure, he had had to work for it. But what an inheritance! Not a penny to his name, and suddenly a pound! How could he give up his own happiness? Why on green earth? He had paid all the taxes. The first, the flat one, and the second, and still there was something left in the barns! The mill was a great help. After all, he was just a farm hand, he had not exploited anyone. He would not be dispossessed. He was going nowhere; he would not sell his property! "Just have a look at yourself, at me, said he to Maria, are we the exploiters? We work like slaves. From dawn to dusk! Not a day of rest, be it winter or summer. And we already have three children".

Still, the atmosphere of hostility was becoming more and more palpable, like the inclement weather of the coming autumn or the cold of the next hungry winter.

This is what my good acquaintance in the village of Ryabchi, the daughter of my mother's best friend, Maria Egorovna Akulenkova told me about those hard times in the same Dubrovka District:

“Our family lived in the village of Aleshnya. We were well-to-do. My father, Egor, was industrious, hardworking, and apt to any trade. We had a big house, outbuildings, a steam mill, a fine horse - his name was Shorokh - for going out, and a workhorse; arable land and a meadow; a cow, sheep and pigs, chickens and geese. All this required a lot of work and care.

In mid-September they began to organize a kolkhoz. My parents were offered to join it. But how can one give up everything that has been earned by hard work? There is so much work, anyway, what’s the need for the collective farm? Mother – Antonina Sergeevna – takes care of the house and also has three kids on her hands. But the Soviet government said: “If you do not want to join of your own will, we will make you!” We paid one tax, and they imposed another. We paid. The barns were swept clean. Nothing left. But there’s still the mill: we will work and get through. I was eight years old at the time.

One day I came into the house: Ma is crying! Ma, why are you crying? She says: they took Dad. I wondered: took how? Where? He did not come home that night.

They also took our two horses and a big pig – of some special breed. They took them to the village of Zhukovo, to the kolkhoz “Free Path”; confiscated the mill, the house and the outbuildings; harnessed Shorokh, tied the cow to the cart, and the pig, too. They did not include them in the receipt, though, but made Ma sign the paper that she would come every day to Zhukovo to take care of her own cattle. So Ma went and took care of them. We stayed at home, one smaller than the other: I was 8, brother Vaska – 5, Volodka was not one year old yet, I rocked him in the cradle.

They sent a man from the city to be the kolkhoz chairman - one the “twenty five thousand”<sup>17</sup>. He moved into our house; took up our sitting room; moved us to the “shelf” – the wooden platform behind the oven. Our homemade chest of drawers and the clock, the round one, that struck the hour, were confiscated. They took them without any documents and left, just like that. God bless that chairman! He said: “Sergeevna, do not go Zhukovo any more to look after your cattle! If they get sick, your children will be left without their mother! They will say you yourself poisoned the cattle!” He was sorry for us.

So, we lived on the “shelf” for some time. Then the day came when we were driven from there, too! Our Ma took us to a close-by village, Lyubimovka, to her brother Sanka who lived with her grandfather. The government imposed one flat tax on him, then another. The barns were cleaned empty. Ma’s brother was a sober man, a teetotaler. Had he drunk, it would have been easier for him. He was dispossessed. We were tossed out from his house. Ma could not find a room to rent: people were afraid. They could be accused of helping the kulaks! The government was saying at that time: “The people and the Party are one! Have more hatred for the kulaks! It is they, the exploiters, who are not letting our people live well and happily!” Well, Uncle Sanka was dispossessed, all the property taken; he was evicted, not sent away but made to fell trees in the forest. We found refuge in Aleshnya again. Our former neighbors let us live in their bathhouse.

One day Uncle Sanka comes into the bathhouse and climbs up into the attic. I remember his hands; they were horrible to look at, so bruised they were. He only says to me hurriedly: “Manya, do not be afraid! Do not be afraid!” I ran to Ma: “Uncle Sanka has come and climbed into the attic!” By dark he climbed down and lay on the shelf. Someone passes by – up he goes onto the oven<sup>18</sup> all shaking of fear. When it got dark, he went to Lyubimovka, said goodbye to his wife, kissed the kids and left. He has not been seen since.

We went on living there for a while, Tolik, and then we moved back to Ryabchi. Our relatives let us stay in an unfinished barn. One wall was missing, and there was no ceiling. We fixed it using some boards and logs that we fastened with braces. We papered the walls with newspapers. We began to live there. But how to live? We were allotted no land. Only wasteland; a piece here, a piece there. Not enough to survive.

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<sup>17</sup> The party sent 25 thousand factory workers, communists, from cities to the country side to organize kolkhozes

<sup>18</sup> Russian oven is a big structure. It takes up a significant part of the room it is in; it is used for cooking and heating and has enough space on top to sleep several persons.



Two years had passed when we received a letter from Father. Come, he wrote. As a good worker, he was granted a “free” exile. That is he was free to go to the forest to work and report once a month to the authorities that he had not escaped. His exile was on the Northern Dvina River, 120 km from Arkhangelsk . So we went to him by train to Arkhangelsk, and then on the open deck of a loaded barge. There were three of us: I, my brother Volodka and Ma. Vaska was left with the relatives: he was too weak. In his three years of life he had never eaten properly!

Even before we reached Arkhangelsk, Ma was told that Pa had already rebuilt a mill, and for that they had given him a house. The house was empty and there was not much to eat. But in the woods there were mushroom and berries beyond count! Father got a rifle and a concertina. Man does not live by bread alone! But mushrooms and berries were the only things that were not lacking! I even took the blueberries I picked to the river: I sold them at one ruble for three glasses. Now people say: we should not make children work, they are too small. For instance, you, Tolik, would you send your granddaughter Anka to work? When I was 10, I was sent to pick berries, to go to the wharf, to walk 18 km to where my father worked. I used to walk through the woods alone without seeing a single human being to bring Pa whatever food we had: soup, rusks... Surely my Ma and Pa were worried...”

“Of course, they were, Maria, I bet they were! There were many former convicts around. All kinds of people...”

“No, Tolik, there were no bad incidents.”

“What does it tell us, Maria? That most of the dispossessed kulaks were decent and honest people...”

“In the summer Father was sent to make hay. He had a small booth there to hide from mosquitoes. We used to heat it a little and sleep there. In those places there were no scythes like ours. People used big sickles. Pa made a real scythe and a snath; and became the best hay maker. They cut grass there in the morning, and in the evening it is already in the haystack. The hay is woven around a cross-piece, like we do when we clamp potatoes. A pole is dug in the ground with a cross-piece, and the hay is woven around it without compressing. So, Pa was making hay in the summer. When it got colder, he started repairing the mill. The mill was not working because the miller became blind, and there was no replacement for him. Pa fixed the mill and became a miller. I remember when the blind miller was brought to check if Egor had done everything correctly. Father stopped the mill, and the miller started touching the millstones, the cams, and the flour. And he was satisfied and praised the job well done. That’s how we lived.

But there was no meat, no milk. And brother Volodka fell sick. The doctors said: if you do not leave this place, he will die; and prescribed him a pitcher of skim milk, not even whole one. Thank God: father’s good work was taken into account, and he was released after serving 4 years instead of 5.

We returned to our home village in the autumn of 1934. That was the time of hunger. Ryabchi’s mill had been brought to complete ruin, the dam had been neglected, and the spring flood had broken it. It made more sense to make a damn and build a mill further up the Belizna River – near the village of Chot. They came and said: “Come on, Egor, let’s go. Only you can do this”. So he went, and did it, and took us to Chot.

He started to grind grain, and we survived the famine. But as soon as the mill began to work, people turned up to oversee it and then to work it themselves. However, without Father the mill quickly fell into disrepair. He fixed it again, and we moved back. And the whole thing was repeated again. Then we moved back to Ryabchi, into a little hut.”

“I know that hut, Maria. The Byrdikovs lived there in 1936. Their small boy, Petka, was an avid and skilled fisherman. And aunt Dunya came to visit them often. She also used to visit my father – to take a hair of the dog that bit her. Father was a veterinarian assistant and had pure alcohol. Once he poured her 100 grams and said: “Add a little water”. “No, no need to, Kirillych, let it play a little.” And gulped it all, and then choked, turned white and fainted. Father picked her up, took her out into the garden and did mouth-to-mouth, and Dunya came back to life. My

father, too. He knew: he would not have gotten off lightly. Considering that he had already served 4 years out of his 8-year sentence building Belomorkanal<sup>19</sup>.

“So, Tolik, I have counted: this is the 18<sup>th</sup> house that I live in now. Father had to do all kinds of jobs. He tended cow herds, made wagon wheels and sleighs. Once, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, no - 15<sup>th</sup>, 1937, people were celebrating the Pancake Week<sup>20</sup>, and men were wandering around the village curing their hangover. The kolkhoz chairman came to us and asked Father to make a spring-mounted buggy. At that moment two men wearing leather jackets drove up. They came into the house. The inside was all papered with newspapers. They liked the house and said: “Look at these kulaks! It’s all the same to them. They have made it all comfortable for themselves again! Where is the owner?” “He is in the backyard chopping wood, said Mama, go, Manya, call your father.” I went out and said: “Pa, there’s two men, they are asking for you”.

“Now, Manya, this is it”, and Father drove the ax into the log with all his force. (Maria’s voice quavered and tears streamed down her cheeks; it was bitter to remember the past).

We came into the house. The men began a search. They did not say what they were searching for. And there was not much to search: we had not acquired anything yet. We did not have a cow. Still, they were looking for something, even looked under the floor boards. They found two photographs; one was of my godfather Ivanov. He had a shop here, across the street. “Who is this?” they ask. “This is the children’s godfather.” “Where does he live now?” “In Bezhitsa, we say; he has two sons”.

They took the photo; and took away our father. On the 18<sup>th</sup> Mother went to Dubrovka and brought some rusks for him. On the same day the flood broke the dam, the lake was gone, and there was no crossing over the river. The water swept our chickens and our rooster, and they got stuck in the bushes. I went to bring them back. The next day Ma returned. Dad was sentenced to 8 years. Ma was at the trial. It took place in Smolensk.

You know, Tolik, dreams do come true. Ma was at the trial, and I was looking after the children. And I had a dream about Dad being sentenced to 8 years. And when the door opened and mother came in, I asked: “Ma, is it 8 years?” “8. How do you know?” “I was told in a dream.”

Since then they started harassing me at school. Especially, one of the teachers, Kuznetsov. Later he drowned in our lake. Fell out of the boat.

He gave me 1<sup>21</sup> in zoology, and I did not even take the exams. And I did not make 8th grade. Kolka Byrdikov, on the other hand, finished 7th grade with good marks. He applied for admission to 8th grade but was denied: a son of “the enemy of the people”! He wrote to Krupskaya<sup>22</sup>, she ordered to have him admitted. But he was not.

In 1941 all youngsters were sent to dig trenches but I was not allowed. But a month passed, and I was entrusted with driving the kolkhoz cattle to the East.”

“They must have been in a pickle by then, and they forgot who you were. And they knew all too well that you were no enemy, nor was your father, nor were your relatives. My father, who had been dispossessed and convicted, drove the cattle as far as the Volga River. At the beginning of 1942 he was drafted to the army. He was already 44 then. He said to them: “Why are drafting me? I am an enemy of the people; I was convicted of a political crime, article 58 of the Criminal Code. ” “Half the people here have Article 58,” was the answer. And he defended the communist regime till the summer of 1945.

“Well, my dad did not live to see the Victory Day. At the time of his rehabilitation we were informed that he had died in March or April, they did not say where. The region was not indicated, either. Before that we had been told that he was building some factory in Krasnodar.”

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<sup>19</sup> White Sea canal

<sup>20</sup> The last week before the Great Lent during which the Russians celebrate the end of the winter and, traditionally, bake blini (pancakes).

<sup>21</sup> In school a five-grade scale was used, 1 being the lowest

<sup>22</sup> Lenin’s wife; she was deputy minister of education at the time

“Maria, it was probably at the time when the Germans were advancing to seize the Caucasus. The situation was critical, and all the “enemies” were executed because there was nowhere to evacuate them to. No man, no problem!”

“One more thing, Tolik. In order to help Dad after his first arrest, Mom made the round of the nearby villages to collect peasants’ signatures in his support. The signatures were rejected under the pretext that we had bought them. At the same time an article was printed in the newspaper that Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova was riding around the villages in a carriage driven by trotters and agitating people against collective farms. Investigators came and asked: “Where are the trotters?” She said: “We had a trotter by the name of Shorokh but he was taken and now is with the militia.” “And where are your sons?” “Here is my family: little Vaska in the cradle, and here is Volodka.”

By the way, the entire part of the village that was by the lake was called “genteel”.

Here is one more thing that I want to say. When we came back from the evacuation, I was made kolkhoz chairman, and I coped well. I was respected by the farm workers. They would always turn to me for advice on everything work related, be it the ploughing (Manya, how much land do we plough?), or the hay making (where do we make a haystack?). And did they work well! Ploughed up to half a hectare! I remember you neighbor, Polyukha, picking up a haycock and dashing with it like an arrow; such a good worker she was.”

“Maria, tell me about your son Vassili.”

- He was born in 1929. Finished 7 grades, worked in the kolkhoz. While in the army, he learnt the profession of a driver. When he came home, he worked as a driver first in the kolkhoz and then in Dubrovka for the town executive committee. Someone suggested that he should join the party.

He collected the recommendations and appeared before the party bureau of his home kolkhoz. Everybody knows everybody, no strangers there. But the most “informed” comrade asks: Vassili Egorovich, where is your father?” “My father, Petrovich, is where you sent him.” Eventually, his application was denied, and he lived his life as a non-member.”

There were reasons for the denial. He knew from his mother that Petrovich was one of “the vigilant” who gave false testimony to the NKVD<sup>23</sup> about enemies of the people. It became known at the trial. Besides class hatred, Petrovich had a personal grudge. Both Egor and Petrovich were avid hunters. Both had hounds. They hunted at the same places and usually on the same days: at the start of the season, at first snow, at newly-fallen snow, during spring and autumn bird migrations. One incident made them enemies for life.

Egor’s dog dislodged a hare and started chasing it. Egor fired and, according to him, wounded the hare. But then Petrovich’s dog joined the chase. And since it happened to be closer to the hare, it caught and choked it. The other dog also sank its teeth into the hare. Petrovich got to the scene first and kicked Egor’s dog away from the hare; and fired a shot for good measure. Egor insisted that the hare was his because it was he who had wounded it, and his dog would have caught up with it anyway. He behaved so assertively that Petrovich gave up the kill but promised to make Egor pay dearly.

He did not procrastinate with making good on his threat. He talked two other men from the village, one of them Egor’s relative, by the way, into signing a report to the NKVD about harmful activities of his hunting rival. The reaction did not take long. The enemy of the people was quickly neutralized. But even if there had been no denunciation then, a miller, a mill owner, would have hardly survived since the party and the government pursued the policy of liquidating the class of the kulaks.

Nowadays they say that the Motherland needed to do it, that its strengthening required hardworking people and slave free labor. There was also a belief that it would make sense to get rid of the “seed” of the kulaks since it could be hardly expected to feel love and loyalty for the party and government. Under such inhuman conditions the kulaks’ wives tried to raise

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<sup>23</sup> People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Soviet ministry of the interior

hardworking and honest citizens capable of understanding what was happening in their lives and what was causing changes in them. They were taught to remain open and compassionate to other people's grief and hardships. Not to live embittered against the entire world. And be an example in this life to others and, possibly, a reproach to their powerful persecutors. For it was heard more than once: "Look at these kulaks. They got comfortable again! It's all like water off a duck's back!"

How did Antonina Sergeevna manage to survive in the wild taiga with three children? Only through labor, love of the children, inventiveness, belief that they would get through whatever happened and that the Lord and the Blessed Virgin would not abandon them and would send them their blessing. But how to live without shelter, land, education and profession in a village? She had to learn a seamstress trade. Without teachers or manuals. I witnessed myself a woman who came to her and asked her to make her a blouse. Without any measuring tape the fabric was cut out in a matter of minutes.

The sewing machine replaced the steam mill. How did the Soviet government let it happen? And as soon as Sergeevna (and many other kulak families) got herself a place to live, it always happened so that only at her house various representatives of the authorities could stay – militiamen, public prosecutors, people on official business, judges, propagandists. The reason was that the house was always clean and tidy, the food acceptable, the reception friendly, and no payment was necessary, of course. We had the same experience. And we could often hear them say: "How nice it is here! Time for you to be dispossessed again!" The latter was particularly "pleasant" for the hosts to hear. Interestingly, the place to stay was often suggested to the officials by those who assisted in dispossessing. They knew very well how to earn recognition with the "petty elite".

To conclude: this conversation took place at the time when Maria was gravely ill. Her health deteriorated rapidly. It became hard for her to milk the cow. The neighbor helped her. She sold the cow. Her granddaughter did her best to get her back on her feet. But her feet, or rather her legs, were failing. The mind and memory were phenomenal, and the understanding and critical perception of the reality were impeccable. She was the first person who said to me: "Tolik, you realize that you and I are victims of political persecution, and we must be rehabilitated. I have read about it in the newspaper and I have already sent an inquiry to the FSB. I am now preparing papers for the court for reimbursement of all that was illegally taken from us in 1930."

Almost every day we visited Maria and her husband Andrei. Her legs were impossible to look at without a shudder. She was in pain day and night. She was unable to walk. She suffered for more than a year. But we never saw her fretful or irritated, or discontented. She and her family had gone through many ordeals, and in the end fate took no mercy on her, did not bring her the long-awaited happiness and fortune. They were both sick at the same time, she and her husband, lying in two separate beds. Maria passed away on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005, one day after her husband.

Maria Egorovna and her mother, Antonina Sergeevna, were the most remarkable women that I had the fortune to meet, to live beside and communicate with. They were worthy descendants of those skilled craftsmen and hard workers whom the Soviet government exterminated labelling them "the kulaks".

But let us return to the Kamentsi-Novikov family.

Philipp never took to reading. He did not read, nor was he interested in, the works of the founders of Marxism – Leninism. He did not know, and nobody told him, that knowledge was power. Decisions of the party and government did not attract his attention. He thought that the dispossessions and requisitions might in certain cases be justified. For there were quite a few bloodsuckers who exploited poor peasants. But all this had nothing to do with him, didn't it?

In the dead hours of a dark night, when the snowstorm was wailing, when a good master would not let his dog out of the house, four men in two sleighs drove up to the Kamenetski house. The dog began to bark at the top of its voice, but a shot was fired, and the barking became

a yelp and then fell silent. There was loud knocking at the door. While Maria was lighting the kerosene lamp, the door started shaking from being banged on with something heavy. Philipp put on his pants in a hurry. His question: "Who is this?" was answered with swear words and demands to open the door at once or else it would be knocked down. Four men clad in leather jackets entered. They demanded that the hosts surrender the revolver that they knew they had and be seated. Without introducing themselves or explaining anything they began to conduct a search: they turned things upside down, shook them, tore apart, probed, tossed on the ground. Little Gennadi started weeping. Mother approached his bed, bent down to calm him down and groped under the pillow for the revolver. She waited for the moment when the NKVD men went to the sitting room and threw the revolver out of the window into the snow. The visitors selected some letters and photographs and began the questioning and drawing up of the report. I was awake looking at the parents' scared pale faces in the dim light of the smoking kerosene lamp. The feeling of fear and helplessness stayed in my memory for ever.

The questionnaire for persons arrested and detained by the NKVD was filled out. It contained a warning about criminal responsibility for providing false information.

Last name: Novikov, name and patronymic: Philip Kirillovich, citizenship: USSR, ethnicity: Russian, place of registration: Roslavl Region, Dubrovski District, village of Radichi. Year of birth: 1898, education: village school.

Wife: Maria, age 33, occupation: farmer, address: Kamenetsi farmstead.

Son Vyacheslav – 5 years old, son Anatoli – 3 years, son Gennadi – 1 year.

Party membership: n/m, profession: farming, civil service: Red Army, private.

Property: 8 desyatinas of land, 2 meadows, horse -1, cow, small livestock, house, yard with outbuildings; work: hired farmhand from 1914 to 1918; enlisted in the Army as a private.

Arrested on 01.29.30. Arresting officer, warrant issued by, warrant # - GPU<sup>24</sup> investigator

Place of the arrest: Kamenetski farmstead, Dubrovski District.

Signature of the person arrested Ph. Novikov

WARRANT # 46 Valid till 01.31.1930.

Issued by the Dubr DEC<sup>25</sup> (the entries were made in a sloppy and illegible manner; possibly, the officers were in a hurry or did not consider the warrant as something that was really needed. Or maybe the hand got tired: so many enemies of the people to deal with.

To whom..... Rank.... Last name, first name, patronimic.....to Golovanov Fedor. On the Kamenetski farm.....at....Novikov Philipp...Kir

For the purpose of discovering .....

Regardless of search results Novikov Philipp Koreevi ( ? ! ) has to be detained

Chief (Bold signature, no full name and no date)

#### Inventory

Of the property of citizen Novikov Philipp Kirillovich as of January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1930

House with an inner porch 12 x9 ar<sup>26</sup> 300 rubles.

Barn, wood. 7 x 7 ar 50 rub.

Barn, wood. 7 x 8 ap 60 rub.

Outbuildings 150 rub.

Bathroom, wood. 7 x7 ar 50 rub.

Shed, wood. 25 x10 100 rub.

Horse 6 years old, thoroughbred 200 rub.

<sup>24</sup> State Political Directorate, intelligence and secret police, part of the NKVD

<sup>25</sup> Probably District Executive Committee

<sup>26</sup> Short for "arshin" (= 0.771 m. = 2 ft. 4 in.)

Cow, 6 calves, grey	150 rub.
Pigs 2, thoroughbred	100 rub.
Bull calf, 7months, thoroub.	40 pyб.
Sheep 5, plain	15 rub.
Rye bread in grain	50 rub.
Oats, plain	30 poods
Barley	30 pood.
Pork lard – 4 poods	160 rub.
Gammons 8	160 rub.
Bees, 7 hives	105 rub.
Metal wagon	40 rub.
Chickens 26, 1 rub.50 kop. each,	30r.
Wall clock 1	30 r.
For the total amount	1895 ru.
Investigator	signature

Extract from minutes # 15  
Of the meeting of the OGPU<sup>27</sup> Troika<sup>28</sup> for the Western Region of March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1930

Heard:

Case # 10214 charging  
Orekhov Roman Zakharovich, Orekhov Petr Vasilievich and other 12 persons with offences falling under Art. 58, para 10 and 11 of the CC<sup>29</sup> of the RSFSR

Decided:

To sentence  
Orekhov Roman Zakharovich  
Orekhov Petr Vasilievich to 10 years of imprisonment each in a concentration camp;  
Fomin Ivan Mikhailovich,  
Krasnosheev Semen Samuilovich,  
NOVIKOV PHILIPP KIRILLOVICH TO 8 YEARS OF IMPRISONMENT EACH IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP,  
Larichev Mikhail Feoktistovich,  
Larichev Cemen Mikhailivich,  
Makarov Evtikhiy Pavlovich to 5 years of imprisonment each in a concentration camp,  
Makarov Pavel Antonovich to 3 years of imprisonment in a concentration camp,  
Begunin Alexey Fedorovich to 3 years of imprisonment in a concentration camp suspended,  
the sentence for all ten beginning from February 2 , 1930.

The secretary of the Troika (Sprawling signature made of three strokes with a bold flourish at the front and a straight long tail at the end).

My father was arrested for subversive activity against the Soviet Government and agitation against collective farms. He was alleged to say that “we are not going to have a chicken egg there to drink”. I doubt that he was saying that out loud. Probably, he was thinking that. In any case, his words became prophetic as if he saw it in a crystal ball. After decades of collective farming, poultry farms would be few, but even those few would not produce eggs. Chickens would normally die young. Those who survived would eat eggs themselves: as soon as a hen left

<sup>27</sup> Joint State Political Directorate

<sup>28</sup> A group of three people working together

<sup>29</sup> Criminal Code

the nest, another one, that had been patiently waiting for her moment, would gobble the egg up. Which made producers' cooperatives to purchase eggs for the cities from private individuals.

This is how Philipp, according to his co-villagers, asked the village shop manager to sell him a pair of socks: "Vera, give me those socks over there!" The manager warned him: "Kirillovich, those are exchanged for eggs only!" To which he said: "No, Vera, I need them for my feet!"<sup>30</sup>

This funny story became known to everybody in the vicinity, and even 22 years later a not-so-old man retold it to me as if he were its witness!

That group case of "the enemies of the people" was finally completed with the conclusion made by Bryansk Region prosecutor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class State Councilor N. V. Vikulin, of August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1989, concerning criminal case # 12557 where it was written:

On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1930, P. K. Novikov was arrested and charged with anti-Soviet agitation that he allegedly engaged in for a number of years.

Having found Novikov guilty of the offense provided for by Article 58, para 10 and 11, of the CC of the RSFSR, the OGPU troika for the Western Region on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1930, sentenced him to 8 years of concentration camp.

As evidenced from the case files, the actions of Novikov Philipp Kirillovich did not contain the essential elements of the offense, and therefore, his case falls under Article 1 of the Decree of the Supreme Council of the USSR of January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989, "On Additional Measures to Restore Justice With Regard to the Victims of the Persecution that Took Place in the Periods of the 30-s and 40-s and the Beginning of the 50-s".

Senior assistant prosecutor V. K. Potapov

Assistant Chief of the Administration of the KGB of the USSR for the Bryansk Region  
V. K. Parfenov

The Bryansk Region Prosecutor's Office issued a document certifying that the out-of-court case of P. K. Novikov was declared null and void, and he was considered as rehabilitated by its decision of August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1989.

Philipp Kirillovich Novikov never learnt this good news: he died in his little house on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1976, in the village of Ryabchi of the Dubrovski District, 22 km from his native village of Radichi and 15 km from the once prosperous Kamentski estate.

No one but me in his family came to know it.

I, Anatoli Philippovich Novikov, deprived, when being a minor, of the custody of the father baselessly persecuted on political grounds, was recognized as a victim of political persecution and was rehabilitated.

(Certificate of rehabilitation of 06.05.2002 # 13-121-02 issued by the Bryansk Region Prosecutor's Office)

### In the home village of the Kamenetski family

During the time of the NEP<sup>31</sup> the family of Matvei Iossifovich Kamenetski in Aleksandrovka was doing quite well. They had land; the children had grown up. With Karl's money they bought a threshing machine, a winnower, and other equipment; got thoroughbred cattle: a couple of horses, a couple of cows, two sows, a few turkeys. Vladimir had married a Polish woman, Gelena, and left for Leningrad where worked as a turner at the factory. Mikhail had finished his army service and had come back home. He was still a bachelor. Iossif, Napoleon, Kazimira worked on the farm. And Matvei himself with his wife were still of help. The crops were good, the cattle were purebred, and the equipment was new. The family operated

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<sup>30</sup> Untranslatable play on words: "eggs" in Russian also mean "testicles"

<sup>31</sup> New Economic Policy (1921-1928) represented a temporary retreat from the policy of extreme centralization aimed at reviving the economy

the thresher and the winnower not only for themselves; they leased them to other farmers. Several times they were granted prizes in Mogilev as an exemplary business. It seemed things could not be better until the family suffered a great loss: Anna, the industrious and sagacious lady of the house, passed away. The head of the family, Matvei Iossifovich, followed her less than a year later. Iossif left to live with his young peasant wife.

Starting from the spring of 1929 in Belorussia, as in Central Russia, the Soviet Government started its fight against the “bloodsuckers” – the kulaks.

The persecution did not spare city-dwelling Vladimir Matveevich Kamenetski who worked till 1937 at the Putilovski plant in Leningrad. His family lived at 76 Kurlyandskaya street, ap. 2, near the Narva Gate. Across the street there was a large mechanized canteen where his wife Gelya<sup>32</sup> worked as a cashier. By 1930 their daughter Stasya was at college, son Konstantin was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, son Mechislav was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

But even there the Soviet government was looking for enemies of the people and successfully found them in numbers required by established quotas. Stasya was arrested with a group of other students, charged with the preparation of an armed uprising and shot. Stasya was 21 years old.

## Hard Times

I, Anatoli Novikov, am sitting with Natalia Pavlovna Novikova, my cousin sister, at her house in the village of Sesha, Dubrovka District, and together we reminiscing about the times long gone. She is the last witness of those trying years in the Novikov family. It is a thousand pities that it is not possible to talk with other relatives and listen to their stories about how people survived in the crucible of the planetary insane experiment conducted in Russia. Even my close relatives have remained unknown to me partly as a result of my youthful carelessness, partly because of the necessity to forget one’s own past, not to make a show of it so that it would not do harm to your children, relatives, and friends.

