



**MEMORIES  
OF THE WAR**

**NIKOLAI NIKULIN**

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## **Translator's Commentary**

Second World War was a terrible catastrophe all over the globe, and its Eastern Front remains possibly the bloodiest and most horrible war theater ever to this day. Kilometers of pages have been printed and many more words have been said about it.

However, the perception of Eastern Front is unfortunately still far from an unbiased and complete picture. Part of it is due to the fact that the main Eastern Front actor – USSR, then Russian Federation as its legal successor – still keeps many of the details classified, and with the cult status "Great Patriotic War" reached there it is improbable the situation is going to change any time soon. Part of it is due to a simple language barrier.

In 2007 a relatively insignificant event in the grand scheme of things happened: a Second World War veteran who had been long since tormented by the experience he had to live through accidentally made the manuscript of his memoirs that he had written for himself only available to public. The manuscript, as the writer himself put it, gained a life of its own, thus he had nothing left to

do but allow its publication. The author's name was Nikolai Nikulin.

He was a museum worker, an art historian, a reasonably successful one. In fact, one can already buy some of his works on Dutch paintings in English even now. However, he was also a decorated war veteran. Having gone through the battles fierce even in comparison to other Eastern Front areas, he survived, although just like absolute majority of genuine war veterans, he only wished he could have forgotten everything. Writing this book was a case of self-therapy for him, and he was not alone in that regard. Many more Soviet war veterans did the same, and many of them did get their works published.

This book is by no means a one and only true depiction of the events that occurred in 1941-1945, and the writer himself discourages you from calling it objective, but its perspective is definitely one of a kind. It shows war stripped down to the gist of it, it shows experiences of normal people who got caught in its whirlwind. It shows a scared boy who ended up on his own and simply had to survive. This is the kind of war book the world needs more of since when reading about

grand events, wars and battles we often forget about the myriads of people's personal tragedies that have always accompanied them.

I am not a professional translator, and I am only tangentially related to translation work. This project was done in my spare time, mostly just to prove myself I could do this. The book itself is written in very informal style with grammar often being questionable even in Russian. Still, I strove for making this translation as easy to read and as close to author's original style as possible. Of course, I would be more than happy if anyone wanted to improve on my work. I hope you enjoy reading it!

*–Langley*

## Foreword

My notes were not to be published. This is but an attempt to free from the past: just like in Western countries people go to a psychoanalyst spelling out their troubles, their concerns, their secrets to them in hopes of healing and finding peace, I went to paper in order to scrub away filth, mud and disgrace deeply stuck there, to break free from the memories oppressing me. It's an attempt most certainly unsuccessful, hopeless... These notes are deeply personal, written for myself and not for a stranger's eye, thus extremely subjective. They cannot be objective because war was lived through by me in almost a child's age, with total lack of life experience, knowledge of people, with total lack of defensive reactions or immunity from the blows of fate. There is no accurate, consistent summary of events in them. These are no memoirs that famous war leaders write, and which fill up the shelves in our libraries. Descriptions of battles and heroic deeds are as minimized as possible here. Feats and heroism shown at war are known to everyone and sung about many times. Yet official memoirs lack the

authentic atmosphere of war. People writing them are almost completely disinterested in what the soldier is actually going through. Wars were generally conceived by the ones threatened by them the least: feudal lords, kings, ministers, politicians, financiers and generals. In the quiet of the offices they had constructed plans and then when it was all over, wrote their recollections, glorifying their valors and justifying failures. Majority of war memoirs are praising the idea of the war itself and therefore are creating the foundation for new military plans. The one who pays for all this dies out in the field all while implementing the intentions of generals, the one who does not need the war in any way generally does not write memoirs.

Here I attempted to tell what I was thinking about, what was astounding me the most and what I lived with for four long years of war. I repeat, this tale is not objective at all. My look at the events of those years is not from above, from the general's bell tower where everything can be seen, but from below, from the point of view of a soldier, crawling on the frontline mud, and sometimes sticking my nose in said mud. Naturally, I have not seen much and what I have was in a specific

way.

This position has its interest, as it opens up the facts that were absolutely unnoticeable, unexpected and, perhaps, having some importance. The point of these notes partially consists of fixating some almost completely forgotten strokes of wartime. Yet the main one is an attempt to answer my own questions that obtrusively torture me and don't give me rest, even though the war is long since over, and all in all, even my life near the very beginning of which this war happened, is almost over too.

Since this manuscript was not for stranger's hands, I can avoid apologies for risky expressions and scenes, without which it is impossible to describe the authentic smell of the soldier's everyday life – an atmosphere of the barracks.

If, however, the manuscript will find its reader, let them perceive it not as a literary piece of historical work, but as a document, as an eyewitness' statement.

*Leningrad, 1975*



## Beginning

*War is a worthy pastime for real men*  
–Charles XII, King of Sweden

*Oh, God! Oh, our God! Oh, our merciful God!*  
*Get me out of this dump!*

During the spring of 1941 many people in Leningrad felt the coming of the war. Informed people knew about preparations for it, common folks were made uneasy by hearsay and gossip. However, nobody could assume that already after three months of invasion Germans would have appeared at the city gates, and after half a year every third resident would have died a terrible death from malnutrition. Let alone we, spring chickens straight out from the school walls, didn't think of what was to come. Yet the majority was destined to die among the swamps surrounding Leningrad in the nearest time. Others, those few who would have returned, were awaited another fate – remaining crippled, legless, armless; or turning into neurotics, alcoholics, having lost the peace of mind forever.

Declaration of war was met by me and, as it seems, majority of the common folks not exactly indifferently but somehow remotely. We listened to radio, we talked. We were waiting for swift victories of our army – unbeatable and the best in the world, as they were constantly writing in the newspapers. Battles were playing out somewhere far away so far. There were less news of them than of the war in Europe. During the first days of the war city had a holiday scenery of sorts. The weather was clear and sunny, gardens and plazas were lushing with green, there were a lot of flowers. The city dressed up with talentless posters on war themes. Streets became bursting with life. Plenty of recruits in brand new uniforms were wandering along the sidewalks all businesslike. Singing could be heard from any corner, together with sounds of gramophones and accordions: mobilized were in a rush to get drunk for the last time and celebrate the transfer to the front. For some reason in June-July many good books that had been in shortage before appeared on sale. Nevsky Prospect turned into one giant bookstore: tables with piles of books stood right on the pavement. Shops still had food so far, and lines did not look grim.

Houses transformed. Criss-crossed straps of paper were being glued onto window glass. Shop displays were being nailed down with boards and covered with sandbags. Signs on the walls showing bomb shelters and cover appeared. Observers were standing on duty on the roofs. Anti-aircraft cannons were being set up in gardens, some not very young people wearing extremely wide ski pants marched there from dusk till dawn and stabbed dummies with bayonets. Every now and then girls wearing awkward breeches and poorly sewn service shirts showed up. They were carrying humongous gas balloons for barrage balloons that rose up above the city on the long wires. Resembling giant fish, they loomed sharply in a cloudless sky during white nights.

Meanwhile, the war was going on somewhere. Something was happening but nobody knew anything well enough. Wounded started being taken to hospitals, mobilized were going away and away. A scene of marines being sent off cut into my memory: right under our windows looking at Neva a civilian boat was being loaded with fully armed and equipped soldiers. They were calmly waiting for their turn, but then a woman ran up to one of them, crying loudly. They were persuading her,

calming her down, but to no avail. Soldier was forcefully tearing clutching hands off him, and she was still trying to grab onto the duffle bag, the rifle, the gas mask bag. Boat had gone away yet woman still drearily howled for a long time, hitting her head over embankment's granite parapet. She had felt what I learned about way later: neither soldiers nor boats on which they were sent off for landing party came back any more.

Then all of us enlisted into militia... We were issued rifles, ammunition, food (herring for some reason – apparently it was something that was at hand) and were loaded onto a barge that stood near the coast of Malaya Nevka. And there my Guardian Angel saved me for the first time, taking the image of an elderly colonel, ordering everyone to get off the barge and to line up on the coast. We couldn't understand anything in the beginning, and colonel carefully looked over all of us with his eyes red due to lack of sleep and ordered someone to leave the formation. I was among them too.

“Forward, march home!” – said the colonel. – It's sickening THERE even without you snot-noses!” Turns out, he tried to fix something, do properly, avoid a pointless death of green youngsters. He found strength

and time for that! However, all that I understood later, and then I had come back home – to a baffled household...

Meanwhile, barge moved further along Neva. They say that on Volkhov it was bombed and sunk by messerschmitts. Militants sat in the cargo holds, with the trapdoors that the prudent command ordered to lock up – in order, for all they knew, for the dearies not to scatter away!

I came back home but within a week got an official draft card. Military Commissariat sent me to a military school – first one, then the second, then the third. All my peers were admitted but I was rejected by medical commission – I had poor heart. Finally a suitable place was found for me too: it was a radio specialists school. Even there there was no smell of the war yet. Everything was funny, interesting. They gathered former schoolchildren, students – lively, curious, talkative guys. There are laughter, jokes, anecdotes. In the evening one is whistling all Beethoven's sonatas by heart, the other is playing gusli that he took with him to war. And how interesting it is to sleep on double decked beds with no mattresses, only a wire net that becomes imprinted into

the mug during the night! How do people changed into the uniform change! And what a funny sergeant:

–Aha, you know two languages! Good – you'll come clean the lavatory!

Sergeant's lessons were remembered by me for my entire life. When I mixed up right and left sides when turning in formation, sergeant edified me:

–It's not a university, you know, you have to think with your head here!

Headmaster of the school himself – and old hand who even participated in the Civil War – taught us first lessons of military etiquette. Marching around the yard, we met him and, as we were taught, diligently reported:

–Comrade colonel, squad is moving to classes!

–It's not moving but dragging its balls on the ground, – was the answer...

And chief political instructor, what a humorist he was! During a political talk he informed:

–Ukraine is already captured by the hands of fascist paws!

Then, after bed time, he chased the whole company along the grounds. Soldiers loudly stamped with one leg and stepped quietly with the other – it was a spontaneous

demonstration of a common contempt for the person nobody of us liked. Diamond cut diamond – political instructor promised to chase us until morning. Only interjection of the Headmaster set things straight:

–Stop it! – he declared. – Tomorrow is an exhausting day of studies.

That political instructor later, when the siege began and we started to swell from hunger, got into the habit of going to kitchen, and stuffing his face from the soldier's pot there... One way or another he managed to come out of the war alive. In 1947, going to Moscow on business, I spied a familiar bandit mug with the scar on the cheek on the train. That was our valorous political instructor, now a train car conductor, obsequiously delivering the glasses and dashingly taking tips. He, of course, didn't recognize me, and I gladly put half a ruble into his sweaty, honest hand.

We studied at school with interest, and it was a thing we were accustomed to; only two months since we stood up from school desks had passed. Simplistic wisdom of Morse code was swiftly grasped by everyone. There was no supernatural army drilling – there was not enough time for that. However, formation exercises and

lessons of bayonet fight left cadets completely exhausted. Sometimes parades with music were scheduled, but orchestra dropped the ball: it was a jazz ensemble that got mobilized and dressed up in a military uniform. Instead of a marching rhythm it constantly drifted away to rumba, causing multileveled curses of the Headmaster. Parades were stopped after German reconnaissance plane appeared and photographed the sight.

Meanwhile war was going on somewhere. First idea of it we got when a knocked out division from the front arrived in the school territory for reinforcement and buttoning up. Everyone was surprised that front line troops greedily eat the pearl barley porridge, that was left in the canteen, in huge amounts. Radio school cadets were fresh out of home, still pampered and picky with food. Some couldn't get used to army food at first. Once I woke up at 3 am due to some weird crackling. Its cause was uncovered near the entrance hall: Yurka Voronov, son of a famous Leningrad actor, was standing there and hastily eating chicken delivered from home by the loving parents.

Soldiers from the front were quiet, secluded. They tried communicating only with each other, as if they were



bounded by a common mystery. One fine day division was lined up on the grounds in front of the barracks, and we were ordered to line up nearby. We were joking, chatting, wondering what would happen. Attention was called, and two people without belts were led in. Then captain started to read the paper: those two were sentenced to death for desertion . And by then, instantly, we couldn't even understand anything, SMG-wielding troops shot down both. It was simple, without ceremonies... Their figures twitched and froze. Doctor confirmed death. Bodies were buried near the edge of the grounds, the ground was leveled and trampled on. We dispersed in dead silence. People who were shot, as it turned out, only went off to town without a warrant – in order to see the relatives. In order to strengthen the discipline a show execution by a firing squad was made. It was so simple and so scary! It was exactly then when the shift in our consciousness happened: first time we got that war was no joke, and that it would touch us too.

During August things on the front near Leningrad looked blue, division went to the forward position and together with them were half of our cadets as reinforcements. All of them had quickly fallen in fighting.

Guardian Angel saved me again: I was left in the second half. Bombings started. The most spectacular was the first one in the beginning of September. In the quiet of a sunny day humming suddenly arose in the air from nowhere. It started to get louder and louder, windows were trembling and everything around started to vibrate. Far away, in the clear sky, an armada of planes appeared. They flew in line, on different heights, slowly, confidently. Everywhere anti-aircraft shells were exploding – looking like shreds of cotton wool in the blue sky. Artillery stroke chaotically, disorderly, causing no harm to the planes. They did not even maneuver, did not change the line and, as if not noticing the fire, were flying to target. Yellow edges of the wings and black crosses on the bodies could be seen clearly. We sat in the “slits” – deep, specially dug ditches. It was very scary, and I suddenly noticed myself hiding under a piece of tarpaulin.

High explosive bombs were exploding far away, causing the ground to tremble. However, incendiaries were dropped onto us. They diffused the situation: cadets jumped out of cover and ran off to put out the fire epicenters. It was something akin to a new exciting game:

incendiary burns like a Bengal fire, and it has to be shoved into the sand. It goes out while hissing and steaming. When it was all over, we saw clouds of smoke taking half the sky. Those were Badaevsky Food Warehouses burning. Then we couldn't even know that that fire would have settled the fate of a million city residents, who would have died from hunger during winter of 1941-1942.

Bombings became systematic. A high explosive fell into the school yard tearing several people to shreds, the buildings on neighboring streets were destroyed., particularly hospital (where there is Extension Course Institute for Medical Practitioners now). There were rumors that spies signaled German planes from the roof of that building via a mirror. We spent nights in covers dug up in the yard. Running water and sewer broke down. In two hours lavatories were full of sewage, but command took action quickly: ones knowing two languages had to work extensively and primitive contraptions like in the village were dug in the yard. Losses from bombings were not large, there was more fear. I seriously cowered when a bomb blew up behind the window and threw a huge log that had smashed in

two frames together with glass at me. A second prior I sat down for some reason and log smashed into a nearby wall after flying over my head.

In a state of universal complacency German agents acted freely, lighting up the targets with plenty of flares in the evenings. One of the flares was launched from our attic once. Yet, of course, nobody could have been found, since everyone who had been nearby – one and a half hundred people – ran off to catch the rocketeer. Goofy and futile crowding ensued.

In the beginning of October ones who had passed the learning course were sent to Levashovo station for field practice. There we had lived for a month in summer houses of artillery school. Winter came early. Snow fell, and it had remained there until spring. Practicing was mostly down to sitting in the frost and radio contacts between separate groups of cadets. We were getting used to freezing and starving. Albeit the real hunger wasn't there yet. It's possible to live off three hundred grams of bread per day, but we collected acorns, roots. We dreamed to get kitchen duty, and one day first platoon got lucky. Having come back in the evening, that platoon puked on us, on the second platoon, that slept on the

lower bunk beds: unknowingly they overate and upset their stomachs. The mood, however, was vigorous. There were still jokes, even about the lack of food.

Levashovo was out of the bombing zone. Yet one night, standing on duty near the food storage, I witnessed another sweep on Leningrad. It was a spectacular sight! There were flashes of bomb explosions, glow of fires, colorful streams of tracer bullets and shells, smoky solar prominences lightened by crimson glares. All that pulsated, twitched spreading all over horizon. Dull never-ending humming could be heard from afar. The ground was trembling slightly. It seemed that nobody would survive in that hell. I thought of relatives there with anguish and horror. In the morning kind storekeeper gifted me a WHOLE (!) loaf of bread. I ate the half, the rest I gave the buddies. I remember how handsome brown eyes of one of them were filling up with tears. His name was, I think, Mandel...

Once we had been on duty at the radio for the whole night while sitting in a pile of snow. There was no one around and when German propaganda program for Russians got on air we decided to listen to it. We were shocked not by the message about defeat of another

group of forces, not the numbers of losses, prisoners and trophies, but the fact that presenter called Budenny and Voroshilov who were only written about in excellent way here talentless simpletons in the field of war. All in all we sketchily realized the gravity of the situation then; we understood that Leningrad was on the brink of being crushed but we didn't think about defeat, and crude German propaganda didn't really work on us. Albeit it did feel nasty enough inside the mind<sup>1</sup>.

In the beginning of November we were brought back to the cold glassless Leningrad barracks. Before being sent to the front companies were charged with patrolling the city. We checked the documents and

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<sup>1</sup> How is this pearl of German propaganda, for example: hit the Jewish political instructor. Face is asking for a brick. (a writing on a leaflet). I wonder who came up with that – Germans or Russians who defected to them? And this one was definitely by Russians:

Right is hammer,  
Left is sickle:  
This is our Soviet emblem.  
Whether you reap  
Or you smith  
You'll always end up with...

as required.

Leaflets with a portrait of General Vlasov in German uniform aroused general acute irritation and acted in our favor. It is strange that Germans could not understand that. These leaflets are, however, of 1943-1944 years. It can be argued that the German campaign of that kind was very poorly organized. And doesn't seem like Germans who knew how to foresee all the details

detained the suspicious people. Among the latter were people who got encircled and retreated from Luga and other “kotels”. They were terribly thin people – essentially bones covered with brown, weathered skin...

The city was drastically different from how it had been in August. There were traces of frags everywhere, plenty of houses had destroyed facades opening up the apartments as if in section: somewhere a bed or a drawer were holding onto the remains of the floor, there were clocks or paintings hanging on the walls. It's cold, dank, grim. Clodt's horses are taken down. Yusupov's Palace is damaged. Ethnographic Museum has a huge crack from top to bottom. Spires of Admiralty and Peter and Paul's Cathedral are in dark cases, and the dome of Isaac's is painted with neutral color for disguise. Anti-aircraft cannons are set up in the gardens. Rarely German shells fly howling and explode far away. Metronome clicks rhythmically. Wind carries yellow leaves, branches, some sort of dirty papers... Grim mood reigns in the city, well expressed in couplets later thought up by Leningrad hoodlums:

Leningrad's besieged, there's bombing, there's fire,  
And long-range shells are flying us right by.

It's cold in the apartment and it's dire,  
We're bored to tears right there, ha-ha!  
Goners are now taken to the burial ground  
It's cold in the apartment and it's dire,  
We're bored to tears right there, ha-ha!

Et cetera.

Our post was near the Philharmonic Hall and some kind people – passer-bys – told mother where I was. There we managed to meet for the last time, and she brought me something to eat.

In the night of 7<sup>th</sup> of November there was a particularly brutal bombing (they said that Hitler had promised it to people of Leningrad), and in the morning despite shelling we marched to Finland Station where we were sent to Ladozhskoye Ozero station in cargo cars. We spent the night in the car literally lying on top of one another, and that was good since there were twenty degrees below zero outdoors. It was possible to warm up only by huddling up to the neighbor. In the morning we were safely loaded up onto the deck of an old ship repurposed into a gunboat from the bombed down quay. Movement through Ladoga was calm: sky was overcast, there were large waves, storm. Planes did not fly but we



seriously froze in the wind. We warmed up by huddling up to the funnel. There I made a great deal, bartering half of a dried bread loaf for three hard candies from the stingy Yurka Voronov.

We had a day's rest in snowed down Novaya Ladoga, panhandling wherever one could. We begged for food at the locals', at the bread factory. Then we walked day and night along the remote woods, trying to find the Army Headquarters. Some got left behind, some got frostbitten. We were allocated to the military units in the Headquarters. The best was the fate of those who got into the Signal Corps regiments. There they worked the radios up until the end of the war and almost all of them survived. The ones enlisted into Rifle Divisions got the worst fate.

–Ah, you're radiomen, – they were told, – here are the rifles for you, and there is a height. There are Germans! The mission is – capture the height!

Thus the newly-minted radiomen died on nameless heights. My fate was different: it was a Heavy Artillery Regiment. We had been searching for it for a week wandering around the villages near frontline. We crossed frozen Volkhov with its giant power plant twice. We fed

on what God would send us. Something we snatched from the workers of Volkhov's canteen. Evacuation was being prepared there and food stealing was going on. It was done so openly and shamelessly that manager lady would feel uneasy to refuse us in our humble request for food. Another time on the outskirts of the village Voybokalo (it was wiped off from the face of Earth in literal days) a soft-hearted girl took scraps of curd patties and other tasty food out on the porch: some important commander was quartered at her place – some kind of starshina, he hadn't finished his breakfast that morning.

We spent the nights right and left. Either it was in the empty hall of Volkhov-2 station (it had still been in one piece). There we came across armed men in civilian clothes. That was a squad of guerrillas that were to infiltrate German rear area. Or it was at some old lady's, on the stove. In the town of Volkhov the breath of war touched us again. During an evening twilight we were going past the school that was transformed into hospital. In the corner of a garden, close to the road, two elderly orderlies were burying the dead. They dug the hole leisurely, took the uniforms off the corpses (instruction ordered to save up government property). One corpse

with punctured chest used to be godly handsome young man. He had tight muscles, perfect complexion, eagle tattooed on the chest. Right shoulder has writing: “I love nature”, left one has: “Didn't eat enough again”. Those were marine brigade scouts. First time brigade was destroyed near Ligovo, then it got reinforced and sent to Volkhov Front, where it bled to death very soon... Orderlies pushed the corpses into the hole and filled it with frozen soil. We looked at each other and continued on. (Later, in the summer, I've seen how burying parties were throwing lime onto corpses – in order to avoid contagion; but only few were buried, ones that could have been taken out from the firing line. Usually bodies decayed right where death met soldier boys)

After long wandering, risking to get into the hands of advancing Germans or end up in a penal company as deserters, we reached the station Murmanskiye Vorota. There young, rose-cheeked Red Army soldiers wearing fine short fur coats told us they served in the regiment that was exactly the same as the one we were looking for. And our regiment was impossible to find, it was somewhere near Tikhvin. So we had to ask to get into their unit. Command, in the form of captain named

Sedash, accepted us gladly and ordered to enlist us into the second division of the regiment. That Sedash, a tall and sturdy fellow, was bald, happy, he smoke long roll-up cigarettes and swore impeccably, masterfully. He was a capable officer who had just finished the Academy and things in the regiment were set up, for that time, excellently. It's enough to say that in August skirmishes near Kirishi when infantry partially ran off and partially decided to surrender raising a pair of white drawers on the bayonets, Sedash's regiment had been holding out German offensive for several days, firing. Soon for such actions it became a Guards one. Sedash later became a colonel, he successfully commanded an artillery division (near Narva and Novgorod in the beginning of 1944), but didn't get promoted to general – according to gossip, he was involved in a food fraud. In 1945 he was heavily wounded near Budapest.

The irony of fate! I've always been afraid of loud noises, I couldn't stand popguns and crackers as a child, and I ended up in heavy artillery! Yet it was a lucky fate, for in the infantry during active fighting person stays alive around a week. Then he's inevitably wounded or killed. In heavy artillery this period is increased to three-

four months. Those who actually fired the cannons managed to stay safe during the whole war, since cannon stands in the rear area and fires from the enclosed positions. However, usually elderly people got dispatched to cannons. Youth, including me, ended up in fire control platoons. Our place is on forward positions. We have to watch the enemy, correct fire, manage the communications. I personally managed radio communications. We don't attack but crawl after the infantry instead. Therefore our losses are incommensurably fewer. And the regiment I ended up in had its original contingent saved from the start of its formation while infantry divisions changed their soldiers many times preserving only numbers. All that I found out later. And for then I was given three hundred grams of bread, gruel and swapped Leningrad knee-high boots for felt boots, left and right of different caliber.

Right in the day of our arrival food norms got cut here since Tikhvin had fallen and supplies got disrupted. There people only started to get used to hunger, and I'd already been suffering from dystrophy and stood apart from soldiers with my pathetic look. Everything I was unaccustomed to, everything was hard: stay out on the

thirty-degree frost as a sentry every night for four-six hours, dig frozen soil, move around heavy things: logs and shells (a crate is forty-six kilograms). This is without any habit, instantly. Yet I have no strength and have deathly anguish. Everyone around is alien, everyone only cares about himself. Compassion is impossible. Thick swearing, cruelty and obduracy are everywhere. I momentarily got boundless lice – so many that lovely babes ran in hundreds not only on my underwear but also above, on the overcoat. Fat lice with cross on the back were called KV back then – in honor of the eponymous heavy tank, and soldier boys forgot that tank was named in honor of the great commander K.E. Voroshilov. One had to take those KVs by a handful from under the arm and throw onto a fired up oven where they popped with loud clicking. Eventually I scratched my thin sides to blood and got scabs on the places of scratchings. There was no talking about steam baths since we lived on the snow, in the frost. There was not even spare underwear. Special powders against lice did not do anything to them. I tried to soak the underwear in gasoline and wore it like that. Babes ran away from under the service shirt and they could be thrown onto the snow

off the neck. Yet the following day they appeared again in even bigger amounts. Salvation appeared only in 1942: it was “Soap K” – a yellow, horribly stinky paste that one had to boil the clothes in. Then we finally breathed with relief. And meanwhile people had learned how to build steam baths too.

Yet still I was lucky. I was a worthless soldier. In the infantry I'd have been instantly executed as an example or died on my own from weakness, falling head first into the bonfire: burnt corpses were left by the dozens in the places where units coming from starving Leningrad were positioned. In the regiment I was, perhaps, despised, but tolerated. I prepared dozens of cubic meters of wood for officers' dugouts, did all kinds of work, froze myself on post. Seldom I was on duty near the radio station. In the beginning I wasn't taken to the firing line, and thankfully there were no large battles. To put it simply, I didn't get into meat grinder instantly but rather had the ability to get accustomed to daily military life step by step.

Shelling didn't scare me at first because I didn't understand what was going on at first. There's rumble, people near fall down, there are groans, blood splatters on the snow. I stay there and look blank. Often I was

thrown onto the ground and sworn at so I wouldn't loom in an open space. Very soon I found my calling: I ran up to the wounded, bandaged them and even though I had no experience, everything was successful – to the amazement of professional orderlies.

In the end of November our offensive started. Only then I got to know what war is, even though I still did not take part in the attacks. There were hundreds of wounded, killed, cold, hunger, strain, sleepless weeks... One relatively quiet night I sat in a snowy hole without any strength to fall asleep due to hunger. I scratched licey sides and cried from anguish and weakness. That night a turning point happened inside me. Strength appeared from somewhere. Near morning I crawled out of a hole, started prowling around empty German dugouts, found potatoes frozen as stone, started a bonfire, boiled a brew in helmet and, having filled my maw, felt self-confidence. Since then my metamorphosis began. Protective reactions appeared, energy appeared. I got an instinct helping me how to act. I got a grip. I started to obtain some grub. Either I cut some horse meat with an axe from the thigh of dead German dray horse – it got petrified on the frost. Or I found an abandoned potato



stash. Once a horse riding by was killed by a shell. In twenty minutes only mane and intestines were left from it, since handymen like me momentarily cut the meat down to pieces. Chariot driver couldn't even come to his senses, he remained there sitting in the sledge with reins in his hand. The other time we were marching along the road when suddenly a kitchen got turned over by a shell ahead of us. Buckwheat porridge poured onto the snow. Momentarily, without arrangement, everyone took their spoons, and the feast started! But the movement along the road is impossible to stop! A cart with hay, a truck drove through the porridge, but we were still eating and eating as long as there was something left... I collected dried bread and crust near food storages, kitchens – basically, I obtained food wherever I possibly could.

Offensive was continuing, at first it was successful. Germans ran, dropping cannons, trucks, all kinds of supplies, shooting the horses. I got convinced that tales about their brutality were not an invention of newspaper people. I have seen corpses of burned prisoners with stars cut on their backs. Villages on a way of retreat were all destroyed, population was forced out. There were but a few left – hungry, tattered, pathetic people.

I had begun to get taken to the firing line. I can remember hellish shelling, crawling in the snow. Blood, blood, blood. Those days I was wounded for the first time, though the wound was a joke – a scratch. It happened like that. At night, haggard, we got to an abandoned school building. It was warmer in empty classes than in the snow, there was straw and some kind of soldiers were sleeping. We lied nearby and instantly fell asleep. Then someone awoke and looked closely: we're sleeping near Germans! Everyone rose up, someone started shooting in the dark, there were scuffle, noise, screams, groans, swearing. Everyone beat up everyone, not being able to discern anything in the hubbub. I got stabbed in the thigh with a bayonet, I cut someone with a knife, then everyone ran off to different sides, teeth clattering, everyone became hot. Having taken the pants off, I identified that bayonet was German, a flat one, by the form of the scar. I didn't go to the medical unit, wound had healed itself in about two weeks.

It was easier to get some grub on the firing line. At night it's possible to crawl to the no man's land, cut the dufflebags off the dead with a dagger, and dried bread is inside, sometimes there's canned food and sugar. Many

did that during the moments of silence. Many did not return, for German machine gunners weren't sleeping. Once some starshina, apparently while drunk, drove the sledge onto no man's land where both he and the horse were instantly killed. And sledge had food in it: there was bread, canned food, vodka. Momentarily people willing to get those valuables appeared. First two came out and got struck down with bullets, so were three more. There were no more volunteers. During the night I made my mark. Understanding that Germans shoot after hearing as much as a rustle, I decided not to take anything but instead cut off the harness, tied a telephone wire to the sledge and safely returned to the trench. Then – heave ho! – we dragged the sledge back. Every piece of food was riddled with bullets, vodka poured out, yet we fressed it to our heart's content!

Near the railroad Mga – Kirishi our offensive was ground to a halt and Germans took solid positions. Here, in the large village of Nakhody that has no trace of it left now, I met new year of 1942. There was a shadow put on the end of 1941 by a disgusting episode. Three days prior command of our division got an order to infiltrate German rear area through the breach in defense and

correct cannon fire from there. We skied twenty kilometers in terrible frost, over deep piles of snow, among the virgin forest. Flares lighting up the firing line were left behind. Moon was shining. Giant fir-trees were everywhere. Finally we spotted dugouts that had been already made in summer on the clearing. We decided to have a rest and warm ourselves there. Dawn broke, and then someone yelled:

–Germans!

I was in the farthest dugout and reacted last. Upon getting out on the light I couldn't see anyone and only far away, in the forest, the figures of my comrades-in-arms running away blinked. The only possible thing left was following them. A scared lieutenant with Nagant at the ready met me under the fir-tree.

–And the Germans?

–I don't know, I didn't see them...

Turns out, there was panic, everyone ran away, and first of all the command. It would've been fine but in the rush a radio was forgotten in the dugout, and I didn't know that! We decided to come back. But then it turned out that Germans really had taken our place. Shootout started and we retreated none the wiser. Radio was lost,

order was not fulfilled. Before the New Year repressions followed. Investigator came, there were interrogations. A fall guy was found – head of the radio, a nice sergeant Fomin. Then court martial was conducted – it was a performance with a predefined finale. Finale, however, turned out better than we had expected – Fomin and another soldier who stole honey from a housekeeper in Nakhody got ten years of prison with punishment being served after the war. Bardanosov (that was the honey stealer's name) got redemption soon: bullet punctured his lung. Whether he survived, I don't know. Fomin, however, served with us long and well, and obviously he got rehabilitated later. But in New Year's Eve everyone felt sick. Coming back from the firing line, I fell asleep in warm dugout, I slept through midnight and couldn't even hear shooting that started everywhere at the time.

Soon after we left Nakhody which was the last village I had seen until the middle of 1943. Regiment got relocated to marshy low forests near Pogostye station. Everyone thought that it was a temporary delay there, two-three days would pass and we would move on further. However, fate decided differently. We got stuck in those marshes and forests for the whole two years!

And everything we had lived through — it had only been  
child's play to what was on the way!

## Pogostye

*Those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it*  
–Ancient philosopher

A small railway stop of Pogostye hides among the forests and marshes to the Southeast of Mga. It's several houses at the bank of the river which is black from peat, bushes, thickets of birches, alder and endless marshes. Passengers of trains passing by don't even think of looking in the window while moving through this God forgotten place. It hadn't been known prior the war, neither it is now. Yet meanwhile one of the bloodiest battles of Leningrad Front raged here. In the military diary of the German Ground Forces Staff Commander this place is constantly mentioned in the period from December, 1941 to May, 1942, and even later, until January, 1944. It's mentioned as a hot spot where dangerous military situation arose. The thing is, railway stop of Pogostye was the starting point in an attempt to lift the siege of Leningrad. So-called Luban Operation started there. Our troops (54<sup>th</sup> Army) had to breach the front, move up to the station of Luban on the Leningrad-

Moscow railroad and join with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army that was advancing from Myasnoy Bor to Volkhov there. Thus, German force grouping near Leningrad would get dismembered and destroyed with lifting of the siege to follow. It is known what came out of this plan. 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army was encircled and got partially destroyed, partially captured together with its commander, General Vlasov, itself, and 54<sup>th</sup> after three months of fierce battles, having drowned Pogostye and its surroundings with blood, breached twenty kilometers forward. Its regiments didn't reach Luban just slightly, but after losing almost every single man yet again, it got stuck in wild forests and marshes for a long time.

These days this operation as “one not having a success” is forgotten. And even General Fedyuninsky who commanded 54<sup>th</sup> Army shamefully conceals it in his memoirs, albeit while mentioning that it was “the most complicated, the hardest” time in his military career.

We arrived near Pogostye in the beginning of January, 1942, early in the morning. Snow cover spread all over the marshes. Scraggly trees rose from the piles of snow. Fresh graves could be seen near the road here and there – they looked like hillocks with a wooden pole at



the head. Frosty mist curled in the gray twilight. Temperature was about thirty degrees below zero. There was rumbling and hooting nearby, stray bullets were flying between us. One could see plenty of cars, some kind of crates and various gear poorly masked with the branches everywhere. Disjointed groups of soldiers and separate crooked figures slowly crawled to different directions.

A wounded told us that another one of our attacks on Pogostye had been bogged down and that German firing points that dug into a railway embankment had been sweeping everything living with a hail of bullets. Routes of approach had been intensively shelled by artillery and mortars. It had been impossible to raise one's head. He also told us that friendlies had ostensibly taken the station of Pogostye on the fly, in the end of December when they had first come near this area. However, it had turned out that station buildings had a reserve of alcohol, and heroes who drank too much had been slaughtered by the coming Germans. Ever since all the attempts to break through had been ending in failure. It's a typical story! How many times did I have to hear it more in different regions of the front!

Meanwhile our cannons took positions and opened fire. We started settling in in the forest. Frozen soil could be crushed only to the forty-fifty centimeters depth. After that there was water, thus our shelters became shallow. It was possible to crawl into them through a special manhole, close it with shelter-half, and only be there in lying position. However, an oven made from an old bucked was stoking in the depth of it, and there was wet warmth, like in a steam bath. Snow turned into water, water turned into steam due to fire. In about three days everything dried up and it became completely cozy; at the very least, we slept in warmth, that was great fortune! Sometimes we burned telephone wire in order to light the dugout up. It burned with stinky tarry fire, spreading stench and soot that collected on the faces. Each morning, having crawled out of holes, soldiers expectorated and blew black, tarry clots of soot from the noses onto the white snow. I remember how one morning I stuck out my swollen, dirty mug out of the dugout. Sunlight was blinding after pitch darkness, and I blinked for a long time while looking all over. Turns out, I was watched by starshina who was standing nearby. He noted while grinning:

–I can't understand whether you're crawling your face or ass forward...

He also usually greeted me with the following amiable words in order to emphasize my exceptional malnutrition:

–Well, what, are you still peeing on your bast shoe?

But either way, life in dugouts near Pogostye was luxury and privilege since majority of soldiers, first of all infantrymen, slept right on the snow. It wasn't always possible to start a bonfire due to aviation, and plenty of people got their noses, fingers and toes frostbitten, and sometimes got frozen completely. Soldiers were a terrible sight: they were blackened, with red and sore eyes, wearing burnt overcoats and felt boots. It was particularly hard to keep the wounded away from the frost. They were generally dragged along the snow in special light wooden boats, and in order to save heat they were covered with chemical heating pads. Those were small tarpaulin pillows. One had to pour a little bit of water inside, after that a chemical reaction with heat started and continued for two-three hours. Sometimes those boat-type sledges were dragged by dogs – they are nice, intelligent creatures. Usually orderly sent the leader

of the team off under fire, to no man's land, unreachable for people. Dog sought a wounded, came back and crawled there again together with the team. Dogs managed to get a sled to the healthy side of a wounded, helped him fall into the boat and crawled out of the dangerous zone!

Cruel was the fate of heavily wounded. Often they were completely impossible to get dragged away from a shootout, but even for those taken from no man's land the suffering was not over. Way to the medical unit was long, and way to the hospital took many hours. Upon reaching the hospital tents one had to wait since doctors were not able to tend to everyone despite selfless work around-the-clock during long weeks. A long line of bloody stretchers with people groaning, jerking in fever or frozen in shock was waiting for them. Wounded in the gut could not survive such a wait. Many others died too. Still, in later years situation improved by a wide margin.

However, as I found out later, the situation of the wounded during winter of 1942 in some other regions of Soviet-German front was even worse. One episode was told me by my neighbor in the bunk: "In forty-one our division was transferred near Murmansk to reinforce the

units defending there. We advanced West through the tundra on feet. Soon after division got under fire, and a blizzard started. Being wounded in the arm without reaching the firing line, I went back. Wind was getting stronger, snowstorm was howling, whirlwind knocked you down. Barely overcoming several kilometers, exhausted, I reached the dugout where the warming station was. Entering it was almost impossible. Wounded stood together, huddling up to each other, filling up all the room. Still I was able to squish inside where I slept standing until morning. In the morning yell came from outside: "Is there anyone alive? Come out!" That were orderlies who came. Three-four men crawled out of the dugout, everyone else froze to death. And near the entrance a pile of corpses covered with snow towered. Those were wounded who got driven from the firing line to the warming station and frozen there... Turns out, almost the whole division froze to death in the open mountain roads that night. Blizzard was very strong. I got away with slightly frozen face and fingers..."

Meanwhile it became more and more crowded in the place of our positioning near Pogostye (half a kilometer from the firing line). A whole city appeared in

birch forest. There were tents, dugouts, huts, headquarters, warehouses, kitchens. All that smoked, it was growing with hustling people, and German corrector plane nicknamed "Fire Poker" (its shape looked kind of bent) instantly spotted us. Shelling started, it was sparse but it had continued almost constantly for many days, strengthening and weakening. But what is that in comparison with hundreds dying on the firing line! There I was separated with my comrade-in-arms who came with me from Leningrad radio school. It was one Neelov. Frag pierced his throat, seemingly not hitting vital centers. He could even talk in whispers. Having bandaged his throat, I hitch-hiked him to the medical unit that was located five kilometers from us in tents.

I witnessed strange, weird scenes on a road nearing the front. Being lively as an avenue, it was moving both ways. There went reinforcements, arms and food were delivered, tanks drove. The opposite way wounded were dragged. And bustling took place by the roadside. Here, bread is being divided on a shelter-half laid on the snow, but it's impossible to cut it, so soldiers saw frozen bread with a two-handed saw. Then pieces and "sawdust" are divided into equal parts, one of the people present looks

away, the other shouts “To whom?” Dividing is done without offending anyone, by right. Such bread has to be sucked like a hard candy until it gets thawed. It was a horrible cold: soup froze in the pot and spit turned into an icicle before reaching ground, crisply clinking over hard ground... Here a corpse is being dug into snow, a wounded who either froze or bled out before reaching the hospital. Here's barter, vodka for bread. Here cook is boiling gruel, stirring it with a giant spoon in the cauldron. Steam is blowing and fire is cracking happily under the cauldron... In the forest clearing I came across empty fir-tree huts. Around them dozens of black marine reefing jackets, caps with “cabbage”, sailor caps with ribbons and plenty of fancy shoes are thrown around . Here marines coming from Leningrad were dressed up in warm army clothing yesterday. Swabbies have gone never to come back, and their junk, not needed by anyone, is being covered by sparse snow... Further on, soldiers are given white (!) bread from the truck. (How am I starving!!!) That came the squad of “politfighters”. They're fed before another attack. Command has high hopes for them, but just as high were the hopes for marines... Near the road carts and gun limbers are

standing. The cannons themselves and their personnel went to battle. Junk, obviously, is not owned by anyone, and deft rear area dwellers are ransacking this column in search for something edible. I don't have enough "frontline hardening" for such an operation... Again somebody is being buried and again wounded are plodding... Small anti-aircraft cannon deafeningly pommels at the plane off the truck. Ta-tak! Ta-tak! Tetak! ... But everything misses...

Suddenly there's a series of shell explosions. Farther, closer, near. On the ground sentry who stood near the headquarters dugout is writhing in blood. Elderly soldier who was walking along the road clutched his leg. Together with him is a girl – a medical instructor. She's crying her eyes out, lines of tears are flowing down the dirty face that has been unwashed for several days. Hands are trembling, she's at a loss. What a pathetic sight! Soldier calmly takes his pants down, bandages a bleeding hole at his thigh and even finds the strength to comfort and console the miss: "Daughter, don't be afraid, don't cry!"... War is not a woman's job. No doubt, there were many hero women who could be put as an example for men. But forcing women to experience the torments



of the front is too harsh. If only it was just that! It was hard for them among the men. Hungry soldiers, however, did not care about broads, but the command reached their goals by any means, from rude pressure to the most refined courtship. Among the many admirers were folks for any taste: they could sing, and dance, and talk nicely, and read Blok or Lermontov for the educated ones... And thus girls were going home with addition to the family. It seems it was called “go away under the order 009” in the language of military executives. Out of fifty ones who arrived in 1942 only two soldiers of the fair sex remained in our unit by the end of the war. But “going away under the order 009” is the best way. It could be worse. I was told how some colonel Volkov lined up female reinforcements and picked the beauties he laid eyes on while moving along the line. Those became his FPW<sup>2</sup> (field portable wives) and if they resisted – they got sent to detention, into cold dugout, on bread and water! Then babe went through different hands, was passed to different assistants and deputies. In keeping with the best Asian traditions!