I was interested in the period of persecution of the kulaks and what Natasha remembered about the lives of her and our parents, about living in those hard times.

In 1930, she was 8 years old. Her father, Pavel Kirillovich, my father’s brother, lived in the village of Radichi, 5 km from Sesha and 3 km from the Kamenetski estate. He had a big family but he was the only one who worked. He managed to provide for his family quite well working at the watermill of his brother, Philipp. In January 1929, however, Philipp, my father, was arrested for subversive activity against the Soviet government and agitation against collective farms.

“Natasha, how many children were there in the family? Nine?”

“Misha was born first, in 1920, I in 1922, Shurka in 1924 (died of meningitis), Verka (died at age 16), then Tolik, Grinka, Vitka, and, finally, Kolya and Afanas.”

“And how many children did you have when my mother moved in with you?”

“Six.”

“And how many are still living?”

“Two: I and Tolik. Here is the photo of Papka, you and Verka. She was also born in 1927. You are sitting in Father’s lap. You are three years and a half old.”

“Natasha, the Kamenetski had a big farm. I know that your father helped his brother Phillip there.”

“Yes, he worked at the mill, fixing the millstones, grinding or doing other jobs. They were not only grinding grain but also fulling cloth. There were two working wheels: one for the mill, the other for the fullery. Later on, brother Arseni moved his house and family to your estate.”

“Natasha, what do you remember about the Kamenetski estate?”

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<sup>32</sup> Diminutive for Gelena



“I remember the big house and the rubber plant that was in all the rooms. And the lake. The outbuildings near the house. And the garden all around. One kilometer from your house, down the river, was the village of Kokhonovo.”

“Natasha, what became of the Kamenetski estste?”

“The house was disassembled and moved to Dubrovka. It became a militia station. It was a good house.”

“And the barns?”

“The barns were taken apart by the Khonovo villagers. Now the village is no longer there, either.”

“In 1937 I visited my birthplace. I stayed for a few days at uncle Arseny’s, my father’s brother. I saw our destroyed family estate. By the way, my parents never went back there again. How and when did Arseni build his house?”

“Your father moved his house and his family. He worked at the mill, too.”

“When was it?”

“I was already big enough to remember. I was 6 or 7 (so, probably it was 1928). His house stood close to yours.

“I visited that house. Uncle was away at that time. He was working at a mine somewhere. There were his wife Aksyuta (for some reason I did not like that name, her formal name must have been Aksinya) and two little girls, 10 and 12 years old. I tended the herd with them: a cow and a few sheep. There they taught me how to play “knives”. From different positions you were to throw a knife so that the blade would go into the ground with the knife staying upright. What surprised me, a boy, was that I was put for the night into the same bed with the girls! That was somewhat unusual. I also saw his house and garden. There was not a trace of our house left. Only the neglected garden. No lake, no watermill, no outbuildings. I think even the river was not there. Only the tree alley, very rarified at that, suggested which way was the house. The fields were overgrown with birch trees 2-3 meters tall. In the distance, I saw dark crude huts of Kokhonovo.

It seemed that all the possessions of the gentry and kulaks did do not any good to anyone. The new reality did not bring poor peasants anything substantial, either. But I had my balalaika with me which I played to sing patriotic songs, and it seemed that in that vast deserted expanse, free from kulaks’ estates, I could feel how really “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<sup>33</sup>”.

“Natasha, after the arrest, how did we get to your place in Radichi?”

“Your mother came running through mud late at night to our house and cried: “Pavel, what do I do now? Please help me bring the children and some things!” Father harnessed a couple of horses and drove with her to bring the kids. You did not have the cows or horses any more. They brought all the three of you. “Pavel, said your mother, tomorrow early in the morning go to the estate again and bring whatever you can and whatever is left after the Kokhnovo villagers’ looting, but right now take me to Sesha to the train: I am going to Leningrad.”

Father drove her to the station. Helped her get on the train, and off she went. She had nothing with her, just a handbag. The next day father went back to your house and brought the things the villagers had been unable to take. You, Tolik, and Vechik did not cry. But Gennadi did: “Where is my Ma?” My father had stayed at your house often, and Genya thought he was his dad and said: “This is my Papka.”

To that my younger brother Shurka would say: “No, this is my Papka!” Father would calm them down: “Do not fight. You are all mine. Come to me. Sit on my lap: you here, and you there.” By the way, Shurka was an agile and brave boy but he died of meningitis, after bathing in the bathhouse. Afanas died when he was 4, Nikolai when he was 5, and my little sister died, too.

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<sup>33</sup> Popular song about the socialist Motherland

We, the kids, were all good friends, we did not argue or fight. Vechik, when somebody was coming, would ask: “Auntie, it is not for us they are coming?” Mother would say: “Climb onto the stove, quickly! And do not look out from behind the chimney! Be quiet!”

“Natasha, who worked in your family, who helped? You had nine children, one smaller than the other.”

“Misha and I stayed with the little kids, when Mom and Dad left for work. Mom would instruct: “See to it, Natasha, that the kids do not fall and become hunchbacked!” Mom had to work the most, of course, but I helped her. To feed the kids is one thing but to bathe that entire crowd on Saturdays! Papka would heat up the stove or the bathhouse. And we bathed the children, one after another, until we washed them all. Father was the only one who worked in the field. If he was in need of help, Mom could do any job. She gave birth to me in the field when she was tying sheaves. It was on St. Peter’s Day, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1922.

Mother would get up early, fire up the stove and go to do her chores. She would say to me: “Go lie with them and see that they do not fall.” If the kids got rowdy, I would say: “If you are too loud, the militia will hear and take you away!” They would quiet down. I remember Dad joking once: “I am going to the market and sell some of the kids. Who will go with me?” Vechik protested: “I will not go!” When Father came back, Vechik asked: “Why have you not sold them?” “There were no buyers. No one wanted them.” But he got a candy for everyone. The candies were long ones, with tassels”.

“Natasha, did you ever see uncle Franz, my mother’s uncle?”

“I saw him once, when he visited us. Tall, slim, in a sheepskin coat with gathers. Light carriage, with a suspension, and a fine white horse. Its mane was also white. Its name was “Devochka.<sup>34</sup>” I do not remember Uncle Franz’s face, though.”

“For how long did we live in your house?”

“The entire summer.”

“Do you know where Arseni moved to?”

“He lived in Kokhonovo for several years. He had to go to Zatishie to work: they were mining phosphorites there. There was a mill, too, which ground phosphorites. There is nothing there now. Neither the mines, nor the mill.

In Kokhonovo, in the spring that followed your father’s arrest, the dam was destroyed by a flood. There was nobody to watch the rising water, especially after dark. Nobody to block the gullies, build up the dam, timely open the gates to drain the water. There was nobody to maintain what still worked, let alone restore it. So, the estate was gone, as well as the mill, and many fields were overgrown with bushes.

The store was gone, the road disappeared, and how should the two girls go to school? So, once again Arseni had to move his house and barn to the district center – Rognedino. But it did not happen at once. For the rest of my life I remembered what happened to Aksyuta’s mother.

One day she came to visit us together with her granddaughter Taissia. We sat under a willow tree. She treated us to sunflower seeds. I was sitting on one side of the tree, Taissia on the other, and her grandma right under the tree. All of a sudden, a thunderstorm broke out. A lightning struck the tree, splintered it, but we, the girls were unscathed. But the grandma dropped dead. She had a long beautiful braid. The lightning burnt her sarafan<sup>35</sup>, too. We cried 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!” The parents dropped the flails (they were threshing grain) and ran to get the spades. They dug a hole, put her into it and covered her with soil. I do not remember how they dug her out. So, what do you think? She came to life. She would brag afterwards: “Look, girls, how beautiful my hair is now! It is so wavy!”

“Natasha, our house in Ryabchi was also struck by a lightning. It happened in the summer of 1960. While I was still a student, I got a good antenna – a 30-meter long copper wire

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<sup>34</sup> Russian for “girl”

<sup>35</sup> Long sleeveless gown

with insulators on both ends. Despite the bitter cold, I climbed an old tall linden tree and fastened one end to the top. The other end was attached to a high wooden pole. Another wire was going from the antenna through the window into the house.

All that effort spent on the antenna was due to the fact that only with a good antenna it was possible to receive multiple radio stations with a detector receiver. In the village at that time there was no radio or electricity. And how happy we were when our hopes came true. We could listen to a variety of stations, including BBC and The Voice of America which were mercilessly jammed. Over the radio we learnt the news about Stalin's death. We had to listen through the earphones, though. Several years later we replaced our receiver with a battery-operated valve receiver with a loud speaker. The antenna worked well with it, too.

One morning, around 8 o'clock, the people, who waited for the village store to be opened, which was 200 meters from our place, saw, in the thunder of a storm, a fiery column of a lightning descend on our house. It seemed to enflame the entire house. The people expected the house to catch fire like a candle.

But when, in the torrent of rain, the smoke settled, the house looked intact. My shaken up mother was standing near the house, the nettle leaves had small holes in them, and the glass in the windows was shattered. The antenna was molten. The lightning got inside, burnt the receiver, and the drops of the molten metal burnt through the rubber plant leaves. It then dashed across the room behind the stove missing, by several centimeters, mother's brother, Napoleon, who was sleeping there (he had come for a visit) and killed out kittens.

In our village there were houses that were burnt by a lightning, and two shepherds were killed in the field.

How come, Natasha, that you family managed to avoid joining the kolkhoz almost until the start of the war? How come you were not arrested and sent to the camps?"

"They did not arrest us because we had many children. In the kolkhoz we would have been unable to provide enough food for them. Father worked in the field; mother helped him. We would not have coped without our two horses. And we had only one cow before the war. I do not know how much land we had. We had some *chotki*.<sup>36</sup>

"Natasha, near your house, in the direction of Kokhonovo, was there a brick factory, or a grain barn? In 1935, we caught a baby hare and raised him. But one day we forgot to close the cage door. Before our eyes he got out, hopped past us quite slowly, but not letting us catch him, to the backyard and then towards the grain barn. He hopped away from us quicker and quicker, and we were unable to catch up with him. We were very upset: he was quite tame when we would release him from the cage inside a closed space. At that time, you were not in the collective farm yet.

"We had to join in 1936, after the last warning. Misha had finished 10<sup>th</sup> grade by that time, I had finished 6th.

So, I began to work in the kolkhoz. For an entire month I had one assignment: to harrow the fields. But I had never dealt with horses and never worked in the field. The farm workers gloated: "Finally, they have made you work!" Mother had just given birth to Vitka and was ill. And I had to earn at least 200 *trudodni* per year.<sup>37</sup> "Do not gloat, I said, I will learn!" One kind woman said to me: "I will teach how to harrow, how to cheat, how to pick your horse before the others, and how to harness it." Before then I had had to ask someone to harness the horse for me and worked all day without unharnessing it. "Natasha, why don't you unharness the horse during lunch time?" "No need to. I will lunch quickly and go back to work, or else I will not make the quota." Soon they discovered the truth: she does not know how to harness!

My friend said to me: "If we do by the rules, we will not meet the quota. So I will go first, leave a strip of the field undone – make a gap, that is; and you will harrow it after me. We'll do much as twice." I had to pull flax, too; had no skill to do that, got my fingers all messed up.

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<sup>36</sup> Old unit of area, approx.. 0,5 hectares

<sup>37</sup> Russian: literally meaning "laborday", unit of quantity and quality of labor in collective farms.

“Natasha, at that time it was almost impossible to leave a collective farm for the city, or transfer to another place of work. Farmers had no passports. But later on you worked in retail and a sewing workshop. How did you manage to do that?”

“My mother’s brother, Belugin, came to us and offered me a job in a store. I said: “I cannot. I do not know how to use an abacus. I would rather work at a sewing shop.” But my brother Misha convinced me: “It is better to be a salesperson than damage your eyesight being a seamstress.” “I will come up short, and you will have to sell the cow to make it up.” “No, you won’t! I will teach how to use an abacus.” “All right. Uncle will come back tomorrow and I will tell him that I agree.”

I told him about the abacus problem but he said: “You’ll do it in your head.” He was right. I learnt how to do it. First, Uncle would double-check, and later Misha taught me how to use an abacus.

During the first month I sold bread. I used a price table for that; I kept it under the scale. I had everything in order. I never came up short. I was thankful to Misha for his good advice. He also had a suggestion for our father: “Why do you have to toil and moil? You are a specialist in mills. It does not matter if it’s diesel operated”. “Misha, one needs to keep books there, I do not have enough education for that, just four years of a parochial school.” “I will help, I will teach you.” And he did, he taught Dad how to keep records.”

“Natasha, what time of year was it when we lived with you?”

“You spent the winter with us and maybe a part of the spring, I think.”

“So, my mother left right after Father’s arrest. But from the photo of me, Shurka and uncle Pavel we can tell that we lived with you when the weather was warm: in the spring or summer. It must have taken my mother about half a year or more to get settled in Leningrad. She could not get a job because she had no registration at her brother Vladimir’s place. And she could not get registered because she had no job. The vicious circle was finally broken when she was employed as an orderly at a mental hospital. She replaced the one who had just been killed by a patient.

Before the trip she did everything she could to alleviate her situation: she “lost” her passport in which it was indicated that she was Polish of noble descent born in the Shklov District of the Mogilev Region. She had to give the chairman of the village council some of her jewelry for that. In the new passport she was Russian, born in the village of Aleksandrovka of the Dubrovka District. Yes, I think we left your place in the spring.

I remember well the second day after our arrival in Leningrad (as to the arrival day, I do not remember it at all). Early in the morning my cousin brother Mechislav (Mechik), who was about 10 years older than me, was sent to a nearby store to buy bread. He took me with him. The store with a multitude of goods and people made an indelible impression on me. I viewed with interest one showcase after another and completely forgot about my cousin. As he did about me. After I had seen enough of the buns and cookies, I looked for Mechik but he was gone. I was three years and a half, and I began to cry. Some tender-hearted woman started asking me about my name, address, and took me outside. I said that we had only arrived the day before. She took me to the nearest militia station. People there told there not to cry, that they would find my mother. They let me sit on the window sill and gave me a handful of glued-together candies wrapped in thick gray wrapping paper. Outside was a warm sunny morning. Sparrows were chirping cheerfully in a blooming cherry tree. I calmed down. I felt good. When I saw Mechik in the doorway, I jumped down to run to him but a militiaman stopped me and commanded: “Sit still till your mother comes!”

What a nervous shock my mother must have had when Mechik came home without me: her children had just arrived, and she had already lost one of them! Everybody ran out to look for me but it was Mechik who found me first. The militia men gave me back to my mother with a warning: “If you lose your son again, we will not give him back to you!”

Merrily we strolled, hand in hand, back home. My memory retained that day, or rather a part thereof, while others left only fragments in it: the courtyard surrounded from all sides by

five-storied buildings; the street and the yeast factory in it to which apples and apple peelings were brought; the mechanized canteen where my mother would later work; the kitchen where we lived for four years (1930-1935), the “Hearth” (the kindergarten) with weekly 24-hour board and lodging, excluding Sunday; the square at the Narva Gate with the mock-up of Chelyuskin’s crew camp.

Six days a week Gennadi and I lived in the “Hearth”. I have preserved a warm memory of the place, its atmosphere, its intelligent teachers, the interesting books and fairy tales read to us, the singing and drawing lessons. There were no arguments or fights there. We liked going there. But on Sundays our life was quite different. Mother’s meals were not as nourishing as at the “Hearth”. I remember her giving me a glass of milk telling me to put crumbles of bread into it and eat it with a spoon. I was eating while she kept saying: “More bread, less milk.” She baked buns at her work at the mechanized canteen and brought them home. And she would buy milk with her meager dishwasher’s salary. Sometimes she would treat us to a slice of bread with a half meat patty. We did not have it at the “Hearth” often, either.

One night I woke up, listened and could not hear my heart beat! I thought that I had died. Mother calmed me down: “When a man’s heart stops beating, he is unable to listen or hear.”

Mama did not wash dishes for long. She was a calm, level-headed person well-versed in culinary art (thanks to Aunt Natalia). Grownup Manya was always ready to give a helping hand when it was needed: to replace someone in the kitchen or at the food dispensation counter, or work the second shift in a row as if she had no family to go to.

Thanks to her character and skills she quickly earned respect of all her colleagues and was offered a cook’s job. She got soon famous as soon as she made millet porridge which thousands of school children, who were the canteen customers, had left untouched before. For it had not been tasty. But now the hated porridge would be gobbled! I remember well my first visit of that canteen: a multitude of tables and chairs, schoolchildren of different ages eating their lunch, leaving and being replaced by new groups of children. Someone let Gennadi and me seat at the table, too. We were brought the first dish and then the second – millet porridge with a whole meat patty on top! To our surprise we found another patty inside the porridge! “Manechka, said the waitress to our mother who was working at the stove, I have fed your kids already!”

Many years later my 6-year old son would say to his mother: “No offense, Mom, but Grandma’s cooking is better than yours. Plus, you do not have this fine-looking certificate of achievement where she is photographed in the canteen with the tree biggest chiefs.”

*Below is the picture of the canteen personnel. Maria is the fifth from the left in the top row.*





*Maria's Certificate of Achievement that awarded her "the honorary title of a shock worker on the front of socialist construction in public foodservice industry who actively distinguished himself in implementing decisions of the party and government"*

I remember Mom taking Genya and me to the "Hearth". Her light green bell-bottomed dress is swaying. She is holding Genya's hand. He says: "Mama, can you pick me up? My feet are hurting!" Mother picks him up and asks him if he will carry her in his arms when she becomes old. "I will, Genya answers, but how will I manage to do it with you having such long legs?" I do not remember mother's answer. But he will keep his promise.

I like the “Hearth” but being on Sundays at home is also good. My older brother takes me outside. He knows all the kids in the neighborhood since he spends most of his time by himself with Mom staying at work late often. He is everybody’s friend, though most of the kids are older.

From time to time mothers and grandmothers call their little children to come inside: to practice musical instruments, do their homework, or eat. No one cares what Vechik does. He and Mechik are great friends. Mechik is in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and Vechik in 1<sup>st</sup>.

It is time to go play outside but Vechik is struggling with strokes and pothooks: he has a whole page to write! “Let me show how to do it!” A couple of minutes later neat parallel strokes fill up the page. “This is the way to do it! Got it?” Vechik nods in agreement, and Mechik closes the note-book. “Let’s go outside!”

Mother could not understand for a long time why the teacher kept giving Vechick “One”: the home assignments are done quite well!

Kurlyandskaya Street is paved with cobblestones. The wheels of wagons driven by pairs of dray horses make a rattling noise. Horses’ hoofs clatter in the street. Trucks rumble. There’s always something interesting going on.

Here is a pickup truck that turns to the yeast factory. It stops waiting for the gate to open. A gaggle of kids run up to it and grab handfuls of apple peelings. Good, thick, tasty peelings! Someone is lucky to get a whole apple! The boys are nice to us, the little ones, and share with us. One I saw a man transport many baskets on a flat cart. One of the baskets – the wheel got into a pothole maybe or the basket was loosely fastened – fell off the cart and capsized. A heap of cranberries spilled on the ground. The man picked up the basket only and drove away. We all had our fill. And put some in our pockets!

“Natasha, do you remember how our mother took us to Leningrad?”

“No, I do not. I remember when she brought you back from Leningrad to live with us. You were crying: “We want potatoes!” You mother brought semolina and millet. That was a hard year. Some time later your father returned from prison. You spent the winter with us. We were lucky to have a cow.

“You did have a cow, that’s for sure. I remember the table in the left corner of the hut, under the icons. Uncle Pavel sat with my father on one side of the table on a bench, and on the other sides were the children, many children. I do not remember what was served for the first course. The second one was bread with milk. We all would crumble bread into a large bowl, and aunt Anyuta would bring a pitcher full of milk and pour it into the bowl. As soon as uncle Pavel had his first spoon of the meal, the rest would all set to eat. A couple of minutes - and the bowl was empty! That was the way I learnt how to eat quickly. Aunt would say: Crumble some more” and add more milk. We consumed at least 5 liters at a time.

Neither Uncle, nor Aunt ever scolded the children. The entire 1930-s were hungry years. Uncle would often say to his wife: “Make the kids some potato pancakes or something.”

Natasha, do you remember the cart you had, the one with the metal wheels, and the front ones had an axle with a cushion? The axle allowed turning the cart with a handle. The kids would sit on it, raise the handle and drive it down the border line between your and Platonov’s houses across the road and further to the bathhouse. On one of the first days after our arrival Vechick rode it together with your kids. He was 10 years old, and he was dressed like a city boy: shorts and no shirt. Somehow the handle slipped out of the hand that was holding it, the cart capsized, and all the riders found themselves in the nestle. You kids were wearing sackcloth pants and long-sleeved shirts. They were none the worse for it. But Vechik got seriously burnt. During the entire night we were trying to alleviate his suffering. But the cart was great!”

“Tolya, the cart is still intact. My brother Tolik saw it in Radichi lying in the weeds and picked it up. “It is such a waste, he said, for it to be dumped like this in the weeds.” All the metal parts were intact, only the wooden ones rotted out. That cart came in quite handy, during and after the war: we transported hay in it. Once, it was during the war, Vitka was carting hay and



said: “Mom, don’t you ever give milk to anyone! We work so hard, and no one helps us!” And Mom says: “But we drink milk to our hearts’ content, while others are starving.”

“Natasha, when our father came back from jail, and Mom brought us from Leningrad, we turned to you for help. You had not yet been made to join the collective farm, and Uncle Pavel gave us a horse and a wagon so that our parents could make a living. Mom and Dad began to navvy: to transport phosphorite stone and gravel for road construction. That work gave my mother an ailment that made her suffer all her life. But in three months they managed to earn enough to buy a cow.

Genya was only six then, and at the end of the day he would run out to meet our parents when they were returning from work. Aunt Anyuta would warn him: “Be careful, do not get run over!” “These are Papka and Mamka coming! They won’t run me over!” They would stop the horse: “Get in, one day you will be our food provider!” “Yes, Aunt Anyuta has provided food to us already, we’ve had our fill!”

“In the fall of 1935 you moved from us to Aunt Gasha. Our mother suggested that: there were many children in our family, the older ones had grown up, and your family counted five people. Too many people. We would be eaten by lice before we knew where we were. “Move to Aunt Gasha, she lives alone, and we will help you with potatoes and other food.”

“I remember well that winter well, Natasha. The houses in the village were standing on the hillocks on both sides of the river. The slopes were steep, good for skiing and sledding. No one among boys had skis. Dad made me skis out of barrel staves. They were peculiar in the sense that they were bent up on both ends, which made them unstable.

Nobody could ride them. Only I mastered them. I liked the fact that I was able to make turns easily thanks to the design defect. Still, real skis remained a dream for long seven years. Also, dad came up with a design (or borrowed it from someone) of skates made of wooden blocks with a wire underneath. The skates were fastened to felt boots with straps. One could use them only on snow-covered roads. There was no skating rink in the village.

It was even more fun to ride down the slope on a large sheet of plywood. A band of kids would get on it, bend one side upwards and go down the hill. It was not every time that the sheet went the way they wanted, and the merry gaggle fell head over heels into the snow. By Easter dad made us a bench, lined its bottom with manure and poured water on it so it would freeze and become smooth as a mirror. Two people could sit on it ride down the hill. Dad’s care for us at that time was unprecedented. He did not have to go to work every day then. From time to time, he repaired other people’s shoes. The trade that he had learnt when he was a young apprentice of a shoemaker came in quite handy.

That fall I went to the first grade. I remember only the garden that surrounded the school. I do not have recollection of a single day at school, or of my first teacher, or of any other teachers. I remember only that Uncle’s children, who were older than me, received many books, and I read all the stories and novels contained in them. I could already read well, as well as draw, which was the result of the training at the “Hearth” in Leningrad.

- Natasha, did you work as a salesgirl for long?

- Up to the beginning of the war. I worked for a year and then I was sent to training courses. I still have the certificate of completion. I was not nineteen yet. I was afraid that I would not cope. But the head of the second department<sup>38</sup> said: “You will! We have many people with four years of school, and you have six!”

Every day I went to Sesha to work. In the evening I hurried back home carrying bread or groats, or some other stuff. There was no store in Radichi. And I had to help mother not only on days off but also in the evening after work. I managed it thanks to a bicycle. And the way home was all downhill.”

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<sup>38</sup> Probably HR

That young girl was a valuable and respected member of her family: she was tireless in work and had access to obtaining bread, which was not sold to farmers.

Teachers, doctors and civil servants in the village received a sack of flour each; farmers could receive bread at the end of the year after fulfilling the state order. For each trudoden from 50 – to 150 grams were given. In the course of a year a rank and file farmer had to earn at least 200 trudoden. That is why when flour was given out to state employees in a cooperative store, farmers would voice their discontent: “Look at these parasites! They are the people who eat our bread!”

It was not for long that older brother Misha was his father’s helper: he finished 10th grade and left for a military school. Only Natasha was always there to work in the house and in the garden, to make hay (in the shrubs and ravines), and to cut and chop wood. That was her fate.

“Natasha, what do you know about the Novikov family at the time when all five sons of Kirill Ustinovich, my grandfather, lived together?”

“I know that the eldest was Rodion, then Mikhail and Pavel, then you dad, Philipp, and Arseni. Philipp and Arseni did not remember their mother, she died young, and grandfather was raising them and would not get married until the children became independent.”

“In 1937 I visited that place where in the beginning of 1930 the Kamenetski estate had yet been there. There still was uncle Arseni’s house standing where he lived with his family. I spent there three days, about which I had told earlier. Then I walked three kilometers to Radichi to uncle Misha where I saw my grandfather Kirill Ustinovich for the first time. He was already over 80 years old. He was of medium height, agile, rather slim, with a large bald patch framed on the sides by grey hair, and an almost round face and a slightly hooked nose. His pale grey eyes were kind and friendly despite the hairy white brows hanging over them. His likeness to the wise old man from a fairy tale was complimented by his clothes: homemade white burlap pants and a shirt with an unbuttoned collar. He was barefooted.

I found Grandfather making bast ropes for the collective farm. Beside him was the linden bark which he soaked in a tub of water after taking the top layer off it with a knife. On the inner porch wall newly made bast shoes were hanging; one pair was not yet finished. The collective farm credited him with trudodni that were added to the ones earned by his son Mikhail’s family. Mikhail had three daughters one of whom was handicapped. He himself had not learnt any trade. That is why they were poorer than your family but they were fewer and lead a simple life. Aunt Arina did not care about cleanliness very much and at times would not mind having a drink or two.

Long story short, Grandfather Kirill lived with his poorest son. And while Pavel’s family helped him, invited him to holiday meals, and brought him something to eat, the other sons, who lived away from Radichi, visited with presents once or twice a year.

Now many people do not know that kolkhoz farmers did not get any pension at all.

So, uncle Pavel came up with an idea. He suggested that Kirill sued his sons. The court decided that each son had to pay him from 35 to 50 rubles every month.

I came to see Kirill very content with the care he had received from the party and government: now he was not only a working man but received real money. Now he was not a burden to one of his sons only. And he could afford a shot or two of vodka on a Sunday or a holiday.

Your mother, Natasha, thought that Arina was not a very good housewife, too soft on her daughters, and did not care much about cleanliness in the house and backyard. Your backyard was dry and clean but at Mikhail’s one could get to the cow in galoshes only. Still, life was simpler there, and the family was not burdened by many worries. And Kirill felt himself more at home than anywhere else. In any case, when I sang him, 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 “all the paths are open to our youngsters, and the old enjoy well-earned respect”, tears streamed from his eyes. I think he

remembered the care the party and government had treated him with; those tears were ones of gratitude.

After all, what did he see in his life besides work? Still, he was a sober, dignified, even good-looking man. And only when his sons had left the house to live independently, he got married again when he was 60. His second wife had a 17-year old son and a daughter. He raised them, too. His stepchildren became like family to him and his sons.

Natasha, what else do you know about their family?

“They had little land. Rodion was the first to leave. When the others grew up, Kirill let them go to live independently. Only the married ones got houses: Pavel and Mikhail (they were built side by side on the same lot.) Arseni and Philipp got nothing. Arseni asked at least for a towel and some cloth for bast shoes. Philya<sup>39</sup> was already working for the Kamenetski and said: “I don’t want anything.”

Tolya, here is a picture of my dad in a black hat. We used to say: “Do you know who you look like? Like you father, Kirill.” He also used stand on the hill in a black hat. He died suddenly, without getting sick.”

“Natasha, I saw him and talked to him in 1937. Only my father went to the funeral. It was him who told me about grandfather Kirill’s last hours. Old age is no blessing. Blood is not warming the body enough, and Kirill liked to sleep on the stove.

One night, at about 3 o’clock, he woke up and said to Arina: “Give me a shot of vodka.” She replied: “What is it with you, old man? To light the lamp now? Go back to sleep, you’ll have your shot at breakfast!”

In the morning she offered him a drink but he said: “Drink and eat, while you can taste it. I don’t want it now.”

“Are you unwell? What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong. It is just that I saw a dream that men are digging a grave. I ask them: “Who are you digging the grave for?” They say: “For you.” I am going to die, Arinushka. Call my sons”.

He lied down and died. All those who knew him would remember him as a good man. He raised five sons almost by himself. They were poor, and his sons started working in early childhood but they all grew up to become hardworking, kind and empathic people, and masters in their trades. People respected them. Kirill Ustinovich died when he was 80 years old.”

“Natasha, what do you remember or hear about my father?”

“Kirill Ustinovich had many children and little land. That is why little Philipp was sent to a shoemaker: to wax thread, make wooden nails, run errands and, eventually, repair shoes. When he grew up a little, he was hired as a shepherd boy by “the nobles” at the Kamenetski estate. He was a quiet and hardworking boy: while the cattle were resting in the barn at noon, he would help Uncle Franz’s young niece Maria in the kitchen or around the house. He had not tasted alcohol till he was 26 years old. But years passed, and Maria’s aunt Natalia, who was the boss of the estate, as well as of her husband and her niece, died. Uncle Franz died soon after. Being left alone, your mother married Philipp. It was in 1924. A year later, the family started getting bigger: in 1924 Vyacheslav was born, in 1927 you were born, in 1929 – Gennadi. All of you were born at the beginning of January.”

“What happened to the Novikov brothers? Where were they during the war?”

“Pavel was not drafted and stayed in the village. Uncle Misha was not that lucky. When the war began, the collective farm administration tasked him with transporting some military equipment with the retreating army. After that, being unfit for combatant service, he was sent to serve in an engineering battalion. In the severe cold and rain he had to deploy pontoon bridges and lay bridges. He was discharged and sent home in 1943 when his legs were failing him, and he was unable to walk. He did not live to see the end of the war. One day I went to their house, and uncle Misha said to me: “Natasha, have a look at my leg, I did not notice how I got this burn

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<sup>39</sup> Diminutive for Philipp

on the stove.” There was a red spot on the leg. I came home and said: “I think Uncle has gangrene.”

And so it was. When he was laying bridges, icy water caused damage to his legs. He really had bad luck – an unlucky man would be drowned in a tea-cup, they say. He was older than Pavel but was drafted. His children were all girls. The youngest one, Nina, had bandy legs – like a wheel. Courageously she would agree to one surgery after another, doctors broke and joined her legs again and again.”

But let us us return to our conversation with Natasha.

*“Tolik, here is a picture of my father (Pavel) with his sons Misha (about 10 years old) and Shurka (6 years old) made at the market place, and here is you and Vechik. It was 1930. Everybody is wearing shirts and pants; it was hot. Father is holding you in his hands; Vechik is standing in the middle.*



“Natasha, tell me how your brother Mikhail came back from the prisoners' camp.”  
“It was soon after the liberation at the end of September. It was cold. It rained every day. Farmers were harvesting potatoes. A stranger, not far from our house, was asking women: “Is anybody alive in the Novikov family?” The women answered: “They are over there, Natasha and her mother, digging out potatoes.” We see that person coming to our vegetable garden, a poor wretch, thin and old, in a long old coat. Bare legs in foot wraps and good German boots. He stops in front of Mother. She looks at him and thinks: “We should give the poor devil something.” At that moment I recognized our Misha. I rushed to him followed by Mom. But he said: “Do not come close. See what I have?” And he opened his coat: he had nothing but underpants and a dirty undershirt. He said: “Please bring me some warm water and some clothes. I will undress here and wash. We need to pour gasoline over my rags and burn them. They are teeming with lice.”

He took off the coat. It was a black one and had no white threads. But its inside was all white because of the big white lice that covered it. He took off the underpants. It was hard to look at them without a shudder: a white layer of lice covered the fabric the color of which was impossible to determine. Tears streamed from Mother's eyes at the sight of this big skeleton with angular protruding bones who only two years before had been a healthy young man – her son! He still had his hair but it was thin. Still standing there, he combed it with a fine comb.

He entered the house. The neighbors came in asking questions: “Did you see anyone there from the village?” “Please, people, forgive me, I cannot sit with you now, I need some sleep.” Besides, he was beginning to have a fit of malaria. He fell asleep immediately and started talking deliriously: “We are running the wrong way! We have to run that way!” The next day I walked to Dubrovka to get quinine. He took two packets and wanted no more: “I will recover from this without it.” And he was right.

Mom would boil potatoes for him, and he would say: “Do not mash them, give me them whole.” Mom would caution him: “Misha, go easy on the food, if you eat too much, having been hungry so long, you can get sick.”

He was allowed to rest for two weeks. Mom would give him sour cream and a little meat, and he was getting better. We asked him what had been happening to him. He was in the border troops and for a month they were repelling German attacks but they were outnumbered and encircled. Misha had a contusion and was taken prisoner. He tried to escape twice but the Romanians caught him, punished and beat him. He got lucky the third time: he escaped, crossed the front line and, evading retreat-blocking units, walking or riding freight trains, reached his home village several days after the liberation of the Bryansk region in September 1943. On the way home he called on uncle Rodion's cousin in Bezhitsa but there was only his wife in the house who did not want to recognize a relative in the dirty ragamuffin. He said who he was and asked for something to eat. She gave him a piece of bread but offered no clothes.

He left us on the day of the Protection of the Virgin with a sealed envelope. He was killed on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944. He was 24 years old. He had a short life. His friend wrote to us about his death and promised that if we gave him permission and he stayed alive he would visit us and tell us about Misha. I wrote that we give him permission. But the war ended, and he never came...”

“How could he? For ten more months till the end of the war he would be sent to the most dangerous places, to certain death, as a shtrafnik<sup>40</sup>, his life being long discarded by the party and government under the leadership of the Father of the Peoples.<sup>41</sup>

Natasha, how did you live under the occupation, just five kilometers from a major airfield (in Sessa)?”

“The Germans did not impose taxes on us: whatever we managed to grow was all ours. But one could not plant much as there were no horses. I lived in Radichi with my parents and brothers: Vitka, Grinka and Tolik. All able-bodied people were sent from time to time to work

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<sup>40</sup> A serviceman in a penal unit in which people convicted of desertion or cowardice served. Those who escaped from prisoner-of-war camps were also sent to these units.

<sup>41</sup> Stalin

on the roads and airfield on the foreman's orders. (Collective farms suited the Germans' purposes very well: they were administered by appointed people who could be held accountable for work done or ordered to provide a certain number of able-bodied people.) There was a lot of snow on the roads in the winter, and we cleaned them, covered bomb craters with earth after air raids, dug graves, and cooked. The Germans gave us food for work: a one-liter jar of pea or potato soup, sometimes with meat, and a piece of tasteless bread."

"Was the airfield bombed often?"

"Yes. Single planes bombed at night, later on during the day also. In 1943 many planes attacked at a time."

I, who lived 18 kilometers from Sesha, had a different opinion.

Before the war from the early morning to the late evening we heard the roar of fighter planes and TB-3 heavy bombers. At night they usually bombed practice targets in the artillery firing range near the village of Sopolyovka (kolkhoz "Krasnaya Moskva"<sup>42</sup>), five kilometers from Ryabchi, our village.

Incidentally, our kolkhoz had come a long way till it ended up with its current name. First, it was called "The Poor Man". But for how long could you stay poor? People could think that our neck of the woods was not prospering! It was named after Bukharin<sup>43</sup>. But several years later we, school students, had to put his eyes out in our textbooks. The collective farm had to be renamed again, this time after Ezhov<sup>44</sup>. A gaffe again! Stalin seemed to be a safe bet. But don't speak too soon. The time came when they had to change the seals again. Finally, they came up with a winner: "The Ilyich"<sup>45</sup> Kolkhoz" and installed a solid sign at a crossroads. Years passed, the kolkhoz was disbanded and the sign was smashed but not entirely: the word "Ilyich" stayed, so they have now freshened up the sign with new paint, and it is still there, our beauty.

But let me go back to the Sesha airfield. Every morning we heard the cheerful noise of aircraft running their engines on the tarmac. Then the training flights and bombing practice started over the firing range. Powerful 4-engine airplanes made turns over our village. This was our pride: TB -3 heavy bombers. Infrequent explosions of aviation bombs made the windows rattle, and the houses seemed to bounce up making us afraid that they might collapse. On hay-making days, when the range was closed, we saw craters of 5 to 10 meters wide and 3 to 4 meters deep. Normally, the bombing was done from a low altitude: 1 or 2 kilometers, probably. Blunt-nosed fighters and old biplanes also circled in the sky but were of little interest to us. The TB-3 was something else, on the other hand!

That its crew consisted of seven people became known to us as a result of an accident. On a warm summer night, a TB-3 crashed two kilometers from our village. Probably, the engines had failed, the crew had bailed out but the parachutes had not opened. People said that the altitude had been too low. The captain had died inside; he had not left the aircraft. The scene of the accident was cordoned off, the debris moved away but so many shiny fragments were left behind for us, boys, to find!

The accident did not affect our pride in the Soviet aviation. Confidence in our valiant airmen became even stronger after we saw the film "If war breaks out tomorrow." Before that we had heard about our troops bravely repelling the Japanese at Lake Khassan. It was well worth running to the firing range to watch the movie that was brought to the garrison there. The black and white film was about the beginning of war. Everybody understood that it was with Germany. From our Sesha airfield the legendary TB-3-s were taking off, and flocks of fighters took wing from an underground hangar. The bombing and the war were over in three days. Five kilometers that we walked on the way back home were not enough for us to relive the heroic actions of our aviators.

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<sup>42</sup> Red Moscow (rus)

<sup>43</sup> Revolutionary and Soviet leader persecuted by Stalin

<sup>44</sup> Head of the NKVD from 1936 to 1938; executed in 1940

<sup>45</sup> Lenin's patronymic

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

Early in the morning of that warm summer day I saw three two-engine bombers with yellow-tipped wings and black swastikas. They had already overflown the airfield, totally unimpeded. We had not heard our aircraft for a long time by then, we knew that they had been relocated closer to the border but there had to be some air defense! Somewhere in the east, around Bryansk, explosions were heard. Later we learnt that the village of Kletnya had also been bombed. The next day there was not a single cloud in the sky, and three German airplanes at an altitude higher than the previous day (about 3 km) flew eastward again. And then we saw, at a considerable distance from the aircraft, 15 to 20 bursts of flak fire. A volley, followed by another. And another. With the same result. With the same delay. The aircraft were not hit.

Later, during the occupation, there were attempts by our single airplanes to bomb the airfield at night time but they did not do much harm. And for the whole duration of the war I never saw in the sky or on the ground our childhood pride: 4-engine TB-3 heavy bombers. Almost all of them, with thousands of other aircraft, had been destroyed on airfields along the western border on the very first days of the war.

So, what happened to the Novikov familis later?

Uncle Pavel and aunt Anyuta raised three sons: Anatoli, Victor and Grigori, and a daughter, Natalia, with whom I reminisced about the past. The boys became tractor operators. They worked in the kolkhoz and, as soon they had the opportunity, moved to Karaganda to develop virgin land and, later, work at the Novo-Kuznetsk metallurgical plant.

It was Anatoli alone who maintained ties with his birthplace and his sister. Every year he visited his sister who was always looking forward to seeing him. He helped her to prepare for the winter. First, they needed to stock up on firewood. They did not buy it but brought the remnants of the barns and the house from the old lot. They cut some of them and stacked the rest by the house in the garden. All that was done manually. Even when Natasha became eighty, she still worked hard. Prior to Anatoli's departure, she would gather some money and prepare a gammon for the road. She would send packages with lard by mail, before weather became hot, to brothers Anatoli and Grigori, as well as to her grandson Yuri who was her favorite and came to stay at her place for the summer.

Yuri was a positive and independent man. He worked as an agronomist at a large collective farm. Unlike his uncles and cousins, he never indulged in alcohol. Anatoli could take a couple of drinks after work and was a chain smoker. He was skinny and gaunt. His sudden death was devastating to Natasha. It was as if the last ray of sunlight vanished from her life.

I tried to visit her in Sessa before or on holidays and bring her treats baked or bought by my wife. I never saw any holiday preparation in her house. She would boil some potatoes or make tea with ham or lard, or fried eggs. And she would be looking out for the arriving train from Dubrovka to see whether I was coming.

Her TV set broke down but she refused to have it fixed: "There is no time for me to watch it; I need to take care of the chicken, the pig, two stoves, the vegetable garden (about 800-1000 square meters, without a single weed). Besides, I need to bring water from the well. To stock up on coal. And make trousers for a customer. I have a radio set, which is enough. When I go to bed, I listen to it. Tolik, do you need a padded jacket? Or anything? No? It is a pity. My brother brought me a few. Look at my pig! It is a meter and a half long! Takes up the whole length of the shed! Maybe, you need potatoes? I have lots."

I am happy that I stayed for the night that time, and we remembered those things which only we knew, and about which nobody could tell except us. Only one of her brothers cherished some memories and came every year to visit his birthplace. He was always ready to help his sister and, as in old times, to work using whatever was left by the parents, of their household. How could he allow that the little cart be left abandoned near his parents' decayed house if it was only the wooden parts that were rotten but the metal one were intact?



Natasha and he remembered how handy the cart was to bring home hay over the distance of more than three kilometers. It did not take much effort to repair it. Then the logs on the old house: could he let them rot out if they could be cut and brought to Natasha? But one summer, at the time when he would usually come and work with his sister for an entire month, he did not come. Sudden death. It was hard to be let alone in the world.

But where were the others? The family was so large! The father, Pavek Kirillovich, and mother, Anna Pavlovna (Anyuta, as all people used to call her), had died in Natasha's house, in the village of Sessa. The last time that all the brothers - Tolik, Vitka and Grinka - got together was at the mother's funeral. The reunion was marked by heavy drinking that lasted many days. Sober Natasha was horrified. Victor drank more than the others and developed delirium tremens. Who to turn for help to? Natasha called my brother Gennadi who was in Ryabchi at the time: "Please, come and take him away, or else it will end badly." Vladlena, my wife, remembered: "He was pale and weak, and he was shaking." She washed his clothes for him, and Gennady gradually helped him ease the withdrawal. He did it not with alcohol, though, but by involving him in work. In the end, my wife started to like Victor's willingness to work and proactiveness. Sometime later he would divorce his wife, lock his car in the garage and leave to work in the North. Nobody would hear from him since.

His son Yuri lived with his mother. When he was eight, his parents put him on the train from Novokuznetsk to Moscow, and from there - good people helped him - to Bryansk where Natasha met him. Since then he came every summer. He grew up and became an agronomist at a large collective farm, built a house and got married. He never visited Natasha any more, and did not write a single letter. Every winter Natasha kept sending him parcels with ham, lard or some other fruit of her labor and waited for the confirmation of the receipt. She would sigh and say: "Is it so hard to write a reply?"

In far-away Novokuznetsk she had three grandsons: one from each brother. I met one of them at Natasha's funeral.

On Easter we decided to go to visit Natasha's relatives' graves. I drove her there in my car. She did not remember well the way to the old cemetery but we found it. The place was overgrown with young bushes, and it took Natasha some time to find the grave of her father and mother. We pulled out the weeds, sat for a while and prayed for her parents, her brother and sister who were also buried there. She could not find the grave of our grandfather Kirill Ustinovich. She had not been to the cemetery for many years as she could not walk that far. We also passed the place where the village of Radichi had been. There was only one hut left that belonged to uncle Misha's daughter. On the lot where their house had once stood and where we also had lived there was nothing left except for some plum trees.

That was her last visit of her family's graves. In the following spring we were planning to take her sewing machine to a repair shop: Natasha got occasional jobs sewing trousers and jackets for servicemen. Before I came, some excess coal had been dumped neat the railroad across her house, and she was allowed to take it. She could not believe her luck! She put on her padded jacket, locked the house and began to carry coal to her house in a bucket. For the two stoves she needed a lot! She brought some of it, and then fell and lost consciousness, as if she fell asleep. A ticket agent from the railway station called an ambulance but the medics refused to take her because she had no passport and proof of insurance on her. Finally, they were persuaded to take her. The ticket agent called us and I came to the hospital the next day. Natasha was asleep. I talked to her but she went on sleeping. Having paid for the medications that had been used and that she would still need, I went to her house, accompanied by her friend, to look for the key. It had not been found in her clothes. I found the key in the mailbox. In the house we found the relatives' addresses, and I sent telegrams to them.

Natasha slept in the hospital for three days and died without regaining consciousness. She was blessed by God with the best way to part with this world which had been the place where she constantly had to work, help and look after all her relatives. Was she ever happy? Her mother gave her birth in the field where she was working. After her brother Mikhail she was the oldest

sibling. She took care of us, little kids, and her own brothers and sister. She was the first in the family to get out of the collective farm's yoke and walked 5 kilometers to Sesha every day to get to work by 8 o'clock, worked full time, bought food at a garrison store, the only place where you could buy anything, brought it to the family and worked around the house and the farm till dark.

Just one time it seemed that she found happiness: she fell in love and got married. Soon after, however, she became ill and had to have her uterus removed. Her husband left her immediately. She kept her husband's last name, Polyakova, in the passport, but for the people who knew her she remained Novikova.

Her nephew came to the funeral. It was a young man, about 25 years old, quite unkempt and, as they say, oiled. He said that his expensive suitcase had been stolen, but thank God, he still had his passport. He suggested that I deal with the State registration of the land and the house, but since I was to do the same with regard to my own property, I thanked him and declined. A free-and-easy woman, whom I did not know, popped up out of nowhere, and wine at the wake flowed like water. My wife was waiting for me at home, and I left. Some time later, the administration of Natasha's village called me and asked for the heirs' address since the people's behavior at the house was indecent. I gave the address and asked for no details.

And every time, when I remember my loved ones who passed away, I ask God about Natasha:

"Lord, rest the soul of your servant Natasha and forgive her all her sins, voluntary and involuntary, 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?"<sup>46</sup>

*Mikhail Lermontov*

There was neither trial, nor investigation of my father's "case". After the verdict the authorities deliberated for a month where to send him. Finally, they decided: to Solovki.<sup>47</sup>

I wanted to know about his life in the prison camp, but he would brush off all my questions. "What happened is all in the past now. Over and done with".

Here we are riding from Radichi to our village, Ryabchi. The horse walks up the hill and runs when the road goes down. A rare truck passes us, and we are alone again: there's no one around for a long time. The perfect time to have a heart-to-heart talk. But we are riding in silence. Father is lost in thought, probably remembering the things he has lived through. His silence hurts me. It makes me sulky, and I also keep silent. He is so unlike other kids' fathers!

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<sup>46</sup> The fragment is from the poem "Mtsyri" translated from Russian by Charles Johnston. Mtsyri can be translated from Georgian as "novice".

<sup>47</sup> The **Solovki special camp** (later the **Solovki special prison**) was set up in 1923 on the [Solovetsky Islands](#) in the [White Sea](#) as a remote and inaccessible place of detention, primarily intended for political opponents of Soviet Russia's new Bolshevik regime (Wikipedia)

He never tries to teach me, give advice or warn against something. When he needs to write a report of the work done or check the books, he turns to me for help. Or when he wants to know about some animals' disease, he asks me to read. He always listens attentively but does not like to read himself. And he is quite talkative when instructing farmers in detail how to care for a sick animal. He must be hiding something about his conviction! It is not for nothing that they say: "In our country innocent people are not sent to prison".

I am already 13 years old. I write the best compositions at school: I have read many books. It is so annoying when they say that kids my age do not yet understand certain things. I have already read Maupassant, and I have understood everything! I will become a writer. I have begun to write a story similar to "The Prince and the Pauper". I am a fan of Belinski<sup>48</sup>; I am learning to analyze people's actions, understand their characters, circumstances and intentions. I am trying to be objective about myself, to see myself through the eyes of my parents, teachers and friends. All the villagers are pleased with my father, his work and his attitude towards people and animals. But I am not.

It was many years later that I learnt how convicts lived in Soviet prisons and labor camps from Solzhenitsyn's<sup>49</sup> "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich", "In the First Circle" and other books by former political prisoners.

In 1962 my father came to visit us in Donetsk<sup>50</sup>, and we put on a cassette with a recording of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich". He was listening intently to the reader's voice, and tears were streaming from his eyes. He was not aware of his crying and listened to the end without interruption. His face was mournful as if he had lost someone close to him. Still, he did not tell us anything about his life in the camp.

It was only at the time of perestroika and glasnost that he gave a brief account to his family of his years spent in the labor camp.

He was the only one who got to Solovki. The other members of the "conspiracy" were sent to other camps. He did not remember much about that camp besides hunger and cold. Soon after he was sent to the great construction of that time – the building of Belomorkanal - the White Sea – Baltic Sea canal.

The canal bed was made in the rock. The convicts bored blast-holes, laid explosives in them, lit the blasting fuse and ran as far away as they could in order not to get killed by the explosion or rock fragments. Then the broken rock was loaded on wheelbarrows and removed from the area of the future canal. The wheelbarrows had one wheel for easier handling and required only one wooden plank to be moved along. If the load was not in the center of the wheelbarrow, it was very hard to push it in a straight line. Dad was not a strongman. He was rather weak. That was why his father Krill Ustinovich had wanted him to master a trade which did not require much physical strength: shoe making, tending cattle, taking care of animals. The job he got, however, demanded strength and stamina.

Shortly, Philipp was hospitalized with the diagnosis of dystrophia. After the discharge, he was prescribed light work. Such work was soon found: a blaster. Strength was needed only to bore a hole in the rock, after which one had to insert the blasting cartridge, attach the Bickford fuse cord, light it and get away.

The length of the Bickford fuse cord was established by the camp administration that was guided by considerations of economy. Which meant that the explosion took place after a dozen of seconds. If convicts were not fast enough, they could die.

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<sup>48</sup> **Vissarion Grigoryevich Belinsky** (1811 - 1848) was a Russian literary critic (Wikipedia)

<sup>49</sup> **Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn**<sup>[a]</sup><sup>[b]</sup> (11 December 1918 – 3 August 2008) was a Russian novelist, philosopher, historian, short story writer and political prisoner. Solzhenitsyn was an outspoken critic of the [Soviet Union](#) and [Communism](#) and helped to raise global awareness of the Soviet [Gulag](#) forced-labor camp system (Wikipedia)

<sup>50</sup> City in the Donbass region, Ukraine

The section of the canal that they were working on went through solid rock. The bed was deepened, and the blaster had to be lowered on a rope and quickly lifted back up in the short time while the fuse cord was burning. The probability that the blaster would work like that for a long time was low. The cord must not be wasted but enemies of the people can. More convicts would be sent if needed: there was no shortage of people in Russia. Women would produce more. Human life in Russia never had any value.

Credit must be given to my father: he was a smart person. Capable of thinking. “I understood, he reminisced, that I would not last long on that job! There was always a chance of explosion while carrying or installing the charge, or the rope could be cut by a sharp rock, or the people on the top would take too long to lift you, and you would croak there on the rope like a hanged dog”!

He who seeks, finds. An opportunity soon turned up.

More and more convicts were sent to the great construction. And they all needed clothes and footwear, which were worn out very quickly. Those could not be supplied fast enough and needed to be repaired on the spot. Seamstresses and shoemakers became in great demand, including Philipp. His apprenticeship at a shoemaker’s came very handy. “Shoemakers, two steps forward!”

Now he got a cushy, indoor, job. Philipp felt lucky. But not for long! It soon became clear that even this job did not guarantee his survival. Comes a convicted criminal, throws a pair of dirty torn shoes and says softly: “If you repair them sooner than in a week, consider yourself a dead man. Even if you stay alive, you won’t recover any time soon!” The warden gets impatient: “The inmate has not been out to work for a week! Why is the repair so slow?” He knows why but won’t show understanding for Philipp’s situation. Philipp sees that he is back to square one. It’s not going to work. Wrong job!

Finally, he comes up with an idea: he should get further away from people and closer to animals! And he finds a way to get into the veterinarian unit. He knows his way around cattle, how to take care of them. He can deliver a calf or a foal. The village vet taught him how to castrate. He knows how to treat animals’ deceases: he used to help the veterinarian at the Kamenetski estate. He watched him work closely to remember what to do in similar situations. Dubrovka is quite far, and you can’t go there to get the vet each time you need him. Besides, he may be on call somewhere. For instance, a cow has eaten too much alfalfa, her belly is bloated, and she can hardly breathe. Usually the cow would be slaughtered right away. But now Philipp knows what to do: he punctures the belly with a knife and saves the cow. Skills like that are not easy to find!

He was interviewed by the camp chief veterinarian. They said the vet was a doctor of science and had been a big boss before the conviction. The doctor spoke to the camp administration, and Philipp’s dream came true. It turned out that the support section was being expanded, and, accordingly, the number of inmates in it was increased.

Philipp got lucky: he was sent to veterinarian assistant training courses right away. He was also lucky in the sense that the camp assembled great experts in veterinary medicine, higher school professors and experienced practitioners. There were academicians among them, doctors of science and PhDs.

Among those who visited the Belomorcanal construction was Maxim Gorki<sup>51</sup>. I do not know what he was shown but after the visit he gave a positive assessment of the efforts to reform the enemies of the people.

The situation was different, of course. Authorities did not care about people being transformed into friends of the government. But Philipp was glad that he got into a company of good people, excellent specialists in veterinary science, inmates like himself, surrounded by horses and cows that he had loved since his childhood. The teachers willingly shared their knowledge and experience with the trainees.

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<sup>51</sup> A Russian and Soviet writer

There Philipp found his calling, his favorite trade that people needed so much.

Upon the completion of the courses Father got a diploma and a certificate that later became the basis for his working as veterinarian assistant. After his release he would become a good specialist with great practical experience. More than once he would prove his competence and correctness of his decisions that would contradict opinions of licensed doctors, including not only veterinarians but also physicians. I will tell later about such cases that I personally witnessed.

In 1939, when Father was the head of a veterinary clinic, he was sent to a refresher course at the Saratov Veterinary Institute. He must have been nervous going there. What education had he had? Four years of parochial school and training courses in prison! Knowledge of Latin would be required. Although some Latin had been taught in the camp. But he needed to remember everything. Would he be up to par?

He returned from the course excited and happy. Every time guests came to the house, they were shown a diploma listing various scientific names of the subjects taught and good, mostly excellent, grades. And every time Father said that “there ain’t a single subject among the sixteen in total that he has not completed with flying colors.” His country way of speaking would sometimes betray, of course, his peasant origin. All the interacting with the Kamenetski, Maria or the children who all spoke good Russian did not have sufficient influence to change it.

My father also obtained excellent references from his teachers in the camp and prison authorities. Thus, he proved that the process of reeducation could be considered complete. As a result, instead of 8 years he served only 4. In 1934 he returned to his native village. He was lodged by his brother, Pavel Kirillovich. As soon as he wrote to Mom that he had returned home, she quit her job and left Leningrad with the children.

Thus ended Philipp’s universities. The lessons he had learnt by the time he was 36 years old determined the rest of his life. He learnt the wisdom to not to be or try to become rich. To live and work so that people would be content with his work sparing no effort or time for that. Not to have enemies, not to contradict, especially the authorities. If necessary, to seek favor with the powers that be. Not to insist on what he thinks is right, to agree with an opposing view. Not to show that you are smarter than others, or more competent. To be content and care-free, making an impression of a jester. To build the smallest possible house not to invoke envy, and not to have any extra space in it for holiday-makers or renters. Not to steal and not to buy anything beyond the bare needs. To live modestly without trying to make money on the side. To inure the children to hardships of life. To leave the parenting to Maria; she is an intelligent person, hard-working, fair and much more level-headed. As the experience showed, she had managed quite well without him. She had also read books to them and continued to do that. And, finally, not to indulge his wife or the children, not to buy or have any extra clothes.