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<sup>2</sup> Field portable wife. FPW acronym had another meaning in soldier's vocabulary. Hungry and exhausted soldiers called an empty, watery broth like that: “Farewell, pretty women”.

Meanwhile, a rhythm of sorts formed in army life near Pogostye. During the night reinforcements came: five hundred – one thousand – two-three thousands of people<sup>3</sup>. Either sailors, or marching companies from Siberia, or besieged ones (they were moved through the frozen Lake Ladoga). In the morning, after a sparse artillery softening-up, they went attacking and left lying near the railway embankment. Attacks were done in turtle step while making a trench in the deep snow, plus people didn't have enough strength, especially ones from Leningrad. Snow was lying above the waist level, dead people didn't fall, getting stuck in piles of snow. Corpses were covered by fresh snow flurry, and the following day a new attack took place, there were new corpses; and through winter layers of dead men which only showed up from the snow in spring formed – there were bent, crooked, torn, crushed bodies. Whole stacks of them.

Something about failures near Pogostye, about their causes, about lack of coordination, confusion, poor planning, poor reconnaissance, lack of cooperation between units and branches of military was told in our

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<sup>3</sup> A veteran of the rear area forming unit has recently told me that on average they had been forming a marching company of 1500 soldiers. In addition, reinforcements in Pogostye were also received from several reserve regiments.

press, in memoirs and specialist articles. Pogostye battles were in some manner typical for the whole Russian-German front of 1942. Everywhere something similar happened, everywhere – either in the North, or in the South, or near Rzhev, or near Staraya Russa – there were their own Pogostyes...

In the beginning of the war German armies entered our territory like hot knife through butter. There was no other way to restrain their movement besides drowning the blade of said knife in blood. Eventually it started to rust and dull, and moved more and more slowly. Yet blood flowed and flowed. That is how Leningrad militia disappeared. Two hundred thousand best people, cream of the city. Yet the knife stopped. It was, however, still strong, moving it back was almost impossible. Thus for all 1942 blood had flown and flown, nonetheless eroding this horrible blade. That is how our future victory was being forged.

Professional army died on the border. New formations had barely enough weapons, and even less ammunition. Experienced commanders were few and far between. Untrained recruits charged into battle...

–Attack! – calls Master from the Kremlin.

–Attack! – telephones general from the warm office.

–Attack! – orders colonel from the sturdy dugout.

And so a hundred of Ivans rise up, and plod through the deep snow onto criss-crossed traces of German machine guns. Germans themselves, sitting in warm log pillboxes, stuffed and drunk, cocky, had thought of everything, had counted everything, had calibrated fire everywhere and are firing, firing like on a shooting range. Although even enemy soldiers didn't have it that easy. Recently one German veteran told me that there were cases of insanity among the machine gunners of their regiment: it's not that easy to kill people line after line – yet they're still coming, and there is no end to them.

Colonel knows that the attack is useless, that only new corpses will appear. Some divisions had already had only headquarters and thirty-forty people left. There were cases when division had 6-7 thousands of bayonets when entering combat, and in the end of the operation its losses comprised 10-12 thousands – due to constant reinforcements! Yet there had never been enough people! Operative map of Pogostye is riddled with numbers of units, but there are no soldiers in them. Yet colonel fulfills an order and pushes people into attack. If his soul

hurts and he has conscience, he takes part in the battle himself and dies. A natural selection of sorts happens. Weak-willed and sensitive don't survive. Cruel, strong personalities, capable of fighting in the conditions that have formed are left. Only one way of waging war is known to them – that is pressing with the mass of bodies. Someone or other will kill a German. And slowly but surely regular German divisions are melting.

It's good if a colonel will try to think the attack through and prepare it, check whether everything possible was made. But often he's just talentless, lazy, drunk. Often he doesn't want to leave the warm cover and crawl under fire... Often artillery officer hasn't uncovered enough targets and is shooting from far away over the whole areas in order not to risk it, it's good if it's not at friendlies, although that also happened more often than not... It happens that supply officer started binge drinking and is having fun with broads in the nearby village, yet shells and food are not delivered... Or major lost his way and moved his battalion by compass not anywhere close to where it was needed... Confusion, mess, unfinished work, eyewash, unfulfilled duty, so common for us in peaceful life, emerge as evidently as

anywhere else at war. And there's one payment for everything – blood. Ivans are attacking and dying, and the one sitting in the cover is driving and driving them. The psychology of a person who assaults and the one who is watching the assault differs amazingly – when you don't have to die yourself, it all seems easy: forward and forward!

One night I was substituting the operator at the telephone. Communication back then was primitive and talks over all the lines could be heard in all spots; I found out how our commander I.I. Fedyuninsky is talking to division commanders: “Your mother! Forward!!! If you won't move I'll have you shot! Your mother! Attack! Your mother!”... About two years ago elderly Ivan Ivanovich, a kind grandpa, told Little Octobrists about war in completely different tones...

Talking in parables, here's what was going on: house became infested with bedbugs and master forced the dwellers to burn down the house and burn themselves together with bedbugs. Someone will be left and will build everything anew... We didn't know how and couldn't do it any other way. I read somewhere that English intelligence trains their agents for dozens of

years. They're taught in the best colleges; athletes, intellectuals, masters of the trade capable of everything are created. In Asian countries the task is given to a thousand or ten thousands of hit-or-miss, hastily whipped into shape men with expectations that even if almost all of them are to fail and be terminated, at least one will complete his mission. Neither time, nor funds for training, nor experienced teachers are available here. Everything is done in a rush – one didn't make it in time before, didn't think about or even had done a lot but not how it was needed. Everything is completed adrift, by intuition, with mass, with numbers. Well, we waged war that second way. In 1942 there was no alternative. Wise Master in Kremlin understood everything perfectly, knew and ordered one thing: “Attack!”, – while suppressing everyone with an iron will. And we were attacking, attacking, attacking... And mountains of bodies near Pogostyes, Nevsky Pyatachoks, unnamed heights were growing, growing, growing. That is how our future victory was being prepared.

Had the Germans filled up our headquarters with spies and units with saboteurs, had mass treason taken place, had enemies developed a detailed plan of our

army's collapse, they wouldn't have reached the effect that had been a result of idiocy, stupidity, irresponsibility of commanders and helpless submissiveness of the soldiers. I saw that in Pogostye but it, as it turned out, was everywhere.

At war the villainy of Bolshevik regime was exposed especially distinctly. Arrests and executions of the most productive, honest, intelligent, active and smart people were conducted not only in peace time, the same happened on the front, yet in even more open, disgusting form. I'll give an example. An order from the higher spheres is received: take the height. Regiment assaults it week after week, losing plenty of people per day. Reinforcements are coming non-stop, there is no lack of people. But among them are swollen people suffering from dystrophy from Leningrad who have just been assigned bed rest and high-calorie diet for three weeks by doctors. Among them are infants born in 1926, meaning fourteen-year-olds who're not allowed to be conscripted... "Forrrward!!!", and that's it. In the end some kind of soldier or lieutenant – platoon commander or captain – company commander (which is more rare), seeing this crying shame, exclaims: "We can't dump



people like that! There's a concrete pillbox on the height! And we've only got a little 76-millimeter cannon! It won't pierce it!"... Political instructor, SMERSH<sup>4</sup> and court martial join in instantly. One of the snitches who are aplenty in every unit, testifies: "Yes, he expressed doubts in our victory in the presence of soldiers". A form where one only has to write a name in that has already been prepared is filled instantly, and it's done: "Execute by a firing squad in front of the line!" or "Send off to a penal company!", which is the same. That is how the most honest people who felt their responsibility for society, died. And others were: "Forwarrd, attack!" "There are no fortresses Bolsheviks could not capture!" Yet Germans dug into the ground, thus creating the whole labyrinth or trenches and covers. Go try and get them! A stupid, pointless murder of our soldiers was going on. I've got to think, this selection of Russian peoples is a time bomb: it will explode in several generations, in 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> century, when a mass of scumbags who were picked and nurtured by Bolsheviks, will give birth to new generations of their own kind.

It's easy to write that when years have passed, when

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4 SMERSH – NKVD's "Death to spies!" organization. It was in charge of punitive functions.

craters in Pogostye have closed, when almost everyone has forgotten this small station. And anguish and desperation that I had to live through have already dulled. It's impossible to imagine this desperation and the only one who will understand it is a person who himself experienced the necessity to just get up and go die. Not someone else but exactly you, and not sometime else but now, this minute, you have to go inside the fire where at best you'll be lightly wounded and at worst – either you'll get your jaw torn off, or your gut torn apart, or your eyes gouged out, or your skull blown off. Exactly you, although you want to live so much! You, who had so many hopes ahead. You, who haven't even lived, haven't seen anything. You, who has everything ahead, when you're only seventeen! You have to be ready to die not only now, but constantly. Today you got lucky, death walked past. Yet tomorrow it's time to attack again. It's time to die again, and not like a hero, without grandeur, without orchestra and speeches, in the mud, in the smell. And your death will not be noticed by anyone: you will lie in a large stack of bodies near the railroad and rot away, forgotten by everyone in the sticky slush of Pogostye's marshes.

Poor, poor Russian blokes! They ended up between the grindstones of a historic mill, between two genocides. Stalin destroyed them from one side, herding them into socialism with bullets, and then, in 1941-1945, Hitler killed myriads of entirely innocent people. That is how Victory was being forged, that is how Russian nation was being destroyed, first of all its soul. Could the descendants of who is left live? And anyway, what is going to happen to Russia?

Why did we go to die, then, even though we clearly understood its inevitability? Why did we go, then, even if we didn't want to? We went, not just afraid of death, but struck with terror, and yet we went! Thinking and justifying your actions was not necessary then. There were more important things. We just got up and went, because we HAD TO! We politely listened to political instructors' valediction – which was a semiliterate retelling of wooden and empty newspaper headlines – and went. Not inspired by some kind of ideas of slogans at all, but because we HAD TO. That, apparently, how our ancestors went to die on the Kulikovo Field or near Borodino. It's unlikely they mused about historical perspectives and the greatness of our peoples... Upon

entering the no man's land, we did not yell “For the Motherland! For Stalin!”, as is written in novels. Hoarse howling and thick swearing could've been heard on the firing line until bullets and frags shut the yelling throats up. Would anyone care about Stalin when death was nearby. From where, then, now, in the sixties, a myth that we won only thanks to Stalin, under Stalin's banner appeared? I have no doubts on that point. Those who won either died on the battlefield, or succumbed to alcoholism, depressed by the postwar hardships. After all, not only war but also the recovery of the country happened at their expense. Those of them who are still alive keep silent, broken. The others stayed in power and saved their strength – those who drove people into camps, those who forced them into pointless bloody attacks at war. They acted in the name of Stalin, they're the ones crying about it. There was no: “For Stalin!”, – at the firing line. Commissars tried to beat that into our heads but there were no commissars during assault. All that is froth...

Of course, not everyone attacked, though majority did. One hid in the hole, pressing himself in the ground. That's where political instructor performed his main role:

poking his Nagant in the mugs, he forced the timid forward... There were deserters. Those were caught and instantly executed in front of the line so that it wouldn't become a habit... Punitive organs worked excellently around here. That is also in keeping with our best traditions. From Maliuta Skuratov to Beria their lines have always had professionals, and there have always been many willing to dedicate themselves to that noble activity, necessary for any state. During peace time this profession is easier and more interesting than agriculture or labor at the machine. Both profits are bigger and the power over others is absolute. And at war it's not necessary to put your head in front of the bullets, you only need to watch for others doing it properly.

Forces attacked, driven by terror. Meeting the Germans, with their machine guns and tanks, fiery meat grinder of air bombing and artillery shelling was terrifying. Inevitable threat of execution caused no less terror. In order to keep an amorphous mass of poorly trained soldiers in subordination, executions were conducted before the battle. Some feeble weaklings or those who blurted out something, or random deserters who have always been in abundance were grabbed.

Division was lined up like a horseshoe and the unfortunate ones were finished without talking. That preventive political work led to fear for NKVD and commissars – a bigger one than fear for the Germans. And during offensive if you turn back, you'll get a bullet from the barrier troops. Fear forced soldiers to go for death. That is what our wise party, commander and organizer of our victories were counting on. Executions happened, of course, after unsuccessful battle too. It happened that barrier troops mowed down regiments retreating without orders with machine guns too. That's where fighting capability of our valorous troops stemmed from.

Many surrendered but, as it is known, Germans didn't feed them with sweet pastries... There were self-shooters who wounded themselves in order to avoid battle and possible death. Shooting was done through the loaf of bread so the smoke from nearby shot did not expose the self-inflicted harm. People shot through corpses in order to confuse the doctors. They shot each other in the arms and legs, by previous agreements. Particularly many Kazakhs, Uzbeks and other Asians were among the self-shooters. They didn't want to fight at

all. Majority of people who inflicted self-harm were exposed and executed. Once in Pogostye forest I met a whole squad – twenty-five people with bloody bandages over hands. They were led somewhere by a convoy from SMERSH, rifles at the ready. The other time, after delivering another wounded to the medical unit, I noticed a man with the arm torn off in the operating room. Sentry was on duty nearby. Orderlies told me the following story. One Shebes, food storage clerk, was moved to scouting. There he found out that people shoot and you can die on the firing line. Thus Shebes got inside a log pillbox, stuck out a fist with the grenade fuse from the loophole, and exploded it. Soldiers, knowing nothing, sent Shebes to the medical unit, as wounded. He would have gone to the rear area, back home, if not for the senior lieutenant Tolstoy – our counterintelligence officer. He was a born master of his trade, a high-class professional. The sight of him alone caused awe. He had giant cold eyes, long, wriggling fingers... Tolstoy went to the firing line, found the log pillbox, found the torn off fingers, torn glove and made it to Shebes in the medical unit in time. Upon seeing him, Shebes writhed in hysteria and confessed to everything. Later he got executed.

In order not to go to battle, dodgers strove to get appointed to warm places: at the kitchen, as rear area clerks, storekeepers, officer's batmen etc etc. Many succeeded in that. Yet when companies were down to single digits, rear areas were swept with an iron comb, tearing off the ones who latched onto them and directing them to battle. The most nosy ones stayed at their places. There natural selection was going on too. Honest head of the food warehouse, for example, would always be sent to the firing line, with the thief remaining. After all, an honest one will give everything to the soldiers fully, without hiding anything either for himself or for command. But command loves to fress something fatter. Thief, however, will always appease the higher-up without forgetting about himself. How can one lose such a valuable cadre? Who is to be sent on the firing line? Of course the honest one! A mutual responsibility of sorts was evolving – everyone supported their own, and if some kind of moron tried to achieve justice, he had been sunk by all of them. In other words, something that is veiled and less noticeable in peace time, happened evidently and openly there. This is what Russian land stood, stands and will stand on.



War is the biggest disgrace that humankind has ever invented. Not only recognition of death's inevitability suppresses you at war. Small injustice, meanness of the neighbor, orgy of vice and reign of brute force suppress too... Swollen from hunger, you're slurping on an empty gruel – water with water, and nearby officer is fressing butter. He's entitled to a special ration plus quartermaster steals food from the soldiers' cauldron for him too. You build a warm dugout for the command in thirty-degree frost first and freeze on the snow yourself. You're obligated to get in front of the bullets first and so on and so forth. But all that is something you get used to quickly, that seems horrible only after civilian pampering. And special ration for command is also a historical necessity. One has to support officer's corps – the backbone of the army. Everything revolves around it at war. Mostly soldiers are ones leaving during the battle, and the new unit is organized around the officer core... Nice Keshka Potapov from Yakutsk told me that during the war Master sent a huge plan of grain deliveries to Yakutia. Local head who explained the impossibility of its fulfillment was removed from office and arrested as an “enemy of the people”. The

other one came from the center and achieved requisition of all supplies of grain without remainder. Mass famine started in winter and almost a third of the people died, others survived somehow. Yet the plan was fulfilled, army was supplied with bread. And people? New people were born, and now there's more of them than before. Wise Master knew what he was doing while implementing a historical necessity... Therefore keep your trap shut – you got half a portion of meat and sugar stolen from you, big deal!

When it comes to clothes, although on the frontline they were simple, rough, but they were warm and comfortable. No need to be offended by that. Prudent Germans didn't have anything like that and had always been seriously cold.

Both German and our weapons were decent, albeit Germans were better trained and did not run in front of the bullets for no purpose. I remember how exercises of our infantry regiment that got reorganized yet again took place: we ran around the forests shouting “Hurray!” and did not shoot the targets a single time – we conserved rounds. Germans had it the opposite way: every soldier was an excellent shot. He knew how to dig up quickly and

assess the situation.

Once I decided to test the vaunted German machine gun MG (mashin geвер) that shot, as they said, eight hundred bullets per minute. I took it from the hands of dead German and hanged it over my neck – it was twelve kilograms of iron. Plus there were more than three kilograms of rounds, spare barrels etc, and also grenades, food and a host of other things... We've been walking around forty kilometers and with every step that damn “mashin geвер” became heavier and heavier. I was completely exhausted and only took solace from the fact that our “maxim” is even heavier, more than twenty-five kilograms.

When a line of attacking Germans showed up ahead, I was even glad, I jumped into the hole, took aim, pulled the trigger...

–Donner Veter! Tauzen Tojfel! Drek mit pfeffer!  
Dejche mutter!

Damned scum! This “mashin geвер” wouldn't work at all! In a fit of rage I threw it in the puddle, took dead neighbor's SMG and started to fire at the attackers... That attack we fended off...

It's hard to go with usual measurements to the

events that happened then. If in peace time you're hit by a car or get beaten by a hoodlum, or you come down with a serious illness – that will be remembered for the whole life! And how many talks about that occasion will there be! At war, however, monstrous events became everyday life. What was crossing the railway tracks near Pogostie in January of 1942 worth, for instance! That area was exposed to fire and was called “death valley”. (There were many, those valleys, in other places too.) We're crawling there as ten people, and back – as two, and good if not wounded. We're running on corpses, hiding over corpses – as if that is how it's supposed to be. And tomorrow you're sent off there again... And when nearby person is torn to pieces, showering you with his blood, hanging his intestines and brain onto you – in peace conditions that's enough to go mad.

Every day, every night something new happens. Either German sniper pinned me in the crater and didn't allow me to move until night, shooting after my every single move. I spent three hours on severe frost – and nails came off from frostbitten fingers. Although, they grew back later – crooked, like demon's... Or German threw a grenade into my cover, but, thank God, I've

already developed a clear response, and I managed to throw it over the parapet in time, lightning fast, where it instantly exploded... Or during lunch German shell pierced the ceiling in our dugout but did not explode and just hissed on the floor. “Well, guys, carry it out and let's have lunch”, – lieutenant said. Nobody filled their pants from those trifles at that time already. You get used to everything. Once a heavy mortar shell hit our dugout, sweeping away the log layer but luckily no piercing it. I didn't even wake up from the horrible rumble, trembling of the soil and ground falling from above. Everything was narrated to me by the signaller Polukarov who spent the nights standing on all fours, “in the pose of anti-aircraft cannon”, since stomach ulcer attacks didn't let him fall asleep.

Well-known is the story when during the shelling soldier felt unexplainable anguish and need to visit the neighbors. Upon doing this, he found the neighboring dugout destroyed and all the people buried under the rubble. As he was going back, his own cover had suffered the same fate. That also happened to me, although not near Pogostye but later, in 1944 at station Stremutka near Pskov... And how about when a tank is rolling right

at you while firing the cannon? And how about when you're attacked, when you have to shoot down a person, and make it in time before he kills you? But all that is written about so much, survivors have told that so many times that it's sickening to repeat. It's just amazing that a person could endure so much! But still war left its stamp on almost every single survivor.

Ones started to drink in order to get dumb and forget themselves. That's how, having drunk too much, starshina Zatanaychenko went at Germans while at full height: "Uh, creeps!"... We buried him near lieutenant Pakhomov – a quiet and kind person who died after drinking two pots of vodka due to anguish. On his grave we wrote: "Died from the hands of German-fascist invaders", the same we messaged home. And that was the true, real reason for the death of poor lieutenant. Their graves disappeared in 1943 already... Many brutalized and tarnished themselves with inhumane outrageous acts during the end of the war in Germany.

Many at war became convinced that human life was worth nothing and started acting using the principle of "carpe diem" – grab the fat piece no matter what it takes, press the neighbor, use whatever means necessary to tear

off as much as possible from the common pot. In other words, war easily suppressed perennial principles of kindness, morality, justice. For me Pogostye was the breaking point in my life. There I was killed and crushed. Yet there happened my rebirth in a new way. I lived as if I had been delirious, poorly thinking, poorly aware of what was happening. My mind was as if it had faded out and had barely functioned in my hungry, tormented body. Spiritual life woke up only rarely. When I had a free hour, I closed my eyes in the dark dugout and remembered home, sunny summer, flowers, Hermitage, familiar books, familiar melodies, and it was like a small, barely glowing glimmer of hope among the grim icy world, among the violence, hunger and death. I forgot myself, not knowing where verity, where delusion, where daydreaming and where reality were. Everything was mixing up. Perhaps, that transformation, that cross from the life into dreams saved me. In Pogostye “internal emigration” was like my second nature. Then, when I had grown strong and got accustomed to things, this gift didn't disappear completely and helped me a lot. Perhaps, during the war that fact was seditious, it's not a surprise that once I was stopped by a watchful political

instructor in the trench: “Your mother, why are you walking here without weapons, with a flower in your hand, like Yevgeny Onegin! March to the cannon, your mother!”...

It is after Pogostye I got an abnormal need to wash my hands ten times a day, change underwear more often. After Pogostye I gained an instinctive ability to keep away from meanness, filth, shady business, bad people, and, above all, from active participation in life, from command posts, from necessity to make life decisions – for myself and especially for others. Strange, but I felt the price of kindness, justice, high morals, that I didn't even think about before exactly after Pogostye. Pogostye, while crushing and defiling the strong, in some way strengthened me – a weak, pathetic, defenseless person. Ever since I have always lived in hopes of something better that is to come. Ever since I've never been able to “seize the day” and I've never entered a common quarrel over a piece of the pie. I drifted with the waves – though fate was favorable to me...

Attacks in Pogostye continued in due course. Neighboring forest looked like an old comb: acute splinters of tree trunks broken by shells were stuck



unevenly. Fresh snow got black from explosions over the course of the day. Yet we were still attacking, with the same degree of success. Rear area dwellers dressed up into new white short fur coats taken off Siberians from reinforcements who had died before even reaching the firing line, from shelling. Salvage parties of old men tirelessly crawled around the battlefields at night, picking up weapons that were more or less cleaned, fixed and given to the newly arrived. Everything went on like conveyor belt.

Dead started to be collected later, when the snow thawed, they were dragged into holes and craters, and sprinkled with ground. Those were not burials, that was “clearing the area from corpses”. Dead Germans were ordered to be collected into stacks and burnt.

I've seen something else there too: there were frozen bodies of dead Red Army soldiers which Germans stuck into piles of snow feet up on the crossroads as roadsigns.

For the whole January and February divisions hovered around railway in the region of Pogostye – Shala. At least three divisions pretended for having taken Pogostye and crossing the tracks. That was indeed like

that, but all of them got kicked back, and then they charged there again. Though, they only had the numbers and commanders intact, soldiers were different, new, from reinforcements, and they were attacking over the bodies of their predecessors.

Army headquarters was situated fifteen kilometers to the rear area. They lived a nice life there... They disabused Komsomol girls who had voluntarily entered the front “to fight the fascist fiends”, drank cognac, ate well... In Red Army soldiers had one ration, officers, however, got butter, canned food, hardtacks additionally. Generals in the army headquarters received delicacies: wines, cured fillet, salami etc. Germans from soldier to general had the same, and very good, menu. Every division had a sausage company that cooked different meat products. Food and wines were sent from all parts of Europe. However, when the situation on the front was poor (for instance, near Pogostye), both us and Germans fressed dead horses.

General Fedyuninsky commanded the army from the headquarters via the map, giving divisions approximate routes of offensive. Communications were often broken, reconnaissance worked poorly. Regiments

lost orientation in dense forests, not coming where it was needed. Rifles and SMGs often couldn't fire due to frost, artillery hit empty spots, and sometimes allies. There weren't enough shells...

Germans knew everything about our troop movements, their composition and numbers. They had excellent air reconnaissance, radio interception and many other things.

Yet all in all Pogostye was taken. First the station, then the village, at least the places where all that used to be once. A division of folks from Vyatka, short, bandy legged, sinewy, people with pronounced cheekbones, came. “Eh, your mother! Sink or swim!” – they climbed onto German log pillboxes, smoked Fritzes out, exploded everything and moved around five hundred meters forward. That is exactly what was needed. A rifle corps was thrown into the breach over their bodies and things got rolling and rolling. In the end of February our division was sent into the breach – it was six large, clumsy cannons driven by tractors. People were afraid to send out more since in case of encirclement it was impossible to get that heavy machinery out.

Railway embankment was still being fired at –

although not with machine guns but from afar, with artillery. Crossing had to be overcome in a rush, while running. And still only then we fully estimated the harvest death had collected here. Before that everything had been imagined from “frog's perspective” – you don't get your nose up from the ground while crawling past and you can see only the nearest goner. Now, standing on two legs as the king of nature was supposed to, we were horrified by the act of villainy committed on this patch of marshy land! I have seen many dead before and later, but the sight of Pogostye in winter of 1942 was one of a kind! It had to be photographed for history, with its panoramic photos put in the offices of all the great people in this world – as edification. But, of course, nobody did that. Everything was shamefully concealed, as if nothing had happened at all.

Not only the crossing was chock full of corpses, they lied around everywhere. There were both piles of bodies and single soul-crushing scenes. A Marine, a sailor was struck down in the moment of throwing a grenade and froze like a monument, towering over the snowy battlefield with his arm raised. Copper buttons on his black reefing jacket were shining in the rays of the sun.

Infantryman who had already been wounded started to bandage his leg and froze forever, struck down by a new bullet. Bandage in his arms had been jittering in the wind for the whole winter.

We found the bodies of two scouting groups in the woods. Obviously, Germans and friendlies suddenly faced each other during search and grappled hand-to-hand. Some bodies were still lying like that, interlocking with each other. One held the other at the throat while the adversary stabbed his back with a dagger. Other pair was interlocked by their arms and legs. Our soldier clutched the German's finger in stranglehold using his teeth, and froze like that forever. Some were torn apart by grenades or shot point blank with pistols.

Stacks of bodies near the railroad looked like snowy hills so far, and only the bodies lying above could be seen. Later, in spring, when the snow thawed, everything that had been lower got exposed. Near the ground itself lied dead in summer gear – service shirts and boots. Those were the victims of autumn battles of 1941. Above them marines in reefing jackets and wide black pants (“flare legs”) piled up in lines. Higher were Siberians in short fur coats and felt boots who attacked in January-February of

Forty-Two. Even higher were politfighters in quilted cotton wool jackets and rag hats (those hats were issued in besieged Leningrad). Above them were bodies in overcoats, white camouflage cloaks, with helmets and without them. There corpses of soldiers from many divisions attacking the tracks in the first months of 1942 were intermixed. It was a terrifying diagram of our “successes”! Yet all that got exposed only in spring, and right then there was no time to look over the battlefield. We were hurrying forward. Still, those fleeting, horrifying pictures became imprinted in the consciousness forever, and even more so in subconsciousness: I got a hold of constantly repeating dream here – I saw mountains of corpses over the railway embankment.

Having passed several destroyed KV tanks, the road went downwards into a frozen swamp and stretched among the snowy bumps and bushes for a long way. Then forests started. It was a real dense taiga! I didn't even know that something like that could be near Leningrad. There were royal-looking fir-trees of giant height. There were aspens which trunk could only be embraced by two men. What indescribable beauty! Tractor dragged the kitchen under one of the fir-trees. As soon as cook had

become ready to dispense hot gruel, snow fell from above and a giant German in green overcoat and garrison cap stretched down to ears fell off the branches heavily. Our brave warrior host with the cook ahead turned tail. However, German was completely frostbitten, he couldn't move his arms and just wanted to surrender. He was put on a tree two days before with an order to shoot ivans. Yet the front moved away. Since friendlies had not come back, hans decided to go surrender.

Cook Seregin astounded me the night before. I was walking along the road as a sentry and suddenly heard dull strikes: cook carefully cut the rubber boot on the leg of a frozen goner with an axe while breathing heavily, second boot had already been cut off. "Damp wood doesn't burn but rubber is very good for heating the cauldron", – Seregin explained me. That was soldier's wit in action.

Then we drove and walked further. We stopped only to shoot for a while and to spend the night. We slept at the bonfire or just on the snow. Bonfire warms the part of body turned to it. It is spitting charcoal, burning through hats, overcoats, scorching faces, and at the same time your back is becoming icy from frost. Yet a bonfire is still

better than nothing. After spending the night we're going further. Sparse shelling is going on all the time. Nearby infantrymen are dragging along, loaded up like camels. Skiers in white camouflage cloaks are sliding quickly by the roadside, on the virgin soil. Tanks are rolling and pushing away everyone, spreading snowy dust and gasoline stench. Only few dead can be seen, in single digits. Only one clearing has thirty-forty men lying, obviously victims of an air raid. One of them, senior sergeant, has a giant hole in his chest and a mangled order is burning on the edge of it, on the tatters of service shirt.

Wounded are plodding. Some weird soldier is lying near the roadside – he's feverishly delirious and his face is vermilion red. What happened to him? Maybe he's ill? Fever? Everyone is walking past, nobody has time. We're going past the burned villages. Here's Zenino: there are chimneys, piles of ashes and there are burned horses in them. In two months those fried decayed carcasses would have been eaten with no remains left by brave warriors – Kazakhs who came to reinforce our thinned out regiments. We're going up close to Konduya, Smerdynya. Gossip that scouts have already reached Lyuban and



joined with the units moving towards us is spreading. But the action is brought to a standstill. Front is stabilizing. Several units, particularly ski battalions, that had moved too far ahead, die. In addition, in the end of March thaw starts, snow is melting, goners are reappearing from under it. There are lines of them, on the places of winter attacks and single ones, in the piles of snow near the roads. Those were wounded who had died on the way to the hospital. A substantial amount of them got accumulated during winter: they had bandaged heads, arms or legs in plywood splints that fixed the shattered bones...

Natural disaster is going on: roads have turned muddy, marshes became impassable, neither food nor weapons are impossible to supply. Even tractors get stuck. Chains of soldiers are slopping over the mud, getting stuck knee-deep, and sometimes even waist-deep, while carrying either two shells, or a sack with dried bread, or a crate with rounds. The other way wounded are being dragged through the slush, they're covered by scabies from blood and mud. There's nothing to fress. There's no bread. Gruel is given out unsalted. And have

you ever tasted that? Army is on the verge of paralysis. Having recollected itself, command is taking urgent measures for restoring the road. Thousands of soldiers with axes and saws are bringing the forest down, building causeways. They stick to the road like ants. In about two weeks the road is ready. It's a transversal flooring from thin logs put onto the thick base stones. Driving along this road shakes the soul out of you. Wounded, not being able to bear vibration, are dying, their bleeding resumes at best. But still, the road – a main artery of the war – exists and front is revitalizing. It's being shelled by the enemy. “Bast-shoes” (that's how German dive bombers Ju-87 were called because of landing gear that couldn't be retracted) are diving onto the crossroads five-six times a day, in single file, with horrible howl, turning on the special sirens. Bombs are throwing logs, mud, cars, people around, but in half an hour movement resumes.

Dugouts are sunk in water. Instead of them we're making flooring with the branches surrounded by two wicker fences and filled with ground. Logs and ground, again, are above it. It's not as reliable but it still covers from frags, and it's possible to sleep in warmth. We're wet, covered in mud. Felt boots got changed to boots with

puttees – it's a moronic contraption that is always unraveling and dangling on the legs. Yet not everyone got their clothes changed. Once while crossing a forest river via a log, I met a soldier in short fur coat and felt boots who plodded knee-deep in water.

“Why are you like that, friend?” – I asked. “We're from ski battalion”, – he answered.

One time I went to sleep under the bush on a dry place and put a shovel under myself to be on the safe side – as a purely symbolic protection from dampness. I woke up in the water, and the quilted cotton wool jacket I was wearing had soaked through completely. Later on clothes dried up right on my body – and there was no common cold! There were no accustomed diseases in that horrible time. Of course someone was ill with something. Sergeant Sarychev, pale up to looking blue and thin as a skeleton, suffered with stomach ulcer. Leshka Yudin, a brave scout, suffered from worms. Cook Seregin boasted an old clap. But all those were small stuff in life.

Offensive came to a standstill, it was attempted to be continued by sending new regiments forward. By then there was no talk about lifting the siege of Leningrad. By then we had to help the 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army that had got

encircled near Lyuban. Reinforcements from Tataria, from Kazakhstan, from Leningrad were coming. Yet Germans defended skillfully, and the front was not moving. When summer came, we switched to defense. Shooting became more sparse, roads became empty. Troops were digging in.

Endless work started. We had dug kilometers of trenches, built hundreds of covers, dug in cannons, trucks, kitchens, warehouses. We were digging stationary crap-houses since soldiers had soiled all the forests near the road before. I became an enthusiastic digger, I learned how to cut a log cabin, how to trim every necessary part with an axe, how to hammer out an oven, chimney out of tin etc. I even had to jury-rig a coffin once. Usually soldiers were buried while covered with an overcoat, or a piece of tarpaulin, or just like that. But then senior lieutenant Silkin got killed. Command decided that he was entitled to a coffin, and there was plenty of time for preparation for the burial. So we built a coffin. There were no boards, we had to cut down a huge aspen and split it into thick boards using wedges. Coffin turned out to be monstrously heavy, crooked, convexely-lopsided and looking like a large chest. It was carried by

twenty men.

Meanwhile the nature everywhere was reviving. Soil was drying, first grass appeared, buds became swollen. I, a city dweller, felt a connection with land-mother for the first time, breathed in scents unknown to me. I was recovering from dystrophy, muscles were growing due to excessive work, body was strengthening and growing – I was nineteen. If not for the war, that spring in the woods would have been one of the most beautiful ones in my life. Birds were singing, buds were blossoming. One morning our starshina crawled out of the dugout, let out a long, thick stream, breathed in deeply, looked all around and summarized: “Yes. Spring. Ssplinter is climbin' the ssplinter!”

Troops were having a rest in defense. There were almost no killed and wounded. Studies started, even movies were started to be shown with large dugouts used for that purpose. Once one of the lectures was dedicated to learning the pistol. One of lieutenants accidentally shot the other one in the gut while taking it apart. Bullet got stuck in the intestines. We momentarily loaded the wounded onto the truck and drove him to hospital, holding the stretcher in hands in order not to shake it too

much. Yet an hour of driving over log flooring shook the rest of life out of poor lieutenant's body. There was writing on his grave, as usual: "Died from the hand of fascist invaders". His name was Oleinik.

Steam baths got built everywhere and we finally got rid of the lice. We didn't get rid of every single one, of course, but only of those myriads overcoming us during winter. Then two-three lice per fellow were left, and it was bearable. Every morning they were being caught collectively with people lining up on the glade. Headquarter documents called that "Checking for Group o". Everything was classified from the enemy, everything was a military secret.

Nights became shorter, and in twilight one could come across strange processions on the roads that reminded of a well-known painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. One soldier slowly led a chain of others behind him. He probed the way with a large stick, and the others went in single file, firmly holding onto each other. They couldn't see anything. Those were victims of so called night-blindness — an acute vitamin deficiency that deprives a person from vision in the darkness. I also went through this but illness didn't move past the beginning

stage. I only had my vision cone narrowed, so I only saw two small areas right in front of me. Darkness surrounded everything around them. Night-blindness could be cured by vitaminized butter. But it was stolen, normal butter was stolen too. Illness held fast among the soldiers.

Actually military ration was very good: daily person was entitled to nine hundred grams of bread in winter and eight hundred in summer, one hundred and eighty grams of groats, meat, thirty-five grams of sugar, hundred grams of vodka during fighting. If those products reached the soldier, without intermediaries, soldier quickly became smooth, glad, appeased. But as usual – we have a lot of good initiatives, ideas, conceptions that become their opposites in practice. Food had not always been available. Moreover, it was stolen without shame or conscience by whoever was able to. Soldier, however, had to keep quiet and endure. Such is his fate. But still night-blindness – that's not Leningrad dystrophy. People didn't kick the bucket from it.

Summer entered force, it became sunny, green, full of berries. Nature caressed hapless soldiers. Front became completely petrified, and we were sent back to

Pogostye where Germans had several attempts to cut out the wedge that was pressing into their dispositions. We couldn't recognize the familiar places in summer. Dugouts were sunk in water, grave hillocks melted and were leveled, as if they had never existed. Having settled in again, we started to live relatively calmly.

August offensive of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army, so-called Sinyavino Operation, happened without us. We'd only heard the distant humming and rumbling and had seen armadas of German planes that were flying above us heavily in order to get into the rear of our comrades, those were dying in encirclement that long-suffering 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock got into again. Later rumors about defeat near Sinyavino reached us.

In one of the sunny August days we were lined up and we were announced the famous Order #227 that was caused by a critical situation on the fronts, in particular by retreat near Stalingrad, in ominous silence. Order that had been signed by Master himself, was as always laconic, dry, exact and it stroke bullseye. The gist of it was approximately like that: Not one step back! There's nowhere else to retreat! We'll learn from the enemy and organize barrier troops that must execute retreating



ones; commanders and commissars gain the right to kill cowards and alarmists without court... That is how future victory was being forged! My skin started to crawl. Yet again we felt that we were participating in no laughing matter.

Then winter started, it was cold again. Then it was easier to endure, there was experience but there were enough torments either way. In the end of 1942 we were uprooted and relocated to new positions, about fifty kilometers North, near the station of Apraksin Post. Our location was on the bank of Naziya river. Our cannons had to strike at the villages of Sinyavino, Gaitolovo, Tortolovo, Voronovo, at Kruglaya Roshcha and other places famous on Volkhov Front. All them are as memorable to me as Pogostye. Here my happy youth was going on. Trees along the banks of river Naziya were maimed, ground was full of craters. Many frags that were blown off by the sharp winds of Ladoga could be seen through the thin layer of snow. There were dozens of graves near the road. These were the tracks of August operation that had started and finished exactly there. A forest cut-through with high-voltage power poles went deep into German positions. The offensive itself had gone

through the cut-through. By then we had to repeat it, but a little bit to the North, and lift the siege of Leningrad. Yet so far preparations and scouting were going on.

It's very uncomfortable to sit on the wind at the height of thirty meters above ground on top of the metal high-voltage pole. Wind strikes into the marrow, pole is vibrating, height is frightening – there's vertigo. Plus German is shooting a little too. He knows what we have climbed onto, the creep. We're fencing ourselves from the wind with plywood or tarpaulin and sit, watch, pinpoint German batteries. Troops are amassing everywhere. A ski battalion that had performed a several kilometer march from the railway station is among them. Steamed people were placed on a bare hill, on the fierce wind, to spend the night. And the cold is almost twenty-five degrees! In order to warm themselves, skiers made small bonfires out of their skis and poles.

I met New Year of 1943 on duty while standing as a sentry on the frost near dugouts. I was happy. I had just received a parcel from Stalinabad where my family, having miraculously survived, turned out to be. Among other tasty things there was an apple frozen as stone in the parcel. It sent off unimaginable, fairy aroma that I

reveled in without thinking of Germans much. In twelve hours everything around started rumbling and oompfing. That was the usual New Year's celebration – with shooting into the world, flare launching and drunk screams.

Then there were extremely fierce battles while lifting the siege, grove Kruglaya drowned in blood, Gaitolovo, where regiments and brigades died. After the siege had been lifted I was sent to the region of the new railroad to Leningrad construction for some reason. I have seen how it was made at night, from the truck. Thousands of people were dragging rails, ties, they were digging the ground, ramming in iron spikes. Frosty steam was curling over them, their ear-flaps hats tied on the chin made the heads shapeless, hid the faces. It seemed as though not animate beings had been working, but rather some kind of insects. They worked jerkily, hurriedly, like termites reconstructing their destroyed dwelling.

In February we're in Pogostye Cul-de-sac again. We're participating in an attempt to break to Smerdynya – Shapki to join up with Leningrad troops who took Krasny Bor. There are attacks again, death of divisions,

movement for 200-300-500 meters and then it stops. We ran out of people. I also ended up in hospital in one of the battles of 1943, but that is another story.

It seems like that is the point where the tale of battle near Pogostye can be finished. But suddenly it got an extension in the nineties. Former soldier of the German Army Hendrik Wiers who had been tormented by memories of war just like me came to us with the intention of visiting the battlefields. He stopped in Kirishi, at German language teacher's who had translated my small newspaper article about Pogostye for him. Later he got my phone number and called me from Germany. Turns out, he fought in Pogostye just opposite me, we were divided by less than fifty meters of space, we could've killed each other but thankfully survived. When Wiers came to Russia again, our meeting happened. We had talked for about three days, and it was my first quite friendly contact with the former adversary. Wiers turned out to be a normal man who understood everything. Being Belgian by the nationhood, he ended up in German army, experienced all the horrors of war near Leningrad, and more, upon returning home from vacation by sea, he was attacked by our submarine. Ship had sunk yet Wiers

survived just barely. At the same time his own house and house of his wife in the city of Emden were destroyed by English air force. After German army's capitulation Wiers had spent four years as a prisoner in USSR.

We quickly understood each other, both victims of that damned war, and he narrated me the following story about his participation in battle near Pogostye.

“I was a soldier of the 1<sup>st</sup> Company, 333<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, 225<sup>th</sup> Division of Wehrmacht which was located in France in the beginning of the war with Russia. In December of 1941 the division got quickly relocated to near Leningrad since situation of the German army there became critical. We moved from Vignacourt in France where temperature was +16°, through Danzig, Libau, Riga to Narva – by sea, by railway, then on feet to Konduya and then to the railroad near Pogostye; and we took position 400 meters from station to the side of crossing loop Zharok. We had been on the railway embankment since 16<sup>th</sup> of January, 1942. We did not have winter clothing, only light overcoats, and with temperature –40, even –50° there was little warmth in the wooden bunkers with the iron oven. How we endured all that is a mystery to this day. Losses from frostbites were high. At the same time we

had to stand on duty for two hours, and there was only an hour for warming up. Days were short and nights were long, snowfalls were constant. When dawn had barely broken, Red Army soldiers attacked in droves. They repeated attacks for up to eight times per day. First wave was armed, second was often unarmed but barely anyone reached the embankment. Main attacks were on 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of January. On 27<sup>th</sup> Red Army soldiers attacked our position for fourteen times but didn't reach it. In the end of the day many of us were killed, many were wounded, and ammunition was depleted. We heard desperate pleas of wounded Red Army soldiers in darkness who called for orderlies. Screams had continued until morning until they died. That night workers of battalion headquarters came to our embankment and brought a machine gun with ammunition on the sledge. Even battalion commander wasn't ashamed to help us and he moved from post to post in order to support our fortitude.