*Note: Not all the people persecuted by the Soviet government were as lucky as Philipp. According to the published data (by the biographer Montefiore, for instance), “Stalin was responsible for 20 to 25 million deaths of the Soviet people butchered by Stalin’s slaughter machine, excluding the war losses”.*

## 1935. Dubrovka

In the spring of 1935, our family moved to the district center Dubrovka, which was at that time in the Western Region. An experienced veterinarian of retirement age, who had been educated in Tsarist Russia, headed the district veterinarian hospital. He was a self-confident person who knew his own worth. A cultured man of the old stock. A great expert in horse-breeding, he was of Kalmyk descent. I do not know if there had been professionally qualified veterinarians in Dubrovka before the revolution and, if there had been, how the government managed to do away with them, but, in any case, that doctor was not a local. I assume they had

been all persecuted since kolkhoz livestock was dying like flies, even after receiving injections or other treatment. Food was lacking, as well as care and good barns. But the “saboteurs” had been found and exterminated, and eventually the district was left without specialists. The new doctor was lucky: he got two assistants, including my father. Having learnt about his teachers and the “school” where he had been trained, the doctor hired my father though his diploma hardly met the requirements.

The doctor – a slim and agile old man of gentlemanly appearance who resembled Anton Pavlochich Chekhov - did not stay long at the clinic in the morning. He had full confidence in his young assistants who examined sick animals and provided them with necessary care. He would send for his light spring-wheeled carriage and – in a nice suit and with a small whip – would hop onto it and take the driver’s seat. As soon as he picked up the reins, the young stallion would start trotting uphill. As a head of a clinic, the doctor felt duty-bound to visit district administration officials, to remind them about the equipment and medications that had not been received and submit requests related to a new epizootic. As well as to report that the existing human resources situation was unacceptable since the servicing of all the villages by the available veterinarian staff was unthinkable.

He returned to the clinic by lunch time when most sick animals had been taken home but there were still farmers who begged for someone to go to their far-away villages since to bring a cow or a horse to the clinic was impossible. It would be an animal that was unable to get to its feet, or a cow that had difficulty giving birth. The doctor considered such requests and determined who of the two assistants should go. There was a lot of work. As a rule, one assistant saw patients at the clinic, while the other rode to one of the collective farms to do vaccination.

After the war there were few horses left and not enough of good harness. As a result of excessive work, horses’ backs and shoulders were bleeding and became swollen and infected. Besides, most of them suffered from mange. Their skin was all covered with scabs. There was not enough food. By the spring cattle were fed with the straw pulled down from barn roofs. To make it more edible, the straw was cut and softened in hot water. As a result, cows became so weak they stood up with difficulty or were lying until they were lifted with ropes. There was no immunity any more to resist sickness. No strength to calve. As soon as cattle were driven to pasture, wolves attacked calves and foals. There had been no one to cull them during the war, and their population had grown excessively. Foals bore the brunt. Every day, those of them who were snatched from the wolves were brought to the clinic with terrible wounds on their necks and backs.

Not all cattle survive the winter to see the long-awaited spring. Horses are emaciated but they are at once burdened with work beyond their strength. While the ground is frozen, they are used to bring manure to the field and transport back the seed grain that was stored at the district elevator (the measure taken by the government so that hungry peasants would not eat it during the winter). Then come ploughing, harrowing, sowing, etc.. It is at this very time – in the spring – that epidemics break out: encephalitis among horses and cows, hog cholera and erysipelas...

The veterinarians’ workload would increase significantly: they had to vaccinate collective farm livestock (horses, cows, pigs, chickens) but there were only two specialists for the entire district! The vet assistants – Romakin and my father – had to start working at 6 AM. They worked at the clinic till 9 and then rode out to collective farms and worked till dark. We, the children rarely saw our father during the day.

This is what our father told us later about his working day in Dubrovka.

In the morning he examined the animals that had been brought to the clinic. Then, at lunch time, without dropping by at home, he rode to the village of Zatishye, which was 20 km from Dubrovka, where a cow was unable to give birth for the second day.

It is winter. It is freezing inside the barn, around minus 20; the cow is hanging on the ropes having no strength to stand on its feet. Father asks for hot water, undresses and rolls up the shirt sleeves. He has only his fur vest on. The calf turns out to be positioned the wrong way and

cannot get out of the mother's womb. It is not easy to turn the fetus by 180 degrees with just one hand. Father's experience comes handy. He does not notice a couple of hours pass.

He returned to the clinic by nightfall. By the house he saw a sleigh and a horse that stood hanging its head as there was nothing left to eat. "Must have been waiting a long time", thought Dad. The driver, who turned out to be a woman, began to cry when she saw Dad. She had arrived a long time ago, but the old doctor said that there was no one to go to her village that day. The woman started wailing: what would she do, how to feed her six little kids if the cow, their main food source, died. The doctor then suggested that she wait for Philipp Kirillovich. If he agrees, he will go. But he cannot order him since a man cannot work without rest.

As soon as Dad got off the sleigh and began to stretch his legs and clap the hands to get warm, the old doctor invited him inside. "Margarita, he said to his wife, let us supper together. And bring the carafe, it is too cold outside, and Philipp must be freezing. Though I know that he is not into drinking." They take a shot of diluted alcohol and eat unhurriedly. Dad tells about the results of his trip. When the dinner is over, the conversation turns to the woman who is waiting for their decision. The doctor understands that Father is tired, it is cold outside, and the woman lives at the "Pervomai" collective farm, deep in the woods, at least 30 kilometers away. Father was freezing through while working in the cowshed and riding in the sleigh. And it will be even worse riding the woman's old nag. Too bad for the children, of course, the cow cannot calve for the third day now, it will surely die. "You will go tomorrow", says the doctor.

The room's warmth, the food and the alcohol are making Philipp sleepy. The doctor is a kind man. He must have worked a lot, too. He understands everything and cares about his assistant.

"Go on, Philipp Kirillovich, have some rest, tomorrow is another day". "Of course, I will go tomorrow", thinks Dad. "Exit through the back door. I will tell the woman to come tomorrow morning." But Father is taking his time, his legs are heavy, and his body does not want to get out into the cold, he's had enough of it. He feels like staying on in this warm room. He sighs. He feels sorry for the cow and the children. They won't survive without it. At least not all of them. The old doctor sighs, too. They are having the same thoughts. Philipp remembers how hard it was for his Maria to survive with three children. How hard it was for both of them last year earning enough money to buy a cow. He fell silent, deep in thought, remembering. He is sitting with a vacant expression, supporting his chin with his hand. They were lucky to have good people to help them – brother Pavel's family who gave them a horse, a carriage, fed his children. He and Maria worked at the phosphorite mine. The hard work undermined Maria's health.

This woman's situation is no better. He must go. He must. If something irreparable happens, he will not forgive himself. "I am going now", says he out loud. "My dear fellow, Philipp Kirillovich, I don't want you to freeze to death riding this nag. I will give you my colt together with the instruction (the elegant braided whip). One request only: do not spoil my colt; he must run all the time, not necessarily fast, both uphill and downhill. If he neglects this rule, remind him of it with the whip. Please, my good fellow, do not forget about this. Your compassion can do harm, too. You know the way, and you will find her hut without her help. God willing, you will be done before she arrives. Now you must hurry".

So, off my dad goes feeling good that even among bosses there are good people. For some reason there are more of them at the places where he had his "universities", but only not among bosses.

It becomes colder by nightfall, trees are cracking at times, dogs in the villages that Dad passes through are barking ever more loudly. They are afraid of wolves, too. Snow covered fields are flooded with the deadly light of the full moon. Philipp has done wisely having wrapped himself in a sheepskin coat with long fleece. The coat is one of the few things left of Uncle Franz's property.

The colt is trotting steadily: clippety-clop, clippety-clop. It was hard to believe that he would be able to run all the way up the hill that started at the exit from Dubrovka. It is two or three kilometers of a steep rise followed by a couple of kilometers of a steady one. Up to the

highest point of the Central Russian Upland. Almost to the village of Aleshnya after which the road goes downhill passing through the villages of Lyubimovka, Ryabchi, Bolotnya and, finally, far-away Pervomai, in a dense forest. That is the place to encounter packs of wolves...

In Dubrovka we lived in a state-owned apartment in the main street, not far from the railway crossing. My studies in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade left no memories. The only reminder is the certificate of achievement that I received at the end of the school year. There was an episode, however, that I remembered for the rest of my life.

On a warm April day a group of boys got together in which my brother Vyacheslav and his classmate were the oldest. I joined the company, too. The senior boys decided that we should go for a hike out of town: along the railroad to the railway bridge. That was a couple kilometers from our home. "The experienced leaders", well-versed in independent living like my brother Vyacheslav, had collected several empty bottles, got a refund for them and bought a packet of cigarettes and matches.

Merrily we walked to the bridge across the river. We went under the bridge and had a smoke for a start. No one could see us there! After having smoked to my heart's content, I felt sick. The rest of the gang did not look so well, either. We decided to head back. At that moment one of the younger kids fell through the ice. Luckily, the water was not deep, and my brother and his friend got the kid to the shore. He was scared, cold and began to cry. We got scared, too.

We all ran back home. The little kid's parents changed his clothes and smelled tobacco. The kid told what had happened, and our mother gave a scolding to Vyacheslav. I got my share, too. The kid's parents demanded that Mom punished my brother physically but she would not do that.

Mom's reproaches, however, had a weaker effect on me than the nicotine itself. I had never felt as bad before. I had had my share of smoking for the rest of my life. A year later I tried a smoke of alder leaves and hemp. But it was just one drag, not more. I never smoked since in spite of the teasing remarks of my peers at the Institute that I was not man enough. After I agreed with them, they stopped and did not offer me a smoke ever again.

The school year ended. I was transferred to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. On a summer day our father returned from work in an unusually good mood. Normally, he looked concerned over something, always in hurry. If he made a conversation, it was with Mom only. He learnt about us, how we were doing at school and all, from her. He did not nag us with questions or instructions. The only exception was the year when we lived in Radichi and he devoted much of his time to us making all kinds of things for us.

At dinner he told us that we were moving to the village of Ryabchi. He went on describing the village and its surroundings. Our future house is near the lake. The northern bank of the lake is overgrown with reed and thick vegetation on a slope of a high hill. The lake is especially beautiful in the morning when its surface is smooth and reflects the trees and the white stone church with its cupolas and belfry. There are lots of waterfowl in the reed: herons, wild ducks, geese, waterhens, etc.. The water in the lake is clean and clear since the stream that goes into the lake is quite deep and is not called Belizna<sup>52</sup> for nothing. The lake is full of fish: pikes, perches, roaches, chubs, and ruffs. Kids fish using fishing rods, wicker traps or just hands. There is a mill and a fullery. The landowner had another manmade lake with a sawmill, but it is no longer there. Crayfish are abundant in the lake and in the river that flows down from the dam. They are caught with hands; even little kids do it. Below the dam are a meadow and a woody swamp. There are ducks, woodcocks and partridges there. In the evening snipes are bleating, swifts are squawking and bats are circling in the sky. We did not like the part about the bats. They can seize you by the hair. We heard stories about that. "There are foxes and hares in the woods, badgers in the gullies, and even wolves", said Father. We will live in the house of a dispossessed miller. The house is big and well-built. We are going to move soon.

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<sup>52</sup> Formed from the Russian word "beli" which means "white"



Having heard this, Gennadi and I started making plans: what we are going to do, whom we are going to catch and how. With this abundance of wild ducks, we will be able to test the method invented by Baron Munchhausen who caught several ducks with just one hook.

Goodbye, Dubrovka! Hurray to Ryabchi! We can't wait to move!

## The Occupation

The war burst into our village not with combat action but with a sudden inrush of misfortunes. A week into the war, women were crying saying goodbye to their young husbands who were drafted into the army. The defenders-to-be also looked distraught. They knew from the news broadcast by the only loudspeaker installed on a telephone pole in the village center that the front was advancing in the wrong direction. The fascists were suffering great losses, though not retreating to Berlin but moving towards Minsk and other places bearing Russian names. Only kids like me believed that everything would be like it was in the songs we sang: "the armor's strong and our tanks are swift, and the First Marshal will take us into battle". And our heavy TB-3 bombers will yet show the Germans what is 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 hitching the horse, I saw amidst beautiful white clouds three two-engine bombers with yellow-tipped wings and black swastikas. They had already overflowed the airfield, totally unimpeded. We had not heard our aircraft for a long time by then; we knew that they had been relocated closer to the new border but there had to be some air defense!

Somewhere in the east, in the direction of Bryansk, explosions were heard. Later we learnt that the village of Kletnya had also been bombed. The next day there was not a single cloud in the sky, and three German airplanes at an altitude higher than the previous day (about 3 km) flew eastward again. And then we saw, at a considerable distance from the aircraft, 15 to 20 bursts of flak fire. A volley, followed by another. And another. With the same result. With the same delay. Ignoring the airfield and its defenders, the German airplanes flew on without changing the course. The airfield was not bombed. I concluded that air defense was not effective and could not do harm to aircraft. (Two years would pass, and I would have to change my opinion.)

But we believed that the war would end, as we had seen in the movies, if not in three days then in a couple of weeks. It was upsetting that the newspapers that came to the village council did not contain stories about adventures or heroic deeds. Only brief, vague reports from the Soviet Informbureau. They only indicated the directions of the advance where the Germans were sustaining heavy losses of manpower and materiel. It was alarming that the directions had Russian names. And it was hard to believe that our peasants, even with the best kolkhoz wagons and horses available, would be able to reverse the situation on the front. The horses worn out by hard work and beatings were not much to look at. And on the Smolensk-bound Ekaterina's Tract trucks transporting soldiers were a rare sight. But we knew that the soldiers were armed not with outdated rifles but with new 5-cartridge carbines. And that they could fire in burst mode!

The illusions dissipated, though, when on July 17 in our house the district officials had dinner for the last time. They had come to arrange the evacuation of the kolkhoz livestock (primarily cattle) to the East so that it would not get into the hands of the Germans. Dad had a horse at the clinic. He was supposed to take all the medications available there and accompany the herds of all the collective farms of the area he serviced. Dad asked to be allowed to take his wife and three children with him. The officials denied the request saying: "This can cause panic.

If the circumstances necessitate evacuation, the administration will issue an order and conduct it in an organized manner.”

In the meantime, trucks were already seen going eastward carrying officials’ families but the explanation was that they were transporting archives. The fear of the Germans and the reported atrocities made people abandon their property and livestock. My parents were prepared to take only their cow with them and the bedding, and leave behind the heifer, the pig, 33 adult geese and the chicken.

But the departure never took place. For better or for worse. The future of the country and our own future seemed completely unpredictable. Our existence itself was not any longer secured. For even the hay we had 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 could not even buy salt. Buy I never saw my mother crying or sitting idle. We still had our livestock and our garden.

In the meantime, by the end of June 1941 we started hearing continuous rumble and occasional powerful thunderclaps. But the thunderstorm never came though it would not stop being heard for days. We understood that that was the sound of war: somewhere around Smolensk there was a fierce battle going on. What would happen the next day?

But the next day was no different from the day before. The older brother did not come back from “the trenches”. He had been sent with other 16-year old kids to dig trenches and tank ditches on the opposite bank of the Desna River. Maria Akulenkova was upset: she had not been sent there because she was from the kulaks’ family. Her father had been arrested for the second time as an enemy of the people. Later, however, she was entrusted with driving the kolkhoz cattle to the East.

We were getting used to the overflights of reconnaissance planes that dropped leaflets with the rimed (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 lasts for more than a month and ... then it gets quiet. Our hopes seem to have come true. There is no more movement of troops in any direction. There is no traffic on the highway, nor troop trains on the railroad. It is quiet in the district center Dubrovka, too. On August 7<sup>th</sup> Mom received her salary (as an orderly at the vet clinic). No one is being evacuated; the administration officials are working as usual. All the Jews in town are working, too: barbers, salesmen, doctors, heads of stores and warehouses. Only a dozen years ago the Jews’ occupations were mainly artisans, first-class tailors, tinmen. One of them was even riding around collecting bones, rags and skins. But in recent years young Jewish people have received education, advanced in their carriers. Intelligent, talented people. Many of them did not believe reports about the Germans exterminating all the Jews. One Jew who was transporting archives in a truck made a stop in our village and said that 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, when we were returning from the district center, we came to the village of Lubimovka, which was near the highway. There was no traffic. Still, there were people gathered by the last house who were looking at the highway. “Was it the Germans that you saw?” asked I 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 to Sesha”.

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

Late in the evening two of our tired soldiers dropped by our house. They drank some milk, took some bread and said that there were no Soviet troops behind them. They blew up the little bridge on the highway and turned to the woods. In their backpack we saw bars of soap, which surprised us, and we asked why they needed so much soap. "This is not soap; these are triton blocks to blow up installations".

Mom was scared and ran to the kolkhoz chairman Andrey Ivanovich Yakutov, who was our good friend, to ask him for a horse and a wagon to evacuate us, the children, immediately. But he was of no help. The district administration had not given any instructions; he would be calling them from the village council. Besides, the horses were not there. The stableman Sidor had driven them away so they wouldn't be driven to the East like the cows. He said: "They will take the horses, the authorities will be gone, and how are we going to plow?" It seemed that Sidor was not afraid to stay under the Germans; he had already worked for them as prisoner of war during the previous war and knew their language!

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

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

Like the winter that would come 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 a command over the radio to burn the crops and houses, not to leave them to the aggressor. But in our district there were no madmen to do that.

The morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August was bright, warm and sunny. Light white clouds were swimming in the sky, and, as on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, gentle wind barely stirred the leaves. As usual, the villagers had taken their cattle to the field 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 with the intention to go up the hill past the age-old larch trees planted long time ago by the lords of the manor, the Demidovs, and climb into the church bell tower. A view over many kilometers would open from there, and we would see the Germans. We did not have to go that far: German scouts were riding down the hill on bicycles, without slowing down. They had their shirt sleeves rolled up, sub machines across the chest and the bikes with attached leather bags. We froze from fear. Our path back was cut off. They would start firing at us. But the bicycle riders paid us no attention. They stopped at the store, the guard opened the door for them and they went in. We continued to stand 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 were eating candies. We could not hear what they were asking the guard about.

We sighed with relief only after they rode back the way they had come without paying us any attention. We were surprised to see, 5 or 10 minutes later, the villagers running to the store. They rushed inside to take whatever was still left in there. We observed an even greater commotion near the shed next to the store where there was a rather dirty pile of salt for the cattle. The people scooped the salt with their hands and put it into the bottoms of their shirts and dresses, or into their undershirts. Some were more forethoughtful and came with sacks. I did not dare take part in that undertaking since Mother had always forbidden us to take other people's things. I could not foresee then that salt would soon be worth its weight in gold. In any case, we would have to exchange for it our few belongings.

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

We did not get far from the store when a column of German soldiers on foot, four men in each rank, appeared. They were singing a cheerful marching song in time with their steps. And we had a feeling that we were seeing the victors who thought that 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 quick! 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 getting closer. The section of the road that ran in a ravine past our house was a hard one to travel: feet and wheels sank in deep sand. And it climbed uphill steeply at that spot, and in about a hundred meters became flat and firm again, with houses standing on both sides. Therefore, a person on foot or on a horse tried to negotiate the climb at full speed leaving our house behind – not worth the bother, as they say. Who would be willing to climb the hill to get to our house?

Still, a young thuggish-looking soldier from the forward ranks of the column ran into our house with a pistol in his hand. He gave us and our room a look-over and suddenly yelled: “Kommunistische!” Whether it was a question or an affirmation was not clear. He pointed at the tear-off calendar with the image of Stalin adorning the cardboard. Then 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 put the gun into the holster. Besides, he seemed astonished at 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 eggs”.

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

Meanwhile our house was already trembling, and the window glass was rattling as tanks and caterpillar trucks carrying soldiers and towing guns were negotiating the steep climb below our house.

The troops were marching along our rural road at moderate speed, but not westward, where 10 km down the highway was the Desna river and then, 70 km further, Bryansk, but southward in the direction of Kletnya.

My brother Vyacheslav and other kids of his age had dug 2-meter tank ditches across the Desna but the Germans did not go there. In their leaflets they advised not to dig “holes” for when “their tanks come, they will fill them up.” We heard an occasional exchange of fire in that direction but there were no significant combat actions 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 cannot remember all of them. It was obvious to us that such a target would soon be attacked by our “falcons”, and the distance of 10 km was not an impediment for our artillery to deliver a precise strike. But weeks passed, convoys went one after another but there were no air raids, and the artillery was silent.

For several days at the beginning of the invasion we saw from 10 to 15 one-engine dive bombers with a non-retractable undercarriage – nicknamed “bast shoe wearers” – forming a file and diving over the Desna one after another with an abhorrent and terrifying howl of sirens and bombs. No one fired at them, at least using anti-aircraft guns, and they were doing their merry-go-round methodically and without haste. But that was only at the beginning. The planes stopped their attacks soon after.

It was strange and somewhat bitter to see the movement of German troops stop in order to give way to a column of POWs going in the opposite direction – without belts and trench coats – numbering 400-500 men escorted by three submachine gunners. They did not look depressed. “Are there any of ours, from the Bryansk Region, among you?” someone of our villagers shouted. “No, your people are still fighting, we are from Chernigov!”

They were glad that for them the war was over, and they had survived. But grief and suffering were awaiting them. Neither the prisoners, nor we could even imagine what would happen to them in the next few days.

Where was this armada headed? And where was the infantry? We had seen units on bicycles. There were many motorcycles with side cars, probably for communication. Why had they turned off the highway, damaged as it was, to an even worse, though not yet washed out by rain, dirt road? A month later we learnt from the Germans that they had gone round Bryansk from the South and taken Orel, and only after that - Bryansk. Where was our aviation, we wondered.

What great joy we experienced one day when our plane flew at a low altitude across a moving column of troops. It fired its machine gun from both sides and ... that was it. We expected it to return in order to fly along the column of troops. But it did not return. A few days later, two high speed bombers at a high altitude flying along the same route dropped a dozen small bombs. They missed the target. About three hundred meters from the German column a house was destroyed, a goat was killed and a woman wounded. Since then I did not see our planes 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, the father of all times and peoples, in the wisdom of the party and government! Everything had turned out to be a fake, a lie.

Unwittingly, I compared German equipment with ours, tarpaulin boots and putties with solid leather studded boots, our ton-and-half and five-ton trucks with caterpillar personnel carriers, a burlap sack with a leather backpack, a shapeless bread loaf that became stale in two days with a vacuum sealed compact loaf that could be stored for a long time, our communication equipment with theirs. At the same time, we saw a lot of outdated equipment: short-barreled tanks and artillery pieces, etc..

Villagers made their own assessment of the enemy superiority and came to the conclusion the hour of the Soviet power had struck. Surely, there would be no more hateful kolkhozes where all the grain was transported in the fall to the elevator to be stored for the Motherland, and she, the beloved one, would dole out some back in the spring to be sowed. And the worn-out hags would not be cursing their fate below our hill jumping out of the harness under the hail of blows administered not by a cane or a whip but by a club. And we, the children, would not be yelling: “Why are beating the horse, don’t you see it has no strength to pull the loaded wagon in the sand and up the hill?” One day at work – and only 50 grams of grain at the end of the year. Is that a good salary? And you cannot move to somewhere else since passports are not issued to peasants. There is no pension, either. No meadow or hay for the cow, the family food provider. One could pick up the rye ears left in the field but that is forbidden, there are long prison sentences for that, even children are not spared! If you do not show up for work, your garden will be reduced to the size of your house, and then there would be no need to have your lot surveyed each year to make sure you have not gone beyond it and have not enlarged your garden! And there is no possibility to get out of the kolkhoz yoke except getting recruited to work at Stalin’s construction projects or settle in far-away uninhabited places. Whole families would leave their home villages for the Far East, Siberia, Kazakhstan and the Donbass mines...

Now a new opportunity came up: the war, and there were no more Soviets, just one problem – the Germans: they would shoot a cow in the field and take it by truck somewhere, or they may need a horse to transport something and then abandon it. War or not, one had to eat. The crops in sheaves and rows were divided among the villagers. So were the horses that still remained, that had not been driven to the East, with one horse per three or four households. The

stubble fields were also divided into shares, good and bad lots allotted equally according to the size of a family. We, who were not members of the kolkhoz, also got our share. And just a short time before that, the kolkhoz members had been yelling at the store entrance at the teachers and other state employees who were issued a sack of rye flour each: "Look at these parasites! They get all the bread. And we do not know if we will get several grams for each work day or not! We grow crops but it's others who eat them!"

Harvesting, bringing the crops home, threshing the sheaves of barley and rye, feeding the cow – all this is a responsibility of my older brother Vechik. My task is "to defend the house and property from the Germans" by means of the German language. The youngest brother Gennadi was assigned no task. He was 12, I was 14, and Vyacheslav was 16 years old.

Meanwhile the troops continued to move through our village. At times, a group of soldiers would stop for the night or to have a rest; they would drive their vehicles into our garden and camouflage them with apple-tree branches. It seemed they were still expecting attacks by our aviation. If they stayed for the night, they would drive us from the bedroom and living room to the entrance room and lay a thick layer of straw on the floor to sleep on. We, the teenagers, would be awaiting their departure with impatience. One they left, we would rummage through the straw and often find a penknife or a fountain pen with a picture of a pretty naked woman. I perused German newspapers with interest trying to read everything printed in them. The photos and the print were of better quality than in our newspapers.

Vechik's friend Sergei Baranov also got lucky: he found a bicycle abandoned by Germans. It had a small defect that he repaired. No one in our village owned a bicycle. It was a dream of all the boys. I was eager to try to ride it. I was certain that I would succeed at the first try! In my dreams I rode a bicycle confidently on an even road and downhill. I wished I could try as soon as possible! But where? The Germans were moving not only along the Dubrovka road but also from the direction of the woods, from the village of Soplevka (kolkhoz "Red Moscow")! We had to hide it in hay. The troops must be gone one day!

The bicycle waited for its ride till the spring of 1942. It was not me who rode it. As soon as it was seen on the road, a partisan from our village took it. He needed it more than we.

A German soldier abandoned a Soviet-produced radio receiver, and we found and hid it in the attic not knowing that if it was found in our house we would be shot. We had been supposed to turn in all radio receivers back in July. We also hid under our bathhouse floor a device that looked like a radio transmitter. The capacitors, the valves and the speakers looked so neat that we could not just throw it away. When we returned from Dubrovka in 1945, it was no longer there. Another of our finds, however, almost became our undoing. But I will come to this later.

The road with the marching troops went on living its own life, and the village needed to live its own. Every morning we took the cattle out to pasture. There was no certainty that all the cattle would come back home since from time to time the Germans would drive into the field, shoot a cow or other animal that was to their liking, gutted it and took it away ignoring the crying woman who owned the cow. Once a poor woman from our village clutched at the cow's neck, and would not let go. One of the soldiers shot her. But such things happened rarely. Usually, the first method was used. But even that was not something common. There seemed to be sort of a ban of such activities so as not to set the locals against the soldiers. Besides, the Germans were well provided for: bread, canned food with labels from all Europe, chocolate, candies, etc.. It was surprising how the rear units and the kitchens managed to catch up with the troops that had covered 400 km in their advance. In any case, during the first year of the war there were no requisitions. There were times when we would also get a taste of German products. Especially when the Germans were in a hurry to leave. There were opportunities to steal their canned food but we were afraid to do it. In our presence the Germans would not take our valuables. But when they made us leave the house for a couple of weeks, we found our accordion, gramophone and records missing upon our return.

But let us return to our mutttons, or rather our cow and calf. Like everybody else, in the morning we drove them to pasture. It was only during the first days of the war that we had kept them at home hoping that within a day or two the troops would pass and we would take them to the field to graze. Now every evening we wondered if they would come back home. Another challenge that we faced every morning was to take our 33 geese to the lake across the road packed with moving troops. With all the bans of marauding that may exist who would say no to a fried goose in wartime when it is walking right under your wheels?

The house was not a castle, either. I was at home alone when and a group of soldiers surrounded our chicken, threw some grain on the ground and tried to catch them, though unsuccessfully. I came out and asked them in German: "Are you hungry?" Astonished, they stared at me. They stopped their hunt and started asking me questions: Am I German? Who are my parents? Where have I learnt German? They seemed to look at me with respect seeing that my conduct differed from the one of my peers but it was my knowledge of the German language that impressed them the most. I answered that my parents are Russian, and that I studied the language at our secondary school.

My teacher must have been a good one. She encouraged me to study the material not only for 5th to 7th grades but also for 8th to 10th. I liked the German language. My ear for music also helped. I played all songs on the concertina, mandolin and balalaika by ear.

"My parents were landed gentry before the revolution, said I, they were persecuted. My father is still somewhere in a concentration camp. " A lie for salvation! It was a semi lie, really. Surely, we were not gentry but kulaks, but we were persecuted, and Dad had been in a concentration camp, and he was not here at the moment, and my mother did not look like a peasant. Was I supposed to say that my father had driven the cattle to the East away from the Germans, and possibly, was already fighting against them?

Since then I began to use my knowledge of German without any hesitation. Every time soldiers approached us, Mom called me, and I went to meet them. My older brother tried to evade them. He was 16 at that time. The youngest, Gennadi, was 12, and nobody paid him any attention. He was an avid fisherman. As soon the situation stabilized, i.e. stopped changing every day, he resumed fishing. He used his fishing pole or just his hands. I remember 1 kg tenches caught with a weel in our pond. You raised the weel, and when its upper part came to the surface, you got splashed with a fountain of water. That was a powerful protest of the tenches caught in a trap. I have not seen anything like that since then.

Before the war I got sick with pneumonia twice and was physically weak, unlike my older brother. That's why our father would send him to do all chores that required strength. Vechik was a healthy kid and had many good friends with whom he liked to spend time. He was kind and always ready to help. But in his early childhood in Leningrad, where he was on his own most of the time, he took to smoking, which concealed it from his parents. Only when he was sent to build fortifications and dig trenches, parents allowed him to smoke openly. He was not a particularly good student, which was a result of his lax attitude to studies in the first years of school. Since the age of 5 he was getting his education in the courtyard surrounded by 5-storied houses. When Gennadi and I were not at the "Hearth", he would show his treasure hidden in the firewood pile: matches with green and red heads and long cigarettes in a bright packet. There was a penknife, too. 80 years have passed, I have forgotten many things but I still remember that.

Like most sickly kids, I was aggressive and hot-tempered, always prepared to answer in kind to anyone who would bully me. My constant academic success, achieved without any particular effort, enhanced my self-esteem and independence. I read avidly all books that I could lay my hands on. I was interested in literature, especially literary critique, biographies of famous people, travel and designs of an automobile, radio receiver and U-2 plane. For hours I could play my musical instruments. I liked drawing and wanted to study to become an artist. I even took one lesson about perspective from a Red Army soldier who served at our firing range in Soplevka but the war prevented me from continuing the studies.

On the wall in our room hung a portrait of Pushkin and a heroic woman with a rifle from Grenada that I had copied. I also drew Lenin sitting in a tent (in Razliv<sup>53</sup>).

Starting from 5<sup>th</sup> grade I wanted to be a writer. I participated actively in the school music and drama clubs, recited poetry and prose. I liked to read fragments and even entire books that I liked to anyone who would listen. Mother could listen to my reading only on winter evening since in the summer she worked in the garden and took care of the house and the animals. She also read herself or together with me.

I remember well our reading of the plays by Shakespeare. I did not like many of them. "The Merry Wives of Windsor" was the exception but I don't remember why. At the end of the book I read the critique of Shakespeare's plays by Tolstoy. My opinion coincided with his: I did not like the unnaturally stilted monologues. I also shared his opinion about ballet.

My permanent audience was my mother's friend Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova. She was busy with 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 many years I was an authority for him, and he would listen to my advice on everything until the time he got married.

My ardent wish was to be able to make up stories similar the ones described in "Robinson Crusoe", "The Mysterious Island" or "The prince and the Pauper".

At that time I came across the works of V. Belinski<sup>54</sup>. I learnt from him about qualities one must have to become a writer: to be observant of the actions and personalities of characters and of one's own; to be able to analyze and make conclusions from the attitude, behavior and circumstances in which characters act; to foresee the coming events. As a result, I began to critically assess my own character, behavior and relationships with my family, comrades at school and, eventually, the organization of our State and actions of the authorities.

I was fond of books about famous people. I was fascinated by all of them: Luis Pasteur, Diesel, Mikhlukho Maklai, military leaders, writers... I wanted to know the design and functioning of an automobile differential gear, gasoline and diesel engine, and what newspapers write about. But we subscribed to our district newspaper only, and that was not 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 received a copy of the novel "How Steel was Tempered<sup>55</sup>". We read it aloud after classes. It was very interesting but at the end I had a feeling that Korchagin laid his health on the altar of the Motherland in vain: petty bourgeois elements penetrated the government and, consequently, the fight against them would still take a long time.

But how interesting, how easy to understand, with pictures, was the description of the design of a training U-2 plane! And the number of propeller rotations was indicated. One could make a plane like this oneself: if one took a spinning wheel, it would not be difficult to calculate what kind of sheave would have to be attached to the propeller so that the homemade plane could take off! The calculations were made, what was needed was plywood and some other materials. The assistant, loyal listener and would-be co-pilot was Gennadi, my younger brother. There were some doubts: though it would not be difficult to rotate the propeller, his arm could become numb, and he was only 12 at that time.

The war did not allow that dream to be realized. But in our dreams we would fly for another three years among the clouds without fear of crashing since the plane was light and could land on a small flat spot! And in the middle of the taiga we would find an orchard with apples that were different from ours and a beautiful house. And no one around! How could I know that 65 to 70 years would pass, and the dream would come partially true, and in the most

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<sup>53</sup> Lenin's hiding place near St Petersburg from where he coordinated revolutionary activities in the summer 1917.

<sup>54</sup> Russian literary critic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>55</sup> Socialist realist novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky reflecting the author's experience of fighting for the Bolsheviks in the Civil War.



unexpected manner. It has been a decade or so now that in our area one can find orchards with apples in abundance and houses, good and bad ones, and there are no people! But it was not the war's doing, at least not entirely: the merciless actions of the former governments before and during the war, and particularly of the current one, have led to the depopulation of the land. There are no jobs, no roads, and no prospects for making a living. Villages disappear; people flee to cities and foreign countries.

In order to understand my attitude to the events of those years, I should try to establish what influenced the building of my character as a person and citizen. My early childhood was overshadowed by the pillaging of our estate, the arrest and conviction of my father who was sentenced, as an enemy of the people, to 8 years of labor camps. The family of my father's brother – Pavel Kirillovich Novikov – gave shelter to our mother and the three of us who, at that time, were 1.5, 3.5 and 5.5 years old despite the fact that in those hard times they had six little children of their own, the oldest being only 10 years old.

Then in Leningrad we were sheltered by our mother's brother Vladimir Matveevich Kamenetski and his wife Gelena. They had two sons, 13 and 16 years old. The daughter Stanislava had been already arrested.

We lived in the kitchen with no amenities; the stoves were fueled with firewood and the walls were painted bright green and were wet because of high humidity. Brother's wife Gelya (Gelena) expressed her dissatisfaction when mother hung our laundry to dry in the kitchen. For that reason mother had to dry our laundry under her bedsheets warming it with her body. An iron bed and a bedside table were the only furniture. But my younger brother and I slept there on Sundays only. On those days mother fed us each with a sandwich that contained half a meat patty brought from the mechanized canteen where she worked as a dishwasher and later as a cook. Milk was scarce. Mom suggested that we drop crumbs of bread into the glass saying: "More bread, less milk".

On all other days my brother and I lived round the clock in a good kindergarten called the "Hearth". Our teachers were very good specialists. In three years they taught us how to sleep and eat right, how to be friends with one another, play, draw, recite poems and read. They inculcated in us a taste for books and paintings, drawing and singing.

*The picture shows all the teachers with the senior group. Gennadi, from the junior group, is sitting beside me, as an exception, so that mother would not have to pay for two photographs. My face has already acquired a mature expression. Serious and pensive, I seem to be burdened by a great secret: I should not tell anyone that we had a father and that he was arrested as an enemy of the people; instead I should be saying that he left us, and we do not know where he is. It may be that he is serving a prison sentence somewhere.*



*Gennadi and I are the first and second from the right in the lower row*

My awareness, my perception of the country, people and life was broadened by our moving from the civilized environment, from the best city in the country, back to the godforsaken village of Radichi in the Dubrovka District, to the same house of Uncle Pavel. I went to the first grade in that village. I have no memories of that important event, neither bad, nor good. Who was my first teacher? I don't remember. A man or a woman? I remember only that the school was in the middle of a garden.

Already at that time I was inclined to think that teachers were not really necessary, one only needed good text books. I would read, memorize and retell word by word. Nihilism!

I remember that period very well. I will return to it later. By the start of the school year Uncle Pavel's family, the size of which had grown while we were away, received a great many text books for 1st to 8th grades (they were distributed free of charge then: the country was poor but had enough money for that. Though it was declared that life had become better, buying so many books was beyond a mere peasant's means!) Before the school started and the owners claimed their books, I had read everything that interested me on history and literature.

There I saw the squalor in which the countryside lived, and what hard jobs requiring a lot of physical strength my parents had to take in order to feed the family, to stand on their own feet. Again, good people helped. There were many of them. Later I thought that I would write about life and good people, and that as long as someone remembered them, those people, they would be happy in the other, maybe the parallel, or the best of the worlds.

To complement our own practical experience, we were taught at school, political information classes, as well as in books of contemporary writers and newspapers, to love the socialist Motherland, the hope of all working people of the world, to hate enemies of every hue, to be familiar with military materiel: the design of a rifle, a gas mask; to be ready to fight the evil capitalism. To be able to do that, we had to know how to run, jump, throw a grenade, render the first medical aid.

We loved the Motherland but were uneasy about Pavlik Morozov<sup>56</sup> who had denounced his father. We had not yet got over the damned past: it was considered bad form to tattle on a school comrade, let alone a parent. Besides, we knew what “enemies of the people” were like in real life. They did not seem to be genuine enemies. They were priests, millers or, more often than not, just good farmers who did not want to surrender their property to the kolkhoz. Of course, the government rightly got rid of landlords. But how can anyone consider my father to be an enemy of the people? He completed four grades at school and worked as a hired hand since early childhood at the Kamenetski estate. He was afraid of everyone and worked hard. However, he would not leave the big farm though his wife, a noblewoman, tried to talk him into abandoning everything and get away from their property. Well, that may be easy for noble people to do but he had worked for two decades for it and now was supposed to abandon everything?

In the beginning, the government tried to squeeze out of them as much as possible through taxation. Mother and father were wasting away at work but paid. Eventually, the authorities came up with 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 work. Our cows and horses, including our stud ambler, were taken to the nearby kolkhoz. The buildings were transported to the district center and converted to a militia station.

Quite different were the cases of Trotski, Bukharin, Kamenev<sup>57</sup> and many others who were executed. We, too, pierced their eyes with our pens in their photos in history text books! It was them who wanted to seize power and sell the Motherland to capitalists! But we believed that our army and navy were the best in the world! In the movie “If War Breaks Out Tomorrow” TB-3 bombers from the Sessa airfield defeated the enemy in three days! There was no radio in our village, only a loudspeaker in the village council and a record player at school but we knew all the songs that were all cheerful and sprightly: “ever higher and higher and higher we take our birds to the sky, and in every propeller we hear that our borders are safe” and about “the first marshal who will take us to battle”. And “the armor’s strong, and our tanks are rapid”...

But already in 1939 I began to feel certain disappointment: tiny Finland attacked our huge country. Obviously, it had not read our newspapers, had not watched our films and had not heard our victorious songs! In the severe winter our army started having casualties, our wounded soldiers froze to death in the snow, and the war lasted for months on end. Every day I ran to the village council to read the papers but only one heroic deed stuck in my memory: our mighty tractor with a machine gunner and a tractor driver was surrounded and attacked by the Finns. Then the driver pulled the lever, and the tractor began to rotate while the machine gunner was firing away. Naturally, he killed all the enemy soldiers.

(We have learnt the truth about that war against Finland just recently. The fortified Mannerheim Line was never breached; our losses were 10 times greater than the Finns’.)

That was the first blow to our patriotic education. Our might turned out to be a soap bubble. The first elections in 1937 were also a sham. Even peasants understood that it was impossible to choose out of one candidate. The assertion that life in a kolkhoz became better and merrier was an insolent lie. To receive 50 grams of rye grain for a day of work was the worst kind of exploitation that ever existed. A tiny plot of land near the house, the only source of livelihood for a peasant, was measured every year lest the owner would not - God forbid! - enlarge it by ploughing the virgin soil. One could not refuse to work. In the case of any misconduct, the authorities could take away the plot of land - “cut it down to the house corners”, as it was called. One could not leave the village, either, since peasants were not allowed to have passports.

Life was hard, to be sure. Everything for the army, everything for the defense! One had to tighten one’s belt. And even an ignorant old woman knew that while all were asleep there remained one lit window in the Kremlin - it was comrade Stalin working, thinking about us! And when the time would come for him to pass away, even our good friend, Antonina Sergeevna

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<sup>56</sup> A 13-year-old boy who denounced his father to the authorities and was in turn killed by his family.

<sup>57</sup> Revolutionary and Soviet leaders persecuted by Stalin.

Akulinkova, who was dispossessed twice – in 1930 and 1937 - and raised three children in extreme poverty, would burst into tears: war would break out now! He was feared by everybody!

But all of a sudden the Soviet government in our area ceased to exist. On one single day – August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Communists, Komsomol members and non-party members had all been abandoned by the government without any guidance as to what to do and how to live. Could anyone consider as feasible the order given by the once most powerful and wisest leader to burn the crops and houses so that only barren land would be left to the enemy? Or was he so sure of the unlimited love that the people whom he made so happy had for him, the love that would make them sacrifice their lives? In my long life I have not met anyone who would be ready to do that.

As they say, there is but one step from love to hatred. Comrade Stalin made quite a few such steps. The last one was the bluff about the mighty army and its brilliant leaders. People had always been complaining about the life they had, only not out loud. After the Germans came, they would do it openly. And there was no belief among them whatsoever in a good outcome of the war for our country. Our communists did not have it, either. Among them were the kolkhoz chairman, school principal, teachers, village council chairman and his secretary. All in all 8 people.

During the first days of the occupation we saw only army units; there was no SS. That explained the fact that though I saw our prisoners of war being interrogated, there were no executions. Our communists were ordered to report daily to make sure that they were loyal and had not run away to join the partisans of whom the Germans heard from the Moscow radio though at that time we knew or heard nothing of them. Besides, German troops were moving from the direction of the woods, too.

The arrival of the Germans was so unexpected that it would be safe to assume that there had been no time for the district administration to issue any instructions. The night before that day everybody in the village council was waiting by the telephone to receive them but the communists' vigil was for nothing: the authorities had more important things to do. There was time to prepare partisan resistance only in Bryansk – across the Desna. It would be occupied more than a month later.

The situation changed when the black shirts appeared. The interrogations of the communists became more intense: they were grilled about what their orders were, where the supplies for the partisans were stored, who was supposed to help them. Each time they were released but shortly summoned for questioning again. The communists understood that they needed to abandon their families and run for the woods to wait it out; maybe our army would be back soon.

To prevent partisan resistance from emerging, the Germans decided to get rid of young non-local lads who had been in the Red Army. Stories that I heard would go like this: a guy walks in the street; the Germans stop him, ask him where his house is, then call the village chief to confirm it, but if the underwear is army issued, shoot him on the spot.

Some villagers used the occupation as an opportunity to settle scores. The store guard threatened the man who was the first to start the looting saying that he would be severely punished when our army returned. Someone reported that to the Germans, and the guard was shot. As soon as the Soviet government was gone, people began to disassemble the unfinished building of a communal services center. Women from the house nearby could not standby idly and said that that was a public building and the perpetrators would be brought to account. The poor women were executed in the church that was used as a warehouse.

It seemed that the village council building was chosen to house the headquarters of the army that was advancing in the direction of Bryansk. Prisoners of war were taken in there for interrogation. Once I saw a Fritz saying something to a prisoner pointing at his wrist. The latter did not understand, and the German hit him in the face. The prisoner finally understood the command, took off his watch and handed it over.

Our house was the best in the village and was located opposite the village council. Staff officers inspected the house and expelled us and the soldiers who were stationed there. They brought in bedroom furniture and two big beautiful chests. Guards and a batman stayed in house. A general arrived while we were still by the house with our belongings. I said something in German and the general, becoming curious, invited me into the house. He was interested in talking to a local who spoke his mother tongue. I had to repeat the story about myself, my parents, especially my father, about our more prosperous past which was visibly vindicated by the two-pedestal table upholstered in green cloth, the open-work rocking chair and the gramophone with a big horn.

The braveness and the general appearance of our family also satisfied him and he ordered to bring our belongings into the front room where father used to see his patients. A part of the room was partitioned off with a railing where we could sleep without getting in the general's way.

The general was a slim and lean man of medium height with graying hair. He was about 60 years old. He had a pleasant face typical of many educated men of his age but void of the superciliousness peculiar to high-ranking officers of the Prussian school. Every day early in the morning when my brothers and I were sleeping on a feather mattress laid on the floor, the general, on his way to the headquarters, placed three round packets of mint candies for us, the children, on the railing. For the first few days he was guarded by submachine gunners, after which only his batman, also an elderly officer, stayed at the house.

We started feeling safer. The batman chased away those wishing to move into our house. In our garden he warmed dinners for the general. The batman was friendly and free-handed. He treated us to tasty, thick, black bread that would stay fresh for a long time. We also tried canned fish made in various countries of Europe. On our part, we shared fried goose with him.

Our POWs would be brought to the headquarters, motorcycle riders would drive up, and sometimes an airplane would fly in that landed below the hill near our house on a very small strip. The troops continued to pass through. We understood that we would not be able to keep our numerous geese safe for a long time.

Someone told us that eight wounded Red Army soldiers had been brought to the warehouse near the store. I went there to find out who they were and how they were taken prisoner.

Inside the warehouse, where salt had been stored several days before, eight men were lying. One of them, in a commander's shirt, with a typically Semitic face, was wounded in the arm. He had no insignia. Another man, seemingly Georgian, had a head wound. A man who looked like a peasant was shot through in the chest. The rest were also wounded. They told me that they had crossed the Desna in order to capture a German for interrogation. The Germans had seen them hiding in the reeds. Some had been killed. They had been wounded and taken prisoner. They had been interrogated, brought here and abandoned. Probably, they would be taken to a hospital. So they thought. We thought so, too.

The villagers came in droves to see them. Had they seen anyone of ours? Everyone brought what one 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 see both the road and the warehouse. Mother says that we have to feed them. So every day Vyacheslav catches a goose and holds it against the log. My task is to hold the goose by the nose and separate its head with a single strike of an ax. Mother boils and fries 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 had driven up to the herd, three soldiers had jumped out of the truck and shot the heifer. Without butchering the corpse, they had thrown it into the back of the truck and left. The shepherd had not even approached 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 he 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 his trunks. It was a big, fine trunk. Its top was engraved with an intricate ornament. It contained a countless number of all kinds of fishing tackle for angling, fish-flying, ice fishing; lures, baits, etc.. I was particularly impressed by a fishing pole made by a Finnish craftsman of a great number of matches glued together.

More than once he said that he would like to fish in our lake but that wish was never realized.

Once the batman asked Mother to bake buns using the wheat flour that he had provided. The buns came out to be delicious, which we had the chance to ascertain ourselves. I asked the general whether he could assist in securing medical care for our wounded soldiers since a week had passed, our dressings were having little effect, and we were afraid that gangrene might set in. He denied our request saying that POWs were beyond his competence.

It was an early sunny morning. On the whole, that summer was sunny and warm. In June, July and August. All was as usual on the road: the troops were going and going. On the path going from the dam to our house along the gully I saw a soldier in a Soviet uniform with a trench coat across the shoulder. We had not yet delivered breakfast to the wounded. How surprised we were when we recognized in that person our soldier with the chest shot-through wound. He told us that his comrades had been sent to a hospital but he was set free. "You've shown me where you live. So, I've decided to go your house. You won't run me off, will you? "

Below our house was a hut where the mother and son of dispossessed Byrdikov had lived. We put him up there. No German wanted that place. We continued his treatment described above. Only the smell of the puss oozing from his lung was becoming worse. I had to make an effort not to throw up. When I was not there, my brothers could not bring themselves to help Mother with the dressing. Still, the soldier was getting better. "My family will get the notice of my death, but I might yet get back home alive!" he said. "Thank you!"

Meanwhile the Germans, sensing near victory in the Blitzkrieg, were making everything possible for the emergence of partisan movement. Harsh interrogations of our communists, executions on the roads of Red Army soldiers wearing civilian clothes, searches in villages for young lads posing as sons-in-law of young married women, inhumane treatment of POWs have

forced many men to run for remote places where no Germans were present. Our Bryansk forest and villages close to it were such places.

In our village only the school principal Fomushkin, who had grown up in an orphanage, started collaborating with the Germans. Our communists, after third degree interrogations, and young men who feared for their lives left for the woods. Still, they were not conducting any operations.

For a short while, we had a “polizei” in our village – a young handsome lad, a local, a well-known womanizer, a lover of the young wife of our most zealous communist. The latter had had enough of the interrogations and insolent behavior of the “polizei”, ambushed him when he was crossing the Svinka brook and shot him. Later, he became a commissar in a partisan detachment thanks to his political awareness and successful fight against enemies of the people. It was him who aggressively sought out and denounced apparent and hidden enemies of the people. More than once he reported to the NKVD chief about my father’s hostile activity when after mass vaccinations some animals would die (he said that to Father himself and asked him, as a specialist, to buy a piglet for him). But Father, after having gone through the Belomorcanal “school”, accounted for the animals’ deaths with reports from the Zhukovka laboratory.

In the village of Zarosha, I made the acquaintance of a young lad who, having gotten out of the encirclement, found shelter in that village and later had to leave for the woods. He played the mandolin well and taught me the basics of playing it. Before leaving he gave me the mandolin, and I started playing by ear all the songs that I knew. Before the war we had listened to some old records since new ones were not available, and we could not have afforded to buy them, anyway. They were “Rio Rita”, Lenski’s aria, the romance “A Pair of Bay Horses” and others. I was keen to play the balalaika, mandolin and concertina. The balalaika was handmade for me by a great craftsman and a very kind and intelligent man – Osip Efremovich Sergeev. The father of eleven children, he did not only feed, raise and educate them but made many good things with his hands that outlived him and are still enjoyed by their owners.

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

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

As soon as the general left, soldiers settled down in our garden. They camouflaged the vehicles with apple tree branches. What pedants! Had they ever been bombed? Had they even seen a Soviet plane? It was war, after all! What a shame! We did not mind being bombed if the Germans would have it, too!

A premonition made me get closer to the Germans: were they going to stay long? Did they just stop for a rest? One of them seemed to need to relieve himself and jumped into the hole where our barrel with lard was buried. Then I heard his joyous cry: “Guys, I have found a treasure here!” He jumped back out forgetting why he had gone in there. It was obvious he had found something. The excited soldiers gathered around the hole discussing what could have been buried there. Ah, how could we fail to see that our cache was so easy to find? And what were we supposed to do now? Should we go there and dig out the lard ourselves, and, maybe, they would not take it? Or would it be better to wait and let it come what may? But it would be an irreparable loss! What to do? There was not time to lose! Mother did not know the solution, either.

God must have heard us. Our help came in the form of motorcycle riders who brought an order to move on immediately! All mount up! The soldiers, skipping their rest, left the garden. We waited till dark, dug out the barrel and buried it again far from the house in the vegetable garden where the potatoes had been dug out long before. It was quite a scare!

The next day we understood why our guests had left so quickly: our house had been chosen for another general. His people 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 three oranges Father had brought from Moscow, the fruit we had never tasted before. (He had completed a refresher course for veterinarian assistants in Saratov, passed examinations in 16 subjects with “good” and “excellent” marks, travelled back via Moscow and bought three oranges. How to divide three oranges between six people was not something he had thought about. Mother did not say anything, but it did not seem right to me).

Where we should move to was none of the Germans’ concern. We brought our belongings to our friends who had also been dispossessed in 1930 and whose head of the family, Egor Akulenkov, had been arrested for a second time in 1937. His wife, Antonina Sergeevna, had two sons: Vladimir, Vyacheslav’s friend and coeval, and his younger brother Vasili. Her daughter, who was the oldest sibling, was away: she had driven the kolkhoz cows to the East. Before that she had not been allowed to dig trenches, probably because of the risk that she could transmit secrets to the enemy. And then surprise: she had been entrusted with the entire kolkhoz cattle! But far from the enemy, though.

There were soldiers staying in their house, too, and both our families had to sleep on the boards behind the stove called the “shelf”. We cooped up together for a couple of weeks. I remember us seeing many different canned goods that the Germans kept in a sack that was not tied. Probably, we, the kids, furtively took some. Later, when we would read about the feats of the Young Guard<sup>58</sup> members who also stole something, we would say that it was not stealing since we were thus disrupting supplies of the German army.

We were not allowed to approach our house. Morning frost came early, and our flowers withered. In the first days of September our Army undertook sort of a counter attack across the Desna River, if not a counter offensive: artillery shells were flying hissing and exploding behind our house in the swamp. At times, we heard an exchange of small arms fire. In the glen along the Belizna, in the thickening autumn fog stood German guns that fired from time to time. The projectiles, hissing as if they were straining to break the air, flew across the Desna. It lasted for a few days.

Our wounded soldier cheered up: “Our troops will soon liberate us, and I will be able to return home. My folks will be so happy: they thought that I was killed, and here I am, live and kicking”. It seemed that the miracle that he hoped so much for could really happen. But one early morning Mother went to check on him, saw the open window and his lifeless head on the window sill. He had choked on the excessive amount of phlegm. He had given us his address and his last name, but all papers burnt later with the house. My brother Vyacheslav and Vladimir Akulenkov buried him in his trench coat.

After the front moved beyond Orel, the tenants left and we came back home. The gramophone, the records, the musical instruments and some other things were gone. In September we saw mostly covered wagons pulled by pairs of strong horses. We were told that those were Romanians. Now groups of soldiers would stay at our house for a short while; among them were Poles, too. Rumors went around about the cruelty of the Finns. It seemed that they could not forget the war of 1939. But I never met them.

The cold was setting in, but the Germans were still wearing summer uniforms. Motorcycle riders suffered the most. Once a group of soldiers had barely the time to enter the house to stay for the night when a messenger arrived with an order to depart immediately. The officer was the last to leave. He touched Mother’s shoulder and threw a pair of new army boots on the stove. He was preoccupied with something and looked sad. The boots were a regal gift! Neither Vyacheslav, nor I had good boots. Our feet were permanently wet. Naturally, we hid them well since if they were found, we could be shot for a theft of army property.

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<sup>58</sup> Youthful guerrilla fighters in German-occupied Ukraine.



Now we had soldiers coming from the front for a rest only. No more songs were heard, even on the radio. Military transport was moving on the highway covered with concrete plates. About 15 soldiers remained in the kolkhoz yard, and about the same number guarded the bridge across the Khoperenka on the highway. Finally, the village had a chance to breathe freely.

A lot of work needed to be done in September to harvest the crops and thresh the wheat. The stubble and the frost-bitten grass had to be cut. My older brother took care of that chore. In a matter of days he had somehow become older, more responsible and caring. And stricter. We helped him the best we could. We ground barley in the mortar that he had made himself. We still had some flour left that we had bought before. Mother would put two small pieces of lard and meat into a pot and grind them into fibers. That was mostly for the smell. We ate pancakes with sour cream mixed with fried pieces of lard.

Sometimes, a young German, a little older than our Vyacheslav, visited us. They made friends. I did not know how they communicated with each other when I was not around. Once he brought some wheat flour and on behalf of his CO asked Mother to bake bread. Mother baked a dozen small loaves. We were given one for the work. How tasteful it was! Heini – that was the name of our new acquaintance – would bring us bread and canned food; we gave him milk and shared our meals with him.

During all that time I did not hear about a single incident of rape. In some houses, however, including in the one near ours, there were dance parties with women, schnaps or moonshine. There were women who did not want to wait for their husbands' return and, as a result, quite a few "half-breeds" were born. It was funny to hear women, who gave birth without their husbands, say: "The child's father is my husband. I gave birth a month past my due date. This is the way by body works".