On that day, 27<sup>th</sup> of January, many of my friends fell or were wounded. Loss lists were getting bigger with every day. To the 10<sup>th</sup> of February we had lost six company commanders and many other commanders. I remember another episode. After Russian engineers blew

up the embankment on my birthday, 29<sup>th</sup> of January, an unfamiliar officer visited us, gathered several soldiers, myself among them, and ordered us to assault that hole. There were two Russian machine guns on the other side of it. We had to fall into the hole. Officer told us about the necessity to fulfill an order, about the court martial... But as soon as he rose his arm and climbed onto the edge of the hole himself, he was instantly wounded. Orderlies sent him to the rear area and we were relieved from that attack.

As Russian army overcame the railway embankment and moved from Pogostye in the direction of Serdtse clearing, we had to move from the street of Pogostye village into the forest where a new line of defense in a way of support points had been constructed. We took very heavy losses there. Our first support point was on the distance of hundred meters from the street of Pogostye. There I was wounded in the head on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February and was sent to infirmary in Tosno. There it turned out that my wound had been light... In fourteen days I was on the front again, in the region of Shala. Every night we dragged our dead from Pogostye on sledges. Engineers blew the ground up and buried the

killed in the appearing holes in the region of Shala.

Meanwhile railway had already been in enemy's hands, same as the forest both sides of Serdtse clearing. We had built a new position there between the road and embankment, from which we fended off attacks of Russian tanks and Siberian squads that were very well equipped for winter conditions. Since there we had almost no anti-tank weapons, we were forced to retreat with battles in the direction of Konduya village. By that time there was almost nobody left from our company. Being isolated from the battalion, we had to struggle for survival. Ammunition and provisions were running out. We had to look for food in the backpacks of fallen Red Army soldiers. We found frozen bread and a little bit of fish there.

Situation was exceptionally poor for us. Although, we had an 88-millimeter cannon with shells, and that held back Russian tanks to a certain degree. We lost the concept of time: due to horrible frost watches stopped working. Finally, to our joy, a German plane found us and then help came at night – it was a tank. That tank breached a free way and liberated us, 30 people, from encirclement. In the beginning of March we retreated to



Serditse clearing and positioned ourselves in the small forest on the road from Pogostye. Russian tank appeared. It had been firing its cannon and machine guns and chasing single soldiers, yet we were watching that game lying motionless on the ground until tank ran out of ammunition, and it turned and moved to the direction of Pogostye.

I remember how once in a small forest on the road to Pogostye we came across so many dead Russians that we had to move around them, turning them aside, well. Later, on the road from Serditse clearing, two kilometers from Konduya, we came across a lot of fallen enemy soldiers again. There were headquarters of our regiment on the Serditse clearing. One morning reinforcements came from the side of Konduya – it was a marching battalion. It was shot at from the small forest and it was moved to assault the enemy. Almost everyone who had participated in the assault died... In May of 1942 we were relocated from this area of the front to a more calm one, to Oranienbaum Cul-de-sac, for buttoning up and reinforcements.”

In addition to the Wiers' tale it can also be said that almost all soldiers and officers who came with him from

France were killed, wounded of frostbitten.

*Hendrik Wiers was no more in June of 2006.*

## 311<sup>th</sup> RD

*We've got nothing to expect here except bloodbath...*  
–Marshal Govorov on Nevskaya Dubrovka

Summer of 1943 was hot near Leningrad. Herbage grew in the marshes near Pogostye, thick green of forests hid the soldiers' graves. It was possible to feed oneself a little with berries and mushrooms which one was occasionally able to gather.

311<sup>th</sup> Rifleman Division was buttoning up in the forest near the firing line. After February's attempts to break the German defense in Pogostye Cul-de-sac division had almost nobody left in it. It was reinforced by whomever possible. I ended up in the division too as part of the wounded who had recovered in hospitals. I didn't manage to come back to my artillery regiment and by then I was to drain the cup of an infantryman – that is be killed or wounded in the very first battles to come. I understood that perfectly, and we had been witnessing the 311<sup>th</sup> for two years at our own sight since we constantly supported it with the fire of our cannons. Perhaps other divisions had been the same, yet 311<sup>th</sup>

seemed to be a particularly horrible meat grinder. Thousands of wounded were taken to the rear through our disposition; we were coming across piles of corpses of that division's soldiers when moving forward. I managed to become acquainted with the commander of 311<sup>th</sup> too. Once, during the days of hard winter battles of 1942 near Pogostye, our major was sent to 311<sup>th</sup> to coordinate plans of infantry's artillery support, hear the ideas and suggestions of division commander on the organization of the battle. We found the guarded dugout covered with several layers of logs in the forest cut-through. Shell wouldn't pierce that one! As major went inside, curls of steam broke away from the dugout (it was seriously frosty) and deep-voiced bossy swearing could be heard. I had peeked inside the slit through slightly open frosted shelter-half and saw a drunk steamy general in an unbuttoned service shirt in the light of wick lamp. There was large bottle of vodka on the table, all kinds of food lied there: fatback bacon, sausages, canned food, bread. Nearby towered small packs of honey-cakes, cracknels, jars of honey – those were gifts from Tataria to “valiant and heroic Soviet warriors fighting on the front”, received on the eve. A scantily clad and also drunk broad

sat at the table.

–Go to ... hell and close the door!!! – general yelled at our major.

And meanwhile 311<sup>th</sup> was dying and dying near the railroad of Pogostye station. Who was that general, I do not know. Back then generals were often discharged for the failed battles, but soon they were appointed to a different division, sometimes with promotion. Yet divisions were dying and dying...

But so far it was 1943, it was warm summer, glorious days in the forest, under the sun, were flowing for me, and there was no particular drilling. Although, I had to go through the three-week exercising at sniper courses: I had to shoot at the target, learn the optical sight, study sniper tactics. The lessons of a battle-seasoned instructor who trained us using the dummy left a particularly strong impression: in order to polish the ways of killing a man with a dagger weak spots were marked on the dummy and we stabbed, cut, beat while crawling and jumping around. Instructor was dropping loud flows of swearing onto us, and was telling about his adventures with broads in the city of Vologda in the gaps between.

After becoming a sniper, I, however, was appointed a head of SMG squad since there was a lack of junior commanders. There I got into the heat enough to tear up. Squad ceased to exist as a result of fighting.

Infantry service was alternating with assignments to artillery. We were given a trophy 37-millimeter cannon and I, as a former artilleryman (!?) became a gun-layer there. When that cannon got smashed, a domestic forty-fiver was brought; and I got “fried” with it. Such is the story of my glorious service in 311<sup>th</sup> RD during the Mga Operation of 1943.

We were given a division banner before the battles. All kinds of parades and marching drills had been going on at the clearing for a long time for that purpose. Colonel was looking for two assistants for escorting the banner while moving in front of the line. However, slouching overgrown misters or half-cripples who had just recovered from the wounds comprised the majority in division. Neither those nor these had neither poise nor battle look. The most fitting one unexpectedly turned out to be... me, perhaps due to my numerous medals and Guards badge. The only things that did not satisfy colonel in my exterior were old puttees. They were slate gray,

worn down, they had fringe, all were covered in unwashable mud and blood from the previous battles. “Change!” – the colonel ordered. I went to the supply unit from where I was sent back empty-handed. “Old ones are fine too!” – I was told.

The other day colonel swore at me terribly and told me to change puttees again. I went to the captain, a chief supply officer. A ruddy man wearing a brand new service shirt that was skintight over his plumpness came out of the sturdy dugout. He had, apparently, just had a filling lunch and he was picking his teeth with a match, I was sitting at his legs, just near shiny chrome knee-high boots, and was rerolling the issued puttees. He was looking through me from above while complacently and unhurriedly vaticinating: “Why would you need new puttees in the first place? You'll get killed anyway. It's comfortable in the old ones too. Why are you demanding them?” I humbly responded that I, naturally, didn't care, but there, the colonel told me to...

Ceremonial review went brilliantly. A completely totalled general came – he was the head of army's political department or something like that. He was talking about something in hoarse voice of a seasoned

drunk, orchestra was playing, we were marching while putting out feet up high, loudly stamping over the dusty ground, and we were even filmed by a visiting cameraman. There are frames capturing my figure near the banner in new puttees somewhere in the movie archive. After that it was just fine to go into fighting.

Fighting started on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July. We heard the booming in the morning. Artillery softening-up near Sinyavino had begun like that. Cutting down Siniavino positions of Germans, taking Mga and strengthening the connection between half-besieged Leningrad and the country was the aim of the offensive. Forces were well equipped. There were plenty of tanks, planes, katyushas, automatic weapons. Ammunition was delivered in huge amounts. It happened that Germans were shelled with two-three convoys' worth per day! That was shelling from hell. Ground was trembling, smoke was covering the sky. Yet as soon as infantry had charged into battle, German positions revived and division after division lied down at the foot of Sinyavino hills. We managed to move hundred-two hundred meters ahead after carpeting the area cratered by shells with bodies. Everything was turned over, there was not a single bush, not a single



blade of grass – there were only burned ground, corpses and torn metal. That was called “local engagement” in the reports, and it's characterized as “operation for exhausting the enemy and distraction of the forces from Leningrad” in the works on the history of this war. It was indeed like that but we took neither Sinyavino nor Mga having laid down several corps at the nearby marshes. Although we had got used to everything in Pogostye, there it turned out to be even more horrifying since the scale of battles and the density of fire were unprecedented. Reinforcement soldiers from near Stalingrad claimed that it had been easier there. Yet those battles are but a forgotten episode in the history of the siege of Leningrad.

Other soldiers started doing that on 22<sup>nd</sup> of July near Sinyavino. Our division stayed near Pogostye so far and only one battalion from its composition undertook a sally. In the morning its soldiers crossed Dubok creek and suddenly attacked German ground fence in the marsh<sup>5</sup>. They blew up a part of the fence, infiltrated the

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5 Since it was in the swamp, Germans set up wooden fences between which ground was laid. The result of that was a wall of one and a half – two meters height and just as thick. They fired through the loopholes and moat which the ground was taken from served as an additional obstacle for the attackers.

depth of German defense line, killed off several enemy soldiers, cut down an officer who had managed to shoot down several of ours with the pistol with the infantry spade. Assaulters were stopped by fire and lied prone after moving about a hundred and a half meters. In about three hours battalion was cut off by flanking attacks. In the evening it was all over. Only groans of the wounded could be hear from over the creek. Meanwhile the whole division in Germans' plain sight was moving to the firing line, showing intentions to resume the attack the following day to the enemy. I remember it was twilight, it was sinister dusk, and we're running through the marsh over hollowly thumping flooring made of round logs. Mortar shells are exploding everywhere, frags and bullets are shrieking, smoke is curling... That is how we sought to disorient the enemy as for the site of the offensive in our area: we demonstrated, or how the executive officer rephrased it with soldier's sting, – “menstruated”. He meant heavy losses suffered by us.

Then division was resting in the forest again. We had spent a delightful week on the fir-tree branches under cover from shelter-halves. We had slept the whole week, day and night, waking up only for the meals and

from the explosion of a bomb falling nearby.

A month later, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, which had already been at the finishing stage of unsuccessful Sinyavino Operation, regiments conducted a night march North and entered battle near the station of Apraksin Post near the villages of Tortolovo and Gaitolovo<sup>6</sup>. Initial trench started under the railway bridge over the river Naziya. It remains intact to this day between the stations Apraksin and Naziya. (Crossing loop 63<sup>rd</sup> Kilometer) For a long time there was a cemetery where several hundreds of killed were buried – those who could be dragged out of the firing line – on the embankment near the rails, near the bridge. With time graves became overgrown, poles showing the names disappeared, and now nobody knows about this mass grave... Division then moved two hundred meters ahead and, a week later, bloodless, was taken out of the battle. Operation was over. I ended up in hospital again.

I can't forget the dawn before the battle. It was around five in the morning. We were moving to the firing line through an open space. Dawn was barely

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<sup>6</sup> I have recently learned that our command, expecting a victory, called those battles “Brusilov Operation”. Operation was unsuccessful and that name had been forgotten.

glimmering, front was waking up. Cannons started firing, far horizon lighted up with explosions, smoke curled. Katyushas' missiles traced fiery zigzags. German "cow" had loud hiccups. There was noise, rumble, screeching, howling, banging, oompfing – it was a hellish concert. And infantry is plodding to the firing line along the road in the gray darkness of the dawn. They're going line after line, regiment after regiment. They're faceless figures loaded up with weapons, covered by humped shelter-halves. They went forward, to their demise, slowly but inevitably. It's a generation that is leaving into eternity. That image had so much generalizing sense, so much apocalyptic horror, that we keenly felt the fragility of existence, the merciless foot of history. We felt that we were pathetic moths that were destined to burn down without a trace in the infernal fire of war.

I have a fragment of the note about one of the following battles preserved, made then, in 1943, in hospital, under direct impression of the events. Here it is.

### **15<sup>th</sup> of August**

"...zing a term "fighter" is – it's something like "jumper" or "wolfhound" or "draft horse" – a breed of an animal". We're nearing the firing line. Division was

spread over the trenches. There's confusion as always. Either we're running or we're waiting for something. It's relatively quiet. Shell banged on the road only once. We hid in the crater. Uzbek got the SMG stock split. Hole is larger than a coin. "If only it had been in the leg, I'd have come back to wife!" - he murmurs. There's a helmet on the bottom of the crater. I kicked it - it's a heavy one: it has half the skull in it, perhaps, from the last year. We're moving further. Trenches converge under the small railway bridge. There's one way from there - into hellfire. It's tight in the trench. Wounded are crawling towards us, they're bloody and dirty, with yellowish-gray faces, parched lips and feverishly sparkling eyes. There's groaning, moaning, swearing. Trench is narrow and in order to disperse one has to drag oncoming stretchers between the legs of the people who are moving forward... How long do we have left to live? They say, we'll come into battle instantly, the previous division was enough for two hours... "She's hitting! She's hitting, the damned wretch!" - wounded are answering the inquiries... Cannon mustn't be dragged

by horses from the bridge: it's dangerous, they can get killed. We come out of the trench and harness ourselves. Ground is bumpy - there's crater upon crater. It's hard... Hearing is strained and it catches every rustle sickly. Here it is... It's flying! We roll head over heels into the trench, deeper, lower, into the pit, hands first into something sticky... There's rumble of the explosion, ground is falling. That was close. We get up. Pit is a crap-house.

### **16<sup>th</sup> of August**

We dug in the ground not far from Germans during the night. We're sitting in the holes. Crawling out and getting up is impossible - it'll get you killed. It seems that wind consists of frags. In order to pass time somehow, lose ourselves, we're playing a game invented right here: two poke out SMGs stock up: whose will be shredded first wins... Those SMGs are left from previous attacks, they were lying on the ground smashed, rusty, not fit for work anymore. We cherished our own weapons as the apples of our eyes: we covered a bolt with footcloth in order to save it from clouds of dust that

was raising during the artillery shelling. Those weapons are a guarantee of our life during the inevitable enemy encounter. Cannon got smashed. Barrel is bent backwards.

We go to the rear area with the package at noon. There are three of us. First we're crawling up to the trench like snakes, and then we're running further. Hundred, two hundred, three hundred meters pass. Legs are barely moving, breathing is wheezing and whistling. You mustn't stop. Those who tried to have a rest are now lying both sides of the trench, and thin black streams of blood are flowing down clayey walls, collecting in sticky puddles on the bottom... Shelling starts. Germans, obviously, noticed us and are firing the light mortars amazingly accurately. Explosions get closer and closer. Rumbling ruptures the eardrums. I fall and press into the niche in the wall of the trench. Explosions are very close, it seems that they're over the head... Shell hit the parapet and plopped next to me while showering me with lumps of ground. It rolled a certain distance over an inclined plane and froze about fifty centimeters from my nose.

My hair rose, my skin started to crawl. I was watching this beautiful toy painted bright red and yellow, shining with its translucent plastic nose, like charmed! It's going to blow! A second, another... Minute... It didn't explode! Rarely anyone gets that lucky! I skirt it as far away as possible and start catching up with the comrades.

We're running further. There's a junction of trenches. Scared voice can be heard from the pit: "Run, run faster! It's being shot through!" We run even further. We're ready to drop, we start slowing down. A legless corpse with red stumps instead of knees lies in the trench. Its hair is long, its face is familiar. "Hey, that is the sniper woman from the neighboring company. The one who sang in the amateur talent show! Eh!" - throws the leading one while running and jumps over the body. I mustn't linger, I jump too. Foot slides over the clay, I fall down onto the corpse. Air presses out with a hiss through closed lips, and bloody bubbles bulge from the nostrils... We come back (we'll have a new cannon). Evening is coming. It's quiet. Armor piercing rounds are seldom flying by with murmuring and ricochet off the



ground. Perhaps tanks are working the firing line. But it's far from them so far, and it's possible to walk full height here. There are three of us: there's an elderly soldier in the middle, me and a young guy who has just come from the rear area are in the sides. He hasn't got accustomed yet and he can't hide the fear... Suddenly there's an unexpected roar and some kind of slap. My face and chest are splashed with something warm and wet. I fall instinctively. Everything is quiet. I clear my eyes - hands and service shirt are bloody. Our old man lies on the ground. His skull is clearly cut off by the armor piercing round. Brains and blood got splashed everywhere. Young one stands up and he's looking down dumbfounded, mechanically throwing off gray and yellow mass from the sleeve. Then he starts getting hiccups... I take the documents of the killed and arm the guy further. He probably has a fit... I gave him over to the surgeon's assistant... Ten bodies are near the trench junction. They sat down to rest, not knowing that a German cannon was aimed at them. A single shot disheveled and tore everyone to pieces.

**18<sup>th</sup> of August**

Haven't slept since 14<sup>th</sup>. We're sitting in the same holes. New cannon got dug in deeper than the previous one, and it's in one piece so far. Friendly shell flew from the rear area and exploded five steps from us a day ago. It's a good thing we were in the hole. We got off with bruises: explosion threw an ammunition crate at us, it rode over someone's backs... Shell pulled a goner out of the ground, still a fresh one. Today he's warming up in the sun and he smells. There are whole layers in the ground. One can find rounds, weapons, clothes, old felt boots at the depth of one and a half – two meters. Everything is mixed up... There are forty tanks ahead of us, on no man's land. Some are ginger-colored and burned down. Other are still whole but motionless – they're being shelled by Germans with heavy mortars. Overshoot, undershoot, overshoot again. Crack! Tank of many tonnes is flying into pieces. How must tanker feel! After all, he has no right to leave a knocked-out machine. A song was composed in the tank units on that occasion, it got dubbed “a tanker's anthem”:

Special Department is calling for me  
Why did you not die right in your tank, you creep?  
And for that I them reply,  
The next time I will definitely die.

One tank stands close to us, its front is pointing at our trenches. It was coming back from the attack when it was knocked out. Human intestines are coiled around the turret - these are remains of assault force riding it into attack... Shells assigned by Germans for that tank are flying at us. We're pressing deeper into the ground... It got quiet.

Lieutenant crawls to the side, and comes back pale while dragging his leg in a minute. He got wounded. I cut open the knee-high boot. There are about six small holes below the knee. I bandage it. He's going to the rear area. Goodbye! He got away luckily!.. However I've got vague doubts in my mind: wounds like these don't occur from shells. I crawl into the crater where lieutenant had gone. So what, then? A ring from grenade with a wire lies in the bottom... It was self-inflicted harm. I grab the evidence and throw it into the water in the bottom of a

neighboring crater. After all, lieutenant is a very good guy, and a hero to boot. He got an order for fending off a tank attack in July of 1941, on the border. He endured when everyone else ran away! That means at least something. The current frustration of his is not an accident. He bumped into a drunk major in the trench who ordered him to crawl to a German log pillbox and throw grenades on it on the eve. Unknown starshina who happened to be right there tried to object, he claimed that he had been fulfilling a different order. Major shot him down without further thinking after bursting into a rage. Lieutenant then crawled to the pillbox, threw grenades without causing the concrete walls any harm and crawled back miraculously. He came back to us with his eyes trembling, his service shirt was white from emerged salt. Useless risk threw lieutenant off balance and led to a self-inflicted harm...

Our division has long since only number, cooks, officers and us, people around the cannon, left. Our turn soon too... Porridge has frags in it again: when food carrier is crawling, vacuum flask on his back is pierced...

I'm thirsty and my belly hurts: I crawled two times to the nearby crater for water during the night. I delightfully drank the water, it was thick, brown as coffee, it smelled of TNT and something else. When I decided to have a drink in the morning, I saw a black crooked arm sticking out of the crater...

Service shirt and pants became like thick cardboard: hardened from blood and mud. Holes up to the naked body are on the knees and elbows: I crawlbellied those. I threw the helmet away - few wear them here but many of them are lying around everywhere. This object of soldier's dress is used absolutely not as intended to. We usually soil the helmet, then throw it over the trench's parapet, yet blast wave hurls everything back, on our heads... Goner is stinking unbearably. There are many of them around, old and new. Some are dried up to blackness, their heads are like the ones mummies have, with sparkling teeth. Other are swollen, as if they were ready to burst. They lie in different poses. Some inexperienced soldiers dug covers for themselves in sandy walls of the trench and ground

crushed them when collapsing from a nearby explosion. They're still lying like that, snuggled, like they're sleeping, under a thick layer of sand. It's an image reminding of a grave in section. Parts of bodies tramped into clay stick out here and there in the trench; there's the back, the flattened face, the hand, brown, like the color of the ground. We're walking right on them.

### **20<sup>th</sup> of August**

Haven't closed the eyes for over a week, and I don't want to anyway. Later days consist of cannon fire at areas and at flares, that is into the world anywhere, crawling from one end of the firing line to the other under fire and blood, blood, blood. We've got barely any people left. An order was received in the evening: move the cannon to the edge of the breach for infantry support. I go to reconnoiter. Advanced squads of infantry are sitting in holes near the hillock with the flat top. That platform, fifty meters wide, is where cannon has to be dragged to. Moon is shining, it's huge, yellow one. There are long, ugly shadows from the mangled tanks on ginger sand. It's amazingly quiet. I get up on the

platform. Once I got there - machine guns lashed out and tracer bullets howled like different-colored lightnings over the head. A person can't show up here, let alone get the cannon dragged. I come back, report...

An order was received in the morning: cannon has to be in place no matter what. There it is! Our time has come! Order has to be fulfilled! Hah! There, where it's dangerous to go alone bent down even at night, we have crowded at full height and as a pile. There are twenty one of us - so many because the cannon has to be almost carried in our hands, the ground is so battered and broken... It's less than a hundred meters to Germans, I think they can distinguish the stars on our garrison caps. Yet why are they keeping silent? A sniper took out an infantryman who had stuck out of the hole, who's still lying here while gaping his bloody eye socket ten minutes ago on this very place. Sniper can certainly see us. What is he waiting for? There's not a single shot, as if Germans were amazed by our wildly stupid recklessness and were watching what was going to follow with interest. We're slowly dragging ourselves forward. Here

it is, death! It's playing like cat with mouse! Please let it be soon!.. Morning is chilly, sun shines brightly, amiably. There's not a single cloud in the blue sky... We're moving past the former no man's land, into the breach. Ground here is all poked - not a single place intact is left... There's only a little left. It's quiet. Suddenly there is a pop from behind. Push in the back raises me into the air! I'm flying and thinking in the hundredth part of a second: "This is the end!"... I came to in a deep crater. Neither cannon nor people are around, only curls of smoke and pieces of paper are in the air... Some kind of force puts me on my feet, I run to the trench and further along it. After running a little, I fall down senseless. I came to from rumble and hits of ground lumps on my back. It's as if eruption had started. Dozens of shells are exploding where our cannon has recently used to be. I crawl further, into the rear area. Left arm is bleeding... There's blood in the trench, it's a leg in the knee-high boot with pieces of pants. Further on is shapeless lump from overcoat, bones and meat that has light steam rising from it in the cold air, and incommunicable smell of still



warm blood is emanating. I recognize it by the overcoat – that's our soldier who was dragging the cannon... I lose consciousness again.

### **22<sup>nd</sup> of August**

I came to in the hole near another cannon of our battery. I was dragged here yesterday... Turns out, we got onto anti-tank explosive and blew up. Out of twenty one people two were left – me and one lightly wounded. Seventeen men couldn't be found. A leg with the piece of stomach showed up only by accident, forty meters from explosion. It fell onto the dugout of infantry battalion commander... I feel horrible, my head is ready to burst. It's concussion. There's water in the hole under me: it has been raining since evening. I've got no strength to raise myself, I only roll over like a seal, raising splashes. I feel shivery. Wounded hand is swelling, and no wonder, there's so much dirt around...

...What now? Go away? Run away? – Nowhere to. If you run away from fear – it's death for desertion. It's stupid. If you leave – it's also death, there are no other ways. Yet there's no need to ponder about anything...

There are two people at the cannon. I've got a fever, up to delirium. I'm firing direct laying at the enemy's log pillbox in such a shape - I got forty shots total. Splinters are flying, two Germans are leaping out and running away. We've been spotted, we barely manage to disappear. Shells are flowing around the cannon...

...Two wounded infantrymen are going from the firing line trench. One is limping while using his rifle as a crutch, the other has his hand hanging on a dirty, bloody footcloth. Both are swearing horribly while disregarding the shelling. "Well guys, now there's nobody ahead of you. There were seven of us, now we got finished off by artillery. Now you are advanced units!"... What a pleasant surprise! It's like in that joke: two Russians are a front...

A person who had been wounded in the gut and crawled from somewhere is groaning in the nearby crater: "Carry me out, I'm bleeding out!" What to do? I can barely move myself, left hand is crushed and swollen. I inquire whether he's bandaged. He is. "Crawl on your own somehow!" - I shout. "Help him", - I tell

my neighbor. He's silent. I'm not insisting. This is a matter of his conscience and if while helping him he'll get to the rear area, past the frags and bullets, he can be considered a deserter. There are orderlies for wounded, after all. Except where are they? Wounded gasped and, it seems, died...

There are two of us... I'm thirsty... We're waiting... Some kind of captain with Nagant in his hand is crawling. He's drunk, he's swearing. He asks whether there are shells, warns that German reconnaissance is expected. Where does he know that from? He's swearing again. He orders not to retreat no matter what and threatens with execution. Poor guy, it's not sunshine and rainbows for him either... We're alone again... We should go to the rear area: my arm hurts, my head is ready to burst but I'm afraid I won't have enough strength to come out or I'll be finished off on the road...

Germans are coming - turns out captain was right. There are about forty of them. Morons! They're moving full height and clamoring! And had they sneaked near - they would've taken us alive. Obviously, they're drunk.

They have the same sort of patriotism too!.. Run? Where? You won't run away. Sit in one place? You'll get killed! There are no human feelings here... Shoot! I align the cannon into the waist of people coming via the barrel. The other person is loading up canister shot. I'm firing. It's close to Germans. You can see how steel cuts and tears human bodies... What do I feel? - Nothing. What do I think? There are no thoughts. My head is empty.

I don't even have fear. I'm an automaton, not a living being. Finger on previously wounded arm has been crushed almost to bone by cannon recoil, and there's no pain at all! I've got bloody foam on my lips, my shirt is warm from sweat. I've got inhumane strength, my nails are breaking on the fingers, wheeze is breaking out of the throat... SMG bullets are hailing at the cannon shield. We're shooting more and more. Germans have laid prone... Neighbor gasped and sagged. Expanding bullet came from one side and tore the other one together with the shirt off. I'm thinking completely calmly - "Well, now that's it!" There's no strength anymore, I fall down near the cannon. Sun is

setting... There are some kind of screams from behind. Nearest and dearest swearing is heard. Our guys are running with their eyes bulging horribly while firing SMGs in all directions... It's a counterattack...

...There were many of episodes like that during the war but now I don't want to remember them, let alone write on that theme. In 1943 it was completely different. What I experienced seemed important, timely, I wanted to tell about that to a fellow man. However, a fellow man had a heap of similar experiences of his own. Soon everyone understood that and shut up. And if someone wound up front line memories, he had been told: "Let's talk about breads instead!"

After the battle near Apraksin I was carried out in the cart at night, then I was laid into a plywood body of the truck where double-decked bunk beds for wounded were arranged. Thatch and rags lied on them, but the car was often overloaded: there were a lot of wounded. I ended up on the lower bunk bed and after coming to my senses due to pushes from the road bumps I felt some kinds of strange rain dripping on me from above. Orderlies gasped upon unloading in hospital: I was all bloody! Yet it turned out that the blood was not mine but

rather the above neighbor's who had an arm torn off and bandaged poorly.

I quickly recovered both from scratches on the arm and from dysentery that I obviously caught after drinking from the crater in hospital. I visited the ward of concussed where deaf, paralyzed and mute were situated too. Speech was coming back to the latter. First words were usually a memory about mom but more often they were about doing someone else's! In the middle of September it became clear that time for my release was due soon. What to do? You'd end up in infantry again! Having taken counsel with the doctor, a nice Leningrad resident, I decided to get out "illegally", that is run away and try to seek my artillery regiment. After quietly obtaining my uniform from the nurse I headed for Pogostye forest, reached my comrades and I was amiably met there. However, command decided my fate to be different: I was given documents and instruction to move to Kotovo station that was near Bologoye station where reserve artillery regiment was located, all reinforcements were allocated through it. That was even better! I would go to the rear area by railway, live in real houses a little, look how civilians live.

Yet I wasn't able to slack it off in the reserve regiment. My short stay there started from the event of strategic importance. Command ordered: "Take three soldiers and outfit a crap-house for an officer's canteen!" Soldiers turned out to be Uzbeks and Russian language was like Chinese arithmetic to them. Being in charge of them was a major ordeal. Most importantly, they didn't understand the point of our construction. However, an architectural marvel had been finished in three hours. We dug out a hole, put a flooring with three openings and weaved fir-tree branches through the palisade in order to isolate the thinking office. After that I was able to demonstrate the Uzbeks what they had been building. Head of the canteen gave us a large tub of scraps left over from the officers' breakfast as a gratitude for service. We fressed them with delight in spite of cigarette butts showing up in pearl barley porridge from time to time.

Soldiers in the reserve regiment weren't given time to be bored. Work, necessary and unnecessary, useful and useless, took up all day. You barely complete one thing, you're instantly given the other. I had to teach the youth once, to explain the design of a cannon. I tried hard but recruits turned out to be dense, dumb, where

had they even grabbed those ones? However, the guys were good, they wanted to understand me for all their worth, they were uneasy that I was worrying about them. At the edge of the third hour I had lost my nerve, raised the voice and switched to our nearest and dearest universal language: I remembered their mom. Faces of my pupils got enlightened, their eyes sparkled, their mouths opened with happy smiles. I explained everything I had fought over for so long and without success in five minutes. It turned out I had an excellent educator hidden inside of me.

Soldiers of the reserve regiments were harassed with endless formations, parades, marching exercises. Once, in a hot day we had been held for three hours on the scorching sun while formed in four lines. I entertained myself with catching horse-flies of unprecedented size (they were as big as a bumblebee), tying long threads to their legs and freeing them while standing in the rear line. Soldiers were watching my activity with interest. One beefy horse-fly with half-meter thread on the tail flew right in the face of the colonel who was reviewing the troops like a bomber while buzzing tensely. That one recoiled in fear not understanding what



was going on, to the universal delight of exhausted soldiers.

A new form of military greetings was introduced at those times. Before it was easy, commander said: “Helllllllo comrades!!!” Everyone barked in response: “Hellluh!!!” By then we had to respond in unison: “We wish you good health comrade guards senior lieutenant!” I simplified that complicated ceremonial formula and loudly shouted together with everyone: “Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark!” It worked out very well but guards senior lieutenant heard that and stucked me two extra duties. That led to a chain of events that broke my short stay in reserve regiment.

Duty was going on in the stables where I had to clean up the horse. For me it was a new activity I was unaccustomed to. I'd been watering the stupid mare for a long time, I had been brushing it. She stepped on my foot, what an ungrateful one! Lieutenant rejected my work, he told me to repeat everything all over again, then again and again. Having burst into a rage, I sent him to a known mother, for what I instantly ended up in isolation ward – on strict detention. However, a marching company was going to front from the reserve regiment

the following day. I was assigned to it as an obstinate one and I soon ended up on Volkhov Front again, almost at the same places – near the Porechye village that used to stand on the river Naziya, and now has disappeared in the flames of war. Regiment I was to serve in fully satisfied all my wishes. It was heavy howitzers. All organization is like in my previous regiment. And I'll have to work at a portable radio too. It's familiar job! I got lucky again!

There was silence on the front. We lived in tunnel shafts that Germans had hollowed out in the limestone banks of river Naziya. It was safe there but the draft went from all the gaps. There were moonlight nights, and the moon whimsically lighted a fantastic scenery: there were limestone blocks from which explosions tore off plants and ground, craters, mangled trucks and cannons. The river quietly gurgled and infantrymen swore at each other in whispers among that chaos. They were strengthening defensive positions and digging up destroyed German dugouts at the same time. There it was possible to find watches on corpses, there was a hunt for them going on. Order on relocation came in the end of October. Regiment was directed to positions near

Novgorod.

## War Routine

### Novella I. How Heroes Are Made

There was no soldier worse than me in December of 1941 in the Volkhov Front N unit. Being full of lice, swollen, dirty, suffering from dystrophy, I couldn't work properly, I had neither vigor no poise. My pathetic figure only expressed bleak desperation. Comrades in arms either kept silent, snuffled disapprovingly and turned away from me, or expressed their feelings in strong swearing: "What a premature baby got imposed onto our neck!" To top it all off, high command caught me during a wonderful activity: having dug a dead gelding out of the snow, I was cutting beef steaks out of its frozen thigh. There was a swing of the heavy axe, strike – uh! – with heavy breathing, and then there was a minute of rest. My mouth was open, my eyes were bulging, steam came out of mouth and nostrils. There was severe frost. And then it was again: uh! Ah! Uh! Ah! I raise my eyes, and our sated ruddy commissar wearing a snow-white short fur coat is looking at me with loathing. He didn't even deign to talk

to me, he didn't swear, he didn't shout, but he went right to the headquarters and gave hell to my immediate superior for collapse in the unit, for low morally-political level etc etc.

My immediate superior at the time was sitting in a pillbox not far from the German positions, two-three kilometers from our village. He had his own method of educating his subordinates. He called the guilty ones to himself, and he did that at night in order for them to feel the guilt through better after running to him at the observation point in the frost, often under fire. I was woken up at three in the morning and I was passed an order to set off for getting “flints” (helpful hints, that is scolding).

–And how do I get there? – I asked while not being awake completely.

–There'll be a Y-shaped birch with the top broken off three hundred meters ahead, then there's a large crater, turn left, then straight along and after half an hour you'll see a hill. That is our pillbox. Or better yet, go along the telephone wire. You won't get lost. But be careful, don't run into Germans.

And so I went.

Birch turned out to be much further away and its trunk divided not into two but into three large boughs above. There were plenty of craters everywhere, and the telephone wire disappeared somewhere. In short, I instantly got lost and forgot all orientation points. I still decided to go forward in hopes of stumbling upon our pillbox. Night wasn't very dark, moon was showing up from behind the clouds every now and then. Seldom German flares exploded with pale light. I walked through over the virgin soil through rare bushes while either falling into the snow almost waist-deep or over the bare clearings where wind was blowing and swaying dried up blades of grass sticking out of piles of snow. A trail of footsteps was stretching behind me. German machine gun was firing from somewhere periodically, and colorful tracing bullets flew like small flocks of birds, one after another. Sometimes they were whistling right near while hitting the grass and exploding with cracking, lighting up like Bengal fires. That would have been very picturesque had my heart not been sank from fierce horror. I had been walking for more than an hour, not knowing where myself. German flares and shots were left behind. Where am I?

There was no continuous front line at the time. Offensive was going on, Germans sat in defensive positions and gaps between them were controlled by mobile squads – patrols, or weren't guarded at all. “I'll walk around a hundred meters more, – I decided, – and I will be coming back, I'd rather be punished than captured!”... Thick bushes appeared on my way, wading through them was hard, I had to take a rifle off the shoulder so it wouldn't cling to branches. Holding it bayonet in front, I finally came out onto a height where a trodden trail turned out to be.

My sight was monstrous: I wore a burned-down overcoat, a dirty hat with ear flaps that was tightly tied up under the chin, felt boots of different caliber that had been patched and repatched... I looked liked a dummy covered with snow. Then suddenly I spotted another dummy during a flare, he was even more weird. That was a German with female woolen shawl tied over his helmet. He had a vacuum flask hanging behind the shoulders, he was dragging a sack and several flasks in hands. His SMG was hanging on the neck but taking it off would have taken a lot of time. A dumb show followed. Both of us were frozen with terror, both got wide-eyed and

staggered back from each other. I wanted to run away, hide most of all. I brought out a rifle to the front of me instinctively, even having forgotten I had a weapon held. Then suddenly my fritz, having thrown the flasks on the snow, put his hands up. His lips started to tremble, he started to whine and steam started to convulsively break out of his nostrils through frozen rimy snot. Everything afterwards was like in a dream. I put my finger in front of the lips and pointed German to my footsteps in the bushes: "Well, go there, forward!" German took up his sacks and flasks and moved over the piles of snow while sniffing. Being at a loss, I didn't even take his SMG away.

We had been walking over my footsteps that, thank God, were not snowed over, for about an hour and a half while panting and stumbling, and we strolled into the village where our unit was spending the night already at dawn. My comrades in arms who got an order to search for me, were highly astonished. German was disarmed, vacuum flask was taken away from him and meanwhile I sincerely tried to explain everything that happened to starshina: "I got lost!.." "As you were!" – said starshina while throwing a hard look that seemingly understood everything at me. "Relax, have lunch!" We divided tasty



German soup with fatback bacon between pots, it was hot and flavored, we divided the hardtacks and started eating. What happiness! Starshina was meanwhile reporting to command over the phone: “Comrade colonel! Our unit made contact with the enemy. Germans moved away after a shootout. Our radioman took a prisoner... Affirmative, prisoner!” Colonel told to deliver Fritz to headquarters immediately. I still insisted that my poor pal, looking pathetic and being full of lice, was given a full pot of hot soup, and that was the most pleasant thing left in my memory from the whole tragicomic episode. Fritz himself must have kept the good feelings about me too if he had survived the prison: the war had been over for him, after all.

It turned out that I wandered onto a trail where ammunition and food were delivered to a large German pillbox while being lost. Yet why did the German walk alone? Why were there no patrols?.. Human fates move in mysterious ways! It also turned out that our command had been unsuccessfully trying to get a prisoner – “a tongue” – for several days. Professional scouts accomplished heroic actions, special squads sent for the “tongue” died, and prisoner was still not able to get

captured. Army commander Ivan Ivanovich Fedyuninsky himself swore at subordinates so hard that telephones popped. Command didn't know what to do. Then suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, I solved those complicated problems...

That is how, turns out, heroes are made! My guilt was not remembered. I was pardoned.

## **Novella II. The Most Significant Episode from Life of Sergeant Kukushkin**

We were sitting in the dugout near Apraksin Post station in the middle of August of 1943. I was a gun-layer at the 45-millimeter cannon of “Farewell, Motherland” type but having lost all my comrades and two cannons, one after another, I was relaxing in that dugout at my comrades-in-arms', being concussed... Just prior to that remains of infantry and also cooks, orderlies, supply handlers and similar rear area rag tag had charged into unsuccessful attack and remained on the no man's land after an extremely powerful artillery softening-up.

Lull, if one could express it like that, had come. Unbearable artillery shelling of our positions started. Ground was trembling. Sand was falling onto us through the ceiling logs. The two German mortars of 210 millimeters caliber were especially nasty. First a far away shot could be heard, then a shell gained height and hammered onto us with wild howling in a minute. It's a suitcase weighing more than a hundred kilograms! Crater left by it is the deepest and the widest! A whole house

could fit in there! Ground is rocking from explosions. And that's hour after hour. We're listening for our fate: when will it finally hit us?

Everybody got fed up with fierce horror, and it was decided that in order to distract ourselves we should tell stories of some kind in turns, preferably ones dedicated to the most significant episodes in the storyteller's life. First one having the floor was sergeant Khaldurov, a brave Yakut who was wounded six times and had just been decorated for that with an order. He narrated about his roaming in the German rear area right there, near Gaitolovo village, during the demise of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army in August-September of 1942. Those were terrifying tales! I recalled a diabolical German attack near Pogostye. The turn reached sergeant Kukushkin, a gloomy, large man about thirty years of age, too.

He unbuttoned his pants silently, thus flaunting a huge male part and he asked us: "Have you seen that?" Pause followed. Then someone noted that that was not a society where one should have been demonstrating their manhood... "No-no-no, look at it, look at it!" – Kukushkin insisted. And we noticed a white scar crossing the masculine splendor of the courageous sergeant. He

buttoned the pants up at a leisurely pace and shared the following with us.

“I was wounded in the arm and collar bone during the attack to the direction of Sinyavino in winter of 1942. Legs were intact, and I went to health support battalion on my own feet. After getting away from the shelling I'd almost reached the tents with red cross but I stopped to take a leak. And then it turned out that the most important place in the male body had been dissected in half by the mortar shell frag! Blood hadn't been flowing yet – obviously, some kind of spasm occurred. But as I just thought of that, prodigious – streaming – bleeding started. I managed to run to the medical unit while clutching a wound in my fist where I instantly, very luckily, got on the operating table. “Things are rotten, – said the surgeon, – we'll have to amputate!” “By no means! I'll die, but with it!”... I demanded to be operated without anesthesia. (Else they might put you to sleep and chop it off!) It hurt so much I had green circles in front of my eyes! Then I was taken to a rear area hospital by plane, to Yaroslavl, and young nurse had been clutching the wound that wasn't completely patched with her hand all the way through.

An experienced surgeon, an elderly lady, a colonel of medical service, performed another operation in Yaroslavl – a successful one. Then healing and high-calorie diet followed – I had to restore the blood loss. Finally it all closed. Once surgeon called me to her office and said: “Sergeant, you're healthy and you can proceed to your unit. However, your case is rare, and we want to conduct an experiment for scientific purposes. I'm giving you a week off and a double ration. Try to meet a woman in the city and give yourself a try”. “Yes madam!” – I responded.