I remember well the New Year's eve. A group of soldiers of mature age were having a rest in our house after the combat near Sukhinichi. They were excited about something. They were listening to the radio. The sound was not loud, and it was not music. To my question about what was going on they told me that they were waiting for important news. "What about?" I asked. "Moscow is about to be taken". Hours passed in agonizing suspense but the news did not come. The anxiety turned into despondency. The soldiers looked aged, their eyes looked into the distance, there were no jokes, no conversation. I understood that Moscow had not been taken, and now everyone was thinking that there was no escaping the horrors of the front life in that merciless winter, still dressed in summer uniform at that. Some of them had already frost-bitten ears and feet. Lucky were those who found themselves felt boots. They cut them to wear them like galoshes when it was allowed by their commanders.

How different they looked in the winter of 1941 – aged, exhausted, badly dressed and badly frostbitten - from those whom we had seen in August – young and full of enthusiasm! I asked one of the soldiers, and he confirmed that Moscow had not been taken because the motor oil and fuel had frozen. What's more, the Russians had begun a counteroffensive.

The blitzkrieg was over. Long war with an uncertain ending was beginning. Each of them understood that his chances to survive were close to zero. And just a few hours earlier they were hopeful that the end of the war was near. They did not have the chance to sleep: a motorcycle rider, with his head wrapped in a shawl, brought their marching orders. The soldier, who was the last to leave, gave us the cut-off felt boots that were too small for him. We were happy to get them. Mother attached broadcloth tops to them, and I started wearing them without a second thought.

No one bothered us during the first months of 1942. Only Heini would drop by to have the laundry done in exchange for food or to have a talk with my brother. Since the summer, the Germans had been quartering our POWs in the kolkhoz cattle yards. They had put up barbed wire fences around them. Behind the fences were the fields where most crops had already been harvested. There was one field left with cabbage. There had been not enough time to take care of it, and the crop was not good. The heads were small; it was mostly leaves. Some people wanted to harvest it for the cattle but the guards did not allow approach the field.

Possibly, those were the same prisoners from Chernigov. At the beginning, they were not fed at all or fed so badly that some of them crept under the barbed wire in order to get the cabbage. The guards shot them without warning. By February, the POWs were transferred to the village of Peklino.

Our local partisans began to visit us. At night, they would knock on the window to ask Mother for a medicine. Mostly, though, they came to see the village chief Sidor. Sidor got himself between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, he interacted with passing Germans who needed help with pulling a vehicle back onto the road or with some other job; on the other, he had to meet partisans from our village, propitiated them with moonshine, arranged collections of supplies, meat, etc..

But all was quiet. Neither the Germans tried to catch them, nor the partisans bothered the Germans. In the meantime, cows, bread, potatoes, cabbage and moonshine were requisitioned. Inhabitants of Soplevka, Buda and Bolotnya told that partisan units lead by a man called Kovpak had passed through their villages heading west. Many of the partisans wore uniform and were armed like regular soldiers; they even had cannon. And they did not rob the peasants but requested the kolkhoz chairman to provide them certain supplies. They even gave the receipts. 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 in turns the plays of Shakespeare collected in a thick, large-format book. Each play was well illustrated: king Lear tearing at his gray disheveled hair, Hamlet holding a human skull in his hand, etc.. I do not remember how we came to own such a rare book. To my great regret, I have never seen it since then. Mother had a pleasant voice and read with feeling. I thought that my reading was no worse.

From the first lines of “King Lear” I disliked the unnaturally pompous language of the characters, their flowery invectives and garish phraseology. By that time I had read enough of Belinski not take any authority for granted. In the end of the book I read the fine-printed article by Tolstoy about Shakespeare and other playwrights. And about ballet, for some reason. Without having seen any ballet performance, I totally agreed with him.

There was no library in our village, only a small one at school. I was delighted with Gogol, especially his “Dead Souls” disliked by most students. By my reading of excerpts about Nozdrev, Sobakevich and Plushkin<sup>59</sup> I harassed not only my own family but also our neighbors. When my mother was busy, my faithful listener was Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova who was always home sowing something for a customer.

In the middle of the winter the Germans decided to secure their rear. In the Bryansk Region by that time there were many partisan units. Some would blow up railroads, some would mine highways. We, too, had heard about the blasting of railroads. But there had been no combat operations in our area. Still, during the day we saw German and police punitive units passing through our village. They would go into the woods, but not very far. An aircraft would fly over for reconnaissance or a bombing raid. Our relative from the hamlet of Mikheevka, which is near the village of Soplevka, told us: “When our boys, who had joined the partisans, would learn that there would be a partisan raid of our village to requisition cows and other food and would tell us about that, we would immediately go to the village Zhukovo, which was near the highway and tell the Germans about that. And the Germans would do us a favor and advance to our area. The partisans would find out about the movement in time and retreat into the woods”. And as to the woods in our region, they were endless and spread as far as Kletnya, Zhukovka, Bryansk and then further to the South.

The Germans decided to end this game: despite everything, the partisans obtained food, including cows, in villages located near the woods. So, the Germans decided to move all the villagers to other places or, if they thought that some villages were helping the partisans, to concentration camps, and burn the villages. The same relative of ours told me how it happened:

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<sup>59</sup> Characters of Gogol’s “Dead Souls”

“Early in the morning, when the women had not yet started fire in the stoves, the village was surrounded by Germans; they ordered the inhabitants to pack the most necessary things and gather in the center; the men were ordered to harness their horses and proceed to the same place. My neighbor and I loaded the sled and put our children in it. We noticed that the Germans were busy gathering the people, and there were no soldiers nearby. We had a good horse, and we decided to get away heading for the village of Grabovka. We and a handful of others made it. The rest were driven along the highway to the camp in Zhukovka. They were held there for about a month, then some were sent to Germany while the children and the disabled were set free.”

(Later, these children would receive special pension; some would be given automobiles. One man that I knew who had been wounded on the front and decorated for his valor, and who had not received a car, expressed a negative opinion about such prisoners.)

At the beginning of the year the group of German soldiers, who were quartered at the kolkhoz yard, left. At night, partisans began to visit our village frequently and without fear. Only on the highway, near the village of Susnyag, there were guards left who built a simple earth pillbox. At the same time, volunteers were recruited for work in Germany. We had seen the might of the German army and were certain at that time that the war would end in our defeat. Men of conscription age believed that even if a miracle happened, and the Soviet government returned, they would be executed or, at best, sent to a labor camp because they had not followed orders of the Party and Government. It was known from the leaflets that Stalin had had no mercy even on his own son who was taken prisoner: he had refused to exchange him for German POWs thus condemning him to death. The return of the Red Army did not bode well for such men. And some volunteered to go to work in Germany. It came as a surprise to us when my older brother's best friend Sergei Baranov, nicknamed Buglai, agreed to go. I did not know the details of his recruitment. But we had not heard about incidents of forced relocation to Germany. Probably, that practice existed in concentration camps.

Sergei was a tall and brawny lad and the most handsome in the village. When he was swimming, his torso was almost to the waist above the water. It was him who before the war had built a pedal-driven car using the design printed in *The Pionerskaya Pravda*<sup>60</sup>. Connecting the crankshaft to the wooden wheels turned out to be a most difficult task, and eventually we all had to push the car on the dusty country road. He was also the first to jump from his house roof with a parachute that he had made of a bedsheet and limped after that for a long time having injured his leg when landing. His leaving made me sad. And it happened so fast that I hadn't had time to talk to him.

After the war I met him again in our village and asked him about what he had been doing in Germany. He had worked as an electrician in the countryside and climbed electric power poles. Once he had fallen and injured his kidneys. He told that his boss in Germany had raised pigs, slaughtered and given all of them to the State. Sergey had received a ration for his work there as had all workers and owners of large factories. We remembered my brother, his pedal-driven car, the jump and the bicycle that he had found and that had been taken from him by a partisan. I never had a chance to ride it. Soon after that Sergey died: those were the times of famine.

Came the spring of 1942. Thanks to the efforts of my brother and Mother, the cow had survived the winter. Also, it was our extraordinary luck: it had not been shot in the field, and now it was our priceless food provider. As always, mother had raised a beautiful heifer that she decided to give to one of her two friends – Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova. Her cow had been shot and taken away in the summer. That was a tremendous gift. Mother's other friend, the kolkhoz chairman Yakutov's wife, had been sent to a camp together with her children because her husband, a communist, had run away to the woods after the first interrogation.

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<sup>60</sup> Soviet newspaper for teenagers

Antonina's son Volodya and our Vyacheslav worked so that we had firewood, hay, straw, barley, etc.. They farmed the land, planted potatoes, helped others in exchange for using a horse and did many other chores that had earlier been taken care of by our father and Antonina's daughter Maria.

Finally, the spring came. There were few horses left. But we were lucky: we caught some horses abandoned by the Germans. Most of them were sick with mange or had wounds on the shoulders and withers caused by incorrectly used collars. Mother gave medicines and advice about treatment. I have to give credit to the mutual assistance among the villagers and the help given to us not only by our fellow villagers but also the inhabitants of other villages that had been serviced by our father: they would bring us firewood, hay or straw, or tilt the land and plant potatoes. Everybody had a warm memory of Kirillovich.

(That was the result of his work and humane attitude that had saved many people from prison. For if your animal died, you were accountable to NKVD. And it was not uncommon for a cow to be unable to give birth: since the midwinter it had not eaten hay but chewed only steamed cut straw taken from the roof of the cattle barn. Some were hung on ropes because they were too weak to stand on their own. And when the spring came, and the cows were taken to the pasture, an epidemic would break out – bovine piroplasmiasis. Massive vaccination would be needed in all the 26 kolkhozes. How could one veterinarian assistant cope? So, one had to first see the animals that were brought to the clinic, starting from 6 A.M. In addition, foals were brought daily with wounds inflicted by wolves whose population got out of hand. The wounds needed to be treated and stitched! But where to get hot water? There was no gas, nor electricity. "Maria, where is the water? Why haven't you fired up the stove, like all the other women?")

Mother would start the kerosene stove going. She would wash the wounds and apply medicine to them doing that quietly and ignoring her husband's shouting. She would fire up the stove at 9 when father would harness the horse to go to his numerous kolkhozes. Neither the reproaches, nor the menacing shouting of the impatient "supervisor" would disturb the state of her focused calmness. She was sure that she was doing everything right and well. To hurry her up was unnecessary and, what's more, futile. But the scene would repeat itself the next day without change.)

Another memorable event could have had a tragic ending. After having spent the night in the village, the Germans left behind a big automobile or tank battery that had a crack in its body. We brought it home, assembled a lighting circuit with a 12-volt lamp and started turning on the electric light in the evening. The light was bright, somewhat of a bluish hue - a kerosene lamp stood no comparison - the first electric light in the village! It was incredibly cool! And so pleasant to read by! But one night a loud knock on the door that demanded immediate response woke us up. Mother went out into corridor assuming that those were partisans from our village who came for medications. "Who's there?" Someone shouted back in German. That was where I was supposed to come in. I got up and, wearing just my underpants and undershirt, went to meet a German officer entering the living room with a flashlight in one hand and a handgun in the other. He shone with his flashlight around the room, then into my face, then onto the large bureau and yelled: "Zie helfen Partisanen!" I smelled alcohol on his breath. In a quiet voice I explained that it was our custom to keep bread on the table covering it with a towel. "You see there is not only the remainder of a loaf but two whole ones. Here bread preserves better". That seemed to convince him, and he asked who else was in the house. I said that I had two brothers. "Where are they?" We came into the bedroom where my brothers were lying on a makeshift bed. Vyacheslav had curled himself into a ball; Gennadi was fast asleep. And then the flashlight beam fell on the battery and the wires. The yelling began again: "Partisans! Radio transmitter!" and I felt the gun thrust against my chest. I turned on the light and explained that German soldiers had abandoned the damaged battery, and we had connected a bulb to it. He said that it was German property, and he would send people tomorrow to pick it up.

That saddened me, of course. From the conversation with the German I understood that he had driven his motorcycle into a hole, and he needed to see the village chief so that he could

send people and a horse to pull the motorcycle back on the highway. He ordered me to walk ahead of him to take him to the chief's house. It was a warm night, the stars were bright but there was no moon. Knowing from experience that drunken people were not to be contradicted, and my interlocutor was not only drunk but aggressive, I did not bother to put any clothes on and, in just my underpants and undershirt, and barefooted, lead him through the sleeping village. I was walking followed by the officer with his gun at the ready and, a few meters behind him, by my mother. Why did she go? How could she help me? But that was not what bothered me the most. What would happen in five minutes? And what was I supposed to do? I knew that every night some of our village partisans came to see the chief. And those meetings always entailed drinking alcohol.

Here is his house. There is a light in the window. So, the partisans are there, as usual. The German will make me go first. I will need to walk faster to the door, open it quickly, enter and close it right in front of the German's face. And step aside at once because there will be shooting and I can get killed. So I do. I rush into the house and - a miracle!- the chief is alone taking off his boots. "Here is the village chief!" Sidor speaks German. I return home quickly. But the battery is taken away from us the next morning.

The cherry trees in our garden had shed their blossoms. A narrow strip formed by their dense growth ran along the edge of our garden from one end to the other. In that thicket, at some distance from the house, we decided to dig a slit trench where we could hide so that overflying aircraft would not notice us. As it turned out, German planes never took notice of us when they were flying east headed for Bryansk. Then we thought that it might be of some use when our aviation started bombing the Germans. But we never used it.

On a dark spring night we were woken up by submachine gun fire coming from the direction of the village of Buda, which was 2-3 kilometers from us. We all went out into the garden. We stood looking in the direction of Buda. Soon the gunfire stopped, and we saw the blaze of a growing fire. There was no doubt: it was Buda burning. We were at a loss: what to do, where to run? To the forest? But we could meet the Germans on the way there. Finally, in the predawn mist, on the slope of the hill opposite our house, we saw a line of dark figures of soldiers approaching our village. Where should we hide? "In the trench, said Mother, maybe, they will not find us in the thicket". I objected: "But if they see us in the trench, they will shoot on the spot. It is best to sit on the front porch and watch them. And come what may".

And so we did. It was already light. Before getting close to the first houses in our street, the line of submachine gunners formed a column of four. In the central street across our house, the column stopped as if waiting for an order. We were all sitting on the porch waiting with alarm for what would happen next. Then a command sounded: "March"! And the punitive unit left our village. What did we feel? Fear? Probably. But not the fear that deprives you of clear thinking and makes you run wherever your feet will carry as far away as possible from the danger that threatens your life. No, we felt helplessness in the face of the line of submachine gunners advancing on us. Having no means or way to defend ourselves, we felt doomed.

Still, throughout the entire war, in all critical situations, I thought that whatever had been written in the Book of Destinies would happen anyway. And not a single hair would fall from my head unless it had been predetermined. At that time I knew nothing about the teaching of Christ though I wanted to find out why some books noted its great role in the lives of people and nations. Later I read a lot about the materialist view of world order and made reports and lectured on subject. When I had the chance to listen to lectures by an American preacher in Donetsk, I did not miss a single one of them although they were conducted every day after work during two months. For our exemplary attendance my wife Vladlena and I received a copy of the Bible each. Now I know everything is God's will. And earlier, it seems, I believed in the destiny preordained by the Lord.

It was becoming clear that the Germans were determined to not only liquidate partisans but also the local civilian population that would always be guilty in the eyes of both Germans and partisans. For the latter lived at the expense of the population, and the former, by

annihilating this population, made harm to partisans. Thus, in the village of Buda someone informed the Germans that in their cemetery the crosses had been pulled out, the helmets taken away and the graves defecated on. I do not know if that was true but at nighttime a punitive unit surrounded a part of the village called Gora, which was close to the village Setenka. The soldiers drove all the inhabitants together to the council building. Then they separated men, including babies and old men, and took them to the edge of the village. There they ordered them to lie down. One cripple showed his withered arms crying that he was no partisan. A soldier kicked him in his rear; another added a shove with his submachinegun butt. The cripple understood that he had been spared.

Every person on the ground had a soldier standing beside him. On the officer's order the soldiers fired, each at his victim. The women who were standing nearby wailed. Some rushed to their executed sons and children. Their crying and wailing found no response from the Germans. Following orders they returned to the village and set fire to several houses of the village of Setenka. After they left, two men turned out to be alive. Two soldiers, risking their lives, had shot beside their living targets. They did not want to murder old men and children.

So, the soldiers have completed their today mission for today, but whose turn will it be tomorrow? For we are also providing food to partisans, and some of our young lads have left for the woods. Can it be that the soldiers have got tired and put off their operation till tomorrow?

Well, our Polish mother, unlike most Russians, was not wont to leave anything to chance. It was not the first time that she would take an important decision without consulting with anyone. How to make the children safe? Partisans are no protection, nor are the Germans. Life in the village is not safe. Should she send them to partisans? But they do not need extra mouths to feed; they don't have enough for themselves! As to the Germans, they don't care where we will live. And it is safer now to be near them than stay close to partisans. So, she should send the children to the district center Dubrovka where partisans might turn up only after the area was liberated.

The very next day mother made an arrangement with the veterinarian, who was our acquaintance and who had recently been offered a job by the administration in the district clinic. We arrived there in the evening of the same day. We brought our cow, the chest and the bedding. Mother had stayed in the village to take care of our half acre garden, disregarding the danger. She needed to keep working to provide for the family.

A few weeks later, on a late afternoon, two partisans, unknown to us, rode into the village looking for victuals and saw a column of Germans marching down the hill. The Germans were coming back for a rest after the heavy fighting near Sukhinichi. Knowing that the road turned to the woods in about 50 meters, one of the partisans fired at the column and shot a soldier. Before the Germans realized what had happened, our brave warriors jumped on their horses and were gone.

The formation broke. Some were helping the wounded, the quickest ones ran after the mounted enemy. They had to ascend the road under the hill on which our house stood, and their feet sank in the fine sand. The pursuers ran past our house. One of them, mad with rage, probably a friend of the killed soldier, ran into the house next to ours and saw Antonina Sergeevna Akulenkova and her son Vladimir, our brother's friend. He aimed his gun at the 17-year old lad but his mother tried to shield her son with her body. The German pushed her aside and fired. Vladimir was shot dead.

Those Germans had survived the battle. They were hoping for a respite, and some jerk fired a shot and vanished. It would not have been as slighting had the partisan kept firing, and the partisans would have had that chance if they had met the Germans outside the village. For even an outright scoundrel understood that the price for one killed German would be disproportionate. And it was: 12 people were killed and many wounded by the enraged Germans who kept on running till they were exhausted, shooting every man they saw and throwing grenades into the cellars where many villagers were hiding.

It seemed that our mother must have been praying to her Matka Boska, the Virgin Mary: the shot was fired near our house, and our house was the first one, but we were unscathed! Though I never heard Mother pray.

I had a lot of spare time in those days. There was nothing to do in Dubrovka, and I took to reading anything I could lay my hands on. By autumn I made friends with two boys of my age who had complete sets of literary works that had come as additions to their newspaper subscriptions. Thanks to my new friends, I learnt a new game - chess. They explained the essence and rules of the game, and I was fascinated by it. But no matter how many times I played, I would always get checkmate. I could not accept this. For I always remembered and believed what the good though quick-tempered teacher of mathematics at the Ryabchi school said in class: "He, and he pointed at me, will always be the first whenever he studied!"

I started treating the game very seriously and in a short while I began to win. The game would slow down; I would think my moves over and win. This would upset my friends, and they would suggest that we played again and again. But I was content with the level I had reached. I was more interested in new books. I lost interest in chess though I had read several books on openings and endgame. Besides, in October we learnt that the administration had decided to open the school, and I was admitted to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. History and Soviet literature were not taught.

Mother continued to work alone. She did not allow us to come and visit her. She asked people from our village or people she knew who went to Dubrovka to take some vegetables from our garden to us. She had no money to pay them for that. But people agreed to do her the favor out of respect for her and our father.

September came. The harvesting was coming to an end. Mother had dug out the potatoes and sent most of them to us. There were still some things left to do. The situation was getting more intense. Punitive operations became more frequent. The German command decided to secure its rear and lines of communication. This required that partisans be denied provisions and a part of the local population be involved in the fight against them. In July, the SS ordered all men and boys to of the northern part of Ryabchi to gather near the highway across the village of Susnyag. The men drove the cows towards the village of Lyubimovka, and the boys were made to remain seated on the side of the highway. The men came back the following day, and the boys were ordered to go back home. Later they would say they were very afraid that the Germans would execute them. But those only shot a few bursts without aiming, and so no one was hurt. They were laughing merrily while doing that.

Near the highway, in the village of Susnyag, stood 105 mm and 150 mm guns. They fired 3 or 4 times at our church and destroyed the belfry which the partisans could use to notify about SS punitive squads approaching.

Around that time some young people volunteered to serve in the police but they were not many. Mostly they were residents of Dubrovka and villages around it. The Germans decided then to use men against partisans by force. On the village elder's orders, 10 to 12 men had to guard a wooden bridge near Susnyag. They were given rifles for the time of their duty. Alongside them were German soldiers numbering not more than 10. They also had a pillbox with a wooden ceiling,.

Mother dug out the potatoes, harvested the cabbage and the beets and brought them all to Dubrovka. She would have also liked to bring some of our belongings since all of them would be lost after she left.

It was a cold, unfriendly September. On the dark night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of September partisans rode on wagons into our village concentrating their fire on the little bridge across the brook Khaperinka on the highway. The firing woke up the villagers. The wagons followed the attackers. It may be that the partisans' fire power was not sufficient or they were unable to get close to the bridge; in any case, the little bridge stayed intact and no German was killed.

Partisans found help among residents of forest villages, including women. We were told that they had captured one policeman. In one village around 12 people were killed, including a

woman with a child because her husband served in the police in Dubrovka, a 70-year old man, a woman who cursed partisans because they took her cow...

Ryabchi was a big village, and it was common to hear shootings here and there and see partisans carrying the things they liked out of the houses, loading them on wagons and setting the houses on fire. Most of the people killed were villagers. After the war, there appeared stories in the press that it was partisans who destroyed the church belfry with 45 mm guns, and that dozens of policemen and their helpers were killed. That in the village of Peklino they liberated 500 Polish POWs. Still in the time of the Soviet Union I had a conversation with Iossif Efimovich Sergeev who cited the brochure about those heroic deeds and commented about what had really happened. His son Leonid, a veteran of the Patriotic War, who also witnessed the attack, told me how it happened in his house and his family.

The Story about the Famous Operation by Partisans on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

Leonid was 17 years old at that time. His father Osip Efimovich was a respected and well-educated man and skillful carpenter. The family consisted of 14 people, including 11 children. Leonid was the oldest. Their house was at the same place it is now: on the right side of the Khaperenka brook at the very edge of a deep ravine. Across the ravine are numerous village houses, and along the ravine up to the highway are the houses of the village of Susnyag. Perpendicular to this part of Ryabchi, behind a large orchard, on a hill above the Belizna river and close to the village of Peklino, is a neighborhood called Zaroscha. To the North of the lake are the church and the residences of former priests. That is why this part is called Popovka. Just one footpath down across the Svinka, a tributary of the Belizna river, connects Popovka with the village of Chot. Across the lake, on the south western side, stand the most houses; that neighborhood is called Zaozero.

Now that I have indicated these reference data, I can introduce the story about the famous operation, the pride of the partisan unit of our locality.

To memorize those "heroic" days, in 2008, near the House of Culture a rock was laid on the lawn on which it was written in paint that a monument dedicated to that attack would be erected at that place. Leonid told me that when he goes past it on the way to the store, he wants to stop and pee on it. Here is his story.

"Father was awakened by sounds of shooting that came from Zaroscha and Popovka. He came out of the house and saw the glow of fires there. Partisans were shooting randomly. But there was no return fire since there were no enemies around except those ten Germans at the bridge. Our men who served as guards there ran home as soon as they heard the first shots. The houses that were on fire were far away, but we began to take our belongings out into the garden or into the cellar. Anything could happen now. Soon after, two partisans rode up, cursed our women out calling them German prostitutes and ordered us to come out of the house. There were only our grandma and mother inside. Mother took the samovar out as the neighboring house had already been set on fire. One of the partisans shouted that everything must be left inside and fired at Mother. The bullet went through the samovar but Mother was unscathed. Before the partisans' arrival all the children had gotten into the cellar, and Father and my younger brother had hidden in the nettle, close to the bathhouse. "Those in the cellar – get out! Or I will throw a grenade in!" Everybody got out but me. I was 17 and was afraid that I would be executed. But I understood that in case they threw a grenade in, I had to hide in the farthest corner behind the pile of potatoes.

With no regard for the many children we had, the partisans set our house on fire. The porch under which was the cellar also caught fire. The cellar was already full of potatoes and other vegetables, and I lacked air. Fortunately, there was a little hole in the cellar door. I managed to make it larger and clung with my mouth to it in order to breathe. One partisan was heard shouting across the ravine, apparently to his commander: "Shall I set the bathhouse on fire, too?" "Yes!" was the answer. How could he not notice my father and brother in the nettle near the bathhouse? Either it was still dark, or God helped them. The two partisans were in a hurry:



they had to set the remaining houses on fire. Besides, the SS could arrive any minute from Dubrovka or Peklino. As soon as they left, my parents rushed to pour water on the collapsed boards of the porch so that I would not get burned and suffocate”.

And here is the story told by my mother about what was happening in our part of Ryabchi – Zaozero.

“As soon as I heard shots fired, I hurried to dress warmly, as the glow of fires nearby did not augur well. Some armed men and women broke into the house shouting all manner of profanities. I was ordered to get out. At that moment one of them saw that I was wearing the boxcalf boots that my Philipp had bought for me before the war.

“You, slut, - there was a whole stream of obscenities - take off your boots!”

“Come on, guys! My husband is fighting at the frontline, and you want to take my boots?”

“Take them off or I’ll shoot you! Women, load everything on the wagons! Ivan, set the house and the barns on fire!”

Our belongings and all our documents were burnt, including the address of our soldier whom we had been trying to save. We did not even remember his last name. After the fire we did not return to our village till 1945.

In September we all reunited in the house that belonged to the district veterinary clinic. The house was divided into two halves. In the larger one lived our friend, veterinarian Anton Danilovich, with his wife Lyuda and a newborn daughter. In the smaller half lived an elderly doctor’s assistant with his wife, also an old lady. We had known Anton Danilovich since before the war when he was a frequent guest at our house.

Now he was the chief doctor of the veterinarian clinic. He was a handsome, slim man of 27-35 years old, open-faced and mild-tempered. His wife was younger than him, plump, round-faced, with straight blond hair and, mostly, a discontented expression on her face. Her gait was heavy, as with all fat women, and when she walked, the floor boards creaked. She would always start an argument with her husband over a trifle. I did not like it and sympathized with her husband.

We shared the apartment. We were put up in one room, which was quite large, while the doctor’s family lived in the other two rooms. In that dangerous time, we were very fortunate to have the hosts who turned out to be very good people. We became so friendly that we ate meals together. The doctor received a ration from the administration, and we contributed with milk and lard. He helped Mother to get a job at his clinic as an orderly. The job was not something to be envied. Animals were brought in with common deceases, which required cutting, washing and treating the wounds, but the most frequent cases were related to horses infected with mange. During the war, this decease spread all over the place, and not only among animals but also among people. Normally, the whole body up to the head would be affected. Treatment consisted of fumigating the entire horse, except its head, with the acrid smoke of burning sulphur. I think the substance was called sulphuric anhydride. The horse was brought into a gas chamber with its head insulated from the chamber; the orderly entered the chamber and set fire to the sulphur. Sometime later, the elderly reentered, took out the bucket with the burning sulphur, untied the horse and took it out of the chamber. Without waiting for the chamber to be ventilated, he or she brought the next horse in. The orderly got gas poisoned, developed a cough, and his lungs were affected. Mother suffered from the effects of that poisoning all of her remaining life. But in that time there was no other way to earn the ration. The ration was meager, and my brother Vyacheslav had to get a job: he was hired to deliver mail from Zhukovka riding freight trains that would go empty or loaded with cargo for German troops. He had to wait for such a train so that he could get on the gangway or platform without being noticed by German guards. He had a pass, of course, but the Germans might not bother to check it. Once he got under heavy bombing of the Zhukovka station by our aviation but stayed alive.

Vyacheslav had become quite a grown-up and was faithfully fulfilling the promise he gave to our father – to take care of the entire family. Besides the ration, the job exempted him

from police duty and gave me an opportunity to read numerous newspapers and other publications that debunked the myth about the Great Helmsman, Industrialization, Collectivization, mighty and invincible army, etc. It is not surprising, therefore, that during the war our leaders tried to annihilate as many people as possible among those who had had an opportunity to learn the truth about them and their deeds and introduced special passports for those who had lived under occupation.