The same evening I picked up a nice chubby girl at a dance and things got rolling. Long live the red artillery! After a week I had a meeting with the surgeon. “You know, I am a very timid person – it seems that I did meet someone, but I'm being shy... Can I have another week off?”... “Great, you'll get one”. Yet only five days had passed, chubby one fought a ginger one who had promised to stab her competitor or pour acid on her from jealousy. A row blew out, and the glory of my adventures reached the surgeon. In a week I was on the Volkhov Front...”

And in two days more sergeant Kukushkin got torn

to pieces when we tripped an anti-tank mine. I am not going to judge what is fact and what is fiction in Kukushkin's tale, but the scar I had seen with my very own eyes.

## **Novella III. Love in the Steppe Near Stalingrad**

I didn't get to fight together with the late Leva Sizerskov. He shared me this story many years after the war events. There's so much innocence, simplicity in it, that it's impossible not to write it down. It reminds me of Boccaccio's novellas in some ways.

“We were going to positions near Stalingrad in autumn of 1942. Train convoy was slowly dragging along the steppe, stopping every now and then. In the end it got stuck completely near a destroyed station. Only a pile of stones, semaphore and a piece of wooden fence were left from it. There were dust, heat, nobody was around, it was just bare steppe up to the horizon. Then suddenly girls in service shirts appear out of nowhere. These are anti-aircraft gunners, turns out they're defending the station from planes. And they're very bored. He-he and ha-ha! One is especially cute, a brunette. We're running to the remains of the fence while holding hands and (it's a time of war – one cannot lose moments!) are quickly getting down to business... But suddenly a plangent whistle of



the steam engine arises, and convoy starts moving. “Levka-a-a! Quick!!!” – comrades are shouting. Ah, what a pity! We have to part! Military duty above all! I'm running to the last car while holding my breeches with my hand. Guys are helping me get inside the car that is gaining speed. “Where are you, soldier, cutie!!!” – brunette is shouting... We didn't get to ask each other's names...”

## **Novella IV. Collapse of My Military Career**

I started the war as private, then got a triangle in collar insignia, then three stripes onto the shoulder marks and even, later, one wide one. I had bright future opening up ahead of me! I could serve up to a marshal like that. However, blind chance decides everything in our life. Especially in the military life, and I had not been destined to become a marshal.

Once on a frosty winter day of 1943 our colonel called me and said: “Troop relocation is coming up. We have to move forty kilometers South. There'll be a lot of troops there, digging dugouts in frozen soil is, you know for yourself – a torment. Therefore take two soldiers, food for a week and move out in order to take a good dugout for headquarters beforehand. If we won't come after a week, come back”. Place of the new location was shown to me on the map.

I accurately fulfilled the order. I chose an excellent, dry dugout reinforced with several layers of logs among the many empty shelters and covers. We had outfitted an

oven there and started waiting. Week was nearing the end. Many troops came in large numbers and dugouts became worth their weight in gold. We were attempted to be driven out with brute force and sweet talks, we were threatened and we were being sent officers of different ranks. Finally one supply officer who was freezing under a fir tree offered two circles of salami, a liter of vodka and a whole loaf of bread. It was tempting! Yet duty is above all, and order has to be fulfilled. We did not give in to the temptation. However, I still told supply officer: “The week ends today, and if our people won't come tomorrow – dugout is yours”. Our people did not come, and we were sitting near the bonfire drinking vodka while biting it with salami and preparing to go back where we had come from in the evening of the following day.

Then suddenly a car with the colonel and officers of our headquarters showed up on the road in the twilight already.

–Where's the dugout?!!

–...

–WhaaaAAAT! Drunk?!! Your mother!!! Order is not fulfilled!!!

Well, go try and prove you're not four-legged!..

Colonel was furious. He had to spend the night freezing in the tent. And as for me, the following day an order was issued: “Demote to a private and send to the firing line for an unfulfilled order”. Though latter was redundant since I had always been on the firing line. Yet my military career ended with that. Even though later, having calmed down, colonel awarded me sergeant rank again, that was not the same at all. Many times, months later, upon meeting, colonel was laughing and telling me: “What of that, did you drink the dugout off?”

## **Novella V. Me and Communist Party**

We were sixty-seven. We were a company. We were assaulting that height in the morning. It wasn't too big but apparently it had strategic value, for both our and German command have been trying to capture it for many months. Constant shelling and bombing took off all the plants and even meter – meter and a half of soil on its summit. Nothing had grown on this place for a long time after the war and a long-lasting corpse stench had stood for several years. Ground was mixed with fragments of metal, mangled weapons, casings, rags from torn clothes, human bones...

How we managed that, I do not know, but in the middle of the day we ended up in holes filled with corpses on the ridge of the height. Change came in the evening, and company was sent to the rear area. Now there were twenty-six of us. After dinner we were listening to a colonel who came from the political office of the Army on purpose while almost falling asleep from exhaustion. He addressed us while exhaling fragrance of cognac aroma: “Herroes! You took, finally, this height!!

For that we'll admit you to Communist Party without a term of probation!!! Herroes! Hurray!" Then we were started to be enrolled into Communist party.

–But I don't want to... – I uttered timidly.

–What does it mean “don't want to”? We'll admit you to Communist Party without a term of probation.

–I won't be able to...

–What does it mean “won't be able to”? We'll admit you to Communist Party without a term of probation?!

–I'll fail to do it...

–What does it mean “fail to do it”? After all, We'll admit you without a term...

Political instructor had sincere astonishment written on his face, he wasn't able to understand me. However, omnipresent lieutenant from SMERSH understood everything:

–Who doesn't want to here?!! Last name?!! First name?! Year of birth?!! – He took a large notepad out of the bag and made a note in it. His face was made of iron, his eyes had resolve sparkling in them:

–We'll take care of this tomorrow morning! – he declared.

Soon everyone had fallen asleep. I, however, was

tumbling in anguish and I couldn't close my eyes despite exhaustion: "Not for me sun will rise tomorrow! I'm going to be a Japanese spy or Gestapo agent! Goodbye, my young life!"... Yet man proposes, God disposes: Germans took the height again close to the morning, and we started climbing its slopes during the day. However, we had only reached the middle of it... The following night the company was brought out, and there were only six of us by then. All the others were left lying on the height, and with them was a lieutenant from SMERSH, with his large notepad. He's still there up to these days and I, although corrupt, although wretched, am still alive. And nonpartisan. God is merciful.

## **Novella VI. Surroundings of Polyany Station**

Sinyavino operation started in August of 1942. N<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division went into battle among others. Fighting was fierce and soon almost all the soldiers had been wounded or killed. Medics, most often young girls, were pulling the wounded out of battle, carried them under fire on their backs in order to deliver them to health support battalion while risking their life every moment, it was a terrible labor. That health support battalion was deployed near Polyany station, several kilometers from the firing line, however nothing had been prepared to accept the wounded there. Even tents that were usually used at war had not been deployed. Here's what one nurse told what she had spotted there: "Being exhausted after a long crawl over the firing line, I pulled another wounded from the battlefield, I arduously dragged him to the health support battalion. There wounded were lying in lines on an open clearing, on stretchers or just on the ground. Orderlies had covered them with white sheets. Doctors were nowhere to be seen and it didn't look like



anyone was performing operations or bandaging. Suddenly a German fighter plane fell from the clouds, flew low, hedge-hopping, over the clearing and pilot was methodically shooting the recumbent, helpless people, with automatic fire while leaning out of the cockpit. It could be seen that the SMG in his hands was Soviet, with the drum magazine! Being shaken, I ran to a small house on the edge of the clearing where I found head of the health support battalion and commissar both dead drunk. Before them stood a bucket of port wine intended for the wounded. I overturned the bucket and addressed commander of the health support battalion with ranting in an impulse of resentment. However, that drunken animal wasn't able to perceive anything. By the evening heavy rain started, deep puddles formed on the ground, wounded were drowning in them... In a month commander of the health support battalion was decorated with an order "for excellent labor and care for wounded" under recommendation of the commissar".

*(Written during military historical conference  
dedicated to Sinyavino Operation in Mga  
1.October.1982)*

## Novella VII. Look from above

*No defeat can be more grim than this victory*  
–Wellington on Battle of Waterloo

I'm looking at a far-lung panorama of apartment buildings construction from the window of my apartment in a new district of Leningrad, from the height of the seventh floor. A whole town is appearing in the wasteland. Yet there are broken bricks, bent pipes and concrete sections lying around in puddles. A truck is stuck in the mud on a bumpy road. A bonfire from new, unused boards is burning. Workers are partially smoking and partially go to a beer kiosk that has a huge line in front of it. Stuff is poorly organized... And if it's poorly organized, then maybe one should stop the construction? Naturally, none of us has this kind of thought. And back then, near Pogostye, did we really think about defeat while fighting poorly and losing nine out of ten comrades? Although, back then we didn't think about anything, being frozen with terror and dreaming only about a single thing – surviving. It is now when we're thinking and suffering... Was it indeed impossible to

avoid monstrous sacrifices of 1941-1942? To do without meaningless attacks of Pogostye, Sinyavino, Nevskaya Dubrovka that had been doomed beforehand, and many other similar places?

How magnificently it is all described in books, newspapers! It's steeped in romance and pink mist. What a familiar image! That had happened already. It's enough to remember at least the descriptions of Suvorov's campaigns. Everything is so beautiful there! Yet the great commander was losing men several times more than his opponent when winning. And what about the great campaign of 1812? That was a monstrous victory too! First it was collapse, defeat after defeat. Half the Russia and Moscow had to be surrendered in order to finally understand the gravity of the situation, organize and defeat the opponent crushingly, but at what cost! That had been forgotten, with the truth drowned in jingoism. Turns out, history doesn't teach anything. Every generation starts anew, it repeats the mistakes of the ancestors. National traditions turn out to be more powerful than reason, more powerful than will and good wishes of separate clear minds.

Victory of 1945! What were you worth for Russia?

According to official data it's 20 millions killed, according to the foes' data it's 40 and even more. It is impossible to even imagine! Were one to lie everybody down shoulder to shoulder next to each other, they would be lying from Moscow to Vladivostok! Millions and tens of millions sound abstract enough, yet when you see a hundred or a thousand of corpses, mangled, tramped in the ground – this does impress. Now we're declining and conjugating the number of 20 millions in print and on the radio, we even seem to flirt with it and boast about it while reproaching Western allies for losing fewer. Yet when the conversation drifts to concrete events, to Pogostye, Sinyavino and thousands of other places on other fronts, we go silent. Concrete facts bewilder, one has to name concrete parties at fault while talking about them yet they're still alive so far. Thus we keep silence, and the war actually looks very fine in newspapers and memoirs.

I cannot judge the global statistics. Was it 20 or 40 millions, maybe it was more? I only know what I had seen. My “nearest and dearest” 311<sup>th</sup> Rifleman Division had passed around 200 thousand people through itself during the years of war. (This is according to the last

head of the building unit Neretin.) That means 60 thousands killed! And we had more than 400 of divisions like those. It's simple arithmetics... Wounded were mostly treated and they ended up on the front again. Everything started from scratch for them. In the end, having gone through meat grinder two-three times, they had fallen. Thus several generations of most healthy, most active men, primarily Russians, were scratched off cleanly. What about the defeated? Germans lost 7 millions totally with only a part of them, albeit the largest one, on the Eastern Front. So, the ratio of killed is: 1 to 10, or even more, – in favor of the defeated. What a wonderful victory! This ratio has been following me like nightmare for my whole life. Mountains of corpses near Pogostye, near Sinyavino and everywhere I had to fight, are rising before me. According to official data, there are 17 killed per one square meter on some areas of Nevskaya Dubrovka. Corpses, corpses...

How come? Could it really not be different? After all, so much strength and supplies had been spent on the army prior to the war! Now nobody's concealing that we had had enough forces in the beginning of the war anymore. We even had more tanks that Germans had.

Although not all of them were new but that was more than enough for defense. There were plenty of planes too, but we found a way to lose 2 thousands of them in the very first day of the war, in the airfields, on the ground! In short, as usual, there were collapse, bungling, improper organization. Now, many years after the war later, I think that it could not have been different, for that war differed from all our previous wars not in quality, not in the manner of waging it, but just in the scale of it. Our national mentality took a toll here: it consists of doing everything as poorly as possible with maximum spending of supplies and forces. Sometimes one can come across these words in the memoirs of generals: "Had it been done like this, and not like that, if only they had listened to me, everything would have been different..." If ifs and ans were pots and pans!.. Sometimes Stalin or other figures are blamed. Of course, Stalin is the main evil. But he didn't appear out of thin air. His figure fits perfectly within Russian history that has plenty of great reformers: Ivan IV, Peter I, Nicholas I, Alexander with Arakcheev and many more. And all the time we're overtaking, all the time we're improving, all the time we're tearing our guts and neighbor's nostrils, and we are sleeping on the stove

in the intervals. And we still don't have any order among us... How horrible is the next war going to be if to win in this one almost half of Russian folks had to fall... The view from the window of my new apartment is causing such thoughts to emerge.

I remember another image that had also opened up to me from the seven story height. Once we were sitting among the thick branches of a tall fir-tree on the wooden scaffold that had been fixed almost at the top of the tree in summer of 1943. Planks were nailed down to the trunk, they were substituting a ladder that we used to climb up top. It was an observation post of an artillery regiment a kilometer and a half from the firing line, from which a wide panorama of surroundings opened up. Blue sky was covering us. Sun was shining. A pine was swaying slightly, its branches were screeching and spreading a sappy aroma.

Our commander stood behind the stereo periscope, he was a stately, handsome young colonel. He was freshly shaved, ruddy, he had a cologne scent, he wore an ironed service shirt. After all, he slept in a comfortable covered truck with an oven, and not in the hole. He didn't have ground in his hair and lice weren't eating him. And he

didn't eat gruel but well-fried potatoes with American canned stewed meat instead. And he was an educated artilleryman, he finished an Academy and he knew his trade. In 1943 there were precious few like him since majority got executed in 1939-1940, the rest died in forty-one and people who surfaced by accident ended up on the command posts.

Colonel was attentively looking in the stereo periscope while rubbing his firm tanned nape with a clean palm, and he was loudly, ceaselessly, devotedly swearing. "What they are doing, creeps! Ah! What they are doing, scum!" What they were doing could be seen even without a stereo periscope. Two kilometers ahead of us, over a creek, a large hill where a village used to be was visible. Germans turned it into a center of resistance. They dug the homes into the ground, put concrete domes there, they dug out a whole labyrinth of trenches and entangled them with kilometers of barbed wire. It was a third day of infantry assaulting the village. First one division came – 6 thousand people. Two hours later there were 2 thousands left of them. The following day ones who survived and a new division repeated the attack with the same degree of success. That day a third division was



brought into action, and infantry lied prone again. Thick scattering of corpses on a the hill slope could be clearly seen by us. “What they are doing, f..!” – the colonel harped on, and fire was storming on the hill. German positions were covered by huge spurts of flame, curls of smoke, a forest of explosions. Our artillery, katyushas, mortars were firing, yet German machine guns remained intact and they were mowing doing the assaulting regiments. “What they are doing, creeps! You have to flank them! You have to not head for machine guns, why dump the people!” – colonel kept groaning. Yet “creeps” had a firm order and they were fulfilling it. What a familiar image! Isn't it how commands where to sow corn and where to sow oat are made from the offices? In the end you get neither oat nor corn, and you've got nothing to fress at all. And nobody sows, nobody reaps, and nobody raises cows anymore. There's collapse at factories too. And the main thing is – good owners, honest, experienced superiors were ruined. It's easy to destroy what was being built for centuries. Try to organize an enterprise anew! And scum who got into the higher-up positions will resist. Having felt danger, it'll unite and defend its piece of the pie like there's no tomorrow.

The same actions were paid with the soldiers' lives at war. Master from Moscow tells to perform an offensive after poking the map with his finger. Generals are forcing regiments and divisions, yet commanders in the field have no right to take the initiative. Order is “Forward!”, and lamblike soldiers have gone to die. They have gone straight to machine guns. Flanking? It wasn't ordered! Fulfill what it's told do. Plus they forgot how to think and reason, too. They're more concerned how to hold their place and oblige the superiors. Losses have no meaning. Ones were buried – others will be herded. Sometimes soldiers met their demise without being able to become acquainted with each other prior to the battle. There are a lot of people. And those people are grabbed in the rear area, in the fields, in the factories, they are dressed up into overcoats, given rifles and – “Forward!” Being lost, scared, demoralized, they're dying like flies. I saw an infantryman – a daddy about forty years of age, a recruit who was crawling along the firing line without raising his head, clearly not knowing where, having lost the direction, in the same 1943 near Voronovo. I shouted to him: “Where are you going, soldier!?”, and he replied to me: “Please sir, where is the kitchen of the second

battalion?” (That's to me, an 18-year old boy!) He didn't care about anything. He was hungry, lost and scared. What sort of battle can you talk about! We got used to that: soldiers – to dying, command – to dumping.

A backbone of supply officers, medics, counterintelligence, staff officers and similar people had formed in infantry divisions in 1941-1942 already; they comprised a mechanism of admitting reinforcement and sending it into battle, to die. It was a death mill of sorts. That backbone in its basis remained intact, got used to its horrible functions, and people were drawn together corresponding to that too, they were ones who could deliver. Command that couldn't reason: either dimwits or scum capable only of violence, – was also drawn together. “Forward!” – and that's it. My commander of infantry regiment in the “nearest and dearest” 311<sup>th</sup> division was appointed to the position from the commander of clothing exchange and bath team as the story goes. He turned out to be very capable of driving his regiment forward without reasoning. He was dumping it plenty of times, and he was drinking vodka and dancing a gypsy dance in the intervals. Commander of the German regiment that opposed us at Voronovo, however, had

commanded a battalion during 1914-1918 already, he was a professional, he knew all the ins and outs of the military arts and, of course, he knew how to take care of his people and how to strike at our assaulting hordes...

Great Stalin, being burdened with neither conscience, nor morality, nor religious motives, creates a party that was just as great, that depraved all the country and suppressed the dissidence. This is where our attitude to people stems from. Once I accidentally overheard a conversation between a commissar and a commander of rifleman battalion that was in battle at the time. The whole essence of what was happening was stated in this conversation: "We'll wage a war for about two days more, kill off the rest and go to the rear area for reorganization. Now then we'll have some fun!"

However, war has always been vile and army, an instrument of murder, has always been a tool of evil. There are no and there have never been just wars, all of them, no matter how they will be justified, – are antihuman. Soldiers have always been dung too. Especially in our great power and especially during socialism.

I remember another episode of the war. One

general who commanded a corps at Leningrad Front, had been told: “General, we mustn't attack this height, we'll only lose plenty of people and we won't make progress”. He responded: “Big deal, people! People are dust, forward!” That general had lived a long life and died in his own bed. I remember the fate of another officer, a colonel who was fighting beside him. Colonel commanded a tank brigade and he was famous for attacking ahead of everyone himself. Once during the battle at Volosovo station connection with him was lost. His tank had been searched for for many hours and was finally found – it was ginger, burned. When the top hatch was opened with difficulty, a thick smell of fried meat assaulted the senses.

Is the fate of those two commanders not symbolic? Do they not personify the eternal fighting of good against evil, conscience against dishonesty, humanity against barbarity? In the end good had won, war was over, but what were the costs? Time equalized those two commanders: Saint Petersburg has a street named after general and next to it is a street named after a tanker colonel.

“What they are doing, creeps! Ah, what they are

doing, scum!” – colonel was still harping on. We were sitting nearby looking at the villainy going on in front of us. Suddenly a singaller called the colonel. Having heard what he had been said to on the phone, colonel turned to us: “Scouts and radiomen were hit by a heavy shell at the approaches to the village. Gear up, you’ll change them!” He pointed there, at the hill, into the sheer hell of fire and smoke, with his finger. “Yes sir!” – we responded.

**Novella VIII. Memories of A Seaman of  
The 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Brigade L.M. Markov,  
or Typical Operation of Our Troops  
During The II World War Period,  
Magnificent in Its Conception and  
Just as Brilliant in Its Execution**

Memoirs, memoirs... Who writes them? What kind of memoirs can ones who actually fought have: pilots, tankers and first of all infantrymen? It's wounding – death, wounding – death, wounding – death – and that's it! There was nothing else. Memoirs are written by those who had been around the war: in second echelon, in headquarters<sup>7</sup>. Or they're written by sellout pamphleteers expressing the official point of view according to which we were vigorously winning, and evil fascists were falling down by thousands, being struck down with our precise fire. Simonov, an “honest writer”, what had he seen? He

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<sup>7</sup> Turns out, rational Germans have taken everything into account here too. Their veterans are clearly distinguished by the degree of participation in fighting. There are different front categories listed in the papers: I – first trench and no man's land. These are honored (during the war there was a special badge for participation in attacks and CQC, for knocked out tanks etc). II – artillery positions, company and battalion headquarters. III – other rear areas of the front. This category is looked down upon.

was given a submarine ride, he went attacking with infantry once, once it was with scouts, he looked at an artillery softening-up – and he has already “seen everything” and “experienced everything”! (Although others haven't seen even that.) He wrote haughtily, and all that is decorated fudge. And “They Fought for Motherland” by Sholokhov is just a propaganda piece! I don't even need to talk about the small fry.

Memoirs, memoirs... I heard the best memoirs in winter of 1944 in hospital near Warsaw. Vitka Vasilyev, a known troublemaker, a drunk, a libertine who fought the war near commanders and who was generally pillaging or doing shady schemes with civilian population, had been brought into the ward from the operating room. Vitka Vasilyev finally ended up in a penal company for his escapades, he fought in a real battle and “atoned a guilt with blood”. Here's a stenography of his memoirs: “We got herded to a firing line, I had poked my dome out of the trench, that's when I got f..ked up”. Memoirs were interrupted by scabrous couplets and intricate drunken swearing at the nurse who was making a tetanus jab to Vitka.

And here are more memoirs that I borrowed from



an official compilation:

“Morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 1941, turned out to be windless but frosty... After an arduous loaded march we were at the firing line near the icy Neva.

During the campaign I made friends with Nikolai, a guy from Odessa. He got wounded near Peterhof and got to us right after the hospital. Night between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of November we spent in some kind of hole with Nikolai. We were lying, huddling up to each other and trying to fall asleep. Frost stroke to the marrow, and we were tumbling in order not to get our sides frostbitten.

Early in the morning we got an alert. It was still completely dark. German flares were hanging from the small parachutes like bright chandeliers. Seasoned sailors removed everything unnecessary: they put pots into a pile, took off the gas masks and duffle bags. Only sailor caps and towels were taken from the bags. Sailor caps were put on instead of hats with ear flaps, towels were taken in case of wounding. We and Kolya also followed the example of the seasoned ones.

We bolted onto the ice after waiting for a moment when German flares had faded out. We were moving by bounds. Yet we were able to run only two hundred meters

unnoticed. Red signal rockets were launched from the enemy riverbank, and after them there were dozens of flares. It became as bright as day. And fascist machine guns began cracking immediately. Me and Kolya were running almost next to each other. Suddenly he stumbled and tripped face down. I turned him over. His eyes were open and a stream of blood was flowing out of his forehead above the nose bridge. He died instantly. Having lied the friend down between the risen floes of ice, I kissed him and covered his face with the sailor cap. And then I bolted forward. I ran so fast that I ended up in first platoon from the second one. Sailors were falling all around me after being struck down by a downpour of lead. Groans and yells could be heard. Bullets were ricocheting off the ice. We were only about thirty people alive when Germans put mortar shells into action. One of them knocked me down and stunned me. As it turned out later, my eardrum got pierced.

We were lying behind the ice hummocks. And then I got hit in the right leg. I tightened it below the knee with the towel, I tore off the bell-bottom and bandaged the wound. Eight of us were left from one hundred and eighty-two. And four of the living were wounded. It was

still far away from the riverbank. We were a bit more than halfway...”<sup>8</sup>

Fundamentally it's the same as Vitka Vasilyev's, just a bit more detailed. Which one do you like more?

When the Second World War ended, its surviving veterans instantly ended up in unfamiliar conditions for themselves: a destroyed country had to be restored, one's own daily life had to be established, a slice of bread had to be earned and children had to be raised. People would rather not had remembered the war, thoughts of it were unpleasant. Vodka and hard labor helped forget heavy emotions of the war. But then tens of years had passed, children grew up, veterans became retired, free time appeared. Years softened the burden of what people had lived through, and memories started. Comrades-in-arms started searching for each other, councils of veterans of different units appeared. Many former frontline troops took up memoir writing. It started during the sixties.

I didn't escape the common fate either. Once in late autumn of 1975 I was spending vacation alone in a small seaside Baltic resort town. Wind was howling, rain was splashing over the roof, sea was rustling. Wet branches

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<sup>8</sup> Cited by: Белоголовцев А.Ф. Невский Пятачок. Л, 1970. С. 59-61.

were hitting the window. And I got hit hard with wartime emotions so unbearably burdensome that I could not resist them, I took the pen, and within the week these memories were born: they were a spontaneous, chaotic summary of thoughts oppressing me...

## Novella IX. Novgorod

Germans stopped assaulting Leningrad in September of 1941. Although, in November there was also an unsuccessful attempt to encircle it completely and join with the Finns. But having been worn out at Tikhvin, German forces rolled back to their original positions and they had only been defending ever since. Instead we had been having almost constant offensives – in hopes of liberating Leningrad. Bloody attacks had been continuing here and there but they were yielding no results. Decisive assault was set to January of 1944. Offensive from two points had been planned: from Leningrad and from Novgorod, in hopes of later joining up and defeating German armies crushingly, destroying them. However, Germans were only managed to be pushed aside to Narva and Pskov, having been thoroughly worn out. Crushing defeat didn't come off.

We were starting our offensive on Novgorod from original positions near Myasnoy Bor where 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army had met its demise in 1942. Things were set in motion well, although there were heavy losses. I

remember a large pile of dead bodies in bloody white camouflage cloaks near breached and destroyed German fortifications. We rode into the breach through the well-trodden way. Tanks had just passed through. They ironed several dead men and flatted them. Old fellows from the burying party were scratching frozen heads that looked like flat round discs off the ground with crowbars. Germans didn't manage to get the heavy artillery out, part of their forces was left encircled in centers of resistance. One of the groupings was trying to break through and and join with the friendlies. That was near Nekokhovo village. At night Germans had rushed ahead while showering the area ahead of them with colorful rain of tracer bullets after boarding the trucks. What a beautiful sight! But we were waiting for them. There were tanks in the woods lying in ambush. Infantry readied the machine guns, and we sent an order on opening the cannon fire over the radio. Defeat was crushing.

Road ended up chock-full of burning trucks and tow trucks, corpses were lying around everywhere – that time German ones. Belgian, Dutch and other volunteer fascists who had gone to Eastern Front were in the squad. Our soldiers had been gutting their belongings for several

hours. The things one could find there! Those Germans are astounding pack rats! There were some kind of rags, lingerie, dishes, carpets, even a delftware toilet. And there were photographs, letters, condoms, pornographic cards – whole collections of them – in the pockets. Many soldiers were decorated, majority had a small shield – a badge given for participation in the capture of Crimea – on their uniforms... Now my feelings of the time seems strange to me, but I remember perfectly: a sight of a clearing scattered with enemy corpses was extremely enjoyable for me.

There were fierce battles for Podberezye station and other German fortified areas. Things were faster in other places. Near Novgorod itself we were hindered by a desperately fighting German rear guard. There was absolutely no way to move forward. Right after sticking something out either machine gun or cannon started firing at you. Germans put even rapid-fire anti-aircraft cannons into action. They were pouring little shells at us like peas. We decided to attempt the attack in the morning and lied down wherever one could. Then at four in the morning there was a shriek: “Hey, you, Slavs! You'll oversleep the Kingdom of Heaven! Get up! German

is gone!” It turned out that Germans had boarded the trucks on the quiet and ran away... Novgorod lied ahead of us. There were three-four kilometers before it.

Recently I have read the description of Novgorod assault and exciting lines how some sergeant (name was specified) planted a standard of victory on the walls of an ancient city in one historical essay. None of that happened! Battles, and fierce ones, were going on only in the surroundings. We entered the city without firing a single shot. We, ten people of division scouts, three artillerymen and two radiomen were the first who entered from Southeast. The day was bright, sunny. Deserted highway was in front of us. Loopholes of concrete pillboxes blackened on the sides, and we were constantly waiting for machine gun bursts which would destroy us. Yet Germans were gone. Thank God, highway there wasn't mined for some reason even though there were plenty of mines in other places. Although “surprises” occurred among the various junk lying on the road. A small bright tin box like the ones they store coffee in here had caught my attention. There turned out to be a button tied to a rope under the lid. Had I pulled the button, the trap would have exploded. Some soldiers lost



their eyes and got heavy wounds like that. I was smart enough to throw the dangerous toy far away, and then I shot it with my SMG. Scouts found five sleeping Germans in one of the suburban houses. They had also slept through everything in the world and didn't notice the retreat of the friendlies. Two had been finished off right there and the rest got sent to headquarters. Novgorod was getting closer. We passed the railway where platforms with abandoned shells for heavy cannons were standing. Huge “piglets” were stacked on the embankment too. We came across a Russian soldier near the city itself. He was going towards us without weapons or a belt, he was drunk, happy. “There are no Germans in the city!” – were his words. Where did he come from? Was he captured or something? But we didn't care, may SMERSH do that.

On that sunny winter day Novgorod appeared before me in a way that was unexpected. Majority of the newer buildings turned out to be destroyed. Ancient churches and walls – in short, those dominants that defined the face of a Medieval city – remained intact for the most part. It was a one-of-a-kind image. These days everything is built up, reconstructed, and old town got

dissolved in faceless, formal new buildings... Domes of Saint Sophia were stripped down by Germans, there was not a single intact glass in the windows. Ruin, desolation, dirt covered up by white snow were everywhere. We reached the square where black granite pedestal from Lenin monument stood. A destroyed German food van was nearby. Germans had dropped everything in a rush, and we, of course, started to fill our bags with pea concentrate and other tasty things. When we had finished with that, we saw that troops appeared on the square, a tank and katyusha came. Political officer emerged from somewhere. He climbed the podium and started giving a speech. Soldiers started firing the SMGs and katyusha launched a salvo of missiles into the air. That is how capture of Novgorod had been celebrated. I hadn't seen any banner planting. The city stood quiet, empty. Not a single dweller was left within its cold walls. We only managed to warm up at the Northern outskirts, in a school building where, obviously, Germans had been located several hours prior to us. I stoked an oven – an overturned iron gasoline barrel – and conceived some potatoes fried with fish oil that was discovered in the wardrobe. Yet I didn't manage to eat properly. We were

ordered to move further in order to catch up to Germans.

We saw a humongous German military cemetery – several thousands of graves – in the city surroundings. There was a giant black cross in the middle and small crosses on the graves were all around it – in distinct lines, with mathematic precision. It was very tidy and cultured! Later I had been told that Germans always buried all their killed in coffins and if there was not enough of them, they used special paper bags that were put on the feet and the head. Yet they didn't have time to bury several hundred of dead people which we spotted on the road out of town. Those were the remains of Novgorod garrison that had got encircled.

The following days were passed in movement. We were thrown at the hardest areas in order to ensure the breach. I remember a Luga highway with huge poplars planted on the sides of it. Some of them had been fallen on the road in order to obstruct our movements. Others had only been prepared for that: a cut was made on the trunk and a yellow cube of TNT of two hundred grams that looked like soap was put there. They had prepared that but didn't manage to explode it, they ran away. We used TNT for warming up. After setting fire to it it burns

slowly while emitting a smelly stinky smoke.

I laid prone under the machine gun fire in a wet marsh and caught a cold during a night assault of one village. Toward the evening I got a serious fever but there was no place to be ill. We were spending the night on a small open clearing. Blizzard was going on, wind was blowing. I was dancing a jig between the piles of snow in order not to have even more serious cold. Toward the morning the fever had declined, the illness subsided. Obviously, organism had mobilized all the strength and defeated the cold.

In February we were attacking a large village with strange name Medved but Germans fought up to the last-ditch there: they were ensuring the withdrawal of their main forces that were retreating from near Leningrad and Luga. There, near Medved, a lot of blood was spilled too... There I shot a plane down for the first time, not on my own, of course, but together with everyone else. “Bast-shoes” started diving onto us and driving us into a ditch. We started shooting from all types of weapons: rifles, machine guns and even SMGs, – while lying on the back. As one of the planes was pulling out of a dive, we planted a sizeable portion of metal in its belly. Smoke

appeared, plane crashed onto a nearby field and exploded. Pilot managed to jump out in time and parachuted down. Upon recovering from the fright we had felt, we started catching him despite heavy shelling. He turned out to be a seasoned warrior with orders for flights over France, England and Holland. We gave him a smoke but a roll-up cigarette couldn't be held well in his burnt shaking hands. Antiaircrafters came running, they asked us to give the shot down German to them: they'd get orders and ranks for that. But we didn't. Infantry led him to the rear area. Our command reported the shot down plane following the correct procedure. Probably infantrymen did the same and most certainly so did antiaircrafters. Then Army command doubled the number and it reached the General Staff even more increased. Such was a normal practice of Great Patriotic War... In fifty to hundred years historians will dig up and publish archived documents and they will write interesting books about enemy casualties and about our victories...

In the beginning of February, it seems, on 4<sup>th</sup>, a mortar shell frag wounded me in the back. It was in small Mezchnik village, near the last house to the side of

Medved village. By the way, I had seen how famous military poet Sergey Orlov was burning in the tank exactly from there, from the haycock that we used as an observation post, there had been almost no fighting. Tanks had just poked out, and they were instantly set on fire. Heavily wounded Orlov was managed to be saved.

Upon getting a frag in the back, I drank some vodka, had lunch with comrades and, being hurried by the shelling, went to the medical unit that had been in the neighboring village, or rather, in a small forest near it. There I had a quarrel with the woman doctor who was painfully poking around the wound with the probe but found no frag in the end. Only in the fifties a radiologist found it by accident in the muscles of left shoulder, after which a surgeon successfully cut it out.

I found many acquaintances who hospitably put a bucket of boiled potatoes in front of me in the tent among the lightly wounded. Now that's life! It's warm, it's dry, there's something to fress! I caught up on sleep to my heart's content too. A month in hospital passed quickly. And although the wound hadn't closed yet, I was discharged: Medved had finally been taken, troops were moving on further, hospital was relocating too. It was

boring to go into battle straight out of the hospital. Our troops were assaulting the village by the name of Ivankovo just at the time. We took it in severe frost, probably being hurried by cold in hopes of warming up in the village. Of course, there had been long since any houses were there but German dugouts turned out to be sturdy. Some firing positions even had steel domes on them. At night we, being lounged and steamed, were counterattacked by Germans and pushed out of the village. I remember that we were running away together with infantry under heavy fire – don't know how we came off with the whole skin! In the morning there was chastisement organized in the infantry regiment: several people were shot in front of the formation with the blame for the defeat being laid on them. That Ivankovo, it seems, was on the German “Panther” defense line and fighting for it was laid stress on by both friendlies and Germans. We didn't manage to breach that line on the fly. Fighting was dragging on.

We participated in another unsuccessful operation aimed at breaching “Panther” – in fighting for the station of Stremutka that is several kilometers South of Pskov – in the end of march. That Stremutka costed us dearly.

## Novella X. Stremutka

*There are no atheists in foxholes*

–General Eisenhower

Sometimes after tearing apart the chaos of memories separate bright images appear in my consciousness, as if memory had stopped a frantically spinning movie on one frame, where everything is frozen and every detail is traced with photographic precision. I see a grim scenery lit up by the light of declining sun. It's a flat snowy plane within the knee of a frozen river. Craters and trenches are everywhere, corpses are lying uncollected. And there is a giant knocked-out German self-propelled gun “Panther”<sup>9</sup> - a monstrous burnt enemy covered in soot and spotty camouflage pattern among this. It burrowed its long trunk – the cannon – into the ground and froze. Two burned corpses are sticking out of the open hatches while drooping down and almost touching the ground with their hands. One has a black charred face and light hair waving in the breeze, the other is completely mangled by frags...

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<sup>9</sup> Germans loved exotic names: “Panther” line, “Panther” tank, “Tiger” tank etc.



It was March of 1944. We were nearing Pskov, and Germans were retreating while snapping at us heavily. They had counterattacked friendlies on the eve, they were stopped, only “Panther” broke through. It crawled over the rived and only then it got nailed: a small snow hillock could be seen near the bulky iron machine. Ivan who had destroyed “Panther” with a bundle of anti-tank grenades was buried there...

I shiver remembering that image right now but then, in forty-four, everything seemed ordinary. We were thinking not about the horrors of war but rather how we could get ourselves safer and warmer: we cleared the snow near the “Panther” expecting to shield ourselves from a possible shelling at least from one side with its steel body. It was impossible to dig, meadow turned out to be marshy. Shelter had been made small with walls made of snow and tarpaulin shelter-half on top instead of the roof. It only protected from wind. We used wooden shell crate lids as flooring. Then we huddled up together with everyone lying on one side. We slept the same way with turning over all together, on command. Our joy – a red-hot jury rigged oven made out of a bucket not so much warming us as lending us moral support – was

puffing in the middle. However, it was possible to press feet in wet felt boots against it – then a thick smell of burnt carrion spread under the tent. It's hard to imagine anything more comfortable! Mellow and warm soldiers had sweet dreams. Only occasionally someone poked a soldier who had barely fallen asleep and as he was coming to his senses with an effort, told him: “Petya, go take a piss!”. That was a cruel soldier joke after which it was hard to fall asleep and bitter swearing of a victim could be heard for a long time.

That night I had more important things than sleeping. Two telephone operators got wounded on the eve, I had to take their place at the phone. Our scout brothers calmed down soon, it was quiet everywhere, shooting almost stopped. I could only hear the steps of a sentry who was wandering around our “house”. All kinds of boring briefings were reported to headquarters over the phone and instructions were coming from the headquarters. Towards three hours the talking stopped, command fell asleep. Then long-awaited concert of Monya Gleyzer started. Monya was a telephone operator at the artillery battalion's headquarters. He was small, nimble, cheerful, he had huge hawk nose and bulging

brown eyes, he was notable for his musical skills, singing with sonorous voice while being a masterful sound imitator: he could cry like a donkey, bark like a dog, he gabbled, crowed, imitated the voices of the command. Monya originated from Odessa where he worked in a brass band that specialized in funeral music. “We played daily at two-three goners, we earned right-on, there was always something to spend on drinks, chasers and visit the girls”, – said Monya.

Being lively and fidgety, Monya had a hard time remaining at the phone for four-five hours. In order to blow off some steam he had started to sing into receiver, to everyone's enjoyment. Concert had been widely broadcasted over all communications. Monya's repertoire was broad: ranging from classic operas and operettas to Odessa criminal songs. Sometimes Monya held his long nose with two fingers and imitated saxophone: “Pew, pew, pew! The weary sun gehntly partehd with the sea!”... Command took a relaxed look at Monya's escapades: his concerts kept phone operators from falling asleep in the hardest predawn hours.

That night Monya started from Violetta's aria from “La Traviata”: “Fa-arewell, happy dreahts of the pahst!

– he kept on sweetly, and then suddenly, at the top of his voice: Pour me a wineglass off the frost! Pew pew, pey, pewmbbb! Two criminals ran off from Ahdessah prison! Meow! Meow!” “Monya, as you were!” – strict artillery battalion commander's basso sounded. Instructions on our further offensive started to be conveyed. And that was where I had first heard the strange name Stremutka. It was a station on the railway between Ostrov and Pskov, not far from the latter. We were to strike at it, cut off the railway and breach the German defense line.

Preparation for the offensive was being conducted carefully, elaborately. Command was coordinating the actions between service branches: tankers were making arrangements with infantry, infantry did it with air force. A heap of shells and other equipment was delivered. Everything was as it had been supposed to, by the rules, and there was enough resources. First came reconnaissance-in-force – a penal battalion was probing Germans to the North of Stremutka and we were sitting in the hole in no man's land and spotting targets. Then our heavy cannons were firing at pillboxes, yet they had no success. Concrete or steel coverings withstood the impact of two-pood shells. Artillery of a particular power

was needed here.

The following day main offensive started a little bit to the South. Infantry was ordered to ride on the tanks and those who didn't manage to fit on them had to take off the overcoats and short fur coats in order not to fall behind the armored vehicles. We also had to run together with advance detachments. But I didn't want to take of my excellent short fur coat. I recalled how we left our stuff before the attack in summer of 1943 at Pogostye, and upon coming back I found dirty rags instead of a new overcoat. Some kind of scum had time to swap it. How low and mean human nature is! Death is looking you in the eyes, yet one still has to steal from your neighbor, even in small amounts! Yet it's possible to do without an overcoat in summer, but in winter, in the frost, it's dumb to lose a warm short fur coat. I found a large sheet of iron – apparently it was remnants of a destroyed house's roof – I bent one of its sides, attached a thick rope and hooked it to a tank. An improvised sledge was ready. We fit on it together with all the belongings, weapons and heavy radio stations. And wearing short fur coats, of course.

Artillery softening-up was powerful. It suppressed the resistance of advance German detachments. Tanks

and infantry overcame a small river of Mnoga, entered German positions and then quickly passed several kilometers to Stremutka and broke into it. We followed the tank on our sledge as if it had been a horse carriage, only wind whizzed in our ears. There was a two-story tall stone school building in the center of the station settlement. Headquarters of a German regiment were located there. We ended up there when enemy colonel was exiting the doors while putting his gloves on, and he was going to enter a car to run away to the rear area. He expected everything to happen in the normal order: advanced troops would slaughter Russians, hold them off for a long time and retreat would be necessary way later. This time everything happened differently – we were right on cue. Infantry finished the enemy off, and our command took the car, I think it was “Opel-Admiral”. Victory turned out to be unexpected and quick. I saw fortifications that had been destroyed by the pinpoint fire of our artillery: there were ruins of log pillboxes inside which logs, ground and soldiers' bodies were muddled together. Everything was going on well.

We unhooked from the tank and followed the attackers. It was getting dark. Bushy clearing lied in front

of the railway. Cannons and mortars were shooting sparsely, but no fortifications could be seen on the embankment. At any rate, at least in our section. It was weird. Germans could have entrenched there firmly, like in Pogostye. We were following the trails of tank tracks clearly imprinted in the snow. Seldom we came across empty casings of tank cannons that were thrown out of the turrets. A corpse of a friendly soldier lied in the crater, his belly was ripped and open like a chest with an lid on the side. All the entrails could be seen like on an anatomic model: there were intestines, liver, stomach. We met a burned tanker whom we had parted with just recently near the embankment. His tank had just been burned, and the whole crew died. He took a hand-rolled cigarette we offered with a shaking hand, drew down, waved us farewell and went to the rear area.

Everything was calm on the railway bed, tracks were intact. Neither friendlies nor Germans could be seen. Some kind of building stood near the tracks, we entered it in hopes of warming up and establishing an observation post in the attic. However, upon seeing smoke coming out of the chimneys, Germans shelled our shelter, setting it on fire. We had to run outside to the

frost.

Being tired and wet, we made a fire. I took off my felt boots and started to dry the footcloths over the fire. Bonfire got encircled by soldiers from the reinforcement who were going forward. They asked us how it was on the front and whether everyone got killed with agitation. Recruits could always be distinguished from the seasoned soldiers. They hustled without being able to stand at one place and anticipated meeting with the front. Seasoned ones, however, sat down while putting the SMG between the knees and relaxed while resting with all the cells in their bodies as soon as a free minute happened. However, they could focus in a split second, evaluate the situation and, if necessary, get into action. A person with slow reaction rarely survived at war. They could spend weeks without sleep but if there was an opportunity, they slept for days, as a reserve so to speak. People who had been on the front developed protective reactions that helped them survive. I remember like while scouting in the forests near Leningrad I, who had never had a good sense of smell, could have sniffed out German tobacco over fifty-seventy meters, like an animal...

Suddenly a German shell exploded near, frags



whizzed by. One of them, huge and heavy, passed over my back, tore off the whole behind of the short fur coat and fell on the snow, hissing. Being tired and stultified, I kept indifferently drying the footcloth, apparently without even changing my expression. Then I touched the loin and remembered the German and his mother at length since I had understood I had to freeze then. Recruits were bewildered, frightened – for them the incident was bizarre and horrifying...

Meanwhile a night pause in combat came. Germans turned on the radio loudspeakers and sultry tune of “Rio Rita” – a popular foxtrot in prewar years – sounded in the dark of the night. We were napping wherever one could. The frost was intensifying. I climbed into a crater but harsh wind was constantly turning the flaps of a torn short fur coat, thus making my back bare. It was very cold.

The other day offensive was continuing successfully. We cut off the Pskov-Ostrov highway and moved forward despite the losses. However, it was clear that Germans were gradually recovering from being caught by surprise and they started throwing in the new forces. Shelling from their side intensified... Towards the end of the day I

understood I had been falling ill. I did catch a draft from the hole in a short fur coat! I was shivering with fever, my teeth were clattering. Upon seeing that, command ordered me to go to the rear area and have a thorough rest in a branch hut near the cannons. I would have to walk eight-ten kilometers. I envisioned the road only approximately: I walked along the way which had been rammed by trucks and tanks... Soon it became completely dark. Shooting could be heard from somewhere far away. Flare glow flashed near the horizon.

I was all alone under the sky studded with large stars. Former German defense line stretched everywhere around me. Pillboxes rose like black hills, cannon barrels, knocked-out tanks, trucks could be seen. Palisade interwoven with barbed wire was sticking out. The wire was nearing the road itself in fantastic spirals. Here and there rag ribbons were flapping and bodies were hanging on it. Darkness concealed the objects, it was impossible to see separate details, and it felt sinister due to that. I was listening to the silence cautiously and preparing for all kinds of surprises, having turned the safety of my SMG off.

The moon had come out. It illuminated the snowy

kingdom of death. Fever which did not leave me gave an ominous, delusional tinge to all the surroundings. I had been dragging on for the whole night while overcoming weakness, stumbling over dead bodies, falling down into craters, falling, getting up, and I sometimes felt that pale hazes were flying over tormented land in the darkness and silence, taking the forms of human figures or bizarre animals. Yet those were hallucinations from fever – my temperature rose up to, probably, forty degrees, maybe even more. I felt dizzy. I often lost control over myself and did not understand where I was. Only the awareness of necessity to move forward and by no means stopping remained intact. As the dawn broke, tractors with cannons moving towards me appeared on the road. What a lucky coincidence! That was our artillery battery relocating forward. Had I missed them, I wouldn't have found anyone and God knows how it would have ended! I was put on a trailer, covered with tarpaulin and upon reaching the new location, was laid down near the small oven in a branch hut. Cannons were firing and I was getting rid of my ailment, almost lying on the red-hot oven itself. After a day cold withdrew.

Having come to my senses, I crawled outside on the

sun one morning and dove on the ground while barely managing to look around. Instinct hinted me – there was danger: a huge shell flew with horrible snorting, ricocheted off the ground and exploded. Two battery soldiers who didn't have the quickness of reaction that develops on the firing line were killed. That is how 7<sup>th</sup> of April, 1944 started – a day when I became 21.

The following day I had already been in Stremutka. We were sitting in a large half-destroyed German log pillbox. A hand and parts of two knee-high boots were sticking out of the fallen log covering. There was no way to pull the poor hans out, he was jammed firmly. Thus we lived in pleasant neighborhood like that. Six more “friends” in green overcoats lied near the log pillbox in the ditch. Remains of the log pillbox had soon been fallen during the shelling and crushed down on Mishka Bepalov who had kept to bed for two months and then walked with a lean.

Offensive was continuing. Army wedged in forward almost reaching Velikaya river, yet Germans increased resistance. We got to the tip of the wedge in Olenino village that had just been captured. All hell broke loose there. German cannons were firing non-stop from three

sides – from the front and the flanks. Dive bombers were flying over us continuously. Cartridges and shells that had been set on fire exploded in the stone foundations of destroyed houses – our supply storage was there. Tank shells were flying by with sinister howling: newest German “Tiger” tank was firing at us. Its seven-meter cannon threw out shells with horrible force. Everything around was exploding, boiling, collapsing, rumbling. Some truck that god knows why had come to Olenino exploded. People around were dying and dying. Shells contrary to the theory of probability often hit the same spot. We gnawed out holes in a rocky road that stretched along the village like a hump and we were sitting there. It was almost impossible to poke out: as soon as the stereo periscope was risen, it got both tubes torn off by frags. Char, dust were everywhere, piles of sand rose up in the air. SMGs and rifles got dirty, jammed, became useless. We had to fight off German counterattacks with grenades only, which thankfully were in abundance. We fought with shovels, knives, crowbars, teeth. Artillery that we were calling over the radio helped a lot, thankfully the station was still in one piece. All the telephone wires got torn to shreds. Of all we had lived through that hell was

comparable probably only to the fighting near Sinyavino, Gaitolovo, Tortolovo and Voronovo in 1943, but everything continued longer there, and fighting near Stremutka had soon died down. Apparently, command understood that strengths got equalized, that it was useless to spill blood further, and above all – season of bad roads started. Spring came, snow melted, ground turned into slush, roads became muddy, resupply was broken. Germans had a railway close by, and they had shells supplied in abundance. We, however, carried everything in our hands since trucks kept getting stuck in the mud. Just like in Pogostye in spring of 1942, chains of packed people were going through twenty kilometers while getting stuck knee-deep. One is carrying two mortar shells that are hanging over the shoulder, the other has a sack of dried bread. Third is wandering over puddles with a shell crate or grenades... Biplanes were dropping military supplies by air with parachutes during the night. However, one can't wage war for long like that! Wounded were almost impossible to pull out, and they were dying in the mud en masse. Continuing offensive in such conditions was madness. Thus operation near Stremutka had been stopped.

We were running over a large plowed field during one of the final battles. Muddy ground stuck to the boots, and every foot had lumps weighing seven kilograms each hanging from it. We tried to move fast, for the place was open and shot at by Germans. However instead of running there turned out to be only turtle steps that drew all our strength. We strove for slipping the dangerous place while panting, wheezing, bulging out eyes. Yet heavy mortar shells started exploding all around us. We had to dive in a cold liquid mud. It got behind the collar, behind the service shirts' cuffs, into the nostrils, into the ears. What a lovely condition! Still, we crawled through that field and only Algulla Hikmatullin, our good friend, had stayed there forever.

A wreckage of our fighter plane – IL – that had been shot down by Germans on the eve – was sticking out of the mud at the edge of the field. Pieces of purple meat were scattered all around. Those were the remains of a “Stalin's Falcon”, as our brave pilots were called those days... Fighter plane attacks that we observed from the ground were an engrossing sight. Usually ILs flew in nines. All the German front line started to quake from shooting. Machine guns, anti-aircraft cannons of all

calibers, rifles spat out a sea of fire. Sky was covered in colorful traces. Red, blue, green, white – those ones were hazy. Fighter planes were covered in curls of explosions yet stubbornly moved towards the target, as if despising death. They dropped the bombs over our heads that tumbled in the air at first but then straightened and flew towards Germans under their momentum while gaining speed. Then fighter planes launched rockets that looked like pencils from below. They rushed to the target while hissing and leaving a trail of fire. Usually that kind of sweep ended up with one-two or even three planes being destroyed, either breaking apart and exploding in the air or falling to the ground and leaving a trail of smoke. Pilots often saved themselves with parachutes, although Germans had a mean habit of killing them in the air prior to landing. As far as I know, friendlies did not have this kind of baseness towards the enemy... Everyone died on the front, most of all infantrymen and tankers, but their death happened not as spectacularly as death of pilots that was witnesses by tens of thousands of eyes.

I had lost many people in Stremutka. I bandaged the wounds of many and sent them to the rear area for recovery. Gradually fighting was dying down. We settled



in a dugout on the bank of a river that had corpses floating in it. Fortifications were being built everywhere around. Trenches were being dug, giant cisterns of flammable fluid were being dug into the ground – those were stationary flamethrowers on the sides with tank hazards. Ground started to dry up, grass turned green. Lieutenant Pshenichnikov started inviting broads to his place, and we could calmly boil some porridge two times a day and bake flatbread from rye flour that we had picked up in destroyed Olenino. This flour was mixed with water and salt and then sticked to a red-hot side of the oven. Dough was burning, flatbread stabbed the tongue, scratched roof of mouth and throat with poorly milled grain, but we were glad.

Shelling became rarer and it was mostly concentrated on the railway tracks that were nearby. Every impact on the tracks hit the target since there had been plenty of dugouts and coverings built in the dry embankment. We could see how logs, boards, some kind of rags and, probably, people were flying up in the air during the explosion. At night Germans flew in small planes imitating our practice of using training U-2 for actions in the darkness. Such a plane shut down the

engine and sought bonfires, burning roll-up cigarettes or sparks flying out of chimneys while quietly gliding from the height. Bombs were dropped on those targets. Our dugout stood near a path that went to a firing line. One night I heard two infantrymen stopping for a smoke nearby while being half-asleep. They were striking sparks out of steel without haste, they made two drags each and suddenly something howled in the sky. Then numerous explosions rumbled everywhere around. German dropped a cluster full of small grenades that were called “snort-snort” by soldiers. Cluster opened up in the air and dozens of grenades littered the surroundings like pea. Explosions had rumbled, lumps of ground had fallen, plane engine started in the air. And then a voice could be heard:

–Vaska, are you alive?

–Alive, your mother.

–Well, then let's go further.

Receding steps sounded, and everything became quiet.

We were recovering, we washed ourselves in a steam bath-dugout near the lake that was captured from Germans, got summer equipment. Operation in

Stremutka was over.

In a few days I managed to witness the scale of fighting that had happened there with my own eyes. I went to the rear area from the firing line on some kind of business. I stumbled upon a large forest clearing entirely covered by destroyed machines five kilometers from the front. Special tow trucks moved destroyed tanks, cannons, APCs here from the firing line. German machines were among them too. It was done either for repairs or for sending them for melting: metal was particularly scarce during the war time.

The picture was impressive. Thick metal of tank armor was pierced by armor piercing rounds. Layers became torn, twisted into spirals or mangled like jagged petals of unknown flowers. Some tanks were ginger – those burned down, some could be seen with brown dried human blood on them, and sometimes maimed remains of tankers lied there... All that monstrous exhibition was out of character with the silence of a forest turning green. Sun was shining, air exhaled fragrance, and I was thinking that in every tank, near every destroyed cannon people had died while shuddering. And I knew that that monument of death would disappear soon, being molten

into other tanks and cannons. New people would come and would be directed into a sinister conveyor belt of war that was working continuously and demanded more and more sacrifices.

**Novella XI. Pogostishche Village. Sashka  
Palashkin, Ivan Ivanovich  
Varennikov, Serezhka Orlov and  
Others**

It's great near Pskov in summer! Fields are green, intact villages are hiding among the gardens, bell towers of half-destroyed churches pierce the sky somewhere. There's a lot of sun, air. It's such an expanse. And the sky is so blue! It feels good as heart, and it seems there's no war. That's how it was near Shvanibakhovo station where we came battered from Stremutka in July.

We climbed a grassy hillock near the firing line during a dark night, dug a hole at its top and managed to set up a sturdy trench shelter covered by a green turf in short hours before dawn. When the sun rose, hill looked as usual, only a barely noticeable loophole looked at the German side. New OP (observation post) started working from which we monitored the Germans through a stereo periscope. There was a line of our trenches ahead of it as well as small gully with a marshy river, and after it there were German positions in the village among the hills. The

actual village didn't exist. Only foundations remained intact somewhere, and the logs from houses went to setting up trench shelters and coverings. It was a powerful center of resistance on German "Panther" defense line. We were to take it, breach the enemy positions, thus opening up a way for a new offensive. Or maybe just a reconnaissance-in-force was supposed to happen. I don't know.

The village behind the river was called... Pogostishche! Lucky us! We hadn't forgotten Pogostye yet, and then we had Pogostishche... Won't that coincidence be fatal? Won't there, ahead, a churchyard be prepared for us? It is very much possible! So far everything was quiet. We were shooting sparsely, Germans were shooting sparsely. Through the periscope their figures looked small, like toys. They're digging something, they're hurrying somewhere, they're carrying something heavy. In other place – they're looking for lice while stripped to the waist, and they are bathing in a large crater. Here a motorcycle came, here a car appeared. And – bam! An explosion of our shell rises nearby. You're naughty! It's not forty-one anymore! Now there's a lot of shells, and we learned how to shoot too...

We're enjoying complete quietness and filling grub, since we're receiving foods in full, in field rations, and we are boiling our own lunch. Everything ours stays with us.

During the nights new troops are showing up. Tanks stationed themselves in the small forest. Cannons were moved ahead passing us by for direct laying fire. A series of crates with "Ivans" – huge large-headed rockets that fly right out of the crates and cover large areas – was set up in the small valley. Explosion of their large head that weighs a hundred kilograms creates a crater ten meters in diameter.

Once young Sashka Palashkin was on duty at the stereo periscope. He looked like he was fourteen-fifteen, but he managed to go through fire and water, and he was considered to be an exceptionally experienced scout. Three medals were clinking on his service shirt. He was a great guy, cheerful, resourceful, quick-witted. At four in the morning when the sun had risen Sashka dragged all our crowd that had been having sweet dreams out of bed with a savage voice. We figured that Germans sneaked to our dugout and grabbed our SMGs. But Sashka was laughing enthusiastically and inviting us to the stereo periscope. Turns out, a medical unit moved to the foot of

our hill in the evening. By then, in the morning, orderly girls went to the bushes, suspecting nothing. Sashka was showing them through the periscope zoomed tenfold.

According to all the evidence offensive was just about to start. A penal battalion was designated for the assault of Pogostishche, PB in short, or “Players on Bayan”, as soldiers called it jokingly. That time battalion consisted not of the professional criminals, deserters or self-shooters but rather of demoted supply officers and quartermasters caught stealing, and other rear area scum. They got about ten-fifteen years of prison each, then swapped for penal battalion. How shamelessly did one have to steal in order to get caught! Those were fellows about thirty-forty years old, and sometimes even older. They had sleek, fat muzzles, double chins and fat bellies. They flaunted fashionable tailor-made overcoats, fancy caps. Only they had the usual rough soldier boots with puttees instead of knee-high boots. It was a picture worth seeing!

Then an order comes: attack is in the morning; our lieutenant is to be together with the scouts and a radio station near battalion commander, accompany him and regulate the cannon fire. We had already been at “bayan



players” in morning twilight. They were fed, given vodka and they were announced that if battalion captured three German trenches, their conviction would be expunged. After such a promise “bayan players” were spoiling for a fight like greyhounds for a game.

An artillery softening-up roared. It was excellent, weighty, done from many weapons over well-spotted targets. There were many shells, firing went on for a long time: clouds of smoke, fire and dust rose over the German positions. If only this kind of softening-up had been in 1941 near Pogostye! Cannon fire was still going on, yet “bayan players” had already jumped out of coverings and overcame two hundred meters of no man's land in a matter of minutes. They had crossed the river, and by then they were in the first trench already. German defense turned out to be mostly suppressed. Only separate machine guns were firing. Yes, obviously, Germans did not expect the attack and they didn't have that many troops on the firing line. After the first chains of attackers we started to move too. Stray bullets didn't hit anyone, there had been no artillery fire yet. River turned out to be shallow but sticky. Winter goners lied on the other bank of it – they were a result of an

unsuccessful offensive in February. They're black corpses in rotten short fur jackets – there's decomposed fur between the ribs that are full of infesting worms. It's a horrible stench. After them our tank blown to smithereens that had obviously driven over a land mine and exploded is situated. But there's no time to slack, we're running forward, over a small road marked by engineers. There are no mines, but move a step to the side and it's curtains for you! Here's a first trench too. There are destroyed log pillboxes, dead Germans. Friendlies can't be seen, they're already lobbing grenades into the second trench. We're following them and suddenly there's a horrible howl, rasp, whiz. I dive into the crater and freeze. Ground is quaking, ears seem like they're plugged with cotton. Something hits hard and heavily on the leg above the knee. It got torn off! – I figured. I look over the shoulder – the leg is fine but a huge lump of ground lies near. What was that, then? Turns out, after downing quarter a liter of vodka each, “bayan players” had rushed and moved ahead of the schedule, had taken two lines of trenches without particular hassle and there the last chord of our artillery softening-up caught them – it was a salvo of rocket

mortars, “Ivans”. “Small inconsistency” so often accompanying our endeavors happened. We got off cheaply but “bayan players” were hit harder. Essentially, battalion got demoralized and didn't reach the third trench. And Germans meanwhile managed to come to and launched a counterattack. Fighting ensued.

After snooping around the firing line, we found a shelter for us – it was an excellent German dugout, dug deeply into the ground and covered with five layers of logs. Even a heavy shell can't batter down the one like that! There were tidy bunk beds fit for four people and a small oven. Walls were planked. A forgotten map with the most thorough and the most accurate designations of locations of our troops lied on the small table. None the less, fritzies knew how to wage war! We settled in with comfort but it was not to be! Suddenly a thick tow-headed soldier whose exterior reminded of young Nikita Sergeevich burst into the dugout. He had sloping soldiers and slanting nape. He held an SMG in his hands – “Yo-ho, Slavs, buggeh off! – he declared firmly. – Here will be command post of colonel Orlov, your mother!..” Yet we were old hands, we grabbed the SMGs too and had words with him. Colonel Orlov HIMSELF appeared, wearing

Budenny style mustache, wearing orders. He was full of determination to throw us out in the trench but we found a good argument: “Comrade colonel, radio will surely be destroyed there!” That convinced him after which a compromise solution followed. Me and my partner Ivan Ivanovich Varennikov were situated under the bunk bed, colonel Orlov and his colleague, commander of the other regiment, reclined on the bed, and our lieutenant, scouts and colonel's lackeys were on the other beds.

I lied as quiet as a grave and examined colonel's knee-high boots with a toxic smell that almost pushed at my nose. Seldom colonel spitted densely, pressed the hand-rolled cigarette over the heel and threw it at my head. But all that was small pay for safety and warmth... Colonels were having a grim talk. One of them couldn't move his cannons to Pogostishche in time. Shelling started, downpour came, river flooded and even though a tractor was sunk there on purpose in order to create an improvised bridge, nothing worked. Task was not fulfilled, colonel was waiting for demotion grievingly and maybe even more serious punishments – since the defense itself was not breached and then guilty would be sought in order to punish them as an example! Colonels

were drinking vodka, eating well. Orlov was consoling his colleague. The tow-headed guy who turned out to be colonel's lackey and his nephew, Serega Orlov, became very sympathetic after realizing we were not in his way anymore. Scraps of canned fish were passed for us under the bed, a hunk of bread and a piece of fatback bacon came our way. How about that! I would lie under colonel's butt for a hundred years! We had sweet dreams despite extremely powerful shelling and direct hits of small mortar shells to our trench shelter. It would have been different outside. Colonel Orlov's artillerymen who had stayed there didn't have time to bury their comrades.

The following morning after a powerful shelling Germans started to climb to Pogostishche accompanied by five tanks. Raw infantry from reinforcements that changed "bayan players" started to run. And while Serezhka Orlov was bringing infantrymen to their senses by swearing and using SMG stock, we lied prone at a trophy machine gun and started deterring assaulting hansas. One tank was knocked out by heavy artillery firing from the rear area. Second was burned by colonel Orlov's cannoneers. Sashka Palashkin stopped the third by deftly lobbing an anti-tank grenade from the foxhole.

The remaining ones started to move back. Similar carousel continued the following day and the day after too. In a week Germans understood that Pogostishche could not be retaken, and friendlies did not conduct an offensive. Fighting died down. The incident, as they say, was closed. But we lost Sashka Palashkin. We were running from one trench to another over an open area once. One would jump out, fly over the dangerous zone in huge leaps and dive into the shelter like a stone. Second, third... Sashka jumped out too. And during that time a shell crashed over him. A bunch of frags stroke down the little fellow, one could say, on the fly, like a buckshot hits a bird. He was buried in Pogostishche.

Soon we were relocated to the vicinity of Ostrov. A major offensive started there. I remember Ostrov that had just been taken, all in the green of the trees, openwork arched girders of an exploded bridge, half-sunk in the river. And a large group of prisoners is led on the street. Some of them are not wearing pants, to great joy of our soldiers... I remember large completely intact village, though it had no dwellers, with a high farm silo. It was called Gribuli. A scout Vanka Bozin, former jailbird, wise guy and slicker, quickly renamed it to Grab-

loot-it, for there we found a fair amount of grub in basements and larders... I remember Pushkin Mountains as large as life, without people, without houses, without signs – everything was burned down. Yet forests, lakes and fields boggled the mind considerably more than present braiding-like slick museum buildings. And we managed to drive away Germans so fast that small church with Pushkin's grave remained intact, though it had been mine-studded from top to bottom. Why would fritzies explode it? It was incomprehensible.

Then we were transferred to the direction of Pechory and were announced that regiment that would open fire on the city of Izborsk first would be decorated and honored by command. “Faster, faster!” – command is hurrying us. We're getting inside a fast off-roader and rushing forward. Here ancient walls of the city are seen but there are neither hide nor hair of Germans. We're jumping on the ground, running, SMGs at the ready – there are no Germans! It's empty inside the walls. Population is hiding in the stone towers. And then far away, in our rear area, cannon shots can be heard. First, second, third, fourth. They're firing with the whole artillery battalion and doing it rapidly. Shells are nearing

us with howl and start exploding in the ditch at the side of the highway. Some moron wanted to earn an order but, thank God, he is doing it haphazardly, without preparation and thorough aiming, meaning as usual... That saves us and everyone who is in Izborsk. We're scolding bunglers feverishly and furiously over the radio. We're shouting that we are in the city and there are no Germans here. Shelling stops but a new one starts, by Germans. It's sparse and unsettling. That, however, is not an obstacle for us. Might as well look around too. I run inside an empty house – all the things are in place. A pack of pasta lies on the shelf. Aha! This is my trophy! I put the spoil in the bag and move further... After about ten years since the end of the war I had come to Izborsk to look at familiar places. House was in place. A nice, intelligent priest's wife turned out to be its owner, with whom I had a pleasant chat, remembered the war and other events. Her husband had perished in Siberian camps, and she decided to live the rest of her life in Izborsk. But now they say this house isn't there anymore, and neither is its owner.

After walking through the town we got to Truvor's settlement, looked from the hill near St. Nicholas Church



and gasped! The whole world was spreading in front of us. After the rotten marshes of Pogostye, after a three-year crawl over the trench dirt such kind of vastness and great spaces had opened up there that it was breathtaking. I still can't forget that first introduction to Izborsk...

After getting down from the hill, we went through Maly village. The further way led to Estonia, to the most beautiful part of it. Towns of Elva, Anslo, Vyru, one more picturesque than the other, were in our way. Roads, roads... There are destroyed tanks and cannons on the roadsides, traffic guide girls who're waving the flags, thick dust in the air that gets inside ears, nostrils, eyes. Faces are becoming gray and soldiers look like concussed ones who were dug out of the ground after a shell explosion. There's driving, driving, day and night, only interrupted by accidents. Either we drove over a mine but having lost a truck got off cheaply. Or driver fell asleep behind the wheel and threw us into the ditch. Or a scout tore off a grenade ring together with tobacco pouch that were in the same pocket while having a smoke in the trailer with the shells that was moving fast along the road. We heard a distinctive pop of the fuse, startled to

the sides, and then explosion banged. Five got wounded, including the hero of the occasion – his hip got completely twisted. It's a fortune that shells didn't explode too, else a grand firework would have happened!

Roads, roads... Someone is going somewhere, trucks and carriages are scurrying from pillar to post in the clouds of dust, tractors and tanks are rumbling... German-appointed village chief – a bald and tattered bloke in torn drab peasant's overcoat – is being hanged on the roadside. He's waiting for his fate calmly. Captain from prosecution braced with belts, with a paper – a sentence – in the hand, two-three executors from SMERSH and two-three spectators are near by. Others are walking past indifferently, everyone got tired of death. It turned out that even the execution was done haphazardly: rope was rotten, it got torn off, village chief fell down. Now they're going to start over. New rope was found, it got thrown over the bough, got the noose on and people are pulling it: “Heave ho!”... It's primitive, mundane and boring... And everything is way more interesting ten meters further: soldiers are feeling traffic guides who came off duty. There are laughter, enthusiastic shrieks, screams.

Once universal joyful laughter caught our attention on a busy cross of three roads jammed with trucks, carriages, cannons and pedestrians: a corpse of a hefty German lied on his belly in the center of the crossroads. His pants were down and a small red flag the cloth of which waved in the breeze cheerfully sicked out of his butt.

Fighting, bombings, buildings burning in the night – all that merges into a mere montage of events. I remember a highway to Tartu that was going through beautiful hills and forests, comfortable farms and villas of Estonians. I got wounded for the fourth time on that highway... I remember sated life that, for the first time in the whole war, started there, in Estonia, since “pasturage” appeared – chicken, pigs, cow milk, vegetables, berries.

I remember two fierce battles that, among others, happened there. Germans suddenly attacked us and forced us to run literally without pants at Emma-Juigi river, near Tartu. We swam over the river, having dropped the cannons on the other side. Court martial and penal company were in the air. We conducted a desperate counterattack without hesitation and we did recapture

our cannons almost intact. Comrades-in-arms who shot a German squad that drove us off point blank from heavy cannons helped. Everything worked out.

The other time commander of brigade's headquarters, likely due to drinking or stupidity, drove right into German positions on a headquarters' bus. We had to grab SMGs and grenades and liberate him. We managed it in ten-fifteen minutes but, of course, we only pulled out a corpse that got buried with honors.

I remember beautiful Tartu that had been divided between Germans and us for a long time and was being brutally destroyed from both sides. There had been something to fress and drink in the town for quite a while but then stockpiles ran dry. Handymen started to look for spirits and procured it from university specimen, wet rats, creeps, tapeworms.

March to Riga which we entered among the first was in September. A huge written "Herman Goering Werke" (Herman Goering's Enterprise) hanged at a station market. Local population met us sympathetically and smashed liquor stores together with us. From near Riga our way led to Lithuania where we had finally bumped into Courland German grouping that defended

in the region of Libau. That was a backbone of Army Group “North” that went up to Leningrad and besieged it, now pushed away from the city. Grouping was fighting here until the end of the war, until capitulation, and held its ground.

We, however, were transferred to the vicinity of Warsaw in December of 1944. It was a jumbled move. Army was riding dozens of train convoys: tankers, infantrymen, artillerymen. Soldiers bartered junk for moonshine from the population along the way, and drunk train convoys with songs, whooping, sometimes with shooting, were rolling West over the Polish territory. Command tried to prohibit selling moonshine at one station. Approaching tankers turned the tank turret and whacked an anti-tank round into the commandant's house between the stories. They said that commander ran away au naturel. After that everything came back to the old ways.

We were celebrating New Year in a freight car on Lida station. Senior lieutenant Kosinov was grimly punching his watch, and the others danced around a red-hot oven and sang drunk songs with bad voices.

During this move I met Serezhka Orlov for another

time. He was riding in the medical car where, according to him, uncle was healing the old wounds. Nurses told me confidentially that uncle had a relapse of old clap that had been caught as early as the glorious times of Civil War. Serezhka was drunk, he wore kid gloves. He was hospitably treating us with vodka, fatback bacon, sausages. Where did the goods come from? It turned out that during the convoy's movement passengers with luggage entered it and sat in vestibules. One needs to move anyway! Serezhka sought a more wealthy fellow with large suitcases, gave him a powerful kick in the rear, pushed him out of the car, and the junk he put into requisition on the nearest station. And there you have Serezhka!

We met for the third and last time during fifties in Moscow, in an overcrowded subway car. I recognized a familiar figure that looked like young Nikita Sergeevich, but that time he didn't wear a military uniform but rather a fancy mantel and a gray terrycloth cap.

–Serezhka?

–Yes. And who are you?

I explained.

–I don't know, I can't remember. There were many

of you... And where do you work? In the trade department? Yes? Mayb' we could take a stroll somewhere?

We didn't take a stroll and parted forever. I wish I had asked about the uncle...

All the time, starting from Stremutka and up to Tartu, Ivan Ivanovich Varennikov had been my permanent companion. I was registered as a head of the radio station, and he – as my deputy. I carried one crate, he – the other. Ivan Ivanovich, according to my perceptions of that time, was old. He was more than thirty years old. He was tall, narrow-shouldered but he had a very protruding chest like a rooster and wide hips. He wore size 14 boots and walked toes out. His head tapered towards the top and it was covered with extremely thick black hair that concealed small retreating forehead. He had prominent brow ridge, pithecantrope-like cheekbones and a large duckbill-looking nose. Hair always grew out of extremely wide nostriles. Chest and back were hairy.

Ivan Ivanovich's initial civilian occupation was a pantryman somewhere in a small railway station somewhere in Transurals. At war he had been initially

assigned as a clerk in the rear area, but he got transferred to the firing line. He couldn't stand weapons, he didn't want to learn how to work at a radio station, although it was as easy as falling off a log. In short, he was an “inner pacifist”, not by convictions but just instinctively, not being able to stand anything military. Yet he had remarkable composure, he didn't tremble, like all of us, during the shelling. As far as I know, he managed to survive at war while getting off with a few scratches.

Ivan Ivanovich had to be saved from command's anger, to be forced to dig a covering, to take care of weapons – he did not give a darn about all that himself. During a lull in fighting he gave lectures to soldiers on techniques and technology of love with a fruity voice. Tips of my ears went red, I managed to drift off and not hear anything. Ivan Ivanovich's speeches were accompanied by loud guffaws of the audience and amazed bawls: “Well!”, “No way!”, “So there, your mother!” Ivan Ivanovich possessed other abilities too. They said that for half a loaf of bread he could douse the flame of a wick lamp from afar by loudly breaking wind on it. That kind of performance gathered many spectators and commentators, but I didn't get a chance to



be present during it.

We lived near each other, we shared bread and salt but we had neither liking nor understanding between us. I think Ivan Ivanovich was glad when I had been wounded, and I sighed with relief too after getting rid of his company. Shortly before our parting an event that burdened last days of our coexistence occurred. Once Ivan Ivanovich got a ration for two for a week: bread, sugar, canned food and other things. A ponderous “sidor” formed which Ivan Ivanovich jealously guarded, since he loved fressing. During the night “sidor” served him as a pillow. We went to sleep in two small holes near a path going to the firing line. In the morning there was no “sidor” under the head of my colleague. Infantrymen safely pulled our supply out from under Ivan Ivanovich who was sleeping soundly when walking past us at night. He was famous for his deep sleep and snorting reminding of a far away cannonade. Poor Varennikov was shaken by this event, it was easier for him to endure the defeat of our regiment. I didn't say a word about the disappearance but I felt that I became even more unpleasant for Ivan Ivanovich. Even more so, soldiers had been toying about what happened for long...

Lieutenant Pshenichnikov commanded us, having changed lieutenant Popov who got his head torn off near Stremutka. Pshenichnikov was slender, graceful, handsome like Apollo, yet mean, unscrupulous and rotten to the core. Broads were his main passion. They were in his thoughts, speeches and actions. In leisure time he talked about his romances during peace time interlarding the narration with juicy stuff. His position – a school board inspector – allowed him, as he said, to scare young teacher ladies and succeed... He was constantly finding sweethearts somewhere. Near the village of Bolshaya Gorushka, during a horrible shelling, when several people had been torn apart near his dugout, he was quietly fooling around with a cutie. Near Stremutka he brought a cute sergeant girl from somewhere again. And he put security near the doors – me and a phlegmatic sergeant Zaytsev, a brave warrior and a proud man. Zaytsev took offense and started firing his SMG in the air in order to spoil Pshenichnikov the pleasure. Yet he got nothing of the kind. Lieutenant emerged from the dugout only in the morning and asked: “What was the reason for salute?”

He hit on every civilian girl we met on our way. He

loved to sing songs from Leshchenko's repertoire to guitar with a fruity bleating voice: “Where is, where's my Tatyana?..”

I didn't serve under him anymore in Germany but soldiers were telling the feats of then senior lieutenant already. He started a document inspection from civilian population somewhere in a crowded place. Good-looking German women were taken for “additional inspection” which was then conducted in a secluded place.

Last time I saw Pshenichnikov in the hospital. While walking past the venereal diseases department I heard guitar strums and familiar: “Where is, where's my Tatyana, my love and erstwhile dreams...”

–Oh, my radioman! – Pshenichnikov recognized me...

Fragment of a German shell stroke him down near Danzig.

## Novella XII. A Dream<sup>10</sup>

*Thus I dreamed I was a butterfly fluttering over the flowers,  
and when I had woken up, I did not know whether I was a man  
or a butterfly dreaming it was a man...*

—Ancient Japanese philosopher

In July of 1944 Germans left their defense position to the South of Pskov and we followed them. Four days and three nights had been spent in constant offensive, short battles alternated with marches, and we knew neither sleep nor rest. Finally, towards the end of the fourth day overnight rest was announced. After a long-term strain, after rumble and scorching calm and silence came instantly. Upon looking around, we got into the hands of amazing perception of the novelty of outside world that always arises for people who had spent many days on the firing lines. We were rediscovering this world for ourselves, astounded by its colors, its scents, the fact that it existed.

I climbed a small hill that had a wide panorama opening up from it. Everything was there: small houses,

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<sup>10</sup> That dream that indeed happened in 1944 impressed me so much that I wrote it down right after the war, in 1945.

trees, green meadows and far horizon, yet there were neither craters nor mangled metal nor barbed wire. Standing full height in an open place was unusual and strange. Silence aroused concern, scared me a bit and suppressed me. I wanted to get down to the ground, to merge with surroundings – frontline habits were too strong. I started preparing for sleep with feelings like those. Long life at war had accustomed me to seek a well covered, firm place for sleep under any circumstances – else (I knew that) sleep would be uneasy and it would not bring any rest.

Usually we hastily dug small holes in the ground that one could lie in after bending double and slept in them. This time a wonderful place for spending the night turned out to be right beside. At the very top of the hill a fresh hole dug by someone, a meter and a half deep, sufficiently wide and long, just fitting my height could be seen. It even allowed to spread the legs out freely. What else could one wish for? I jumped into the hole joyful and lied down on the bottom having rolled myself into the shelter-half. It was dry there, clay soil smelled nice, and I felt myself at home, in comfortable familiar surroundings. I saw a large red ant looking at me with its

metallic eye while falling asleep.

I had slept for long, all the evening and night and woke up only the following morning with head feeling heavy and full of memories about strange dreams. Those dreams seemed so apparent, so unusual to me that I started recollecting them from memory even with my eyes closed.

I dreamed that some kind of people moved close to the hole where I was lying and put something heavy near it, showering me with lumps of ground. Then they screamed from above: “Hey, you! Where did you climb to! Get up!” I tumbled, murmured something and didn't want to wake up. New demand to climb out of the hole sounded commanding and I caught the notes that cast fear into my heart and expectation of an important, tragic event in the tone it was spoken with. Then I dreamed that, half asleep, I climbed out of the hole and stepped aside.

–Watch your step, you brute! – a voice sounded.

–Eh, Slavs, they got inside here too! – the other replied.

A corpse lied in front of me on shelter-half. His face was scorched and sooty, a torn off arm was put against

the shoulder. The image of a dead person did not cause any emotions in me, this sight was that accustomed to and routine. Being in condition of sleepy torpidity that did not leave me, I was shaken by something else. Banner that covered the goner and wooden column-obelisk lying nearby offended the eye with their striking red color that only appears in a nightmare, in delusion or in fever. Their bright surfaces lit by a setting sun were hypnotizing and scaring me. They had something merciless and insane in them, as if they had been full of some kind of devilish joy no matter what and nobody knows why. Being at a loss, I had stood for several moments and looked, and the people who gathered looked at me. Finally I saw colonel's shoulder marks on one of them and mechanically greeted him, reaching out to the garrison cap... A fine sight I was! Overcoat had no belt and strap, it was completely covered in clay, I had a dirty pot and sidor with dried bread in my hand. My mug was unshaven and swollen with red straps and spots from the log I put under my head for the night. Colonel grunted and looked away.

–Get out of here, you! – they shouted at me.

And I moved to the side, lied in the bushes and fell

asleep, having rolled myself in shelter-half over my head.

My dreams were continuing, and, as it often happens, I felt myself both a participator and a spectator. I dreamed that I didn't lie in the bushes at all, but on the edge of a hole, on shelter-half, and that I was the one killed. Gruff voice sounded above me, it was calling me Petr Ignatyevich Tarasov for some reason, it told that I faithfully did my duty and met my death befitting for a Russian man. Then people kissed me on the black forehead, covered the face with a rag and lowered me into the hole. Salvo rumbled three times, as if a large piece of tarpaulin had been torn, and everything was over.

I lied, experiencing neither fear nor self-pity – it was more like calm. And then I understood that I had been long since prepared for an end like that, that I had been long since living convinced of its coming. I understood that fear that pressed me into the ground, forced me to scratch it with my nails and whisper improvised prayers, was from an animal, but with my human soul, perhaps unwittingly, I had already been on the other side of the line. I understood that my small and weak soul had long since died, remaining with those who



would not come back.

I understood that even if I had been to survive the war, nothing would have changed for me. The chasm between me and the run of events would always be there, everything would lose sense being crushed by a heavy weight of the past. I understood, finally, that my place was there, in that hole, near the similar holes in which ones similar to me lied. Having understood that, I sank into a calm, serene oblivion that had only been interrupted by me waking up in the morning... Having recollected my dream like that, I suddenly felt that I lied in the bushes and not where I had settled since evening. I sprang to my feet astounded and saw a hill with a newly-made grave nearby. A bright red obelisk topped it. Upon moving closer I saw a piece of tin at the foot of the obelisk. It had letters pierced with a nail on it: Guards Lieutenant Tarasov P. I. 1923-1944.

## Novella XIII. Hospital

The highway was wide and tidy. It either climbed up on the hills or went down into the valleys passing picturesque farms, small groves and lakes. But it passed the woods more often. Rising sun was gilding pine trunks with its slanting rays, night fog dispersed in cold morning air. Birds started singing. In this peaceful kingdom of quiet and calm not being violated by any evidence of war, we were silently sneaking forward along the highway. There were ten scouts of infantry division in spotted overalls and five of us – lieutenant, two artillerymen and two radiomen. Germans retreated, we had to catch up to them and see where the new enemy position was. The task was not a pleasant one: we had to go into uncertainty until machine guns fired or tanks that lied in ambush banged at you. There was another possibility too: you could end up on a mine-studded road section and get to hell and gone after tripping a mine.

Naturally, we were walking with caution while listening to every rustle, SMGs at the ready. We were walking along the ditch since it had been a natural cover,

and a probability of coming across a mine was lower there too. However, not only us were smart like that. People had already walked there, as it turned out. We stumbled upon five crooked soldier corpses and the sixth – a junior lieutenant, obviously the commander who had led his platoon to scout – lied in front of them holding Nagant in his hands. Corpses were cold from the night. Spent casings lied at the bottom of the ditch in the puddle of blood in hundred and a half meters. German ambush had been there. Machine gunner had finished off the friendlies point blank but he had been wounded and taken away by his comrades.

We went on further with double caution. Stacks of crates appeared near the highway, pieces of bread covered by tarpaulin and bricks of pea concentrate lied there. Something was soaked in gasoline, something was completely intact. That had been Germans hurriedly leaving their warehouse. So many goods! I'd love to take everything, everything would come in handy! But there are more than thirty kilograms of weight behind the back already: a radio station, food, SMG, cartridges, grenades and many other things. I put two packs of dry pea soup in the pocket – it's an excellent thing! We're moving further.

Sun has already risen, we have a rest in the small grove. Scouts sit in the circle and start cracking jokes. One girl, a very pretty one, is among them. She is addressed with words from which one can understand that life in that small unit follows the customs of a primal communism. Everything they have is common, and pretty Katka, and cook Natashka who stayed in the rear area are common too. They are gifting scouts their love... Rest is short, we're going further. Highway dives into a beautiful pine forest again. Dry land is covered with white crunchy moss. It would be better to pick mushrooms here, and not wage war!

First mine hit to the side, second and third – closer, and fourth – right near us. And even though everyone lied prone on the ground, three people got hurt. One scout was killed outright, second was still wheezing, and I felt like my back was lashed with a large whip: “H...oo...ly cripes! I got wounded again!”. But I'm feeling it wasn't too serious: I'm still alive and I'm not losing consciousness. God Almighty! How lucky I am! Bones are not fractured, head and belly are fine! And this thing happened not in the German rear area where you have to get out arduously, not in a large battle that you won't

always be able to crawl out of, not among the corpses, dirty ground, stink, stench, but almost in the Garden of Eden! We're falling fifty meters back and hiding behind a stack of wood cut by someone. I'm taking the shirt off. Soldier bandages me but keeps silent. I see it on his face: back got torn up good.

–Can you walk? – platoon commander asks.

–I can.

–Well, go to the rear area!

I leave all the belongings and weapons. I only cover myself with shelter-half – an indispensable piece of soldier's equipment. It will protect you both from rain and from blizzard, and it will cover you from the sun, and it will serve both as bed and as tent. And you'll be buried in it when the fatal hour comes...