That very summer we, students of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, were summoned by the administration and were instructed to come to the yard where horses and farming equipment were kept. We had to harrow the fields. The old collective farm ways were still there: he who came early got a good harness; those who were late would not find a decent collar or backband. A few days later I and my friend Shurik Stiplin were sent, as the “literate ones”, to measure the cultivated fields. We had to apply our theoretical knowledge of geometry in practice. At the Ryabchi school we had no practical training in any of the subjects: either in chemistry, or in physics. Hence my nihilism: what are teachers for? One only needs good textbooks. But our field exploits were soon put an end to. The administration decided to open the Dubrovka high school with the former teachers with a prohibition to teach history. We finished the school year and passed the exams, or maybe we were graded without exams since almost all the teachers were eventually arrested and shot. The latter circumstance served us a good turn. After the liberation, a decision needed to be made: either to credit the year we had studied and the knowledge we had obtained under the occupation, or to discard them altogether as if they had never taken place. And the fact that our teachers had been shot worked in our favor. Every cloud has a silver lining, as the saying goes. The school year was credited because we had been taught right, for which the Germans had shot the teachers.

At that time I read a lot because there were more opportunities to obtain books by various authors. I used to read aloud the fragments I liked most to everyone who would agree to listen. I would harass my family into listening to extracts from “The Dead Souls”, early Gorki or Belinski. I would read from Dickens, Mark Twain, Jules Vern and many others. Chekhov was not to my liking: the life of his characters seemed too boring. I read “War and Peace” skipping the parts about the role of an individual in the events described. And during the war I did not want to read about war. I was tired of it. Only after the war I would become interested to know about the events that I had not witnessed. About the patriotism that had been displayed in Stalingrad, for instance, and which I, for my part, had never encountered. “In the Trenches of Stalingrad” by Victor Nekrasov was the first book from which I learnt about the sources of resistance and valor that our leaders are so proud of nowadays. Another such book, which I read later, was “Cursed and Killed” by V. Astafiev.

1942 ended for us more or less quietly. Understandably, we were worried when Vyacheslav left for Zhukovka to get mail. Roaming around troop trains at that time was very dangerous. Besides, at night our rare bombers would start trying to approach the Sesha airdrome. Why try? Once they were over Dubrovka, a dozen beams of light from the Sesha airfield would rise to the dark sky. At their criss-cross a light silhouette of a small aircraft would appear. And as soon as explosions were seen near it, the aircraft would dive and turn around. Following which the explosions of randomly dropped aviation bombs were heard, and the droning of the returning aircraft faded away in the east.

We learnt from leaflets about the surrounding of German troops and surrender of one hundred thousand Germans at Stalingrad. For the first time we had a hope that Father would come back and the Germans would be driven back. But after the summer defeat of our troops on the southern front, there existed also an opposite view. While our apartment neighbors, two elderly Ukrainians who waited for their son to come back from the front, wanted our army to win in the war as soon as possible, to our kind doctor our victory would bring serious problems and, possibly, imprisonment. Both he and we understood that. Although he worked not for the Germans but for our population, he knew the ways of our leaders and comrade Stalin; he had no illusions and was certain that he would be found guilty and punished.

In the mornings, walking to school along Lenin Street, I sometimes saw, by the roadside or under the hill near the winery, dead bodies of the people who had been shot during the night. They were lying there, clad in vatniks<sup>61</sup>, unknown to anyone.

At dusk, we would hear again the drone of an approaching aircraft. All our family would hurry down into the cellar since most of the time it was Dubrovka, not Sessa, that was bombed. We would lift the floor boards above the cellar when the aircraft was heard flying closer and put them back when it was flying away after accomplishing or not accomplishing its mission. But an hour later, the drone of another plane would be heard, and everybody would dive into the cellar again.

Everybody but me. I either observed the attempts to bomb the airfield, or continued to sleep or just lay in bed. Mother was worried and begged me to get into the cellar, too. But I kept saying that the bombs would not get me.

When the intervals between the attempts to approach the airfield got shorter, it was decided not to cover the opening in the floor. That eventually caused the incident that was waiting to happen: Mother got up at night with no light on. She had forgotten about the opening and fell through it hitting her chest. Most probably she broke her ribs but it was impossible to get an Ex-ray at that time. Her chest hurt for several months. No one would hide in the cellar since then..

I remember how we, both families, had breakfast together. Mother fried lard adding, for greater volume, flour and sour cream. Everybody dipped pancakes in that mix. Once Gennadi said something that was out of line, and Vyacheslav struck him on the forehead with a wooden spoon. Neither Mother, nor I said anything recognizing his right to do so as the head of the family. But he did not reprimand Gennadi, either. We all felt his care about the family and responsibility. Were it not for him, we would have had a much harder life.

Mother used lard so sparingly that we had been eating it from August 1941 to mid-1943. But what sustained our and the doctor's families the most was the cow.

By watching the Sessa airdrome we understood how great the resources concentrated by the Germans and our army around Kursk and Belgorod were. The deafening roar of hundreds of aircraft 18 kilometers away preceded the taking off of German planes that formed an immense flock never seen before. The planes that took off first would fly in a large circle waiting for the others. Then they flew east.

Now our aviation, too, started getting through in the daytime and dropping bombs. The din of exploding bombs and anti-aircraft fire would last for several minutes, and we would see a smoke rising above the airfield, which meant that there had been some hits.

During the first days of the war I had seen how totally ineffective our anti-aircraft guns had been and thought that anti-aircraft defense, in general, was not capable of doing any harm to aircraft. However, two years had passed, and I had to change my opinion.

During the battle of Kursk there were hundreds of German bombers based in Sessa. In droves they would circle above us, gather in groups of a hundred or more aircraft and fly east. Once, on a fine spring evening, our two-engine high-speed bombers attacked the airfield. Something caught fire. The bombers turned around and flew in our direction. The first one was already over Dubrovka (18 km from Sessa), right above our heads. All of a sudden, something glittered or sparked on its fuselage. The plane began to smoke and fell down. It was followed by a second, third... The last plane, the twelfth, crashed when it was past Dubrovka. There were rumors that the captain was a Hero of the Soviet Union, and the Germans buried him with full military honors.

Being a young optimist, I believed throughout the war that our bombs and bullets were not going to kill me. German ones were a different matter.

The battle of Kursk came to an end. The droves of Yunkers and Heinkels flew away, and the frontline was coming closer. Every night we would hear the distinct low rumble of an

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<sup>61</sup> Quitted jackets

approaching U-2 (Flying Bookcase, as it was called) flying at low altitude. Targets were now less significant but the danger to us was more real. An illuminating bomb would be parachuted, and the engine noise would become quieter, which meant that a bomb or a grenade was going to be dropped. I barely had time to go to sleep when I would hear again the timid rumble of an approaching "Bookcase".

In all the years of the war I never saw, either in the air, or on the ground, the pride of our childhood – the TB-3, our heavy four-engine bomber. Almost all of them, as well as thousands of others, were destroyed on the first day of the war on airfields at the western border. I learnt about this from the memoir of military pilot Emelyanenko "The Merciless Sky of War" who wrote about the history of the IL-2, the Flying Tank. He wrote that the first batch of 90 IL-2-s had been produced before the war started. However, when the trial models were inspected for mass production, marshal Voroshilov, having learnt that their ceiling was about 2 kilometers, issued an order to increase the ceiling by removing the gunner.

In the first days of the war those IL-2-s were ordered to relocate to Orsha because there were no planes for air reconnaissance and the command did not know where the frontline was. During the very first flight without a fighter escort (there were no fighter planes), flying at low altitude, the pilots were surprised to see that German armor units were crossing the Berezina without any hindrance! By the way, when flying from Kharkov to Orsha, dozens of planes did not make it to the destination for various reasons, fuel tanks of different capacities being one of them. Two planes had an emergency landing on a ploughed field near the village of Susnyag. We, the boys, ran there and saw a monoplane with a sharp nose. Its propeller blades were bent. We liked the plane very much.

The fate of the first IL-2-s was tragic. They were shot down by Messerschmitt fighters that approached them from the rear or from the side. My patriotism, my belief in our might and the wisdom of comrade Stalin and the first marshal Voroshilov at that time only began to fade. Every day I, a 14-year old boy, would run to the village council in order to read in the newspapers about the promised victory in three days, to learn where the frontline was and how the promise to defeat the enemy in his own territory was fulfilled. There was no answer, though...

Instead, there was confused bleating about "heavy fighting", "the surprise attack of the insidious enemy" and the "exact" indication of the direction of the offensive and, of course, about colossal enemy losses. A month would pass, and we would give milk to our tired soldiers in our village, hundreds kilometers from the front. There were no commanding officers among them (they had turned out to be traitors), and they carried no weapons. They told us unbelievable stories: all commanders are traitors, there are no rifles, they obtained a machine gun from a museum but its barrel had a hole in it and so on. They walked in groups of 20 to 30 people.

To recapitulate my reminiscences related to the airdrome and aircraft: I understood early on that the aim of the myths that were inculcated in us at school, through newspapers and reports was to bring us up as patriots prepared to die for the Motherland and Party personified by its first leaders whose wisdom could not be surpassed by anyone in the whole world. When we were children, we believed that our TB-3 bombers were the best and, as we were told by grown-ups, they would end a war against an aggressor in three days. Later on I saw in the film "The Living and the Dead" how helpless the TB-3 planes that had survived by some miracle were. Massive and slow, without fighter escorts, they became easy targets for fast Messerschmitts.

So, in the autumn of 1942 Gennadi and I went to the Dubrovka high school. Vyacheslav made trips on freight trains once or twice a week to Zhukovka to collect mail and newspapers from Bryansk, which was a dangerous business and for which he received a food ration. Mother continued to work at the veterinarian clinic.

I still liked to look at the sky, the clouds and imagine flying my noiseless plane that required no fuel. Each time the sky was different and beautiful. I think it was the source of my optimism and courage. (On the other hand, never in my life I had the luck to find a wallet or money on the road. Once, in Donetsk, I found myself without money to pay for two streetcar

trips to get home. I decided to walk until I found three kopecks. It was a holiday, and there were many people in the streets. But however hard I looked under my feet, I found nothing and walked all the 20 kilometers to home. As to courage, I had no fear of anything in the time of peace, too: in Krasnoyarsk I had to walk at night carrying a knife when in 1951 the city was flooded with former inmates released from prisons after the general amnesty. They robbed and killed people throughout the country from Norilsk to Moscow. Another fact: I was flying on the plane and noticed through the window that one tank was leaking fuel. I showed it to the stewardess and told her that the pilots should not bank that wing because fuel would get into the turbine exhaust. The pilot then came, looked at the wing and nodded. The flight ended well. But my friend did not want to fly any more after that incident and preferred to travel by train.)

I devoted more and more of my spare time to reading. I read fiction, technical literature, books about famous people, history, adventures, etc. Doing anything else seemed a waste of time to me. I had one dream – to become a writer, for which I had to learn how to critically and independently assess the lives of ordinary people and the actions of the government, to determine the real motives behind of what was happening.

In the meantime, what was the situation in our town? There were not many Germans. One could see them on the roads at the entrance to the town and at the railway station. I did not know where their commandant's office was. I did not encounter them on the way to school or my friends' houses. There was our administration. The enterprises were closed. I do not remember any stores. There was a market where people could barter their belongings. There were no more "chicken-lovers" waiting at the entrance to the market. They had disappeared before we moved to Dubrovka, in 1941. We were told that the entire Jewish population had been executed or sent to camps. There had been about three hundred of them. Before the occupation they had worked as barbers, shoemakers, tailors and leaders of government agencies, including the NKVD.

My friend Sasha Stiplin wrote an essay in which he described the Germans taking a beautiful girl away for execution. It may be that he had seen it. It was well written. Sasha was a very good student and competed with me for leadership in our class. His mother was single, and he was the only child. I liked his mother very much. She was good-looking, about 40 years old, with thick fluffy hair, merry and sociable. She liked the fact that her son and I were friends.

I also made friends with the Kubekin brothers who lived without parents. Anatoli, who was my age, was a skilled worker and provided for his younger brother, Victor. Without any outside help, he made his living by making and mending pails, repairing locks, kerosene stoves and making potbelly stoves. He worked, mostly, for food. I never heard him complaining or fretting. Mother would send him milk or pancakes. We had pancakes every day. I do not remember us buying bread. Workers got flour in their ration. Salt was worth its weight in gold. City dwellers brought secondhand goods to the market or went from house to house to exchange them for food.

The older brother was busy working. Gennadi hung out with me; we went to school together, I to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he – to 6<sup>th</sup>. There were many people living in the town: the population had grown due to the influx of people from the countryside like us. The railroad was intensively used for transporting weapons, ammunition, fuel and troops. At night we heard lone U-2 planes but no one hid in the cellar. And they did not stop me and my friends from visiting our classmates in the evening. I liked one serious and reserved girl with dark hair and brown eyes. (She was not the first girl that I found attractive. The first one had been the daughter of that doctor's assistant who had refused to bandage the wounds of our soldiers.) She was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and an excellent student, like me, good-looking and dignified. I liked her very much but to show it would have been a mistake. At that time, a 14-year old who fell in love would have been ridiculed and teased: "Look! Here come the bride and the groom!" Even later, at the Institute, only veterans could afford getting married, but not we, greenhorns of 18-20 years of age. I got married when I was 22 and was assigned to work in Siberia after the graduation.

Spring came. School ended one month before schedule because our teachers were arrested by Gestapo.

I have already described the demoralizing effect that the defense of the Sesha airdrome had on us. We were also being corrupted by newspapers. We learnt many things that would remain unknown for a long time, for many decades, to those who lived in the unoccupied territory: about Katyn, the assassinations of Stalin's associates (Frunze, for instance), the collectivization, industrialization and concentration camps. The population of the occupied territories was thus being set against the communist government. It was rumored, for instance, that during the battles for Moscow and Stalingrad Zhukov<sup>62</sup> made a promise that there would no more kolkhozes...

I also remember a company of Azerbaijani that frequently marched in the streets of Dubrovka in Russian Liberation Army uniform. I do not know what they were doing there. They marched singing one and the same song in which I was only able to discern the words "Caucasus" and "Azerbaijan" but which still got imprinted in my memory: "Kavkazus dol lorus chacha li Khasan, Kavkazus dol lorus chacha li Khasan! Au vidi shorde Azerbaijan!" There were rumors that all Ukrainian POWs had been let to go home. While living in Ukraine I did not check this fact. Maybe, those of them were released who agreed to fight on the German side?

In mid-September 1943 our army broke through the front in northern direction, and suddenly (for us and, possibly, for the Germans) we heard the explosions and the sound of an approaching frontline. It was not a continuous rumble and noise but separate explosions and overflights by Il-2 attack planes. There were no significant troop movements. The German front was being breached as ours had been near Smolensk before. Rumors spread that the Germans would drive the entire population to the west. People would have to walk, of course. We were terrified! Still, nothing suggested that the next day would be different from today.

Our house was located near the lowest point of a valley that went along a rivulet, a tributary of the Desna. About 200 or 300 meters up the rivulet there was a dam and a lake. Past the lake ran a road that led from Dubrovka to the village of Davidichi and, further on, to the village of Aleshnya which was situated near the Bryansk-to-Smolensk highway. The road after the dam ran up a steep hill.

In the evening of a sunny September day, somewhere in the east, we heard the cries "Hurrah!" sounded by thin and weak voices that were similar to those usually heard during the military games conducted at school. Small arms fired in response. The setting autumn sun illuminated the entire valley and us as we were anxiously watching what would happen next.

All of a sudden bullets swished by cutting branches and leaves on the birch trees, right above our heads. It was a burst from a German machine gun that reminded us that it was early to celebrate yet. The fire was coming from behind the hill, from the direction of Davidichi. As a flock of partridges flushed by the shots, we rushed to the trench nearby. At that very moment we heard our old doctor's assistant moan. He was applying pressure on his forearm: a bullet had gone through the soft tissue missing the bones. As soon as we gathered around him hiding behind the house, we saw smoke coming from under the roof of the veterinary clinic building where the hay for the winter had already been stored. The entire building was quickly engulfed by fire. Vyacheslav ran to take the cow out. Right after that a mortar bomb exploded near us followed by several others. The explosions were getting closer; the fragments shattered the mortar vessel. Although there were only a few meters to the trench, Mother and I fell to the ground, and the fragments flew over us. There were seven or eight shells fired. We thought that the Germans wanted to punish us for our impatience to see our army back.

Then it became quiet again: no more "hurras", no more shooting. The sun set, it was getting cold, almost freezing. German tanks drove up to our house. They stopped behind the western wall of the house. There were five of them. One of them was Ferdinand. Even we, civilians, understood that we and our house were doomed once the shooting began. The Germans entered the house but did not order us to leave. They had a snack and went back to their tanks.

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<sup>62</sup> Soviet general and marshal; oversaw some of the Red Army's most decisive operations during the war.

Before sunrise they started the engines and left for the hill, the commanding eminence near Davidivichi. We did not know what we were supposed to do.

At dawn we saw two tall human silhouettes walking in the fog in the valley. They were wearing long coats and had thin legs. When they got closer, we recognized two Red Army soldiers in overcoats and boots. Their legs were wrapped in puttees. They were carrying an antitank rifle laid on their shoulders. We were very glad to see them and offered them milk. They did not refuse and stopped for a rest. We told them about the tanks and where they went. We did not sleep that night. Our kind doctor had left for the west the day before with his wife and child. We were sincerely sorry for him and did not want him to be arrested by the NKVD. In fact, he had not worked for the Germans, and would have faced no danger in other country, under any other government except for the Soviet and Nazi one.

Right after daybreak we heard shots fired and an explosion in the vicinity of the dam. The lake water flooded the valley below our house but soon the river returned to its former bed. One of the soldiers who had carried the antitank rifle came back to our house. He was wounded. Mother bandaged the wound. He told us that they had lain and waited not far from the dam. Soon a Ferdinand had appeared driving on the road from Davidichi. It had stopped at the dam, and a tankman had gotten out of the hatch. Our soldiers had fired and killed him. But he had had enough time to blow the dam. They had fired at the tank but it had driven up the hill, turned the gun and fired at the soldiers killing one and wounding the other.

When Mother was tending to the soldier's wound, we noticed between its jagged edges his pulsating lung. Having drunk some milk, he left seemingly not too saddened by his wound. A little later we heard, as yesterday, a thin-voiced hurrah. Some shooting in the east behind the hill, nothing major. Just a few Germans running in the valley. One of them fell, the others ran past our house. Finally, we saw our soldiers. They were no more than ten, and they walked unhurriedly, keeping a good distance between one another. One of them was walking along the river. When he was about fifty meters from the German, he saw him getting up and raising his hands. Our soldier aimed his rifle at him and fired. The German fell facedown. This group of soldiers went past us without stopping.

Thus, the liberation of our town Dubrovka from German occupation happened quite inconspicuously. Again, not according to my scenario: there was no major battle. I had imagined that the masses of troops of both sides would meet in a battle, and our valiant partisans would rain down fire on the enemy from the rear. Of course, we were lucky that the front had been breached far from our place, and the Germans were rolling back to "the previously prepared positions". Also, there had been no large presence of German troops in our area at all. That is why there had not been much shooting or bombing. Only lone low-flying IL-2 attack planes had been flying over.

The next day the Germans were already in Roslavl. But where were our valiant partisans? Pursuing the Germans? Or celebrating the victory? We learnt the answer a week after the liberation from our relative who was a partisan.

To reunite with the Red Army, the partisans entered Dubrovka with flags and an orchestra. But there was no one to reunite with: the army had gone west a week before without waiting for the Reunification. Before the partisans' arrival we had a visit by some kind of official who did not introduce himself. He was interested to know who we were and what we had been doing, and where the veterinarian doctor was. He suggested that the oldest brother should go and talk with a representative of the NKVD, noticed the battered German made bicycle and confiscated it as a piece of German military equipment. After he left, Vyacheslav said with disgust: "I wish they drafted me soon!" In this case we would be able to say, as many others did: "Our brother left for the front as a volunteer!"

After the rally in the center of the town held on the occasion of the Reunification of the partisans with the Red Army we were visited by our relative Kolomonov, a partisan. At dinner, he sighed profoundly and said: "All the young partisans have been drafted and sent to the front. We would have rather fought as partisans for another three years!"

The weather was getting really bad: it was cold, and it never stopped raining. The loudspeaker praised collective farming that provided food to the army. Everybody realized that nothing would change. Kolkhozes would not be disbanded. Poor people would work again for the empty trudoden having no chance to get out from under the kolkhoz yoke, with no passports, no leave, no pension. Apparently, the rumors about Zhukov promising to the soldiers on the front that there would be no more kolkhozes had turned out to be false. The only good thing was that during the two years of the occupation it had been possible to sow, harvest and make reserves. But what would happen when they were depleted? Again the ungreased wheels of wagons carrying harvest to the Motherland's granaries would creak in the fall. Again peasants would be striking kolkhoz wretched nags with thick sticks under the hill below our house where it was beyond a horse's strength to pull a loaded wagon in the deep soft sand. And in the spring the grain would be carried back from the granaries as a loan to farmers. But the saddest fate would befall the weak emaciated horses who would be mercilessly beaten by angry farmers and not with a whip or a switch but a thick bludgeon, and not on the croup but on the ribs and head. Everything would be as it was three years before.

A week had barely passed before Vyacheslav was drafted. A group of 18-old lads like him was sent to catch up with the advancing army on foot. What would he wear in the rain and autumn cold? He had some clothes but there was only one pair of boots for the entire family. Those were new solid leather waterproof boots with metal studs that the German officer had given our mother. Vyacheslav was unlikely to wear them, though, as he would be issued tarpaulin Soviet-made boots. That would be a pity. The boots would be of great use to the younger brothers. But we all decided that Vyacheslav would wear them. As to me and Gennady, we could dry our feet at home if they got wet.

On a gloomy day that was coming to an end, walking in the autumn drizzle on the cobblestone road up the hill towards Davidovichi, Vyacheslav and I were hurrying to catch up with the group of the draftees. I was carrying a rucksack with just a few things inside. After we climbed the hill, we said goodbye to each other, I handed him his light rucksack, and he continued walking at quick pace after the draftees.

We never saw him again. We would not receive letters from him for many months. That was at the end of September 1941.

Mother went on working as an orderly at the veterinary clinic and received a small salary. Our school was supposed to open in September. An issue arose as to whether the previous school year could be counted as normal given the fact that it was under the occupation. After having conducted consultations and having heard our comments, and also considering the fact that the teachers had been executed, the administration decided to allow us to transfer to 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

That period is now remembered as a single gray autumn day: uneventful and grim. There were no letters from our father and brother. We went to school when it opened but there were no classes. 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders were lead out of the building and then through entire Dubrovka in the direction of Sessa. Someone had given an urgent order to rebuild the runway. We left around midday. Lightly dressed, wearing ragged shoes, we walked on a dirt road shivering from the cold autumn wind. We walked about ten kilometers and reached the Bryansk-Smolensk Highway. It had been called the Old Smolensk Road before. Napoleon's retreating soldiers must have taken that road on their way back to France.

When we were taken to the runway, we saw bomb craters on it up to five meters in diameter. We were exhausted. We began to wait for the shovels to be brought. We were freezing but the shovels would not arrive. It was getting dark. We were taken to some building. I decided to go to the village of Radichi where our father's brothers lived who had given us shelter after Father's arrest.

Like eight years before, Pavel's family warmly welcomed us. Aunt Anyuta told us to take off our shoes, gave us felt boots and gave us food. How tasteful the hot cabbage right from the Russian stove was! I remembered the past years when she had poured milk in a bowl, and we,



the children, had crumbled bread into it and, after we had been allowed to start, had eaten as fast as we could.

It had been long ago but I remembered it in 1943 and remember it now.

In the morning Aunt Anyuta brought out homemade woolen socks and gave them to Gennadi. The night before she had looked at his ragged shoes and had shaken her head in silence. We were very grateful for the priceless gift. However, the “march to support the Red Army” finally did Gennadi’s shoes in. We could not buy new ones anywhere even if we had money, which we didn’t. It may be that the Kubekin brothers gave him the idea, or maybe because he simply needed something to walk to school in - in any case I had no part in it – Gennadi cut off the soles and insoles of the shoes and made new ones. Using wooden nails that he had made himself, he attached the leather soles to the leather insoles the way Father had done it upon his return from Belomorcanal. I was surprised. This was the first of the innumerable things that Gennadi would make with his own hands. I myself would remain a “theoretician”, so to say, for the rest of my life. To tell the truth, I have been lucky to always have at my side talented people good at repairing things, including sophisticated equipment, and making new instruments. As to people like me, a friend of mine, Jack-of-all-trades, called them “one-armed”. I was good at writing but not much at making things.

Nothing memorable happened at school in the winter of 1943. Nothing interesting was taught, only what was in the textbooks. No laboratory classes, no instruments. What I remember well are the evenings I spent socializing with two girls, my classmates. Those were the beginnings of my interest in girls. My friend and I used to come over to their house to have a talk. In the spring we read an announcement that the Bezhitsa Institute of Transport Machine-Building (BITM) started enrollment of 9<sup>th</sup> graders to the preparatory department so that they could learn the material of 10<sup>th</sup> grade in three months. The results of the examinations would be counted as the results required for admission to the Institute. The dormitory was offered free of charge, three meals a day, stipend of 350-400 roubles. But I wanted to study to become a writer or an artist! For that, probably, I needed to go to Moscow, but it was so far away, and I could not even afford the fare. And here was the real opportunity to acquire a good profession.

Without taking exams for 9<sup>th</sup> grade, my two friends, Shurik and Veneamin, and I left for the preparatory courses of the BITM Steam-Locomotive Building Department. The Institute building and most private houses around it were intact. The factories and the railway station had been demolished by our retreating troops in 1941. The Institute dormitory had also been burnt down. We got accommodation in private houses. Ours was a solid stone house that belonged to a photographer who had just returned from the evacuation. His wife Sofia Moiseevna was a thin, tall and energetic woman with a passion to dominate. Besides her absolute power over her husband Abram Yakovlevich, she also presided in the Street Committee, the duty that she particularly enjoyed though she was not paid for it. An applicant had to come to see her several times to receive the necessary document.

She kept her house clean but it always smelled fish and garlic. We lived quite comfortably there. There was a radio set. Every time there was news from the Soviet Informbureau that ended with the words: “Let the memory of those who perished for the Motherland live forever!” Sofia Moiseevna would cry out: “Abram! Where are our Pima and Milya, I wonder?”

In my spare time I played chess with Shurik. He played fast while I took time to think before making a move. This annoyed Shurik, and, as a rule, he lost. He demanded that I continued to play but I refused: one game tired me, and I also did not want the result to change. This angered Shurik, and he would try to demonstrate his physical superiority. He would take me by the wrists, and however I tried, I could not break free of his grasp. This undermined our friendship. I was skinny and weak, and little exercise and my keenness on reading, drawing and playing the concertina, balalaika and mandolin were not the only causes of my condition. It was also a result of the two pneumonias that had had in the first year of my life and in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and the dry pleurisy I had suffered from later.

As a lightning in the clear sky, a great misfortune struck Shurik: his mother, a young and beautiful woman, died of a heart attack. I was very sorry for her. Financially, Shurik's situation got considerably worse. When she could, my mother provided food for both of us. The good thing was that we did not have to pay for the meals and accommodation. We had excellent grades at the Institute and received a 25% supplement to our stipends. Traveling home and back was our biggest expense.

During the preparatory courses we were sent several times to the station Netvinka to harvest crops. I was worried about overstraining myself physically but all went well. From the station to the fields we marched in a column singing songs like this one: "Mom's not home, Pa's not home, no need to be afraid, come and see me, student, quickly, you'll get lucky and get laid!"

At the end of the summer Shurik and I passed the exams with excellent marks and were admitted as first-year students of the BITM majoring in steam-locomotive building (design).

It was 1944. The war went on and required more and more reinforcements. It was just as well that the boys on the occupied territories had grown up – cheap cannon meat. It was them who cried in thin voices "Hurrah" when our town was liberated. We, the 17-year olds, were not forgotten, either. We were summoned to the Military Commissariat for a medical examination and registration. The commission found numerous dark spots in my lungs, the consequences of pneumonias and pleurisy. I was issued a certificate exempting me from military service, harvesting and logging. The diagnosis was fibrous tuberculosis. I was not registered for observation but got a recommendation for treatment: to eat fat food and take a spoon of honey with visceral fat. In reality, I could count on thin millet soup in the cafeteria with twinkles of some kind of fat (possibly grease) and sweet tea with salted butter. And Mother had probably some lard left of that pig that had been slaughtered by the German general's orderly.