I go back along the highway and platoon commander, the scoundrel, is already harping over the radio: “We got under a mortar shelling, radioman is wounded. We stop. Infantry scouts are moving forward”. He knows that German machine guns will be ahead and he takes the opportunity not to put his forehead in front, the creep... And scouts have already moved forward, having left the killed behind.

And here I am alone on the highway, under tender sun rays. Everything goes backwards: forests, farms, lakes... And here's a German warehouse too. I should take something to fress – I don't know what will come next. But it wasn't to be! Sentry is already standing near the warehouse and he fend me off supplies with his rifle. “Well why are you, creep – I say – where were you when we were conquering all these provisions!?” And don't poke your rifle at me! Trying to scare a soldier with a rifle is the same as trying to scare a girl with dat place!” – I remember one of our starshina's popular proverbs. But the sentry is inexorable. He was put there, he serves. It's not like you should fight him... I move further. Now there are many of our troops around. There are some kind of kitchens, workshops, trucks. Two chubby fellows are playing volleyball on the clearing under the sun. They're deftly passing the ball to each other. They're clean, red-cheeked and cleanly shaved. And service shirts they're wearing are spotless. As if there was no war at all.

There's an astonishing difference between the firing line where blood is spilling, where suffering is, where death is, where one can't raise their head in front of the bullets and frags, where hunger and fear, backbreaking

job, heat in summer, frost in winter are, where it's impossible to live in the first place – and rear areas. It is a different world here, in the rear area. Command is located here, headquarters are here, heavy cannons stand here, warehouses are situated here, so are health support battalions. Seldom shells reach it or a plane drops a bomb. Killed and wounded are a rarity here. It's not a war, it's resort! Ones on the firing line are already goners. They're doomed. Their only salvation is wounding. Ones in the rear area will stay alive provided they won't be transferred forward when the lines of attackers will run dry. They will stay alive, come back home, and in time they will be the basis of the veteran organizations. They'll grow bellies, acquire bald patches and they will tell how heroically they fought, how they defeated Hitler crushingly. And they'll come to believe that themselves! They'll be the ones who bury the cherished memory of those who had perished and who had actually fought! They'll present the war that they don't know much about themselves in a romantic halo. How nice everything was, how lovely! What heroes we are! And the fact that war is horror, death, hunger, villainy, villainy and villainy, will pale into insignificance. The real frontline troops, who're

one and a half man left, and both are bonkers, corrupted anyway, will keep mum. And command that will also stay alive to a great degree, will wallow in squabbles: who fought well, who fought poorly, oh and if only they had listened to me!

But the most mean role will be played by newsmen. They made their capital off corpses at war, they were scavengers. They sat in the rear area not being responsible for anything, and wrote their articles – slogans with rosey water. And after they war they started publishing books where they had slanted everything, had justified everything while completely forgetting villainy, filth and bungling comprising the foundation of the frontline life. Instead of honestly studying out the causes of drawbacks, learning something in order not to repeat what had happened in the future – they blurred over everything and varnished over everything. Thus, lessons given by the war were all for naught. If a new war starts, will everything happen in the old ways? With collapse, confusion, usual Russian disorder? And there will be mountains of corpses again!

It's easier to distinguish yourself in the rear area too. Fighting and dying are somewhere on the firing line,



but reports are written here. Where, for instance, did our headquarter clerk Pifonov or Filonov (I can't remember the name properly) get Order of the Patriotic War from? He didn't poke out of the dugout during fighting... Although, later German bomb hit him during the relocation, so let God be his judge... And head of the brigade provisions warehouse, I don't know his name, which feats did he get two Orders of the Red Star for? After all, he sat through all the war among bread, fatback bacon and canned food. He's probably the head veteran now! And Vitka Vasilyev – a failed actor who got kicked out of the theater after the war for alcoholism and became a store manager (one has to drink for something!) – got two orders for two pairs of golden German watches that he gifted to brigade commander. Now he's talking about his feats in every corner.

Feeling tired and weakened, I finally get to our brigade's headquarters. Doctor has to be here somewhere. But so far I can only see the brigade commander. He's playing tag with his wife. They're running around the car and laughing. His wife and daughter came to him on the front for a stay. And why not if life is like a resort in brigade rear areas at the

moment? Daughter is right here too. She's wearing a military uniform.

Finally I find our medics. I'm having bandages taken off, doctor shakes his head and pronounces:

–Wound is serious. Operation and hospital treatment are needed. We could put you in our orderly company, but it fell behind and it's unknown where it is now. You'll go to hospital!

Moth... er's luck! Things are going from bad to worse! Going to hospital, and then ending up in infantry again! I don't want to kick the bucket! I dash to brigade commander:

–Leave me in our unit!

He's glad. Such patriotism! What heroes are in the brigade he commands! However, doctor insists, I'm put into a truck and rushed to hospital fifteen kilometers to the rear area. I'm going in fear of my future fate and at the same time I'm dreaming how I'll be admitted now: they'll arm me to doctor, perform an operation, wash me, feed me and I'll fall asleep, and I'll be sleeping for three days and nights and then we'll see.

Hospital was deployed on the forest clearing in several huge tents. I had my documents taken, I was

shown the operational department and told:

–Wait here. First heavily wounded will be handled, then the others.

Heavily wounded lied right there on the stretchers, some silently, some with groaning and swearing. There was a fair amount of them. Lightly wounded sat in different poses nearby. Three people were having a smoke near a small smokey bonfire – one had a bandaged eye, the other had leg wound, third had his arm in a sling.

–Hey, Slav! Come to us! To fire! – I was called. I sat near.

–Well, – said the one-eyed man, did you think that now all the personnel will run to you and start treating – appeasing you? Frigging right! I lost my eye as far back as yesterday, I can hardly wait! And they don't give anything to fress! Come on, have a smoke!

H...o...ly cats! Where did I end up! But there's no getting around it. I'm sitting, waiting. I'm hungry. I remember the bricks of pea soup thankfully still being in my pocket. We find an empty tin can, boil mashed peas and eat well.

We felt better at once. And a leisured soldier talk

started flowing around the bonfire. Everyone was talking about their own stuff but eventually I sensed three keynotes of our conversation, comprising the main problems of military life: death, grub and sex.

*One-eyed.* I'm the second time in this 'ere hospital already, guys. Oh, what broads are here! Especially one nurse, Zamokshina is her name! She's a bimbo about thirty-five years old. Fire! Vitamin! I met her in the corner of the tent behind a curtain. I look, she's sitting, reeling the bandages, knees open and there you can spy the tonsils even! So we made love on a bale of cotton-wool once. But unsuccessfully. My girlfriend started loudly whining and squeaking. I look, Chief Physician comes near and yells: "It's you misbehaving and being naughty again, Zamokshina! Ten days of arrest to you! And you, dear (that's to me), are going to be discharged ahead of schedule!"

*Lame.* So, we snatched three chicken and a turkey from the coop, boiled them in a bucket and fressed them. Could you imagine, the two of us! And the soup itself – it's like amber, thick, balmy – doesn't fit inside anymore! We had to pour in onto the ground! I'll never forget that!

*One-eyed.* But I didn't go to my unit by then but

rather blinked to Zamokshina: let's go, I say, to the bushes! We set up nicely but there's misfortune again! During the most interesting moment an orderly (there is one here – a featherbed soldier, slacker, his mother, grew a neck so thick he's afraid of turning around), not like he could have gone ten steps to the crater, poured surgical waste into the bushes, almost onto our heads – there were different intestines, bloody bandages, tampons. Zamokshina rolled her eyes, she can't see anything, she growls, scratches. And I got all my ability knocked out: a cut off human leg lies right in front of my nose, a fresh one, and blood is oozing from it... So I left the hospital frustrated like that.

*Lame.* Sooo, we got to the farm – there's no owner. We've ransacked the whole house – nothing. However, an oak door to the larder is closed. We wielded sledgehammers and – crush! Cru-ush! But it's all too firmly made, sadly. And then executive officer has just ran to the noise: “You, h'says, what are you, rowdies, what are you smashing here?!” – “Beg to report, comrade colonel, we want to check whether there are any spiers there!” – “Oh, well then go do it!” We banged some couple o'times more, door got battered down, and there

are – ham, sausages, eggs, pickled mushrooms in the larder! Wow! That we fressed alright! I'll never forget that!

*Armless.* Near Voronovo, then, infantry, mostly from Smolensk, went to surrender. They don't want to die – they thought Germans would send them home. And Germans finished them, three hundred people, heartfelt, off from the machine guns – in order not to dawdle with them or something. It was a huge pit, full of dead people. And the other time it was in the small Olomna village on Bolkhov that was occupied by Germans in forty-one. Friendlies came out of the woods, also three hundred people. They're armed, equipped, sated. Just from the rear area – reinforcements. Germans filled their pants – village garrison is only about thirty soldiers. But turns out, rus-ivans came to surrender! Then ober-lieutenant, garrison commandant, ordered everyone to put their weapons into a pile, take off short fur jackets and felt boots. Then brave warrior host was led to a forest clearing and gunned down. “Who would need the likes of you, – said ober-lieutenant as valediction, – you betrayed your own and you will betray us...”

*One-eyed (dreamy).* You know, guys, if only we left

in one piece, what a life I'd have! The only men surviving in the village are me and legless Kuzya-accordionist! Then me and Kuzya would hit every broad in the village after war! What a sweet life! Today you go to one, and she gives you pies, half-liter, of coursh, tomorrow – to another. And I'd pull my friend Kuzya in the cart, he'll be fine otherwise. Everything he's got is intact except for legs, and he's some stud! He'd work and play the accordion! We'd replenish the male livestock just like that, we'd give birth to new soldiers for the Motherland!

*Lame.* So listen what they're writing me from home. My neighbor, Proshka, a handsome guy, he's got door-wide shoulders, was herded to war in the very beginning. And in the very first battle he got wounded and it was hard that both arms and both legs were amputated up to shoulders and to the root in hospital. A basked case was left. And they'd rot him completely in some kind of nursing home like other unlucky fellows if not for Marja – a young widow from our village. She understood with her broad's mind that war was going to be a long one, there would be no males left and she'd be cuckooing alone for the rest of her life. She got that and took Proshka from hospital. She drove him home, put a spike-

nail into the wall and hanged a sack with Proshka there. He's hanging there, sated, washed, combed, even shaved. And Marja carries him for walks, and come evening, takes him out of the sack and puts him in her bed. And they have everything in harmony. One little scamp is already gurgling in the cradle and the second one is planned. And collective farm helps Mashka too, it gives her various leeways – this kind of cripple in the house, with an order in the sack... Marya is shining, she's glad. Man is always in her presence, after all – he won't leave her for another, he won't start drinking. And she places a bottle for him on holidays for cheering up. And he revitalized, they say, Proshka, he's hanging from his hook singing songs and whistling... There it is, dear friends.

*Armless.* And often they cut prisoners with a bayonet, hit them with barbed wire, stabbed them with nails, burned them or poured water on them during frost... And civilians too, women, children... Not some kind of SS-men but the most basic grunts. All of them did that...

*Lame.* We look, some kind of unit arrived, they're loading sacks and crates. So then we nicked two sacks. One had sausages, the other had old boots. And the unit



itself turned out to be Special Department! We, then, filled our pants from fear, sure, we took the boots back, put them where they were. And sausages we had eaten already. What can you do?

*Armless.* So I'm walking along the besieged Leningrad in spring of forty-two, I can barely move my legs. Suddenly a truck passes buy. It wailed during the turn, moved to the side sharply, and something started falling out of the body. I look – they're frozen goners. They're stacked in the truck body and two of each are put in the corners for support. "Stop, – I shout, – you creep! Pick them up!" And he shouts in response: "I don't have time, bugger off!"

*One-eyed.* I took a bottle of white and half a bottle of red and went off to Fenka. I come there, and she's sitting in a birthday suit with her friend, both full as a boot from wine. Well, I know beans...

*Lame.* And one sat in the pile of snow arms spread with bandage waving in the breeze in his hands near Pogostye. He probably wanted to bandage the wound, yet he got finished off. He froze to death just like that...

*Armless (interrupting everyone and talking over them).* Once, in January of forty-two reinforcements

from Siberia got herded near Myasnoy Bor: it was a ski battalion – five hundred of 17-18 year old guys. They're tall, strong folks, sportsmen, red as cherries. Everyone has new short fur coats and felt boots on. Everyone has SMGs. They're Komsomol members. Spoiling for a fight. And just then a German center of resistance got in the way of the attackers – it was a small village on the hill standing out among the fields like a belly button. There are pillboxes, many log pillboxes, machine guns, mortars in the stone foundations of the houses. There are two layers of trenches. And there are about seven hundred meters of open, bare, snowy field around the village itself. It's impossible to penetrate that open area: fire is adjusted everywhere. Offensive was brought to a halt there.

And then a drunk general ordered the skiers without scouting, without estimations: “Forward!! Take the village!” And battalion, sweepingly, gaining speed, yelling “Hurrrraaaaay!!!” popped out on the field in front of the village. Skiers had been sliding forward, as if under momentum, for two hundred meters, and after ten minutes only corpses lied in the snow. Battalion was no more. Germans finished off the wounded who had been

moving. Those who kept quiet froze to death soon. Nobody was able to crawl out. Orderlies didn't dare to come out on the field, and those who did try to were killed...

Yet the story didn't end with that. Later on, when the village got taken a week after by outflanking it from behind, a huge pile of cut off human legs was uncovered. Nobody could understand anything. Local granny clarified that Germans, very thrifty and saving peoples, could not stand such mismanagement: new felt boots and short fur jackets were being wasted on the clearing! Officer ordered the soldiers to collect those valuable assets, especially since Germans had poor situation with winter equipment. However, it was impossible to take off the felt boots from frozen up corpses. Then one of the German “handymen” suggested cutting off the legs of dead Ivans, taking them to a steam bath and thawing them there. Which had been done just like that. That unusual cargo had been transported by cart, like wood...

*Lame.* Eh, guys! I'd love to boil some horse meat now!

*Armless.* And remember, in August of forty-one regiment retreated without an order near Glazhevo

station? Some guys came on the truck, put regimental commander, executive officer and other superiors up against the church wall (it had been still in one piece then), shot them and drove away. In the twinkling of an eye...

Suddenly a sergeant who had been wounded in the head groaned loudly. He had only been wheezing and blowing bubbles prior to that. Doctors left him for dead addressing those who could have still been saved. Armless said, having turned over to the stretcher: “Hey, I know him! That's our scout – he was a hell of a lad! They're all reckless there, in scouting. Last week they were talking along the path on mission, then suddenly a captain – head of FFW<sup>11</sup> – leaped out from the opposite direction while riding a stallion. He got bored of sitting in the rear area so much his blood is almost boiling, and he's gaged from spirit too: “Yo-ho, get out of the way now!” And he whips sergeant almost on his mug... Scouts' reaction was lightning fast. A whiz could be hear, then a short burst, and it was as if there had been no one on the road in the first place. Guys faded from view in the bushes like mirage. You can whistle for them. Were they

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<sup>11</sup> Food and forage warehouse.

there or were they not? And captain, a lousy stinker, stayed on his stallion with a pierced palm”...

Meanwhile a tracked off-roader with a body full of wounded drove over to hospital tents. Hey, they're from our brigade! And off-roader is ours too. As the stretchers were being unloaded, I ran to the driver I knew and yelled:

–Listen, God damn! Get me out of here! That'll be it for me here!

And what's it to him? He's even glad:

–Get inside the cab, – he says.

That lightning fast decision, as I know now, was a silver bullet and it saved me. In an hour we were in our brigade's location. Doctor had been swearing for a long time and started to prepare for the operation.

–Well, you asked for it! Now endure it. I don't have novocaine.

I sat under the fir tree, I was given vodka and doctor cut my back open without anesthesia –one, two, three, four. Maybe that was how the treatment had gone even in Julius Caesar's legions. Can you imagine what that is? You can't! And God forbid you'll have to experience that... All in all, I almost fainted from pain after several

minutes. Yet wound had been cut open, an inch-wide fragment had been extracted from under the shoulder blade, it was all covered in eiderdown and rag ribbons. (I wore a trophy down-filled vest under the service shirt for warmth.) Then doctor had been cleaning and rubbing the wound with some kind of gunk, it hurt again.

–The shoulder bone is grazed a little, – he said. Half a centimeter more – and your spine would have been fractured. Then you'd have been kaput! Lucky you!

Then wound was plastered, I was given more vodka and let go in peace:

–Have a rest!

Cook poured me a pot of cabbage soup with meat but I gobbled it up without a usual appetite, I lied down in the hole, rolled myself into a shelter-half and I had slept like a rock for fifteen hours. The following day I felt excellent. And I had the only thing on my mind: where could I get my hands on some grub? But that problem got solved easily: guys brought me either bread or honey or canned food or fresh carrots from some kind of field. Regimental mailman – a fellow of about twenty years of age with an old man's face – started patronizing me. All his teeth had been knocked out (during a fight or

something?), and his mouth fell in similar to a hundred-year old grandpa. He looked after me movingly, he dug a hole for two for the night, and we slept nearby while warming each other.

Petrov (that was the mailman's name) who seemed so nice to me, came out as a criminal, looter and rapist during the end of the war. In Germany he told me, as an old friend, how many golden watches and bracelets he had managed to plunder, how many German women he had corrupted. It was he who told me the first of the infinite series of tales titled "our people abroad". That tale seemed like a monstrous fiction to me at first, it made me angry and thus it got etched into my memory forever: "I come to battery and firing granddads are preparing a feast there. They can't get away from the cannon, it's not allowed. They're making meat dumplings from the trophy flour right on the cheek, and they're taking turns fooling around with a German girl that they had dragged from somewhere at the second cheek. Starshina is dispersing them with a stick:

–Stop it, you old fools! Do you want to bring infection to your grandchildren or something!? He leads the German away, he goes away, and in twenty minutes

everything starts over”. Another Petrov's tale about himself:

–So I'm walking past a crowd of Germans while looking for a prettier broad and suddenly I see: a frau with daughter of about fourteen years is standing there. She's nice, and “Syphilis” is written on her chest akin to a sign, that is for us, so we wouldn't touch her. Hoot you creeps, I think, I take the girl by the hand, hit mummy's mug with my SMG, and go to the bushes. Let's check what kind of syphilis you've got! The girl turned out to be yummy...

I didn't feel particular discomfort from the wound. I was sleeping at night and loafing around the surroundings during the day, demolishing abandoned beehives, collecting currant, plucking carrots, idling. I lived near the kitchen... I wish I could have fought like that for the whole war! Senior sergeant Dzema was in charge of the kitchen, he was a lanky guy who had been stealing from the soldier's cauldron in great numbers. He even lived in a truck with provisions sleeping on the sacks of groats or crates of canned food. One morning I was warming on the sun while hiding from wind behind the body of supply van. Suddenly a terrible rumble could



be heard, tree branches were falling down. Dead Dzema fell on the ground through the van door that had been shattered by frags. Nearby another soldier covered in blood was writhing. Large frag fractured his leg at the hip, blood was spurting, and one could see how life was leaving the person: his face became ash-gray, his lips became blue, his sight faded. Combat medic ran up to him from somewhere and started deftly applying the tourniquet in order to stop bleeding. What had happened exactly? The explosion was kind of strange. Having looked around, I noticed a 76-millimeter cannon hundred meters from us; crew was bustling around it and preparing to open fire. Everything is clear! I bolt there, hold the young swanky junior lieutenant (probably straight out of the training school) by the chest at once and shout:

–What are you doing, scum!!! Where are you firing?!! Lieutenant, confused, gets cocky:

–How are you talking to me!? You'll get court martial for this!!!

–Look, f....!!! – I shout, open the breech-block with a clank and point my finger at the barrel. Tree trunks that rise over our kitchen can be seen through the opening as

if through the spyglass.

–Where were you taught, you bastard? You have to clear the field of fire before shooting! This is the ABC!!! You have killed two people right now, you creep!

Lieutenant turns pale, soldiers are standing with their heads low. Everyone understood that shell exploded without reaching the target while being caught onto a tree branch.

I don't know how it ended, the affair was probably hushed up in order not to cause a scandal. We buried Dzema but in five month a cook, a horribly ugly cribbage-faced Mordvin woman with sunken nose, gave birth to twins which Dzema managed to gift her before death. Labor happened right on the front since cook found a way to conceal her condition up until the last moment. Human fates are strange and they move in mysterious ways!

I had been living near the kitchen for about ten days. Fighting intensified. Shells started to reach the rear area more often and air raids that scattered everything in the vicinity with small bombs intensified at night too. And doctor told me during another bandaging:

–Stop hanging about here, dearie – else you might

get finished off. You'll have to be treated for a long time, for two months, or maybe even three. Go to our orderly company, it arrived yesterday.

And so I went to the orderly company.

## **Novella XIV. Guards Yefreytor Kukishkin, or How I Fought for High Moral Ideals for The Last Time**

People who actually fought at war were bound to either die or end up in hospital. Don't believe the one who says he had got through the war without being wounded once. That means they either loitered in the rear area or hanged about the headquarters.

Not just luck had saved me from death but, mainly, wounds. They helped get away from the fire during a critical moment. Wound, though not heavy, not in the gut and not in the head which equals death, is very good! You go to the rear area, you're washed, changed, put on clean bedsheets, fed, given drinks. Pretty nurses are looking after you. You sleep, relax, forget about horrors and death... Wound was hankered for. For a light one. Like for a leave. The holy grail was a wound not too heavy but one that would get you completely demobilized. If only a left hand (right one is needed more) or a foot got torn off! Yet few got something like that. Fortunately, my wounds weren't heavy but thanks to them I, as an army phrase

goes, had been hanging about in hospital for nine months out of four years. Meaning one fifth of the war passed me by. Others had an even longer period like that.

A fragment of the German mortar shell hit me particularly well. It pierced the back under the shoulder bone, passed over the spine and got stuck under another shoulder bone, hardly grazing the bones. “Half a centimeter from death”, – the doctor said. Entrance and exit wounds were cut open and a sizable hole appeared – it was as large as a small saucer. And another one, a bit smaller, was nearby. According to medics' predictions, all that would have been closing for about four month. Instead my organism managed way faster – in about two months, and body recovered “like a dog's”, as my wounded friends put it. I was a healthy guy, I was loitering around the unit, helping doctors during influx of wounded, I filled in the medical records, bandaged the light wounds. Medical personnel was glad since there was plenty of work for everyone, they had been on duty for weeks without sleep. I was assigned to a so-called RT – recovering team.

It was a very peculiar unit. There were from seventy to a hundred of hefty scallywags with closing wounds.

Some had an arm on a band, other had a crutch, third had glue bandages on the chest, back or butt. Ones suffering from heavy furunculosis and so on and so forth were here too. There were even burned people – with black head covered in scabs, white eyes and teeth. That contingent mostly comprised people who loved kindling stoves with artillery gunpowder. It burns slowly by grain, but one merely has to ignite more by accident – and a flash you can't run away from happens.

Youth was largely among the wounded – scouts, signallers, radiomen, – those who live on the firing line, at the gates of hell. They were seasoned guys who had been around the block a few times. They crawled for kilometers on the belly near Pogostye and Sinyavino, they knew well what death was, and they held “featherbed soldiers” with contempt – hospital personnel in particular. Coping with them was very hard. For instance, a certain guards sergeant sent a very good man – captain Mikhail Aizikovich Goldfeld, commander of an orderly company – to a known mother – after clinking a dozen of medals on his chest. And upon turning to us he added: “He'd better go jump in the lake!” (Captain attempted to give him some kind of utility task – there

was a shortage of workers.)

The other time a young and brave scout, holder of two classes of the Order of Glory, was carelessly sent as a batman to a stunning dentist, Lidiya Nikolaevna. When Lidiya Nikolaevna asked him to shine her boots while smiling nicely, he responded: “How about you screw yourself?!” in basso. And he added that she should have scrambled off to her division commander who decorated her with an order and medal “For Household Merits”. “Let him clean them”, the hero added. Indeed, Lidiya Nikolaevna, talking in civilian speak, had a romance with division commander. And speaking army-like, she was commander's FPW... Naturally, contacts of a new batman and Lidiya Nikolaevna came to an end with that and he went to the firing line before recovering completely, to his scouting job. There were many cases of this sort. So what was to be done? Wise doctor Goldfeld found a way out. Head of recovering team was appointed among the wounded, and all the orders were coming through him. They listened to their own, and things got rolling. However, previous head recovered and left to fight, and command found a new candidate for a free position – me, since I was expected to be treated for a long time and

I seemed like a decent, non-harmful person from command's perspective.

I was at home in the team. I had been acquainted with the most since 1941 and 1942 already. I had blood ties, so to speak, with many: we had saved each other in former battles, we had shared the last slice of bread. Of course I was solidly behind their interests and they had never let me down. I tried to do business rationally. For example, command orders to appoint six posts for guarding the orderly company tents at night. I reply: "Yes sir!", draft a fancy plan of guarding and defending the objects with designations of six posts, fields of fire and other instructions. Plan is signed and approved. Then I come to the guys and say:

–We should take turns napping in front of the tents at night, just in case, fritzes might pay a visit...

Everybody understands that we should. Someone takes an SMG under his arm and comes outside to sit and smoke for an hour and a half in the evening. Then he wakes up another, and nobody needs any six posts – one scout is worth twenty posts. Everything is great. Command is happy, people are sleeping.

Then a nice sickly head of the pharmacy, senior



lieutenant Aaron Mordukhaevich, comes to me, looks at me through thick glasses and humbly asks me to help outfit the pharmacy.

–Aaron Mordukhaevich, and what about the fuel?

–I'll get some, I'll get some, I'll get some! – he says gladly.

I ask the guys whether anyone was a carpenter in the previous life. Three of those are found. I ask them to help the pharmacist who promised some spirit. Guys are making artistic furniture for the pharmacy. Everyone is happy. My military-diplomatic activity continues, and I stick to an orderly company for a long time. There are almost no responsibilities. I hand over the report on the number of people, those who got discharged and those who had just arrived once a day, I deliver the orders on errands and that's it. Wound has been closed already, and I'm still fooling around in the rear area. However, guys are not criticizing me. Once I eavesdropped how my sinecure was discussed. Everyone unanimously decided: “He needs that, he has crawled his share!” And that's how we live.

Meanwhile troops have crossed the German border. Now war turned its another unexpected side to me. It felt

like everything had been experienced: death, hunger, shelling, backbreaking job, cold. Fat chance! There was something very horrible too, it had almost crushed me. Propagandists came to troops on the eve of moving into the Reich territory. Some were high-ranked.

–Death for death!!! Blood for blood!!! We won't forget!!! We won't forgive!!! We will avenge!!! – et cetera...

Erenburg gave his best shot for that, his articles full of claptrap and straight-from-the-shoulder remarks were read by everyone: “Dad, kill a German!” And Nazism in reverse happened. Although, those were making mischief according to plan: they had a network of ghettos, network of camps, recording and listing the loot, register of punishments, planned executions etc. We had everything going on spontaneously, Slavic-like. Beat them, guys, burn them, stun them! Corrupt them broads of theirs! In addition, an abundance of vodka had been supplied to the troops prior to the offensive. And it got going, and it got going! As always, innocent suffered. As always, bigwigs ran away... Houses were burned without distinction, some random old women were killed, herds of cows were shot aimlessly. Someone invented a joke

that was very popular: “Ivan sits near the burning home. “What are you doing?” – he's asked. “Oh yeah, I had to dry the footcloths, I made a bonfire””... Corpses, corpses, corpses. Germans are scumbags, of course, but what's the point of imitating them? Army had abased itself. Nation had abased itself. That was the most horrifying at war. Corpses, corpses... Several train convoys of German refugees arrived at the station of Allenstein city that had been captured unexpectedly for the enemy by valiant cavalry of general Oslikovsky. They thought they were going to their rear area, yet they ended up... I witnessed the results of reception they got. Station platforms were covered with piles of gutted suitcases, bundles, duffle bags. Clothes, children's stuff, ripped pillows were everywhere. All that was in puddles of blood...

“Everyone has the right to send a parcel weighing twelve kilograms home once a month”, – command announced officially. And it got going, and it got going! Drunken Ivan burst into a bomb shelter, banged his SMG over the table and yelled while bulging his eyes horribly: “URRRRR!<sup>12</sup> Creeps!” Trembling German women brought watches from everywhere that were then swept

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<sup>12</sup> Die Uhr – watches (German).

into a “sidor” and carried away. One soldier had forced a German woman to hold a candle (there was no electricity) as he was rummaging through her chests. Loot! Grab! That was a bane that engulfed everyone, like an epidemic... Kind, affectionate Russian folks turned into monsters. They were terrifying alone, and in herd they became such that it's even impossible to describe!

Now a lot of time has passed, and almost everything had been forgotten, no one will know the truth... Though, every war leads to similar results – such is its nature. But that is scarier than dangers and death.

When the team got inside the “lair of the fascist beast”, as the writing on the German border said, common influences found their way to us too. Treks for junk, treks to German women started, and I was powerless to prevent them. I persuaded, implored, threatened... I was told to stuff it or just wasn't understood at all. Team had gone out of control.

We stationed ourselves in the house that had been abandoned by the population in Allenstein city. We had to drag an old woman's corpse lying in a puddle of blood out of one room. All the furniture and all the stuff were in place. Cleanness and abundance of different appliances

astounded. Kitchen was shining with tiles. Every jar had writing that specified food that was stored there. Special scales were used for measuring food... Thick books with expensive covers stood in the sturdy cases of the office, and behind them there were obligatory pornographic cards in a stash. As I had found out, they were in all decent homes. There were several bathrooms in the apartment. There was their own water closet for every person: for dad, for mom, and smaller rooms for kids. Pots were covered with extremely white starched lacy wrappings that had preachy aphorisms in intricate ornamental Gothic script embroidered on them, like: “Nothing is impossible to a willing mind”, “Long live diligence, away with laziness!” etc. It's scary to come close to such a sterile magnificence!

A small dark pantry where dishes sat on the shelves was situated near the kitchen. I found a magnificent Sèvres porcelain dinner set for many places and other beautiful things. Tablecloths and napkins from Holland cloth lied stacked.

Having laid down on luxurious master beds, soldiers leisurely, tastefully, discussed what owners were doing on a soft featherbed, and fell asleep. I, however,

had a bad night, previous days' impressions were not the ones to make you sleepy. At three hours at night, having taken a candle, I went to wander around the home and I heard strange noises that inside the pantry while moving past it. Having opened the door, I found guards yefreytor Kukishkin doing his business into a Sèvres dish. Napkins nearby were soiled...

–What are you doing, scum, – I shouted.

–So what? – Kukushkin said gently.

He was short, round, smiley and very kind. He had good relations with everyone. He seemed amiable to everyone. He was usually called not Kukushkin but rather, lovingly, Kukish. Then suddenly this happens! It was attack on Supreme Values. It was assault on the idea of Kind, Beautiful for me! I was furious, and Kukushkin was bewildered. He pulled the breeches up and calmly went to get more sleep. I, however, was frantically thinking what I could attempt for the rest on the night. And I devised something – although I couldn't have come up with anything more moronic.

In the morning when everyone woke up I told the team to line up. Apparently, there was something that surprised everyone on my face. I usually hadn't practiced

statutory formations, checks etc that were dictated by army regulations. War was going on, and we didn't care about that kind of rubbish. Then suddenly – “Co-over off! Atteenshun!”... Everyone obeys, even though there are many people ranking higher than me in the line. I order Kukushkin to come forward and give an ardent speech. It seems, I've never been so eloquent and I've never talked so passionately in my life. I appealed to their conscience, I talked about Beautiful, about Human, about Supreme Values. My voice was jingling and it had expressive modulations. Then what happened?

I suddenly noticed that the whole line is smiling from ear to ear and looking at me lovingly. I finished with expression of contempt and reprehension to guards yefreytor Kukushkin and sent everyone off. I did everything I could. In two hours all the Sèvres set and all the dishes in general had been soiled. They even found a way to foul up the bookcases. Ever since I fight neither for Justice nor for Supreme Values anymore.

## Novella XV. Famous Polish City of Czestochow

You, dear reader, have probably been to Poland, you have visited the city of Czestochow, you have admired the beauty of its streets and churches, haven't you? Have you bowed to “Matka Boska Czestochowska”, a healer and savior of Christian kind? I have also been to Czestochow but I have seen neither of that nor have I bowed to a famous icon. Only dirty basement with low ceiling arches and two soldier graves in the backyard have remained in my memory... Our orderly company was deployed in that house, and I was healing my wound there. Three people sat there – two who were walking with crutches and me who was bandaged from shoulder to shoulder. Of course, had my companions been more mobile, we would have certainly set off to town in spite of the shelling – to watch its sights, look for some grub and drinks. But walking with crutches can only get one so far! However, we had fun even in the basement; friends sent us a large flask of German schnapps “for holding the pants up” from the firing line on the eve, and we were drinking it



accompanied by doctor Shabalin – a man of forty-five years, large and bulky, weighing about a hundred kilograms. He used to be a village doctor, and then he became a major of medical service.

German hit Czestochow with sporadic fire. Every five-six minutes heavy shells exploded either close to us, or further, or right next to us. Sand was falling from the ceiling, we were used to that and didn't notice anything, but doctor Shabalin cowered while pressing his head into the shoulders. His hands were shaking. And we were treating him with schnapps and engaging in a scientific conversation:

–Doctor, what is immunity?

He explained it to us very clearly:

–If five of you screwed one German woman and four of you caught something yet fifth remained healthy, that's what immunity is...

Our conversation was interrupted by an orderly:

–Doctor! To the bandaging room, quickly! Two “guts” were brought there!

Back then “guts” were people wounded in the abdomen nicknamed like that by medics. Usually only lightly wounded were treated in an orderly company, and

heavily wounded together with “guts” were sent further, into the rear area, into hospital, to more suitable conditions for and operation. But by then the way to hospital had been blocked off by Germans, and orderly company's commander doctor Goldfeld ordered Shabalin to operate.

One could see how confused doctor was. He had never performed operations like those before. He delivered babies, treated stomach upset, common cold, fractures and dislocations in his village, and here he's got laparotomy! In other words, abdominal incision. His hands were shaking even more than before... Walls of the bandaging room were hastily covered with clean sheets and surgical instruments were boiled, all the personnel was agitated.

I walked up to the stretcher. One wounded was unconscious, he was breathing and wheezing heavily. His face was gray, the facial features became sharp. I looked at the other stretcher and got stupefied... A nice man, my only war friend, lieutenant Lesha, lied in front of me. We had met in 1941 already. I had just arrived on the front – together with reinforcements from the besieged Leningrad, I had dystrophy and I was overtaken by

dismay. I had to fight and work, yet I could barely move my legs. Lieutenant Lesha, in contrast with everyone else, showed sympathy to me, he guarded me as best he could, he even brought me slices of bread with butter from his supplementary ration. Back then officers were entitled to a special ration – it had butter, canned food, biscuits. Usually officers gobbled that up somewhere alone, behind soldiers' backs. Lieutenant Lesha was not like that. Having dystrophy himself, recently coming from besieged Leningrad too, he had remarkable fortitude and aspiration to help the neighbor.

We became friends in spite of the difference in ranks. Lesha had managed to graduate college prior to the war, he was an engineer, he adored books, music, he visited lectures of University philological department. We had plenty to talk about. When we had a free minute, we sat in the dark dugout, we read poems to each other, we had long conversations; and that helped us escape the deadly horror of war, hunger, cold, violence...

At war a person loses everything he had in his life before that – parents, wife, children, belongings, books, friends, usual society and usual surroundings. He is given depersonalizing uniform that equalizes him with others

and weapons to do evil. He is defenseless from command that is nearly always unjust and drunk, that forces him to commit outrage, violence and murder without a second thought. In other words, people lose human face and turn into wild animals at war: they're fressing, sleeping, working and killing. And meanwhile, human soul given by God is resisting that transformation in every possible way. However, few can withstand this terrible duel of little man with giant and merciless war! Being barely alive himself, Lesha helped me hold out during first days and weeks of my frontline existence a lot.

Then we parted ways. And then I met him again while only managing to kiss him and tell him several words of cheer in the basement of Czestochow's house. Lesha only smiled a little, and there were sadness and fatality in his smile... I had been waiting for the end of the operation astir for several hours, and then I had been sitting next to the stretcher where Lesha barely breathed, I cried and prayed. By morning Lesha had died quietly. He was buried right there, in the yard, next to the second wounded person who had given up his spirit during the operation already.

Either wounds were too heavy or doctor Shabalin

was not particularly experienced, but everything ended tragically. I have seen thousands of deaths at war. Many died in my own hands, but I can't forget this loss for all my life...

In several days a letter addressed to Lesha came from liberated Leningrad that said that all his family, parents and wife with daughter had died from hunger... God moves in mysterious ways!

Thus, I have been to Czestochow yet I haven't seen its sights, I haven't bowed to a local relic – a miraculous image of Holy Mother. Only dirty basement with low arches and two graves in the backyard remained in my memory.

## **Novella XVI. Guards Captain Tsykal, or Soviet-German Love**

Guards captain Tsykal was aged – he was forty-nine. He had rich life experience: he handled dekulakization in the Ukraine in thirties, he had been a head of collective farm for a long time and right from there he ended up in Myasnoy Bor massacre in 1942. Encircled 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army was dying. People were falling among frags and bullets, they were dying from starvation like flies. Dead people were used for making roads in the marsh, people rested sitting on dead bodies while constructing shelter.

When a way from encirclement to friendlies was successfully breached, wounded were driven out through the narrow gauge railroad, and since there was a shortage of ties, frozen bodies were put under rails more often than not. Ivan lies iron spike nailed into his nape, rail is above and trolley is running on the rail, jumping, pushed by entrapped people who are more dead than alive... In short, Tsykal, then still a lieutenant, had hell of a time. He was one of the few who got out of encirclement in

May or June of forty-two.

Barely moving entrapped people were showered in a special tent, their lousy rags were burned, they were fed in a medical battalion for two weeks, and they were allocated to units again. Tsykal ended up with us. He looked horrible. He had black sunburned pockmarked face with traces of childhood smallpox and protruding Mongolian cheekbones; he had huge wild eyes in each side of a crooked nose, rotten teeth sticking out of a wide mouth – he was an uncanny scarecrow, scarier than death. To be fair, he remained like that even when he had battened on the rich rear area provisions: he wasn't sent to the firing line but rather got appointed as a supply manager in regimental medical unit out of pity and considering his age. Foodstuff ended up in his supervision.

Me and Tsykal were thrown together by military fate every time I got to an orderly company after the wound. First time we met each other near Medved village. Having just fallen asleep after an operation in the tent for lightly wounded, I was woken up by grating squeaky voice. That was Tsykal conducting political conversation with the soldiers. At first I thought I

dreamed a nightmare, guards captain's pockmarked mug was just that repulsive. New white short fur coat only emphasized its deformity. Captain spoke through the nose with thick Ukrainian accent while addressing a young man lying on the bunk bed:

–Well why have you grown sad so much? Are you thinking about family? Do you not get the letters?

–I don't, I'm thinking, – young man responded, looking at captain with melancholic eyes.

–There, that's why it's breeding. From the thoughts!  
– Tsykal remarked with satisfaction.

–Who's breeding? – we asked, becoming interested.

–Louse, – and captain gave a long lecture on causes of lice's appearance and on how people shouldn't be blue and lose courage in hard conditions...

Tsykal treated me suspiciously, I felt his “class hatred” result of which was my early discharge to the front with the wound not having closed yet.

After the next wound I had to serve with guards captain side by side, and we had either quarrels or watchful armed truce. Once in August of forty-four, when we had been stationed in the woods far back in the rear area and enjoyed peace, a heavy two-cannon German



battery suddenly started firing nearby. It turned out that Germans remained in our rear area during a quick offensive, and now, suddenly (oh, morons!) they decided to fight. They were shooting at the road and somewhere else.

Twenty of lightly wounded people and me with Tsykal ran to the farm where Germans were stuck, having grabbed rifles and SMGs. Their cannons were in the yard surrounded by sheds, a cowhouse and a house with red tiled roof. After entrenching himself in the hole Tsykal ordered us to attack fritzes, but wounded were neither newbies nor fools. No one ran in front of the bullets. Nobody reacted to captain's words, no matter how steamed up he got. First one had to find out what was what.

We searched the woods around the farm all over and found a 45-millimeter "Farewell, Motherland" cannon in the crater. Its wheel was shot off but the shooting part was fine. Several crates with shells were scattered all over. That's the solution for the problem! Hanses have to be frightened. We reinforced the cannon as best we could, I moved the barrel to the farm and – ka-boom! What beauty! Farm roof burst like a bubble. Tiles

swelled and scattered all over spectacularly, baring the rafters. There were several more shots, and white rag appeared over the farm. Germans did not show any particular heroism and did not wish to die in battle as regulations ordered them to. Twelve men together with the hefty ginger feldwebel who hadn't shaved in a long time surrendered. He lined up his warrior host, ordered "Attention!", clicked heels and courageously reported to captain Tsykal in German which unit surrenders, he told his rank and name.

–Yeah, okay, okay, – Tsykal said.

Prisoners were fed and sent to the rear area. Yet captain did not forget our cussedness and insubordination...

The other time we had a conflict over safe in the bank of one East Prussian town. Tsykal wanted to crack it without a doubt, I said that wasn't our mission. Artillerymen exploded the steel door of the safe and captured the gold which was in there while we were bickering. Then once, also in Germany, Tsykal was searching for vodka at my quarters, turning the whole room upside down, even ripping the mattress, yet he didn't find anything. I had vodka indeed, but I stored it

inside the piano. As for Tsykal, he had never touched that thing before and he didn't know that the instrument can be opened both from above and from below. In short, we were at odds with him and we didn't bear good feelings towards each other.

Two of my old acquaintances were among Tsykal's subordinates – Zimin and Zabiyakin. We had first met near Stremutka during a terrible foul-up. New reinforcements came – elderly people, sobersides – and they got straight into hellfire. Most of them died soon after. Zimin and Zabiyakin who were about fifty years old each found a way to survive. I felt pity for them and I tried to help them as best I could. A simple kind word was worth a lot in those conditions. Then Zimin and Zabiyakin were transferred to the rear area, and they were guarding the food store, without change, in turns, until the end of the war. And during the day they were running errands for Tsykal. Old fellows welcomed my arrival to the orderly company with joy, almost tearing up. They fed me with what they could, gave me blue denaturated alcohol with repugnant odor which they had a full jerrycan of reserved to drink. They were thrifty fellows. They got accustomed to the rear area and

acquired vigor. Once, upon entering a dugout in the evening, I found a peaceful scene: Zabiyaikin was sitting near the oven, burning lice nested in the guards badge with a red hot nail and telling an exciting story based on Sherlock Holmes and his Russian colleague detective Putilin to soldiers who were keeping silent. Sometimes classic plotlines could be heard in Zabiyaikin's stories. For instance, here's one:

–So, one beautiful broad married a general, even though he was aged, and a negro to boot. But, you know, public position, salary, glory... She had lived with the general for a while, then she put out to the lieutenant, and general found out about it too! He found some kind of handkerchief there... He was a hefty and fierce negro, he took and strangled his girl, and then added some with the knife: police counted thirty-two wounds! And turns out the girl didn't even put out to the lieutenant: captain who wanted to establish a career had made everything up. General went mad or something once he found out about it, he started yelling, his mouth foaming. He grabbed the bayonet and hit himself right in the gut: One! One! One! One! And his spirit left him. That's what kind of a story it was, guys!

Zabiyakin's stories about the Civil War that he had served at Budenny's baggage were even more interesting. He had preserved long mustache and love for horses since then. He remembered how good life was back then, what kind of sausages, cheeses and wines fell to them in stores of the towns reconquered from Whites. He shared his holy grail of the time with us: it was being in possession of a countess or a princess. That dream hadn't been fulfilled earlier but, as I've been told, Zabiyakin found his share in East Prussia. Once an old refugee woman was walking along the road past our unit. Soldiers informed a tipsy Zabiyakin: "Quickly, look! There's a German countess walking!" Zabiyakin took it seriously, he caught up with the old woman and screwed her by the roadside, thus fulfilling the goal of his life and establishing himself in this world.

He had always been fascinated with the fair sex in general. Once, upon running into a kitchen, I found a drunk Zabiyakin who was peeling potatoes for lunch together with a German woman mobilized for that there. She was a lady of forty-five years, dressed elegantly, well-groomed, she was sitting there as if on a formal party. Zabiyakin, his mug red from denaturated alcohol, having

fiery eyes and mustache sticking out, was hitting on her while doing it to the best of his knowledge and ability, meaning just like at home, on the animal farm: you grab her pulp and she's shrieking with delight... There was horror in lady's eyes, her hands were shaking. I yelled at Zabayakin and offered the German to head home. Zabayakin was very offended, especially since he considered me to be his friend. After I left, he, apparently, led his helpmate to kitchen again.

Zimin possessed different abilities. He was very thrifty. It was him who taught me how to get honey from the beehive. In order to do that one had to wear a gas mask, twine a footcloth around the neck and wear mittens. We even got inside one hive but suddenly messerschmitt flew by and cut a burst over the road that was going nearby. We stucked our noses into the ground, and bees stung us plenty. The other time honey hunt went off better. It was during a dark night, hives stood in the hollow, bees were sleeping, and we harvested a whole pot of thick fragrant honey each. Upon exiting the valley we saw people standing on the opposite side of it. Those were Germans. They were also going for the honey and the had been politely waiting for us to leave. Command

slept at night and soldiers who were sick and tired of massacre called an improvised truce. As for the morning, everyone started ripping the throats out of each other and crushing skulls again. That's what can happen too!

Zimin sometimes got into hot water because of his thriftiness. Friendlies captured a house that had an alcohol tank in the concrete basement in one station. People were too lazy to climb for the hatch above, an SMG burst was shot, and alcohol trickled down to the floor. I entered the basement as the concrete floor had already had a knee-deep puddle, air full of alcohol vapors was intoxicating. Here and there cotton pants and ear-flaps hats of drowned boozers could be seen. Dazed Zimin was walking with a pot in his hands in the middle of that, bumping into walls and not being able to find the exit. He was close to drowning after falling into the puddle. I managed to drag him out on the air, dazing and suffocating myself. The business was serious. One spark was enough to blow everything to smithereens, and there were more and more thirsty people with pots coming. It was as if some kind of wireless telegraph or telepathic impulse had notified everyone of alcohol's presence. Slavs were flying from all sides as flies to meat. We had to

guard the dangerous place with SMGs in hands until command cordoned the disastrous house off.

Zabiyakin and Zimin, Tsykal's subordinates, ended up being involuntary participants in the romance that took place in one small German village. It was the last spring of war, a happy and sunny one. Cupids were flying in the air, probably not wielding bows but rather machine guns befitting for war time: myriads of their arrows were striking the soldiers' hearts. Soldiers were courting German women who looked at conquerors' attention more than with favor: their husbands had been gone somewhere for many years already. Elsa – a ginger beauty of regal thickness – stood out among the Germans. Her assets were flapping and overflowing like jelly during a walk. Her cheeks had always had dimples from a permanent smile. We were twisting our necks looking back at her, we stared at her with our mouths open. Feelings of amazement and shock had been with us for a while.

Turns out, nothing human was alien to guards captain Tsykal. Cupid's arrow struck him too. He lost a considerable amount of weight, lost color and started pondering which we had never seen him do. However,



Tsykal was efficient, assertive and unquailing. Having consulted with people who knew German, he attacked Elsa:

–Ikh (points finger at himself), bitte you (finger at Elsa) will give deezer teer – cow (finger at a cow from our herd that gave milk for the wounded). Then leeben du tsuzammen.

–Tee-hee! – said Elsa, made a breathtaking turn with her behind and ran away.

Tsykal was a great psychologist. He took German character, German pragmatism and efficiency into account superbly. He understood which button to push. Elsa was over thirty, she knew a thing or two about life and she came to a sensible decision: captain's mug was, of course, pockmarked, but a cow in the household is a great thing! Even Willi will approve of the deal once he comes back. Having made a decision, Elsa fulfilled her obligations in good faith like a true German. Tsykal started living a happy family life. His room was shinningly clean, Elsa put featherbeds on the windows in the morning, she cleaned and beat captain's overcoat, ironed his breeches, cooked lunches. Tsykal was glowing. He invited guests, sat them down at table covered with a

starched tablecloths. Elsa with a steaming tureen entered. It had Ukrainian borscht inside that captain had taught his new girlfriend to cook. Smiling and dancing, making unmatched undulations pass through her body from the rounded shoulders and lower with them becoming more and more expressive, Elsa declaimed captain's rhymes: "Broff from groats, Broff from groats mit sieben glans!" Tsykal's eyes were beaming with happiness, he was roaring with laughter, like a stallion, so much that the glass in the wardrobe started to rattle. Guests became still, admiring his wit. Guards captain's honeymoon was going on for ten days, then we were ordered to relocate to a new town. Upon entering the truck, Tsykal gave orders to Zimin and Zabiyaikin to lead the cow out of Elsa's yard and join it with our herd while smirking... Thus Soviet-German love was all over. But, rumor has it, justice does exist in this world: soon guards captain Tsykal ended up in venereal department of our hospital.

## **Novella XVII. Why did major G. shoot?**

I tried to accurately reproduce the names of characters and be accurate with the facts whenever possible in these notes. However I cannot tell major G.'s full name: he is still alive and prosperous, and in his case I know far from the whole story.

It happened in February of 1944 in East Prussia, in the city of Allenstein. We had just rolled over the whole Poland from Warsaw to its Northern borders in a lightning-fast march. Army was transferred on heavy American Studebaker trucks. It was an excellently organized automobile conveyor. Trucks were going back and forth night and day. I remember how I was sitting on packs and crates of property, strong wind with snow was blowing. I was shaking on the bumps, I latched onto crates and tried not to touch the stretcher with my hands. It was tied down with a thick rope over the load and suicider's body was on it. A soldier had shot himself two days prior, investigation was going on and body had been preserved for autopsy for which there was no time on our previous position.

Poland was ransacked, destroyed and suppressed by German occupation Warsaw amounted to mountains of ruins with their basements full of murdered Poles' bodies. Graves could be seen everywhere – in the streets and in public gardens. Polish villages looked pathetic.

–Nic nie ma! – scared locals harped on.

–Nic nie ma! Butter, eggs, meat – fshistko German took! – they repeated...

–Where do you have the restroom? – one soldier asked.

–Nic nie ma, fshistko German took...

On the contrary, East Prussia astounded with abundance, prosperity and order, there were comfortable farms with agricultural machinery, everything was electrified, rich bauers' houses always had pianos and good furniture together with a shed with closets and bunk beds for Eastern workers. Pigsties and cowhouses were full of well-fed cattle. Yes, they lived in great comfort there... And cities were clean, rich, well-built. We found a heap of junk and foodstuff taken out of USSR that was stored in warehouses just in case in Allenstein. The other warehouse had canned food from Holland, Belgium and France. Although it got burned a little after

a fire, it was decent enough. Soldiers fell into the habit of drinking pure alcohol, washing it down with condensed cream... I remember one empty house had fifteen gold Kaiser minted coins lying on the windowsill. Nobody had taken them for a while; soldiers did not expect to live until the end of the war and they did not want to burden themselves with unnecessary weight.

We found all kinds of military regalia in many houses: there were orders, uniforms, SS daggers with “blood and honor” imprinted, shoulder marks, fourragères and other spangle. Indeed, East Prussia was a nest of militarism. Yet military, fascist activists and other higher-ups had managed to run away. Mainly ordinary people – women, old people, children – remained. They had to face the consequences of defeat. Soon they started to be lined up in files and sent to the railway station – to Siberia, as some said. A woman of thirty-five years with two children lived at the very top of our house, in mansard. Her husband had died on the front, she had a hard time running away – one can't run away far with an infant, so she stayed. Soldiers found out she was a good tailor, brought the fabric and forced her to sew breeches. Many wanted to show off, and they had

worn the clothes out plenty during winter. The woman had been stitching on the sewing machine from morning till night. She was given lunches, bread, sometimes sugar for that. And during the night many soldiers ascended to mansard in order to make love. Woman was afraid to refuse that too, she worked until dawn, not getting a wink of sleep... There was no choice. There had always been a line standing at the mansard doors, and there was no way of dispersing it.

At the time I was healing the latest wound in our orderly company. Once major G. came there together with a new team of wounded. I had known him for a long time and thought him one of the few positive heroes in the large tragedy called “war”. Major was amiable, well-educated, at the very least in his field – he was a highly competent artilleryman. He was notable for his remarkable bravery. I was told of his desperate adventures in German rear area when 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army got entrapped near Sinyavino in August of 1942. In short, he was an exemplary officer. I had served together with him for several months and grew to have massive respect for my commander. Then we ended up together again. German frag tore out a hefty piece of meat from major

G.'s brachial muscle. The wound was large but not dangerous. It did not have an impact on major's general health. He was as stately, red-cheeked, cheerful, vigorous as always and he did not lie about on hospital bed, instead spending his days walking around town and being interested in everything.

That strange and bizarre incident happened one late night. I was sitting in my room and suddenly heard pistol shots above, in mansard. Suspecting something wrong, I bolted up the stairs, flung a door open and witnessed a horrifying scene. Major G. stood with a smoking gun in his hand, the woman sat in front of him holding a dead infant in one hand and holding the wound with the other. Bed, pillows, baby linen – everything was covered in blood. Bullet went through the baby's head and got stuck in mother's chest. Major G. was absolutely calm, motionless and sober as a judge. Instead, lieutenant who stood next to him was coiling and hissing:

–Well, kill! Kill her!

That lieutenant was completely drunk – he had gray face, blue lips, tearing eyes, drooling mouth. That's how alcoholics on the last stage of alcoholism look like. (I had seen one of those in metro recently. He was sitting,

mumbling, and a puddle that was trickling over the whole car, over fifteen meters, appeared under him... And girls wearing jeans and makeup were sitting opposite him and discussing: just how much liquid can a person have inside?) Lieutenant was amazingly drunk, yet, as I understood, he was still doing his job: goading major. Why? I didn't know. Perhaps, he had a goal – arrange a provocation and put a case together? He was from SMERSH, after all! And that organization moved in mysterious ways and methods... Nevertheless, major G. was still holding a pistol in his arm. Having understood and having considered nothing, I socked him in the ear, unexpectedly for myself. I likely thought his judgment got clouded and my hit was to make him come to his senses. That happened on the firing line when young soldiers were lost with terror in the first battle: a strong box in the ear brought their reason and common sense back. Once I copped a young lieutenant who filled his pants during the attack, and later he was thankful for that. Yet there it wasn't a firing line, and everything developed differently. Major G. calmly holstered his pistol, and lieutenant raised a hue and cry: “A-a-ah! Officer was hit!” – he shouted solemnly and happily, as if



he had been waiting just for that. I understood I had got into a nasty predicament. Hitting an officer was an incredible occurrence. Nobody would care I had done it with good intent.

In 1941-1942 I would have been put up against the wall without further ado. By then I could hope for a penal company at best. It needs to be said that our army did not have physical abuse during Second World War. At any rate, I have seen nothing of the kind and I haven't heard about it. Soldier could have been shot for cowardice, for cussedness, but hitting – not a chance! Try to hit one – you'll earn a bullet in the nape in the very first attack! But most importantly – need to share danger, to go for death together formulated mutual respect, and there was no physical abuse. Higher command was a different story: they had their own etiquette that we had nothing to do with. I once saw how a drunk general, a tanker commander, was clubbing his colonels and a major with a thick knotty stick. Later they figured everything out on their own...

The next act of drama took place in the stairwell on the floor below. The acting was completely silent but majestic: two orderlies slowly carried baby's corpse from

above while lighting their way with smoking torches. Doctor wearing a white coat could be seen through the open doors of an operating room, he was preparing to take the bullet out of mother's chest, and two soldiers with SMGs led me out – without belt, without shoulder marks – through the opposite door in order to take me to lock-up.

I was locked in a damp basement and I had been held there for a night and day. Toward the evening I was led somewhere. For interrogation – I figured. If only they wouldn't beat me! Yet fortune had smiled upon me again. SMERSH commander had been inspecting me for a while, and then he said:

–Go now, and don't be daft next time. And keep silent, keep silent!

I was given belt and shoulder marks back, and the matter was dropped at that. Later on I understood that command wasn't happy with the incident while comparing the circumstances. Lieutenant was apparently acting independently and he had overdone it. A scandal was brewing. Major G. was an exemplary officer, I was a division veteran who had just got decorated to boot. The affair was covered up, as if nothing had happened.

Yet what was that exactly? Why did major G. shoot? Had it been the lieutenant, I wouldn't have been surprised. Lieutenant was supposed to act like that both due to his position and character, but major...

Then I was condemning him, and now, after many years, I am at a loss and I can understand nothing. Perhaps, major G. got an eyeful of German violence? Like all of us, he saw a huge mass grave with murdered Russian prisoners that we had discovered in Voronovo. He saw the corpses of our children, tortured and burned. He probably knew well that German victories in 1941-1942 were to a great extent due to violence: they killed one and all without further ado, military and civilians, old and young. Perhaps all that had hardened the major and he decided to take revenge. Also, German woman's son would have become a soldier in twenty years and marched at us again... Maybe major G. knew that violence is a permanent companion of human history from biblical times to our times, and innocent suffers more often than guilty. Maybe he understood that all great reformers of humankind – Ivan the Terrible, Hitler, Stalin and many others – asserted themselves on violence while eliminating friends and foes, enemies and

followers indiscriminately in order to consolidate their ideas and their power by that. But it is unlikely that major G. was reflecting on that. He was simply shooting. And I am still racking my brain: why? I have never seen him anymore, but I have recently found out that major, now colonel already, had been working in headquarters for a long time, then he had been giving lectures in the Military Academy, and now he's retired. I am not the one to judge him but I remember him with disgust.

As terrible the affair with major G. was, it had quickly been lost in the nooks of my memory, put aside by a complete kaleidoscope of new impressions. Sometimes so many events happen in a single day during the war that one can't always gather as many in several years during peace time. Here's another episode of those days.

One night we were suddenly woken up. Half-asleep, spurred by command, having grabbed SMGs and grenades, we climbed the tank. And only as it started forward like wind, we had woken up properly. As we were told later, a scouting squad found a German concentration camp where several hundreds of still surviving Jews had been held in deep German rear area,

forty kilometers from us. Judging by the shooting that could be heard from there, prisoner extermination was going on. Scouts reported the camp coordinates over the radio and command deployed us – two tanks with soldiers on the armor – to save the dying people.

Since offensive was going on and firm German defense did not exist, tanks jumped over like wind and soon we had reached the destination, being mudded by dirty snow from under the tracks. Tankers shot German firing points with cannons and machine guns, then one tank smashed the gate on the move, and we entered the camp grounds. After a short, exceedingly hard-fought shootout we sent SS guards to hell.

I misremember the following events since I got stunned by a grenade that hefty fritz had lobbed at me. It cut my short fur jacket all over and wounded me a little. And still the images of an area in front of bunkhouses scattered with corpses of shot Jews were preserved in my memory, and we found several hundreds of survivors in the bunkhouses. Skin-covered skeletons were sitting there. They looked at me with their huge dark eyes that had not even fear but terror, desperation and death in them. I could have never forgotten that gaze for all my

life.

## **Novella XVIII. Petka Shabashnikov**

Petka Shabashnikov was a scumbag!

He wasn't just a small dirtbag but rather a big scoundrel who couldn't exist without messing with his neighbor. I had been looking at him remotely with loathing until fate made us cross ways.

Sometime we had stayed in a rich German house for a short while, and Petka promptly went for the owner's wardrobe. Hearing the woman's cries, I threw Petka outside while smashing his nose at that. Frothing with spite and bloody snot, he swore to take fearful vengeance on me, and soon after he carried out his threats.

Once I discovered a small malfunction in my radio station, a completely trivial, almost invisible one, entirely by accident. Such a malfunction would have seriously let me down at a critical juncture since I would have to look for it for a couple of hours. Just that evening Germans launched a tank attack, artillery softening-up tore the telephone connection and had my radio not worked, it would have ended very and very harmfully. And I would have only had one way – up against the wall! I had no

doubts that Petka had his foul hand in the radio.

He was a psychologist, he knew how to get to me, and his strikes hit me precisely, and in the most unexpected way. One night I was on duty at the telephone in division headquarters, and Petka did the same, but he was in the observation post that was located in a small peasant farm between our and German trenches. There was a lull in fighting, both armies were asleep, and only sentries were lazily shooting their rifles and machine guns, and launching flares.

Our scouts who were at an observation post used the lull as an opportunity to indulge in some cheerful fun. They closed owner and mistress in the closet and then all the platoon started corrupting young daughters while taking turns. Petka, knowing that I can't stand even stories about such things, transmitted poor girls' shrieks and groans, and also explained what was going on in great details. His juicy commentaries reminded of a football report. He knew I was not allowed to hang up, that I wouldn't go to the command since command was sleeping, and it wouldn't even be surprised by such accidents – it was a common occurrence, after all! He had been scoffing at me like that for quite a while,



soothing his foul soul. Later on he expected name-calling or fighting from me, but I kept silence, and my silence made him sour to the bone.

Two weeks had passed. We had set up an observation post in a small two-story brick house that was situated in the outskirts on the edge of some kind of German town. Our first trench was hundred meters ahead of us, and German one was further on. Observing it from the second floor window was very convenient... German attack started suddenly. Our infantrymen, small in numbers, ran away expecting to save themselves in the second trench behind our house. We were shooting from the window trying to help them to no avail. Remaining in the house became dangerous. Starshina took six matches and made us draw them. I, of course, drew the short one.

–Cover us! We will give you a hand later! – said the brave artilleryman and took a powder.

I had been shooting from the windows for one, two, three minutes. I ran out of ammo. I had been throwing grenades. I ran out of them too. German bullets whizzed by my head and penetrated the opposite wall. Good thing they didn't hit the head! Splinters flew out of a window frame. Germans were near. One of them started aiming

faust-patrone at my window while sitting in the bushes forty meters from our house. It's a terrible feeling when you're being aimed at! Then I had been having a dream for all my life: Germans are attacking, I pull the trigger, but rifle is silent, I'm frantically looking for ammo in a pile of spent casings and see how faust-patrone is being aimed at me! After that dream I usually woke up in a cold sweat. And then, in 1944, I dove onto the floor to the corner at lightning speed. Faust-patrone hit the window slab fifteen centimeters above the window. Room filled up with brick dust. Almost being stunned, I did manage to hear German speech: fritzies had already got to the first floor, and they were going up to me by the stairs. What to do? I hid in the built-in wardrobe, and then my kneecaps started shaking from fear so much I couldn't steady them with my hands. Luckily, Germans engaged in shooting and did not poke around the wardrobes like soldiery of all the world's armies usually does. In fifteen minutes they were chased away, and my comrades-in-arms returned. I got off with shaky knees...

Soon after platoon was sent to the second trench for resting. Having dozed off in deep sleep in a warm dugout, I hadn't heard the shelling, but I was woken up by

starshina:

–Get up, a dugout got overwhelmed there and Petka got crushed. He was dug out and carried for burial. There are his papers and letters left. Look at them, and then we'll send what we need by mail.

I started sorting out a pack of papers and suddenly found something directly concerning me. It was a tip-off! Petka informed relevant authorities on circumstances of the battle that had taken place the day before. According to his story it appeared that I stayed in the observation post of my own free will, surrendered to Germans and for a long time I had been in contact with them, obviously, getting a task from them. Else they would have taken me with them or killed me! Would you look at that! Great job! You can't prove anything and you can't exonerate yourself! And organization in which Petka served wouldn't require any exonerations anyway. They'd just fulfill a plan and put nine grams into your forehead!

But starshina, how was starshina!?! To this day I don't know whether he read Petka's papers or gave them to me by accident. Chances are, he read them – since he knew Petka and his escapades better than me.

It seems that everything ended well. Yet Petka did

manage to finish me off. He was the force, he was the system, he was the impenetrable wall. He was the personification of everything that surrounded me, and it was him who made me thoroughly grasp what our life is held together with.

## Novella XIX. Erika, or My Defeat in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War

*The flower that smiles today,  
Tomorrow dies.*

—Shelly

Our army moved next to Danzig in early spring of 1945. Germans intended to put up long and hard resistance there. They built strong fortifications, drew the ironclads that damaged us considerably with their large-caliber cannon fire from the sea near the city. Everyone who possibly could was sent into battle. I was told of German sailor attack headed by a handsome captain. They moved in a distinct formation, as if on parade, wearing elegant black uniform. Captain had a cigar in his teeth. But it wasn't 1941 anymore, ivans were hard to frighten: squad got under katyusha salvo that turned valiant sailors into a bloody stew.

Yet still German resistance was strong, our losses were, as usual, high and city siege was dragging on. One fine morning leaflets fell down onto our heads and also on Danzig. They said this approximately: "I, marshal

Rokossovsky, order Danzig garrison to cease hostility within twenty-four hours. Otherwise the city will be assaulted, and all the responsibility for victims among civilian population and destruction will fall upon German command's heads..." Leaflet text was both in Russian and German. It was clearly aimed at both opposing sides. Rokossovsky acted according to best Suvorov traditions:

–Guys, here's a fortress! It's got wine and broads! If you take it, you'll party for three days! And Turks will be responsible!

And we did take it. Rokossovsky was a romantic. Zhukov, that one was a stern, cruel man of business, and that one was a romantic. And, so they say, he was a very amiable, polite man equal in conversing who was liked by dames. Look at his portrait – the face is very likeable.

Danzig was taken relatively quickly, although almost the whole army had fallen at its walls. But that was customary – what is another horde more or less, who cares. There are a lot of people in Russia, plus new ones are born fast! And they did get born! Everything was as usual: there were drunken haze, hellish shelling and bombings. People moved forward while swearing obscenities. One out of ten reached the target. Then fun

started. Feather flew out of beds, there were songs, dances, plenty of grub, you can roam around the shops and apartments. Houses are ablaze, broads are shrieking. People had partied to their hearts' content! But that cup was taken from me. I was still living a quiet life in Recovering Team. We passed through the burning city and stayed in a small resort town that is now famous for song festivals.

By that time my relationship with guys from Recovering Team was as perfect as it could get, and I didn't feel myself an odd fish among the others. I learned to fress vodka. I hadn't tasted that brew until winter of 1942 when necessity made me to. I fell down into a frozen crater and ended up chest-deep in the ice cold water one frosty day. I had nothing to change into and I couldn't do it anywhere. Starshina saved me. He gave me dry underwear (service shirt, overcoat and cotton wool jacket were just about dried by the bonfire), rubbed vodka on me and gave me a glass to drink, saying: "Vodka is not luxury but hygiene!" I got lucky again! A mountain brigade assaulted village Venyagolovo near Pogostye in the same 1942. Attacking battallions had to overcome Mga river.

–Forward! – they were ordered.

And so soldiers waded waist-deep, chest-deep, neck-deep in the water through the crushed ice. Then it frosted toward the evening. And there were neither bonfires nor dry underwear nor starshina with vodka. Brigade got frozen and its commander, colonel Ugryumov, was wandering along the Mga riverbank drunk and confused. This “victory”, however, did not prevent him from becoming general in the end of the war...

Thus I had been accustomed to vodka since 1942, swearing became an integral part of my lexicon so much that many months after the war I was afraid that sacred word might suddenly get out during a conversation with decent people somewhere in University or Hermitage. As a result, we lived in perfect union in Recovering Team. The only thing my colleagues did not approve of was my lack of interest in the fair sex.

–You blockhead – they told me – take the opportunity! It's going to be too late after that! You're going to be kicking yourself after that, you know! You'll wish you had used such a possibility! Pick anyone – black, white, ginger, polka-dotted, fat, thin! Don't



hesitate!

My behavior was incomprehensible and it shocked everyone. But later on they let go of me, they got tired of wasting words, I didn't listen to kindly advice anyway. And we lived in peace and friendship.

Town called Sopot was intact to a considerable extent and half empty – more wealthy German population went West... I settled in a mansard of a small home where apparently some kind of student girl had lived before. There were many books, monographs on artists in particular, there was piano and notes. There was a record player together with records. It was paradise! You could get inside, switch off from everything and dream! I lacked a place just like that! To be fair, everything wasn't clean and innocent there: I discovered photos of the owner making love to young SS-men deep into the table. However, things of that nature didn't surprise me anymore, they could be safely thrown in the dump.

I stocked up on candles, food and I was anticipating how in the evening, when everyone goes to bed, I would be left alone with my thoughts. And by then I was sitting together with my sworn friend Mishka Smirnov and

warming up on the spring sun. We were almost happy. Everything around is quiet, calm. Nobody is shooting or bombing. Air is clean, we're still alive, full, slightly drunk. Sweet slumber embraced us. Mishka was narrowing his whitish eyelashes on the sun, I was admiring the pattern of tiled roofs on the other side of the street. It was great! I had long-standing friendship with Mishka. We had known each other since, it seems, 1941. He was a flax-haired fellow two meters tall with a heavy, sluggish gait. His face was kind. He was a nice Russian guy... One winter evening in 1943 we ended up in the observation post in the trench wedging into German positions. Germans, obviously intending to cut the wedge off, launched an attack. Mishka got a stray bullet in the leg below the knee apparently passing over the bone but damaging the vessels in the very beginning of artillery softening-up. Blood gushed out. I bandaged the wound, applied a tourniquet properly in order to stop the bleeding but I had no strength to carry such a bear on myself. Having explained Mishka that I would come back in half an hour with the sledge I saw at infantrymen's, I departed. I found the sledge quickly, I snatched it from heedless owners (they might not have given it!) but it had

been impossible to get to Mishka already. Germans cut off the wedge! Mishka remained in their position. I was calmed, assured that Germans had surely shot him already and there was no need to act in the heat of the moment, to crawl in front of the bullets. Yet still, in two hours when it got dark I crawled over the no man's land, having taken the sledge with me. The venture was a suicide, it was senseless and almost hopeless. Germans were on the lookout – I was probably saved by coming snowstorm and a white camouflage cloak. I managed to crawl to our former dugout near which Mishka lied in the hollow. He was alive. Either Germans hadn't noticed him or thought he had been dead already or left him to freeze. Mishka took everything with amazing fatalistic calm and he only told me: “You did come, after all!” He had barely been frozen since it was relatively warm but he got severely weakened by blood loss. Loading him onto the sledge was piece of cake. Then I had to crawl back. Germans can't be seen by there are sparks flying out of the dugout's chimney! – they're warming up, the creeps! Nobody came out of the dugout but flares flew from all directions. I don't know how I crawled out. Almost impossible happened – we must have certainly been

finished off, but for some reason we had only been noticed on no man's land, near our positions already. They started shooting accurately almost hitting me, but our infantry lent a hand: they covered us with fire, and I dove into our trench with Mishka. Mishka came back from hospital in two months and since then he had tried to constantly be around me. He brought me the best grub, he got the drinks, he was ready to do all in his power for me. I repaid him in kind.

So, we were basking in the sun in resort town of Sopot with that Mishka Smirnov. And suddenly I noticed a girl running along the street near the pharmacy that was opposite of us. She was very beautiful – thin, lean, with short slightly wavy hair, large blue eyes. I managed to notice her fingers – they were long and flexible. I thought that running on the street full of drunk soldiery was risky with such an eye-catching look, especially in those troubled times. Mishka also followed her with his eyes and snickered kind of strangely in response to my words on girl's attractiveness. Odd grin appeared on his lips.

I had instantly forgotten that episode. I was overwhelmed with business. I only managed to get to the

room in mansard – that long-awaited island of tranquility – only late at night when it got completely dark. I lighted the candle and started flipping through the book pages. Suddenly stamps could be heard over the wall, door swept open and closed again letting some kind of sack that fell down on the floor through. Making nothing out of that, I wanted to run out of the room, but door wouldn't open since it was pushed from outside. Leaving steps and soldier cackle could be heard.

Suddenly sack on the floor moved. I looked closer and, to my amazement, saw the girl – the exact one who was running along the street during the day. I understood everything! Amazingly kind Mishka interpreted my heedlessly said words in his own way, and decided to do me a favor. It was just like in a fairytale: you get exactly what you wish for! You like this babe – have her, and have a good time!.. I banged on the door, exasperated, but everything Mishka did he did thoroughly. That door could be opened with nothing short of grenade explosion by then. And girl was still sobbing and looking at me. What to do? I tried to explain her in broken German that door was closed, that I couldn't let her out then, that it would have to wait, that

times were parlous at the moment, that bad people played a cruel joke on her, but that there, at my place, she was on completely safe ground. I wouldn't lay a finger on her... She probably understood little of that but she saw I wasn't aggressive, that my face was perplexed, and my tone was more of requesting and apologizing, and calmed down a little. I offered her to go to the other half of the room, behind the wardrobe, and sleep there, in bed, if she would like to. I sat in the armchair so I couldn't be seen. We sat until morning like that, not getting a wink of sleep, each thinking of their own things. I could seldom hear sobbing. She calmed down completely at dawn, she ate breakfast that had been offered by me and introduced herself.

Her name was Erika, and she was a daughter of the pharmacist who lived opposite. Mishka appeared in the morning, he unlocked the door laughing and congratulated me with absolution from such long fasting, turning a deaf ear to my swearing. "Happy matrimony!" – he said cheekily. I sent him further than to hell and led Erika home. One could imagine what her poor father had to experience! All around people were cut, strangled, raped and daughter disappeared nobody knew where!

Erika fell upon the old man's neck and she started chirping something while pointing at me. I tried to apologize, I explained something but then I gave up and left. It seemed that that story was over. I got overwhelmed by business again, then I managed to sleep for four hours, and I forgot about everything.

When the following night fell upon town, I heard the knocking on my door.

–Come in, it's open! – I shouted...

Erika entered accompanied by her father... Look at that! What a surprise! Father had been explaining me something for a while while smiling shyly. His speech was full of modal verbs and conditional mood, refined politeness higher than my language level. But I got the gist of it:

–It's war time, it's bad everywhere, mister officer (flattery!) is so kind and amiable, my daughter stay at his place once more. Soldiers can enter the pharmacy...

And so on. He brought two bottles of wine to gift me, I refused them, and we were rearranging those bottles on the table for a while – me to him, and he to me. It turned out that I agreed and Erika stayed. What was the pharmacist thinking? Perhaps, a practical German

figured that decent life was better than nightly atrocities, and chose the lesser evil? I don't know. But Erika stayed and she acted completely different from before. She was affable, cute, she smiled a lot and she talked a lot. She told me about Germany, about books. I understood something. I heard some unknown poems for the first time then. She knew Pushkin, I hadn't even heard of Rilke! She played the piano for me, and then – oh, what an idyll! – I accompanied her as I could – we played music duets! Truly – it was a feast in time of plague...

The following night she was with me again, then again and again. No soldier dared to say an ugly word to her, let alone make a pass at her during the day. She was taboo. She was my lawful booty, my war trophy, and Recovering Team guarded my rights inviolately. Our relationship was developing quickly. A romance was brewing, but it was an unusual one. I didn't even think of possible intimacy. Not because I was inexperienced and I was going through the first serious contact with a creature of the opposite sex. For me Erika was the personification of what existed beyond the war, what was far from its horrors, its dirt, its meanness, its villainy first and foremost. For me she turned into a concentration of



spiritual values that I had been deprived of for so long and that I had thirsted for! It turned out that the scariest thing at war is staying in spiritual vacuum, in filth and vulgarity. Human stops being Human and turns into a fish washed ashore. Erika brought the atmosphere I had been deprived of for so long back. And I repaid her in most pure and most serene feelings I was capable of. I shaped up a refined bouquet of those feelings consciously and unconsciously and put them at the girl's feet. I experienced hours that are very few in life. I got up from four legs that we are usually walking on while burying our noses in everyday routine to two legs, I drew myself up and saw the stars.

And I made Erika see them. She understood everything, she appreciated everything. Apparently there was some similarity between our nature.

Those were hours and days of the highest enlightenment and purification and military environment had possibly only amplified the tense situation! The completeness of understanding between each other that emerged between us was incredible. Neither language barrier nor briefness of acquaintance (after all, we knew nothing about each other) hindered it.

During first days Erika wondered why I hadn't launched any amorous attacks, I saw that, later she did not expect anything like that and she got imbued with infinite confidence in me. A nice romance could have happened in time, great feelings could have developed, but there was no time.

–We're departing tomorrow! – Mishka Smirnov declared.

–We're departing tomorrow, – I imparted Erika, astounded by this news. She was silent for a minute, then she fell upon my neck in tears and she talked, talked. I understood approximately this:

–I don't want to lose you! Let everything happen! Let at least one day be ours! And further on like that.

I stood petrified and I couldn't even kiss her. Erika became a personification of all German women who were offended, who were bullied by us, Russians, for me. I wanted to, I must have acted honest to God with her, I wanted to rehabilitate us, Russians, in her eyes... I stood frozen and I was silent. She interpreted it her way:

–You have a bride, it is sacred to me! – she looked on the ground and left.

The following day we were loading junk on the

trucks, someone saw us off. Erika's father held her hand, and she was crying bitterly.

–You amaze me! – said Mishka Smirnov, – no German broad cried when I was leaving. And I did my best alright! What did you bewitch her with?

And so we left...

Weeks had passed. I left the Recovering Team, I fought again, there were fears again, there was torment, knee-deep blood again and other merriments. We were fluctuating around the Baltic coast back and forth, like fire crew, to the hottest places, Sopot story had started to dim in my memory. Was there Erika or not? Or did I dream her, and everything connected with her was just a sweet fantasy?

But the story continued – just like in the old song. Once executive officer called me and said:

–Here's a package, there's a motorcycle outside. Learn the route on the map and go to the commander.

He showed me two routes on the map: one was long, safe, the other was way shorter, but dangerous.

–Stray Germans are wandering there and shooting! – he explained. Dangerous way went through Sopot! “I'm going to visit it at least on the way back!” – I decided. I

hastily gathered the food – canned food, sugar, bread.

It turned out to be a weighty sack – thankfully, nice Mishka Smirnov helped. And so we went. The way there was uneventful. I begged the motorcyclist to go to Sopot on the way back, I promised half a liter of alcohol to him for that. Who would resist there? A machine gun fired at us from the bushes almost at the outskirts of Sopot, but it missed. German was either drunk or inexperienced, but he found a way to miss even though we had been clearly visible. I emptied the whole SMG drum into the bushes, and machine gun shut up. We slipped through. We entered the town wet from cold sweat, teeth clattering, accompanied by continuous obscenities of the coachman cursing me, all my ancestors and descendants for involving him in that foolish scheme.

Here's the familiar street, here's our house, here's a pharmacy. I recognize the surroundings, I recognize familiar things... I knock on the door. It took some time for it to open. A short guy wearing a jacket with cotton-padded shoulders is standing at the doorstep. He's got a nasty ferret-like snout, but he's shaved and he wears a tie. He tips tyrolean hat with feather, he bares his teeth with a smile, he bows.

- What would pan officer like?
- Did a pharmacist live here?..
- Does pan require a suit-length?
- A pharmacist and his daughter lived here...
- Would pan like a woman?
- Pharmacist...
- Does pan require eleudron<sup>13</sup>?
- You, pan, are a LAIDAK!!! – I shout.

Door slams shut. What to do? There are new owners here already. The old ones were probably kicked out. Where to find them now? And then I notice an old German, First World War veteran, in the yard. Poor fellow lived nearby, and I sometimes fed him before. I run up to him:

–Bitte, bitte, sir, I implore you – where is the pharmacist, where is the daughter?

–Nein, nein, nic nie ma, I don't know, – he looks with lackluster eyes – as if on the wall, although he seems to have recognized me. He's scared, his hands are shaking, and there are purple spots and swelling on the face. I had seen such looks in besieged Leningrad among people suffering from dystrophy! He doesn't have

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<sup>13</sup> Eleudron – a patented German medicine for venereal diseases.

anything to eat! New Polish authorities don't give even hundred Leningrad grams to Germans!

Meanwhile motorcyclist is honking and loudly swearing while calling to me:

–Faster, or I'll go alone!

Being desperate, I stick the foodstuff sack to the old man and want to leave. And then old man wakes, straightens up, human dignity gleams in his eyes. And he spits me in the face:

–There were six of them, your tankers. Then she broke out a pane and fell on the pavement!..

And he left. I can't remember how I entered the motorcycle sidecar, how I rode. I regained consciousness in Mishka's arms who was shaking me.

–What happened to you?..

What could I say to him? Could he really understand that my breakdown, my decisive, irrecoverable defeat in Second World War occurred? Or maybe he could? After all, Russian folks are sensitive, delicate and quick to understand, especially when sober...

## **Novella XX. Marshall Zhukov**

Magnificent highway Frankfurt – Berlin, a marvel of German road building, went from the East directly West, pierced the outskirts of German capital and bumped up against Reichstag, a symbol of German statehood after going through the entire city. A powerful stream of Soviet military trucks was going over that highway in the beginning of May of 1945 like over a giant artery embodying metal, oil, designer thought from all the corners of huge Russia, and also a powerful stream of people in soldier uniform – blood of Russia squeezed out of all the pores of Russian land. All that comprised a gigantic force that inevitably had to flood and crush agonizing Germany.

We raced to the direction of Berlin on our truck similar to a small blood bead in an artery. But suddenly a worn out tire blew out with a loud crack, and energetic traffic controller led us out of the car stream to the roadside while waving his flag and confirming his directions with hoarse obscenities. We withdrew from the common shoot forward, just like a runner falling out of

the race, breathed calmly and looked around. May sun flooded comfortable houses, verdant fields and groves. Blue sky of uncommon purity only in some places soiled by explosions of anti-aircraft shells spread out above us. Driver was changing the wheel, we were enjoying the rest. And an unending stream of trucks continued to roar several meters from us while rumbling and honking – it was a grandiose force moving over the highway.

Suddenly interruptions developed in continuous rhythm of road movement, highway got cleared out, cars froze on the roadsides, and we saw something new – it was a cavalcade of guarded trucks, armed motorcyclists and a jeep on which marshall Zhukov sat solemnly. It was him who sent everything that moved over the highway, everything that country that picked a deadly fight with Germany accumulated forward, to Berlin with the power of his adamant will. Highway was cleared for him, and nobody should have hindered his movement to German capital.

But what is that? A truck with shells is rapidly moving over the highway, it overtakes the commanding cavalcade. Ivan is behind the wheel, he was ordered to deliver the ammunition to the firing line faster, faster.



Battery has no shells, guys are dying and he performs his duty paying no attention to the traffic controllers. Marshall's jeep stops, marshall jumps down onto asphalt and drops:

–... your mother! Catch up! Stop! Lead here!

In a minute shaking ivan is before the menacing marshal.

–Your driving license!

Marshall takes the paper, tears it to shreds and barks to the guards:

–Beat up, piss on and throw in the ditch!

Retinue pulls ivan aside and whispers to him quietly:

–Come on, get out of here quickly, and keep out of the way!

We are standing by the roadside dumbfounded. Marshall has long since left for Berlin, and rumbling stream has resumed its movement.

## **Berlin. End of the War**

We launched offensive on Berlin from the famous Kustrin Lodgement on Oder. Artillery softening-up was unprecedented, it had a grandiose destructive force flooding German positions in the sea of fire and frags. Our army had never concentrated such power in a single battle and rained it down on Germans' heads before. Yet still they resisted. I saw several hundreds of our burned tanks on one height after a breach. It turned out that German command positioned a regiment of volkssturm – old men and boys with faust-patrones – in the holes on the hillside. That warrior host had perished, but it destroyed a great lot of tanks thus hindering our offensive. Our blood had still been flowing like water. Momentum that was gained in 1941 in Pogostye station and ones similar to it did not decrease but rather increase even though we had learned how to fight, and there was an abundance of weapons. It's just that people got used to not considering losses. Only corpses didn't accumulate in one place then but rather got distributed equally over Germany during our swift advance. Also, they got buried

instantly. Many things got on the right track after four years of the war, including funeral service... Of course, war is a competition in which participants contest who kills each other off first. In the end, we did kill off Germans but alas, we found a way to kill several times more friendlies at that. Such is our great victory!

Berlin Operation is well-known and thoroughly described. It's not Pogostye, after all! Success smiled upon us there! Thus there's no point to repeat how it unfolded. I remembered the blossom of nature in those April and May days. Whole Germany was covered by white flowers of apple and cherry trees, days were clear, air was fragrant. Often wind carried white fluff over the streets of villages and towns together with flower petals. Sometimes it covered streets and sidewalks like first snow. It was fluff from German beds that victors cut open and threw outside out of the windows. It is so interesting and funny, after all, and victor feels noble and validated! White flags, rags, bedsheets, tablecloths were sticking out of almost every single window. Germans demonstrated their surrender harmoniously and in an orderly fashion. We were amazed by tidy gardens with obligatory ugly gnome at every flowerbed, comfortability of villas and

houses, cleanliness, order, but we were annoyed by tall fences with wire nets above that were guarding private property. Excellent roads without bumps, potholes and dirt, with apple trees planted by the sides were also unaccustomed to... Later, when war had already been over and fruit ripened, we started knocking them down by breaking branches. A German who passed by politely asked us not to do that and offered to carefully pluck as many apples as we wanted to for us. He told us that apple trees belonged to a council of a neighboring town that had the road under its jurisdiction. When the fruit would ripen, a special brigade of workers would get hired that would pluck them, load onto the truck and sell on the market. Small percentage of income would cover their payment, and everything else would be spent on repair and road maintenance... There you have it! Be we learned that later, and meanwhile war was going on, it was spring, and the whole army was drunk. Liquor was found everywhere aplenty, and it was drank, drank, drank. I had never consumed as much liquor throughout my whole life as in those two months. Maybe that is why the war was over so quickly since being woozy from wine, we forgot about the danger and we asked for trouble. There

were explosions, bombing, shelling – and right there were accordion and drunken haze.