Most of the boys of my age were lucky: they did not have to demonstrate their patriotism and lay their lives at the Motherland's altar. Most but not all. One lad who was born in 1926 and who completed the preparatory courses with us was drafted, and never came back.

In the summer we finally received a letter from Father. It had been sent to his brother Pavel since Father did not know our current address. He had written the letter from the front at the Kursk salient where he had been awarded the medal "For Battle Merit" after the fighting for Kalinkovichi in the vicinity of Prokhrovka where the famous tank battle had taken place. He wrote that his cattle drive had ended in the Saratov Region where he had been drafted despite the fact that he had been convicted under Article 58 as "an enemy of the State". He had been reassured: "Here every other man is an enemy like you." This part was not in the letter, though. Only that he was alive and healthy and wished the same for us. About his concern that he had expressed to the authorities that the Soviet Motherland should be defended by real patriots only and that the Government should not take the risk of entrusting its political rivals with weapons, he told us after the war.

The second triangle<sup>63</sup> came from Radichi. It was my brother Vyacheslav who had written from a Moscow hospital. He had written to Dubrovka but the letters had not reached us. Why? Maybe he had written that they had been feeding him well – canned meat, tinned foods, omelet – and that all the food had been American. Still, he had been hospitalized just 40 km from our house diagnosed with beriberi. He had become blind due to vitamin B deficiency. And how about our legendary kolkhoz farms? Were they not supposed to provide for the dependants of the Motherland? The only preoccupation was to prevent soldiers from telling something negative! How many censors were there? Did they have enough time to open those triangle-shaped letters? No, they did not. It was easier to destroy them, and then there would be no problem. And no need to upset the patriots in the rear. Maybe this triangle would be the last one – who knows?

From September 1943 to June 1944 we received from Father and brother two letters from each. And even father and son exchanged letters. Father was at the Kursk salient, and son in

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<sup>63</sup> Letters from the front had the shape of a triangle.

Lithuania. Farther was in the artillery, taking care of horses, Vyacheslav was a spotter directing artillery fire.

In his book "The Cursed and Killed" Victor Astafiev, who was a signalman, described the job of a forward observer, or a spotter, and explained why killing him was a priority for the enemy.

I am holding a yellowed sheet of paper folded in a triangle. On the front side there is an address: Orel Region, Dubrovka District, Radichi Village Council, Village of Radichi. To Novikov Pavel Kirillovich. And the return address: Moscow, 44. 4<sup>th</sup> Krutitski Lane, house # 5, school # 608. Novikov Vyacheslav P.. And two stamps: One of Moscow Postal Office 114.04.44.13 and the other with the word "REVIEWED".

On the back side: State emblem, REVIEWED by Military Censorship 21186.

The letter is written with a pencil.

"8/04-44

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

I am sending you my heartfelt Red Army greetings. I am in a Moscow hospital now. I am feeling well and will be discharged soon. I got sick on the front near Vitebsk on January 23<sup>rd</sup>. The doctors said that I had elementary dystrophy due to vitamin B deficiency. I have been in Moscow since the 18<sup>th</sup> of February. It is snowing now in Moscow and cold. Please let me know where my family is. Any news about Misha, about Uncle Misha? How are you doing? At this I am ending my brief letter. Give my regards to aunt Arina, Zhenya, Nina and Maria.

Yours truly,

Novikov Vyacheslav"

We wrote to him and let him know Father's address. He was very glad to learn that Father was well, and I was applying for admission to the Institute. Most importantly, he did eventually get a letter from Father. It was upsetting, though, that he had undergone his artillery spotter training not far from us, in Roslavl, but his letters had never reached us. Otherwise, we could have visited him.

In June he wrote to us about heavy fighting on the front that was getting close to Eastern Prussia.

In July the students were harvesting crops, and in August we were released for vacation. Gennadi and I had to make a reserve of hay for the winter. We asked the neighbors to lend us bicycles and scythes. Mother put some bread and lard in the rucksack, and we left for the place of our former home. We passed Ryabchi and Soplevka and stopped at the fork of the road. We could not say whether the grass around us was good or bad, but we had to try somewhere. We learnt later what kind of grass that was. Thick and short, it turned out to be extremely tough for our scythes. We cut the area of about 10 square meters waving off the gadflies that were stinging us quite painfully. We were exhausted and sweating profusely. We sat down, had a snack and came to a conclusion that Mother had given us an impossible, undoable task. We decided to ride to our relatives, the Kolomonovs, who lived in the village of Soplevka, recently renamed to Krasnaya Moskva.

Evgraf Evgrafovich, a man of retirement age, with a neat Russian beard, welcomed us warmly. His wife Ustinya treated us to boiled potatoes. After having inspected out scythes, he pronounced a verdict: to cut enough grass for the winter with scythes like ours was impossible. Especially, if you cut matgrass, the grass that we had wanted to cut which, as it turned out, cows did not eat. Besides, if we were going to come here from Dubrovka and go back every day, there would be no time left to do the work. It would make more sense to stay at his place. "Go back home today, I will sharpen your scythes, and you come back tomorrow and I will take you to the meadow. And bring some lard. We'll fry it with onions and make soup. We have potatoes and milk."

Only an hour before we had had no idea what to do because haymaking had seemed an impossible task and Mother had no money to buy hay. Now we were riding home filled with enthusiasm.

Evgraf Evgrafovich told us that in 1905 he had sailed on board a naval ship, (I think it was “Koreets” or “Vrayag”.) In the Battle of Tsushima the ship had been sunk. He had been picked up by the Japanese, and he had been interned in Japan for some time.

He impressed me with his way to speak, with his somewhat special way to pronounce words and form sentences. I did not enquire where he had acquired these peculiarities at that time but they gave his stories some solidity and cogency. I have kept a very warm memory of him and his family. His eldest son Vladimir was a kolkhoz chairman, his younger son Granya became a prosecutor, the eldest daughter Anna (Nyura) stayed in the native village and married a good man, a store manager, and the younger one, Katya, left for Moscow to work in construction.

The next day we came back. The scythes had been sharpened and adjusted, the onions and lard fried. We all went to the firing range where before the war TB-3 heavy bombers had practiced bombing. Haymaking had been already completed in June and July but there was still plenty of grass and no people. There were few cows and horses left, and there was more grass than needed. Our “teacher” gave us quite a lecture about how to adjust the scythe to make the cutting easier; how to move the body and arms; how to press down “the heel”; how to hone the blade; how to fit the blade to the snath and adjust the hafting angle. Being the senior brother, I had a big-size, number 9, scythe, Gennadi had a number 7.

“Tolya, you only need to swing the scythe to the right, it will go to the left by itself, just press the heel down. Well done, you are getting the hang of it. Gennadi, on the other hand, needs to mow smoothly and not come at the grass with a swoop like a young rooster. And he seems to have a wolf’s ribs, they do not let him turn his body”. Obviously, Gennadi lacked both the skill and strength. The grass was high and coarse and, which made it even worse, intertwined with dodder. It took strength to cut through the grass and the dodder. Clearly, such work could not be to my brother’s liking. In the evening he said that tomorrow was September 1<sup>st</sup>, and he had to turn up at school. Thus I remained alone and within two weeks mowed a sufficient quantity of grass. Strange as it may be, despite the doctors’ recommendations I grew stronger. When the studies recommenced in October, and my friend, in our spare time, decided to bully me and got hold of my wrists, I broke free with no effort and did the same to him. This was my triumph, the biggest achievement of the “summer vacation”.

Out of the events during my studies at the preparatory courses two turned to be fateful. The studies began in March. The weather was frosty, and I took care not to get too cold while traveling, which was at times unpredictable and which I did, occasionally, by freight trains. My outerwear consisted of a well-worn cap with ear flaps and a short fur coat. The coat had moleskin on the outside that had lost a match to a nail and had a tear as a result the edges of which I had stitched myself. It had been made a couple of years before the war and, therefore, was a bit short for me. For esthetics and warmth purposes, the coat was girded with a thin leather belt that had belonged to Father. My feet were kept warm thanks to solid felt boots with the tops attached to them by my mother. For the cut-off felt boots I should thank the German officer who, before leaving for the front, had given them to us in 1942. Now I see that my mother and I were ahead by a whole fifty years of the currently fashionable two-piece footwear. But at that time anyone who saw me in this outfit would at best smile. Among the Institute entrants I had not seen such a ragamuffin. The best dressed were the ones who had returned from the evacuation.

But this ragamuffin did not feel humiliated or short-changed. I never reproached Mother for having to go around dressed like this. She was not a tailor though she had worked like a slave at the Kamenetski estate. She never complained, never grumbled no matter what happened. While knowing that sometimes I coughed out tiny drops of blood, she did not object to my working, including mowing grass with a scythe, relying with confidence on her Matka Boska. She treated and fed me as well as she could. And however badly Mother was dressed herself, her straight posture, composed conduct and self-esteem, showed her Polish gentry origin. She liked to read to us on winter evenings and share her warm memories of her noble relatives and their relationships.

On the day of my arrival at the Institute I turned with some request to the facilities manager, the Party cell leader, who had just brought some equipment from Krasnoyarsk. Instead of answering my question, he eyed me from head to foot and said: "There is no place for people like you at the Institute. You should work at a kolkhoz building back the agriculture!" In reply I told him to go to his facilities and eat a dick. That was not my noble blood speaking but its other part, the blood of a Russian peasant. But my Polish part was also always ready to stand up for itself, no matter what the circumstances were. I never forgot the words of the neurotic math teacher in the Ryabchi school: "This boy will always be the first in anything he does!" So far, they had turned out to be true. But my successes were not the result of great effort on my part but were my parents' gifts, the genes of my ancestors. I thought so then and I think so now.

Another incident characterized my relations with my peers. I was standing in line in the store to buy bread. There were about ten people ahead of me. But I was not getting closer to the counter. Every now and then someone would run in, usually a girl, and join his or her acquaintance ahead of me. This lack of order and impudence made me mad. Still, silently and slowly I was approaching my goal. Now a cute plump girl ran up to me. She was wearing a fashionable brim hat, a light coat of the same fabric and new high boots. I had seen her in class. Like some other girls, she would sit in the front, close to the teacher, at the only desk with an ink pot and make notes. My usual place was in the last and highest row of the lecture room. I had no need for a desk and ink pot since I never made notes but only listened attentively. Usually, there was no one sitting near me. But one day an elegantly dressed girl took a seat next to me. I asked her: "Couldn't you find somewhere else to sit? There are plenty of empty seats". I was feeling uncomfortable in my clothes sitting next to that all-dolled-up girl!

And now there she was in the store. She asked if I could do her a favor and let her in ahead of me. The cheek of her! Cutting corners! In reply I indicated to her the end of the line and told her to try to behave more properly. She blushed and went to the end of the line. "I need no girls. I will have no wife. And no children". So I thought, remembering my illness.

How bitterly I regretted what I had said when this girl became our class monitor and recorded those who were absent in the journal. And I was absent often. If I did not like a professor, and textbooks on the subject were available, I went to the library or reading room. But when I faced the prospect of losing my stipend because of the classes missed, I had to get to know her better. Her full name was Vladlena Ilyinichna Anikonova. It turned out that she was from Kletnya, and we rode freight trains together to the Zhukovka station after which our ways parted.

By summer we received a letter from Father who wrote that he was in already Poland and was going to send us a parcel. Mother did not react to it in any way. A bit later he wrote that he had sent a parcel with a man from our area who had promised to deliver it to us on his way home. We never received it though it would have been nice to get some clothes, even if they were military.

For my academic achievements I was awarded with women's shoes with quite sharp toes. As my boots made before the war had fallen apart altogether, I put these shoes on cursing their manufacturers who had botched their job: my feet were hurting terribly. I did not care about derisive comments of my friends but girls' smiles were upsetting.

Many families of those who served in the military received allotment notes from the army, which entitled them to be paid some money. Probably, Father thought that he could help his family, too. But his hopes were not meant to materialize. Why? Mother never said anything about it neither at that time, nor upon his return home from the front. I kept all correspondence with Father and brother, and no bad news from home was communicated to them. Letters were written on a single page, folded in a triangle and were not sealed to make work easier for censors.

Once, having arrived from Bezhitsa, I found Gennadi making a stock for an ancient muzzle-loading rifle that he had found somewhere. The rifle was loaded through the muzzle: first powder was put in, then – so as it would not spill out – a wad, then shot or a bullet followed by

another wad. At the rear end of the barrel there was a hole through which the powder was ignited by the cap struck by the cock. Gennadi fashioned the stock and needed to attach the barrel to it to finish the job. My participation was reduced to my agreeing to his suggestion that he should weld a nut to the barrel, the opinion that he took as coming from an authority. The rear end of the barrel, that had the shape of a sharp spear, was supposed to set against a jut on the stock. We also used a bolt and metal strip to fasten the barrel to the stock. Gennadi tested the weapon in our vegetable garden: he lied on the ground and aimed. I was standing next to him. He fired. The barrel got loose from the stock and its sharp end hit Gennadi on the forehead. Gennadi continued to lie on the ground. Finally, he raised his head, and I saw a gash and blood. Mother heard the shot and ran out of the clinic. My brother was still lying on the ground covering the wound with his hand. "Get up, said the doctor who joined us, do not scare you mother!" Gennadi stood up rocking from side to side.

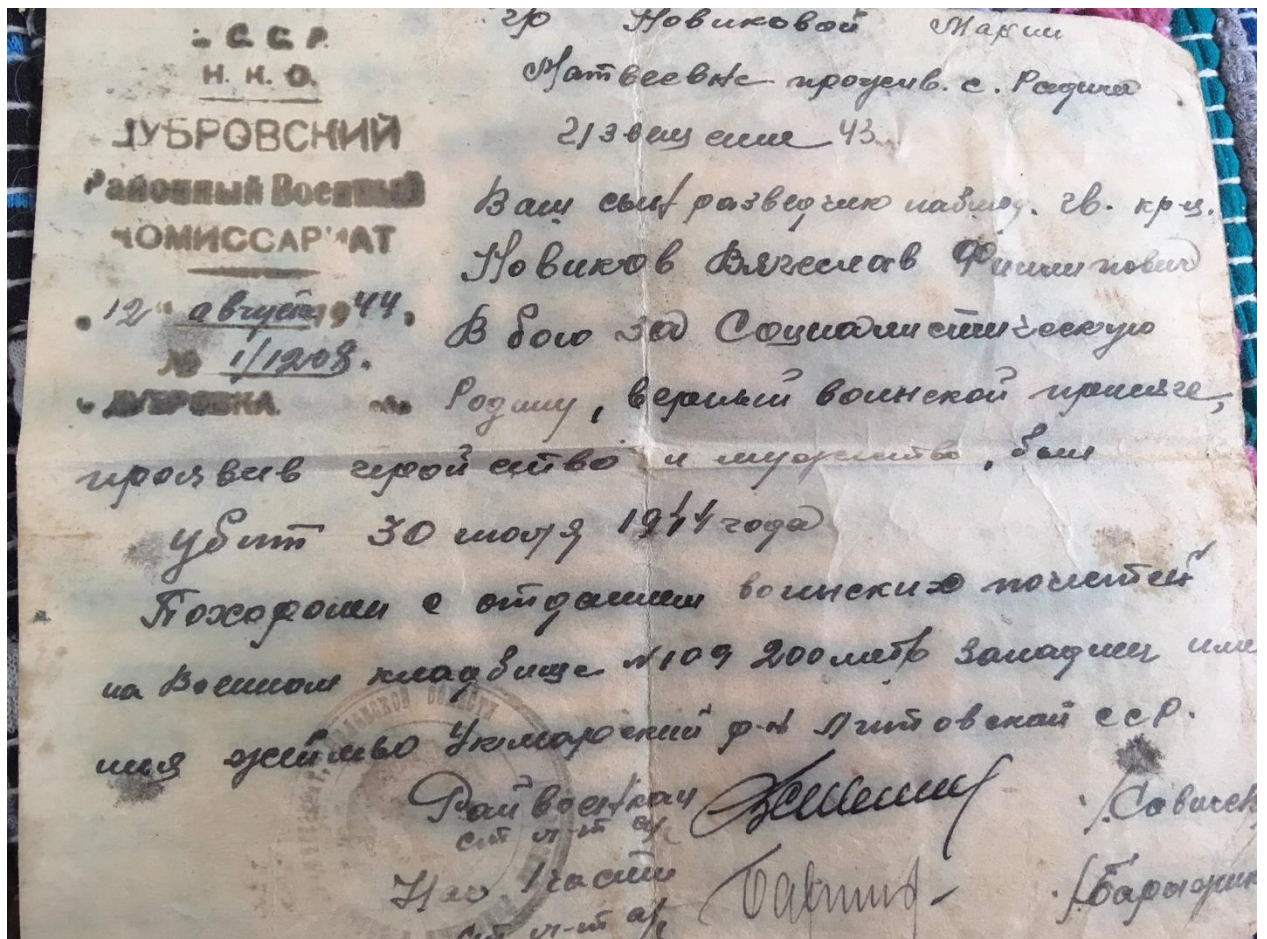
He carried the scar for the rest of his life but never lost his fascination with guns.

However, all our worries and concerns paled beside the grief that soon befell our family.

At the beginning of August we received an envelope from Radichi, from uncle Pavel, with a note inside written on a grease-stained half-page piece of paper. The pencil did not seem to write very well, and the text was barely legible. Or maybe the commanding officer, a lieutenant, was tired of writing letters like this:

"Hello, Novikov Anatoli. Novikov Vyacheslav received your letter but had no time to answer it. This is to inform you that your brother, artillery forward observer Guards Red Army private Novikov Vyacheslav Philippovich died a hero's death having demonstrated heroism and valor during the advance of our troops to Eastern Prussia in Lithuania. On June 30<sup>th</sup> he was buried in military cemetery # 109, 200 meters west of the estate Zheistvo, Ukmerge District, Lithuanian SSR. "

On August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1944, again from Radichi, we received a killed -in- action notice. The Dubrovka District Military Commissariat specified more formally on a quarter-page piece of paper that in combat action for the Socialist Motherland, faithful to his military oath, having demonstrated "heroism and courage", my brother was killed on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944.



*Notice of Vyacheslav's death issued by the Military Commissariat*

It so happened that both notices were delivered when Mother was not at home, and Gennadi and I took a decision not to tell her for the time being. There could be many reasons for not receiving any more letters. He may have been wounded or taken prisoner. She would be told later. The commissariat was not going to bother us any more, nor the government: there would be no death benefit for the survivors anyway. “Everything for the Motherland! The people and Party are one!” said posters at every corner.

The following is the story told by our co-villager Leonid Osipovich Sergeev about what happened to him after his discharge from the army.

“The village of Ryabchi was liberated on 18/09/43; Bryansk on 17/09/43. Before the occupation all men of 22 to 40 years of age had been drafted. Due to the fact that the Germans breached our defenses and entered our district and village on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, a significant number of men were still remaining in the occupied territory. Besides, 15-year old lads had grown up by the liberation and had become eligible for military service. On September 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> the District Administration summoned men of 17 to 50 years of age to the Dubrovka District Military Commissariat.

On September 27<sup>th</sup> all the men were interviewed by the NKVD and assigned to military units active in the direction Smolensk - Vitebsk, as well as Nevel – Pskov. 17 and 18-olds were separated from the others. The partisans who had just come out of the woods were also drafted. All the men were ordered to move on foot. Our group was led in the direction of Kletnya. We started out late, in the afternoon, and had to spend the night in the field. Many of us did not have much on in terms of clothes, just quitted jackets or suit coats, or footwear: some had galoshes or even bast shoes. The next morning we were joined by horse-mounted men in uniform, and we continued marching to Kletnya. But even there we were not given any food. We did not have much in our rucksacks, either: some shortcakes and boiled potatoes. Very few among us had lard or sugar.

We had an impression that we were hurried to march on without clear destination. We were not expected in Kletnya, and we treaded on along the railway tracks to Zhukovka. Why had they not sent us there in the first place? Zhukovka was closer to Dubrovka, and the road was better. From there we walked to Bryansk. In Bryansk we were issued uniforms and trained for several days how to act under fire, in offensive, in a bombing raid. Then the “buyers” arrived from the front and picked me and many others from our village to be in artillery. I was assigned to a unit that had 76-mm guns firing from indirect positions. It was not as dangerous as being on the frontline. On November 7<sup>th</sup> we were loaded into heated cars of a freight train and sent to the front in the vicinity of Nevel and Pskov. Before that we had been given some rusks that we had eaten right away, after which we went hungry for three days having no food at all. From the train we were loaded onto American Studebaker trucks and brought to the firing positions. “Here you will be taught how to fight!” we were told. We saw Nevel burning. Pskov was waiting its turn.

The first thing I learnt to do was digging a trench for the gun followed by digging trenches for ammunition and myself. In combat I carried projectiles to the gun, and after the gun layer was wounded, I was appointed gun layer being the one who had some education: I had completed eight years of school. From November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1943, to February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945, I had been in action till I was wounded. I came back home on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945.

Here is another story about the first days of another group that was sent from Dubrovka in the direction of Mogilev. The group of the draftees included young lads and men of mature age: from 20-22 years of age to 40. There also were former partisans among them. Most of them, probably, had not taken part in combat but cooked food, prepared banyas for bathing, did digging and helped to build dugouts. There were lads from the village of Chot that we knew: Vassili Pronichev, Ivan Saltykov and others. After the war they told about their first combat.

They were sent to the front on foot. They were provided neither food, nor clothes. When they reached the front, they were issued rifles and a handful of bullets. “Have some rest, they were told, tomorrow at dawn we launch an offensive, you have the Pronya River in front of you, the Germans are on the opposite bank. You will cross the river after an artillery barrage. Do not get too far behind the line of bursts of our projectiles.”

They went into the attack wearing well-worn vatniks and civilian suit jackets; many of them had bant shoes or galoshes with foot wraps for footwear, some were practically barefooted. Leonid Iossifovich, a war veteran, concluded from the story that they had been assigned to a penal battalion.

Vassili Pronichev ended his story about the first combat with these words: “The Germans beat the crap out of us. Out of 240 men in our company only 12 survived. And they were all wounded.”

Was such treatment of the draftees who had been considered as corrupted by German pernicious propaganda during the period of occupation an isolated or random incident?

Here is a story told by my colleague, chief designer of mine hoisting equipment of the Mining Machinery Research Institute at the Donetsk Machine-Building Plant Alexander Volokhov. After the liberation of the Donbas region, in Ukraine, as in Russia, all young men were drafted. Alexander was 18. There was no training and no uniforms issued; just a few rifles for some of the draftees. Those who did not get rifles were told to pick the ones of their killed comrades.

“We were all ordered to mount the tanks and go into an attack to breach the well-fortified German defense. We were in a valley; the Germans were positioned on a hill. There was a dense wall of fire in front of our tanks. The tanks caught fire, one after another. “This is certain death!” I thought. Without giving it a second thought, I jumped off of the tank into a shell crater.”

The Germans repelled the attack. The tanks were burning. I stayed in the crater the entire day till dark. At night I crept to our positions. The next morning there was no one to launch another attack: most men had been killed”.

The survivors were taken to the rear to be replenished with newly arrived draftees from the occupied areas. “No, they won’t let me live here!” Alexander thought. But then a “buyer”



came and said to the draftees: “He who plays any musical instrument, step forward!” Alexander had not held a single instrument in his short life, but he understood: “This is my chance to part with this company. Because there will be no stopping! Tomorrow they will make us mount the tanks again!”

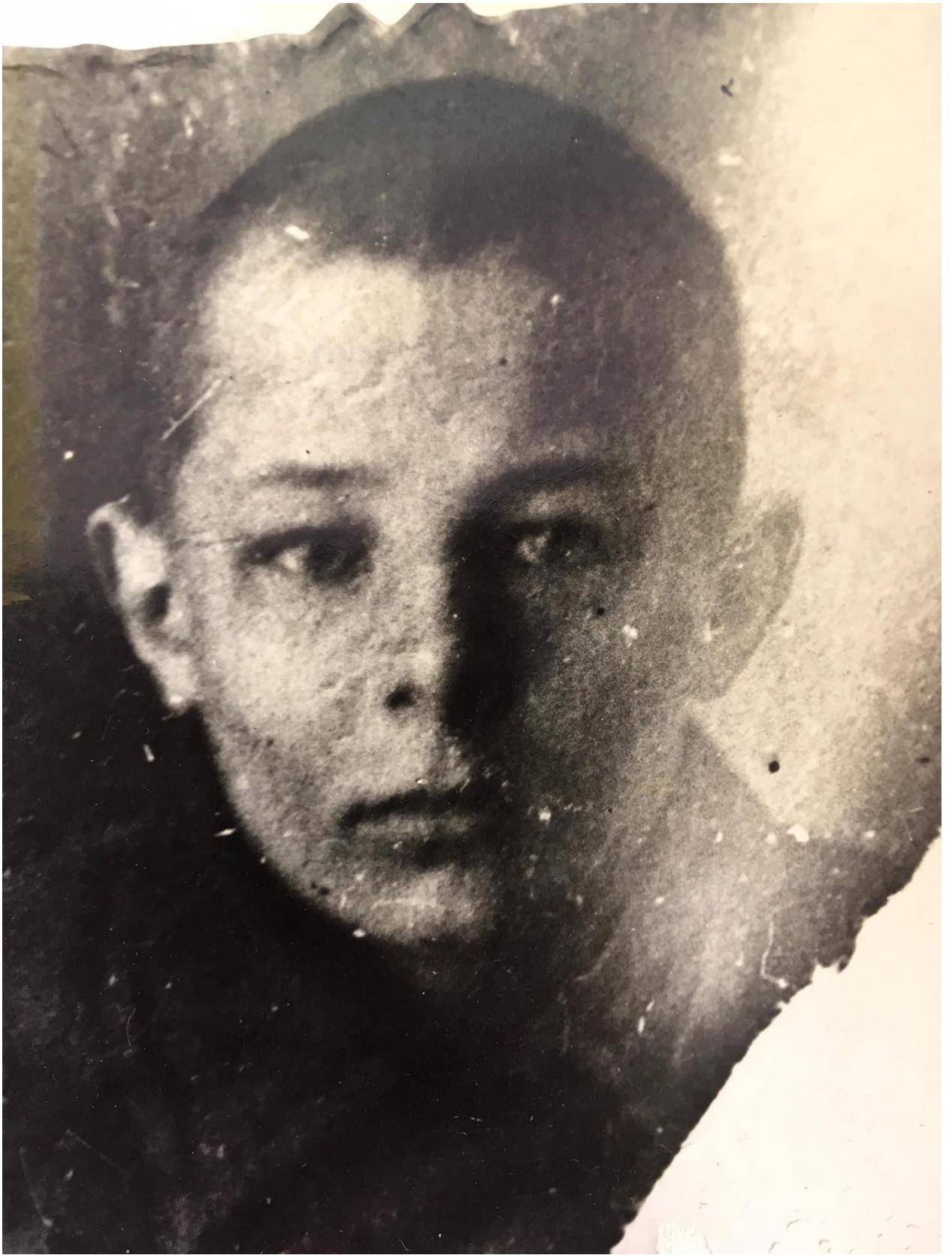
Without hesitation he stepped forward.

After the war, in civilian life, he would also be inventive. He would design a mine hoisting machine and special devices to it for safe operation with two sets of keys. A prototype model based exclusively on his design would be made, and the State Commission would accept it. For mass production Alexander would design a machine without the devices and with only one set of keys. It would save money to the manufacturer. For this innovation he would be awarded a bonus, albeit a paltry one.

And in this case, after his first combat, his decision was the right one. He became a drummer in a military band and reached Berlin with it. There is a picture that shows him and the band in front of the Reichstag.

It comes as no surprise, considering these stories, that writer and Patriotic War veteran, signalman Victor Astafiev would write at the end of his life: “Under Stalin the Soviet Army was the most incompetent army of slaves designed to breach enemy fortifications with its soldiers’ bodies.”

The war was hard, its devastating beginning unexpected, the losses of the army and country irreparable. The people who populated that country had been proud of its might and the wisdom of its leaders and believed in their infallibility. It was under the occupation that they began to see the truth. Everything had been a lie and a hoax. Incompetent experimenters!



*My brother Vyacheslav*