The closer it was to Berlin, the denser the roadside buildings became. Essentially continuous settlement started many kilometers before the city. German capital could be seen from afar. Crimson flame rose on the horizon at night. A smoke plume several kilometers tall appeared over the sea of flame during the day. Orgy of destruction reigned in the city. Planes, cannons, katyushas, mortars rained thousands of tonnes of explosives upon Berlin. A continuous flow of trucks with soldiers, supplies, as well as tanks, cannons and other military equipment was going forward. Only orderly buses and numerous squads of liberated foreigners came in the opposite direction. There were Italians, Belgians, Poles, French. They carried junk in carts, packed it onto bicycle saddles and had always proudly carried their national flags. There came a groups of English prisoners in tattered but ironed uniforms, parading their poise. They saluted us grandly. We came across Russians taken to Germany for work too. Broads wailed and bawled when meeting our soldiers.

Berlin amounted to a pile of burning stones. There

were many kilometers of ruins. Streets were covered with debris and only walls with empty window openings instead of houses were by the sides. Once a heavy German shell exploded behind one such wall, and it started falling onto the crowded street slowly at first, then faster and faster. Savage wail could be heard, but nobody managed to run away. Only red brick dust raised over the emergency site. Though, they say that surviving tankers were extracted out of an overwhelmed tank later. Everyone else was crushed. I was only fifty meters away from that wall and I was only the witness of the fall by sheer luck.

Fighting escalated to the utmost extreme within the city limits. Battles were at close quarters. Often both Germans and friendlies were in the same house. Fighting was done with grenades, knives and anything. Huge, clunky howitzers of our brigade were moved to direct laying fire and walls and barricades were destroyed with them point blank, just like from a pistol. There were many losses among the artillery crew. Old men who had fought the whole war in relative safety near the cannons that usually fired from the rear area were forced to fight hand to hand and suffer the same danger as infantry

then. In short, blood was flowing like water. Reichstag alone was probably worth several thousands of lives. Artillery stationed in Berlin could have leveled it to the ground together with defending garrison in five minutes. But that building – a symbol of Germany – had to be preserved and flag of victory had to be planted on it. Therefore Reichstag was assaulted by infantry that cleared the way with their own hands, just like in Pogostye.

I met the victory day in Berlin, in the Kaulsdorf neighborhood, in the huge concrete school grounds where German barracks had been at first, and then we got settled in. I was drunk, I picked up a rifle that laid on the ground – there were as many as one wished – and I started shooting at a rooster weather vane. One, two, three – clip after clip! Rooster is covered in holes already, and I'm still shooting and shooting, and all around everyone is firing too! Thousands of rockets flew up in the sky, anti-aircraft cannons are shooting – the whole sky is covered in explosions. It's a cannonade similar to the one before an offensive... We shot to our heart's content for the last time, although we had got sick and tired of that in four years of the war.

We lived in school-barracks at first. We slept on three-tier (!) beds. I hadn't seen ones like those before. There were two-tier ones in Russia in order to save space. But Germans went further and piled up third tier almost at two meters height. How nice was climbing there while drunk! There were thirty of those beds in a huge gym hall. Loud yell "Roll out!" could be heard at night, soldiers climbed down from the top in birthday suit, put only the boots on and drinking binge started. Schnapps was guzzled with cups straight from the bucket, then there was singing and dancing with half-soles clattering over the concrete floor.

During the day we were messing about and had fun however we could. Marble bust of Hitler was discovered in the barracks yard. It was put onto the fence post and shot from machine gun until there was nothing left from great fuhrer's facial features. A discussion on how Hitler should have been executed if he was to get caught emerged on the spot. Majority instantly suggested hanging him by the balls. However later on everyone agreed to a project by Leshka Brichkin, a seasoned scout and a head of the cemetery in Leningrad by civilian occupation. Being a semiliterate fellow, he was, however,



sharp, crafty and stingy, he always knew his profits. One could believe his stories how during peace time he “lived better than any professor” while reselling cemetery lots and tombstones. That Brichkin had one weakness – he loved giving speeches at rallies. He got in front of the line, his eyes became bloodshot and they got out of the pits, his face became distorted. His speech was incoherent, it consisted of words he had read in a newspaper. But Leshka shouted like a trumpet of Jericho. It was an outstanding sight, especially since Leshka's exterior was impressive – he had large belly, cheeks and a round butt. He was in his late thirties... Anyways, Leshka Brichkin suggested digging out a hole, putting Adolf there, making a flooring above over which the whole army would pass through while easing their nature. Let Adolf slowly drown in feces. Everyone liked that project, and we unanimously approved of it. Then someone told a story that Hitler was captured by an unknown ivan who broke into imperial chancellery but since he feared command wasting time, getting all judgy, who knows, maybe even acquitting fuhrer, he made haste to shoot the prisoner and in order to not get him recognized to avoid possible repercussions, he put ten

kilograms of TNT under the corpse and turned him into a pile of shit! I heard that story several times later too. It was popular in the army.

Once soldiers brought a nice-looking cage with a talking parrot from somewhere, they fed him pea porridge and taught him to say obscenities, yet polly had persistently continued to speak German. Officers arranged a celebration on victory day. Just as first toast for the father of all peoples, the great and wise commander was declared and glasses were raised, parrot loudly shouted: “Heil Hitler!!!” That was the end of him.

Soldier groups dispersed over the surroundings seeking junk, vodka and “fravas”. There was a street dubbed “rabid” in close vicinity. Just as rus-ivan appeared there, residents came out of the houses with clappers, copper basins, bells and frying pans. Unimaginable ring, noise, bedlam was raised. That was how street announced conqueror's appearance and tried to scare him off similar to locust. Yet rus-ivan is not that easy to break down. He walks to the pantry in cold blood and expropriates everything he likes at a leisurely pace...

Restoring discipline was difficult no matter how hard command tried. War dogs lopsided with medals and

being off the rails from what they had experienced thought everything to be permitted, everything to be possible. They say that pillages and crimes stopped only after complete swap of occupation units for a new contingent that did not participate in the war.

I was directly involved in one of the “acts” – a chicken theft. Goshka Torgashov, guards senior sergeant, was the initiator. Being schnockered, he constantly wailed:

–Who was I? – A teacher! I taught kids!!! – And what am I now? I'm going to steal chicken!!!

We forced the lock on a coop, took two chicken and a turkey from the roost, twisted their heads by the book and departed, taking them with us. But it turned out that experience and skill were necessary in any field. I wrung their necks unprofessionally. They came to life in my room and raised a terrible cry. I hid them in the sack again with difficulty, which I carried away rather far off, to basement – one could catch hell for looting, the war was over, after all. An acquaintance of mine who was a sentry outdoors that night told me the following day wonderingly:

–What did you do to women in the evening? Why

did they cry so much? You seemed to be the quiet type, and you never go looking for broads. I even wanted to sound the alarm...

Everything was disgusting enough, we didn't want to eat the stolen birds, and we gifted them to nurses from the hospital next door.

At that time, in Berlin, I performed a deed I'm still proud off, but I'm also astonished by my own adventurism... I was sent somewhere one rainy evening. I kept the rain out with a rubber-coated shiny trophy officer cloak. It covered the head with the hood and it went down to ankles; soldier wearing it looked like a general. Having grabbed the SMG, I hit the road. Desperate woman's shrieks stopped me near the house next to ours: some kind of senior lieutenant, a supply officer based upon the color of shoulder marks, dragged a young good-looking woman to the entrance. He took off her blouse, he tore the underwear. I instantly ran up to him, clanked the bolt and loudly barked in commander's voice (whatever I could think of): "At-ten-tion!!! – and identified myself. – SMERSH unit 12-13 commander, major Potapov!!! I order you to turn up to headquarters immediately and report your abominable behavior to

command!.. I will check it!.. To the re-e-ear!.. March!.. Double time!..”

Oh, that fateful word SMERSH. It worked like a charm. We all got frozen with fear after hearing it.

Supply officer ran away drenching me in disgusting stench of an alcohol-laden breath...

Woman stood and looked at me with the eyes of a small mouse that cobra was preparing to eat, and trembled... I figured: she was obediently waiting for me to finish what senior lieutenant had started. I helped her put the blouse on and said:

–Go home and try to go outside as little as possible. And I groaned after a pause:

–Apology (Entschuldigung)... Woman left.

Life in Berlin started recovering. Hungry and scared folks got out of the ruins. Street debris started to be cleared. Our kitchens were giving out broth to anyone. I was feeding several local starveling kids. Now they are, probably, grown-ups, ready to fight us again. The whole city was free to wander around: we saw the ruins of imperial chancellery, we went to Reichstag near which there was a huge junkyard of destroyed tanks, cannons, APCs, machine guns and other military tech in

Tiergarten. Streams of prisoners that filled the streets first days after capitulation had already ran dry.

Many people wrote on Reichstag or considered it their duty to piss on its walls. There was a real sea around Reichstag together with a corresponding stench. There were different kinds of autographs: “We avenged ourselves!”, “We came from Stalingrad!”, “Ivanov was here!” and so on. The best autograph I've seen was, if my memory does not fail me, on the pedestal of great elector's monument. It had a bronze plate with genealogy and list of great people of Germany: Goethe, Schiller, Moltke, Schlieffen and others. It was crossed out with a thick chalk line, and the following was lower: “I f...d you all! Sidorov”. Everyone, from general to soldier, melted, but chalk was later erased, and priceless autograph had not been preserved for history.

A huge flea market emerged at Brandenburg Gate where any currency was accepted and everything could be bought: a suit, a pistol, grub, a woman, a car. I saw how American colonel was selling watches straight from the jeep hanging them from his splayed fingers... Contacts with the allies were sparse. Language barrier, prim reserve of Englishmen who looked down nose at us

hindered it. Americans were more easygoing, especially negroes who liked us. Once I was observing an amusing scene while sitting at the hill by the roadside and catching a few rays. Drunk Ivan stopped a German on a bicycle, hit him in the ear, took the bicycle and rode along the highway wiggling. German complained to Englishmen who were passing by and they gave the German his belongings back after politely talking to Ivan. Ivan did not resist since there were five of them. Not only me but also negroes who were rushing on jeeps far off saw all that. One jeep slipped ahead, the other one stopped nearby, its brakes squealing. Englishmen were told to continue going which was what they did while shrugging. German was hit in the ear again, bicycle was triumphantly handed over to Ivan, and they had patted Ivan on the back for a while, smiling from ear to ear with a white smile... I saw how an American was beating his negro compatriot within an inch of his life in Berlin. He hit him brutally, in the gut, in the face with steel-toed boots. All that didn't make allies any more likeable.

Victorious powers agreed upon dividing Berlin into four sectors in the height of summer of 1945. We got a piece of English occupation zone up north, with the city

of Schwerin, a capital of Mecklenburg land in exchange for the territory ceded by us there. We were hastily alerted, loaded onto trucks and sent to occupy a new territory. Schwerin was completely intact with population that was replenished through evacuated people. Life was in full swing there. Germans in military uniform were walking about the street – Englishmen were supposed to take them with them but they didn't have time to. Meeting people whom we were used to look at only through machine gun sights was odd. A peculiar feeling that arose during those kinds of meetings had probably remained with frontline soldiers for the whole life. Even now when I see officers from GDR whose uniform is little different from Nazi one on the streets of Leningrad I want to dive into the ditch and let out a long burst. The same thing happens with the sound of a flying plane. War ended more than thirty years ago yet that sound still causes the same reaction from me: my eyes are frantically searching for cover. Apparently, some kind of reflexes that had formed at war became an ineradicable second nature for us.

Schwerin looked beautiful. Its red brick gothic buildings, an opera house that somehow reminded me of



our, Mariinsky one in Leningrad, a castle on the island, swans in the lakes were astounding. Pet gazelles, pheasants, peacocks walked about freely in the city parks. However, they hadn't walked for long. Slaves organized hunting quickly and, having picked the animals off, they made broth from them. They had fun in a different way too. They took canoes out of the docks after getting to the boathouse, and lake rides started! There were shrieks, noise, drunken shouts... One person flipped over and called for help in a voice enough to rouse the dead: "I'm drowning!!!" But, as it turned out, water was waist-deep there.

There was more cultured entertainment too. Theatrical productions started. I watched *Madame Butterfly* but performance and decorations turned out to be provincially mediocre. Half the hall was filled by our soldiers. They guffawed in the most unfitting places. Tragic scene of heroine's suicide took place accompanied by unanimous laughter for some reason... After the performance I noticed Germans carefully avoiding one spot and reverting their eyes while walking along the stalls. A dead drunk major sat there resting his head on the back of the seat in front of him. An enormous puddle

of puke spread out under him.

Military girls flung themselves into foreign junk. They got tired of wearing the uniform, and there were such beautiful things all over! But dressing up hadn't always been safe. Once signallers put on bright dresses, high-heeled shoes and walked along the street happy and shining. A group of drunk soldiers came from the opposite directions:

–Aha! Fravas!! Kom! – and they dragged the girls to backstreet.

–But we're Russians, friendlies, ouch! Ouch!

–And we don't care! Fravas!!!

Soldiers didn't even understand whom they were dealing with, and girls drank the cup that had been befallen to many German women.

Generally though Germans fraternized with soldiers willingly without making any kind of a problem out of it. It was strikingly easy in Germany. Russian patriarchal strictness didn't spread beyond the borders of our country. Women were especially favorable if “kamerade” was polite, didn't fight, wasn't too drunk. It was just right if he gave something to eat and gave some food to take with them. But it was bad when there were several

“kamerades” at once and they were violent (that happened during fighting). As a result half-ivans, half-kazakhs, half-uzbeks and half-who-the-hell-knows appeared in Germany... There were, obviously, half-negroes in the West... As a result we also had an unprecedented spread of venereal diseases. Prior to the war thanks to the progress of healthcare such diseases became an emergency event in our country. After all, our Soviet medicine based on socialist principles was the most progressive one: Mashka got infected, Vaska gets dragged along, Glashka after Vaska, Petka after Glashka, then Tanka, then Goshka and so on, the whole chain.

Thus mass infection of soldiers in Poland and Germany where a persistent center of these “assets” turned out to be was even more unexpected. And that was understandable. Bourgeois system is based on individualism: if you're infected, it's your own business that does not concern anyone...

Having faced venereal disease epidemic, medics became lost at first. There were few medications and even fewer specialists. Clap was treated with barbaric method: several cubes of milk were injected into the ill person's buttock, an abscess appeared, temperature rose

to more than forty degrees. Bacillus is unable to withstand such fever, as it is known. Then the abscess was treated. Sometimes it helped. It was worse with syphilitics. I was told that they were gathered in the town of Neuruppin in a special camp and they were held there behind barbed wire for a while, waiting for medicine that hadn't been available yet.

Running ahead of the story, I have to say that our medicine would have brilliantly solved that unexpected and complicated problem in two-three years. By the end of forties venereal diseases had almost disappeared, of course having maimed the body and soul of those who got through them, and often of their household too... I saw a peculiar start of medics' fight against this bane on the German territory. Once Schwerin I met a huge line of young women on the outskirts of Schwerin at dawn. Weeping and lament were in the air. There was desperation on women's faces. There were words:

–Nach Sibir! Nach Sibir!

Indifferent soldiers hurried the ones lagging behind.

–What is this? – I asked an old escorting soldier while horror struck. – Where are they taken, the poor

things?

–Why are those fools crying for nothing, it's for their own good! We're leading them on commandant's orders – to a preventive examination!..

I was awestruck by our humanism! Soldiers were singing:

*Warum did you not come, it was der abend  
And rare wasser poured from the sky...*

There was another version too:

*Warum du gestern did not come  
Ich been waiting for drei uhr  
Rare wasser dripped from himmel  
Ich nach haus went instead...*

And more:

*Frau, frau, frau gut!  
Heute ficken, morgen brut!*  
(A set of corrupted German words:  
Madam, madam, madam good!  
Today love, tomorrow bread!)

Time had passed, and I was plagued by the dream of coming back home. Demobilized old men had already left. There went one group, another one.

–You're going to blow two-three years, – I was

consoled at headquarters.

“How do I get out of this dump, then?” – I racked my brains. And then a saving idea came to my mind. Four wounds! They must rescue me again. Nice Mikhail Aizikovich Goldfeld helped. His unit was just in the process of disbandment, and he made out demobilization papers for me. However, he had his own concern: he had to deliver trophy accordion and some junk of his last FPW who had left to give birth slightly earlier. Nevertheless, I was going home! HOME!!! HOME!!! Two rear area starshinas were going to go to Leningrad with me – they were either commissary-supply officers or supply handlers. As I found out later, they carried a lot of stolen money quilted either somewhere in the pants or in belts.

We devised a plan: we had to get to Stettin and ask to board the Soviet ship going to Leningrad there. Organizing a trip to Stettin was very easy. We hired a German driver, and he breezed through the whole Northern Germany on a huge gas generator truck that moved by burning wooden logs due to a shortage of gasoline.

Empty Stettin amounted to a pile of ruins. We

found almost no one on the streets. A Soviet ship, a beautiful liner called Marshall Govorov, was indeed docked in the port. As it turned out, it had been called Borealis as a part of Finnish fleet before, and it was given to us after the war as contribution. German dockers loaded machines dismantled from the local factories into Govorov's cargo hold. We made a deal with captain's mate with ease. We were promised to be taken on board for a canteen of alcohol that was prudently stored with us (it was a priceless currency!).

–But Govorov only sails in a week, you can live in Soviet commandant's office for a while, – captain's mate advised us.

Commandant's office was situated relatively close. It was a large stone building with lower windows and entrance built up and covered with sandbags. Barbed wire was all over the building. Truly it was an unassailable fortress!

Office of commandant himself was situated on the top floor. We entered a spacious room after knocking. Gloomy major sat in the middle and looked at us from under his eyebrows through trailing hair. Half-empty bottle, glass, bread in the puddle mixed with pieces of

fatback bacon and something else were on the table in front of him.

–Comrade major, I beg your pardon! – I said in due order. Major kept silent, then sniffed and looked at me. I had to repeat everything from the beginning two times. Suddenly major sprung to his feet, grabbed his throat, ran out of the room, and we heard him loudly puking into the stairwell. After coming back, he said:

–Well, what do you want?

We explained.

–Starshina-a-a! – he shouted.

A middle-aged fellow who was ordered to accommodate us came in. We started snacking while sitting on the bunk bed in one of the rooms, we offered a glass of alcohol to starshina in order to establish good relations.

–Bottoms up! – starshina said. He drank, he grunted, but alcohol was undiluted, and his eyes glazed over. Suddenly one of them fell out of an eye socket and loudly flopped into a pot of borscht. We choked in. Meanwhile starshina was calmly digging inside the soup with the spoon while looking for his eye, he got it out, wiped it with his service shirt's tail and put it into place



after opening the empty eye socket with his fingers.

–Yeah, there you go, – he said embarrassedly. – A bullet made me one-eyed in 1944 in Byelorussia. I became unfit for combat, I served in the supply unit, and now I experience the bad side of it. My age is long since demobilized, and here, in Stettin, there are no Soviet troops since this is Polish territory. There is nobody to change our commandant platoon, thus we have to serve...

Indeed, there were no friendlies in Stettin. Nor were Polish authorities there. However, Polish profiteers and all kinds of shady dealers had already come. They sold beer at triple the price, they sold junk, they even offered us beautiful German women at a reasonable price... I met Polish museum workers in the building of Natural History Museum who came to see what remained there. But only the walls were intact, and just fragments of exhibits could be seen in the halls among the broken glass and gravel.

It was quiet and calm in the city during the day but something unthinkable started with the advent of the night. Shooting started everywhere, there were shouts, groans, some kind of unintelligible noise could be heard. Commandant platoon soldiers advised us not to even

stick our nose outside. Door of the commandant's office was barricaded, observers on duty sat at the loopholes. Then I understood why the building was reinforced so much. Turns out, plenty of different imps were gathered within the city ruins: there were diehard fascists, criminals, our deserters, English spies and so on. We heard a lot of unusual stories about gangs of bandits that sprung up on the territory of future Poland like mushrooms after rain in the commandant's office. It was a happy hunting ground for criminals, authority had only been organizing then. Former Soviet captain – a deserter, Hero of the Soviet Union, one Globa, commanded one of such gangs. SS obersturmbahnfuher was his deputy, and the gang comprised all kinds of international rabble. The gang drove around the country on fast-moving German Adler off-rovers, it was superbly armed with weaponry that lied on the roads in abundance. Catching it was hard. Having robbed one town, it drove off in an unknown direction with the speed of more than hundred kilometers per hour. Bandits had informers who radioed where the pursuers were headed in towns. They say, a whole NKVD division had been chasing Globa for a long time to no avail. In the end gang was surrounded from all

sides. Globa went for the breach. Four fifths of his associates met their death but he himself did manage to escape to West Germany. Perhaps he's now thriving somewhere in United States.

The other gang was more cunning, it operated during the last months of the war. It comprised two Russians, two Poles and one French woman. As soon as our units had liberated some small town, they went there wearing Soviet uniform, settled into a house and hang a large poster that read "Commandant's Office". Then sale of German belongings that remained in the town started. Mills, homes, estates, agricultural machinery, cattle were sold on behalf of the new authorities. Payment was accepted in gold, currency, jewels. Receipts with a forged seal were handed over. Poles, being suckers for all kinds of schemes, were easily swindled. Operation continued for a day or two, then "commandants" disappeared, and in a couple of more days the real commandant's office came... They say that those con artists were caught and half a truck of valuables was confiscated from them.

Listening to detective stories was interesting but we felt different when one night our house was attacked. Shooting from rifles, machine guns, SMGs at windows

and doors started. Light mortar hit. It was evident that not an amateur but rather an experienced soldier was commanding the operation. I had to shake the cobwebs and return fire from the loopholes. It was very uncomfortable under the thick stream of bullets. I thought: well, war with its dangers is over but now I fear that I might meet my death here, in this hole! Luckily everything worked out. Only one soldier got scratched and my companions who hadn't got the smell of gunpowder during the war filled their pants thoroughly... As soon as the sun rose, siege stopped, raiders disappeared like ghosts, and it was as if nothing had happened. Who that was, why the performance was put on, that I hadn't found out.

We loaded onto Govorov, that, by the way, moved far from the coast at night in order to avoid incidents, with great joy. Govorov had sailed along the Oder for quite a long time before reaching the sea at the town of Swinemunde. It was an interesting trip. Bodies and masts of sunk ships stuck out of the river everywhere. A tanker cracked in half by a bomb lied in one place, a crashed ironclad lying on the bottom was in another one. Huge barrels of its cannons pointed in different

directions, and water reached the captain's bridge. There were submarines lying on the shore and there were derrick boats turned upside down.

Finally Baltic started. It was cold, windy, gloomy. Rainy clouds flew parallel to the surface of giant gray waves. There was a strong swell. We were trembling with cold on the deck, and my trickster companions made a deal with the mechanic on allowing us inside the cabin. It was a double cabin but one of its passengers had always been on watch. We settled in first-rate, in warmth and with coziness. A week-long trip passed quietly, especially since we had been constantly drinking vodka together with the cabin owner, a hardened alcoholic, for all the journey. He told about himself like this:

–I went to doctor, doctor says: “I dispose you to drink iron...”, I went home and drank away an iron bed, it didn't get better...

We had to sail for a long time since Baltic Sea was chock full of mines. There was only one more or less safe way – right against the Finnish coast. We moved further after waiting twenty-four hours in Helsinki almost pressing against the rocky drops of Finnish skerries until we reached the island of Gogland. Then there finally was

Kronstadt where we had to wait for twenty-four hours again. One could go crazy! The city is near, the home is near, and we're hanging about here and waiting! We were docked near the battleship Marat that had been mangled by bombs in 1941 already, we saw the ruins on the shore. Finally we arrived at Leningrad port on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, 1945. Customs didn't cling to us particularly, it had different concerns: a crate with machinery came apart during the unload and... squares of cloth, suits, shoes and other junk came spilling out. Major escorting the cargo started shooting his pistol for some reason... But we had more important things to think about than that performance. We drove along the city after quickly agreeing on a price with the free truck driver.

All dirty, smoky, covered with scars from frags and potholes from bombs – after full-blooded beauty of Schwerin Leningrad looked like a half-corpse that had life barely glimmering inside. Residents looking gray, crooked, seemingly swollen, wrapped into sack-looking clothes barely dragged their legs. My house appeared unexpectedly quickly. How small it is, how shabby! I only just manage to unload when I come across the neighbor lady. Ah!.. And mother, little, slouching, aged, is already

running towards me... My Odyssey is over.

## Postwar Tales

### Novella I. On Role of Personality in History

*I scold my homeland because I love it...*  
—P. Chaadayev

It was the first postwar summer. Beautiful city of Schwerin was basking in the rays of warm July sun. Flowers were fragrant, trees were green. Surviving swans swam in the lake. Their white flexible necks stood out against the expanse of water and gothic castle towers gracefully. Soldiers enjoyed peace slowly getting used to the thought they would not get killed and wounded anymore and possibly everyone would come home soon. And so far they were eating well, drinking a lot and having a fling with fravas. Live was flowing quietly and in a carefree manner.

Army headquarters were housed in a multiple-story mansion that had belonged to a German general earlier. Surrounding park hadn't been soiled yet, some non-



crushed pieces of furniture remained in the rooms, but general's collections of paintings and ancient weaponry had long since vanished.

It was about three hours in the afternoon. Only one officer on duty sat in the headquarters premises. He was watching women swimming in the lake through binoculars for want of anything better to do. Some random soldiers stultified from heat and drinks were lethargically loafing along the corridors. Suddenly a cavalcade of cars accompanied by an armored one drove up to the mansion. Marshall Zhukov jumped out of an open jeep – he was eighty kilograms of trained muscles and nerves. A bundle of energy. A perfect, brilliantly adjusted mechanism of military thought! Thousands of fault-free strategic decisions were circulating in his brain at lightning speed. Envelopment – engagement! Entrapment – crushing defeat! Bracket – loaded march! 1.5 thousand of tanks right! 2 thousands of planes left! In order to take the city 200 thousands of soldiers have to be “committed”! He could instantly say the numbers of our losses and enemy ones in any assumed operation. He could send a million-two to die without doubts and speculations. He was a new model commander: he

dumped people beyond measure but he almost always achieved victorious results. Our old model great commanders knew how to dump millions even better but they didn't particularly think what would come out of that since they didn't really know how to think in the first place. Zhukov is full of energy, he is charged like a Leyden jar. Officer on duty doesn't regain self control and get up yet, but marshall is there already:

–Who are you?! Where's the army commanderrr? Quiiiiickly!!!

Skittering starts, army commander is called, land of nod begins to putter about as if woken up by an unexpected shot.

–Gather the military council!!! Report army's fighting capabilities! Quiiiiickly! Your mother!!! – marshal gives out those and other necessary instructions.

–Rrrrrragtime army of spongers!!! Demagnetized!!! You have to be shoooot!!! Nobody wants to worrrrk!!! Arrrrmy must be battle-ready!!! Who said the war was over?! Our duty is liberating Europe!!! Forrrrward, to Parrrrris!!!

A powerful energy spread in impulses around marshall. Phones started ringing, messengers started

running, radios started working. Command, bracing and becoming energetic, started swearing at each other through the channels: upper ones to lower ones, and those to their subordinates. Impulses were powerful, they swayed everything around them with a terrible force, but they faded out strikingly quickly as if having got into vacuum. Army was just impossible to galvanize. Everyone in the units drifted away who knows where. One slept wasted. The other went for German girls – to catch a clap. Third was in the medical unit treating what he had caught already. Fourth was organizing a parcel home busy with profiteering, or he was just stealing. Someone gone bonkers by the war grieved for lost ideals while pining with grief. Someone had been singing and dancing for several months happy for having survived. Try and gather them all! Try and make them believe that war is probably not over in two three-hours!

Forrrward, to Parrrrrris!!! Nobody could understand that, and talking with soldier on that subject was similar to explaining art history to a goat in Chinese. Army was like a sack of dough, and whatever marshall was doing yielded no results. His resolute and vivid expressions hit the trained generals' heads like

sledgehammer strikes, generals curbed colonels, yet again everything sprawled like dough in their hands. Marshall had been raging for a long time, yet even his iron will tested on the battlefields could forge nothing out of amorphous mass of demagnetized troops. In the evening he finally gave up:

–Your mother!!! Alarrrrm the arrrrmy!!! Forward march to Murrrrmansk!!! To Kola Peniiiiinsula!!! To tundrrrrra!!! Rrrrrragtme army of rabble, loafers!!! Your mother!!!

Thus strong personality turns out to be powerless if it tries going against the flow of history.

That honest episode was told to me by 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock army commander, general I.I. Fedyuninsky's former lackey – former starshina V.

Later I found out that marshall was doing important and necessary business. War was over and a part of troops from Germany had to be sent to Russia. But the best ones were to remain. How to find out which regiments had been the most capable? After all, almost all of them became decorated, guards, merited during the war. Which ones to choose? And marshall took the matter in hand without relegating it to subordinates.

## **Novella II. Igor Dyakonov, or Who Defeated Germans in Patriotic War?**

I met Igor Mikhaylovich Dyakonov in early fifties. Being a young Hermitage doctoral student, I had to take a foreign language exam. But the professor got ill and Hermitage employees decided to conduct that exam on their own in order not to waste time. Those days older generation of Hermitage workers were at home with European languages while following a prerevolutionary tradition, sometimes they knew even Oriental ones according to their specialties. I.M. Dyakonov was among the examiners. He astounded me with his appearance: he had a handsome, intelligent face, excellently tailored formal black suit, immaculate white shirt and well-tied tie. In short, he was the one who is called “Gentleman” in Europe. Those days it was a rare occurrence in our socialist country. What finally conquered me was intelligent, lively conversation with him, it also had a hint of humor.

Later I learned from different people's stories that Igor Dyakonov originated from an intellectual family, he

had lived and studied in Norway where his father was on a mission for several years. Later he graduated from Leningrad University and became a famous orientalist in our country and abroad. His brother, Mikhail Mikhailovich Dyakonov, also an orientalist, gave us, university students, brilliant lectures on Oriental art accompanying them with his own translations of old Persian poems. Mikhail Mikhailovich told us that they knew twenty-seven languages together with his brother.

When the war started, Mikhail Mikhailovich ended up on the front and fully drank the cup of Soviet soldier's pain: he ended up in the infamous Nevsky Pyatachok where about 200 thousands of Soviet soldiers died in meaningless attacks, he was wounded and narrowly escaped death.

Igor Mikhailovich had a different fate. Command sent him to Karelian front to department of reconnaissance and moral decay of enemy units after finding out he knew Norwegian. There he studied trophy papers, wrote leaflets for the enemy and interrogated prisoners. Circumstances surrounding him were typically Soviet: there were semiliterate drunken political instructors and officers who wrote leaflets that provoked

German laughter and raised their eyebrows. Igor Mikhailovich tried to change the situation to the best of his power. Gradually like-minded people started gathering around him. For example, Fima Etkind, later a dissident, emigrant and Sorbonne professor, was released from Siberia. Here's how Igor Mikhailovich talks about that event from his memory: Fima turned up in ragged sheep short fur jacket and old hat with ear flaps. Command instantly arranged an exam for him: he had to write a mocking new year's leaflet for Germans. Fima sat down and wrote "A Poem of Michel" that had such lines, for instance:

*Michel der Gefreite*

*Stent vor dem Stab*

*Seine linke Seite*

*Frohr ihm ganzlich ab...*

(Yefreytor Michel / Stands in front of headquarters / His left side completely / Numb from the frost...) and so on about freezing yefreytor's misadventures. It wasn't a usual leaflet translated to German from Russian. In order to write like that one had to not only be proficient in a language but also know German folklore, German schwanks and humorous

literature from Hans Sachs to Max and Moritz poems. That sort of thing Germans certainly perceived as their own.

The closer the end of the war was, the more sensibly Dyakonov and his colleagues worked. When Soviet Army pushed Germans out of Northern Norway, Igor Mikhailovich was assigned a commandant of the town of Kirkenes. Locals thought much of a young, handsome captain who spoke their own language with a perfect accent. He did a lot of good, he helped sort out many mistakes, save many people. After the war, after the space of many years, Igor Mikhailovich was constantly invited to Kirkenes for anniversary events and people expressed their thanks to him... However all that the reader can learn in detail from I.M. Dyakonov's "Book of Memories" that has recently seen the light of day. I, however, want to remember a story that wasn't included in the book but became an oral legend instead.

Once, in winter days of the ending 1943 when cold bound tundra and rocks of Kola Peninsula, and general Dietl's Austrian Gebirgsjäger who were fighting there were freezing to death in their stone shelters, Russian scouts dragged a hefty ginger maypole – a major – from



German rear area. His last name started from “von” prefix. He was silent during interrogations while looking at his enemies from the height of two meters with contempt. One could assume what he was thinking of: “I will say nothing to these barbarians of the East! What insolent mugs! They can't speak German properly either! And they reek of alcohol! Troglodytes!!! I will say nothing to them!”.

He was interrogated many times, he was beaten but to no avail. Finally, some translator, being tired, decided to resort to Dyakonov whom people weren't very fond of: let that “civilian intellectual” try but surely German will say nothing to him if he said nothing even to us...

Igor Mikhailovich offered German a smoke and asked him after a pause: “Whom were you before the war?” German was surprised: that Russian's German was impeccable... He said through his teeth, not expecting that barbarian to understand at all: “A philologist”. – “Yes? And what were you studying exactly?” – “Language of Goth age”. Dyakonov was agitated. Long ago, in childhood, he and his brother came across a manuscript of Goth age poem from their father's library. That poem hadn't been published, only narrow focused specialists,

eight-ten people across the globe, knew about it. Trying hard to remember, Dyakonov started declaiming Gothic poem. He's already finishing what he remembered, the last line is already ending... And suddenly German maypole seemed broken, he bent down, lowered his head and large tears started flowing from his eyes.

–How! Here, in this icy country, among these rocks, among the wild barbarians and you know that? This is impossible! Completely impossible!

He hugged Dyakonov, he had been coming to his senses for several minutes while living through the collapse of his perceptions of Russians, of the world, and then he started talking, talking and talking...

As it turned out, he was a special messenger of High Command of German Army who was sent to general Dittl's headquarters with important orders. He was instantly sent to Moscow on a plane. Translators surrounded Dyakonov with inquiries how did he manage to achieve such success? Yet they could not comprehend that, just like many can't comprehend why Russians defeated Germans in that terrible war.

Curiously enough, Stalin comprehended that better than anyone. In 1941 already, after fully realizing that

army collapsed, only eight percent of troops that had been stationed on the border remained, and the country was on the brink of catastrophe, he addressed those whom he had trampled, whom he had tormented for a long time – people: “Brothers and sisters...” Later he weakened the press that pinned the church, introduced shoulder marks to army thus reviving prerevolutionary traditions, abolished the political instructor system, disbanded Comintern, rehabilitated many commanders who had been arrested before. Great military leaders of yesteryear – Suvorov, Kutuzov who had recently been thrown mud at by Stalin himself – returned to Russian banners again. New orders were called in their name... And people rallied together especially since Germans had destroyed any illusions connected to them in the beginning of the war with their disgrace, murders, violence against civilian population: many peasants who got herded into collective farms, GULAG residents and just town and village folk had been waiting for them as liberators. Then those illusions shattered. Germans saw united peoples who rose up against them in front of them.

Then who defeated Germans? Was it Stalin and his

party? Or was it Dyakonov and millions of others similar to him?

### **Novella III. Fortieth Anniversary**

Fortieth anniversary of lifting the siege of Leningrad was celebrated in the Institute. Heedless students who didn't manage to hide or wing it were herded into the events hall. Professors, employees came. Honored Artist, Prorector for Research, full professor who was, however, known not for scholarly works but rather for his skills at weaving plots within and outside the institute and his victories over the fair sex appeared on stage. He showed his magnificent profile looking like a Roman of the period of decline while shaking his shoulders, he shined a spectacular bald head slightly covered with gray curls combed over it, and he gave a speech on "What We Protected" theme.

And a choleric, broken old man who used to be a party secretary of the Institute but got removed from that post in Stalin times because of excessive liberalism sat next to me. Sitting lopsided and twitching, he hissed events long gone into my ear: "It was in 1942, in the hardest period of the war. During a cold and hungry winter Institute ended up somewhere far away in the

East, in evacuation. Extremely bloody battles claiming millions and millions of men were going on on the front. More and more millions were needed to plug the infinite breaches in our defense. Rear area had almost run out of men. Command was sweeping the population with an iron hand and uncovering the ones hiding. Extraordinary mobilization troika was sitting in town: there were chief enlistment officer, district committee secretary and head of local NKVD. Turn had come to the Institute to undergo the examination too. People appeared nude in front of troika in order for everything to become instantly clear without wasting time. Sickly calligraphy and perspective professor Peterson who looked like a small stooped frog came in first. He silently presented his glass eye to a high commission and put it on his palm covered with a dirty handkerchief. Commission kept silent, then sniffed and summarized:

–Well, everything is clear with you. Go home.

The second one was a person known for his ailments:

–Here, tuberculosis... – he said, shuddering and coughing.

–Doesn't matter, you'll serve the motherland! To

the front!!! – commission said.

–Next!!!

The next one was an athletically built man in his prime with the profile looking like an ancient Roman of the period of Imperial Decline. He had a thick pack of papers with numerous stamps and signatures that he handed over to the commission without hesitation in his hands.

–Ye-e-e-es! – commission was reading certificates.  
– Kidneys are destroyed, there are almost no lungs, heart is failing... Yee-e-e-es!

Even the NKVD head who had seen things one couldn't tell in a tale or write with a pen in his life looked at certificates' owner ruefully.

–Well then, go live your last days, – he stretched out musingly...

–And that is how we won the war... – neighbor hissed into my ear.

## **Novella IV. War is Always with Me**

That was many years after the war. I was walking around the deserted Tsarskoselvky Park and I saw a girl sitting on the bench only in one place. “A pretty one” – I made a mental note of her. Having walked fifty more meters, I suddenly felt an unexplainable worry and turned back. Girl was still sitting in her place but blood was flowing out of her arm in pulsating coral stream. “What a fool! She cut her veins!” – I figured. After that I acted mechanically, unconsciously, tightly, confidently and quickly. A pianist plays like that without looking at a keyboard, an experience typist types like that while thinking about secondary things or a ballerina does learned steps. Everything was familiar to me. How many dozens of times had I done similar things on the front! “Yes, – I thought – war is always with me”. I confidently wrung a tourniquet from handkerchief, bandaged the arm above the elbow with it, broke a branch off a tree, put it under the tourniquet and twisted it tightly, bleeding stopped. I slowly walked the girl to the exit from the park expecting to meet people. Indeed, some women



were walking there. “Call the ambulance immediately!” – I shouted. We were waiting for fifty minutes, and I was persuading the girl: “No grief, no misfortune, no insult are worth losing your life for...”, but these were useless words. Girl couldn't hear me. Although tone of my voice seemed to calm her down.

Finally the ambulance came. I told the doctor: “I applied an improvised tourniquet here, a proper one should be used. Be careful! Don't take it off!” But young assuming doctor tore the bandage off. It was as if I had caught his thoughts: “Some nobody will advise me something!” Blood gushed out again. A new tourniquet was applied quickly and car drove off. I washed the bloody hands in the lake and went back where I came from.

## 1978. Veterans. Memorable Places

Years had passed. Then decades had. Once I saw a small announcement on the third page of one Leningrad newspaper: “A meeting of 311<sup>th</sup> R.D. will take place”... Why not go? Who are they, veterans? Who exactly is left from more than 200 thousands people who had burned in that division during the war? I came to the meeting place not without agitation.

Twenty people gathered. As I learned, about four hundred are registered totally but they mostly live in Kirov where division was formed. Only a small part lives in Leningrad – forty people. Of course, there were no familiar ones among them.

Leningrad cell secretary, Abram Moiseevich Shub, an amiable balding man, named some arriving people. There were: regimental doctor, an orderly woman, two former starshinas who had already been quite elderly, main Komsomol functionary of the division who still hadn't lost the sharpness of his lyncean eyes. There were many supply officers, procurement officers and other rear area workers. All of them had medal ribbons, orders,

memorial badges. Only a single person had no orders, but he lacked one eye, leg and an arm.

–Where are you from? –I asked.

–Foot scouting... – he responded.

Lieutenant colonel who was wearing the jacket that bagged over him – last executive officer of the division – was the chairman. His head was quivering, his hands were shaking and drumming over the tabletop. He was listening to the speeches and finally spoke himself:

–I, as you can see, comrades, cannot do anything now, but I would like to salute you and I call for voicing protest against the actions of Chinese military clique in Vietnam! (Chinese attacked their neighbor just those days).

We all got up and voiced it.

Abram Moiseevich Shub expressed the words of joy for the meeting of comrades-in-arms, and then he offered everyone to take turns speaking about themselves.

–Who were you in the division yourself? – I shouted.

–A sergeant.

–And what was the position?

–...

–But still... Which one?

–I worked in the Special Department.

Then starshinas were giving long speeches full of memories. An unending argument over whether one of the companies got bombed in August or September near Kirishi started. The meeting could run over time. Wise and sophisticated Shub kept thanking the speakers insistently, but then former editor of the division newspaper – one retired colonel – wished to give a speech. He came to meeting wearing a classy suit with many orders on it together with wife – a dyed blonde twenty years younger than the husband. His speech was blatant self-glorification: it was a long frontline biography. It turned out that the war was won thanks to him! However, that man had never been on the firing line, he hadn't heard the bullet and shell whiz. He lived in warmth, satiety, comfort fifty kilometers away from the front, he wrote articles that were impossible to read and that were used for roll-ups at best. Then he said that he had undergone heart surgery recently, he was treated in the best clinic by the best doctors but he swore to be loyal to 311<sup>th</sup> R.D.! His square mug expressed complete lack of talent and firm, spiritless tenacity, belief in his own

exceptional nature. Yet he hadn't even been able to write memories about division in the postwar years – there probably was essentially nothing to remember in the first place, and the task was out of his depth too. Former division photographer – sergeant D. Onokhin, one of the few people who had remained in the division from its formation until the end of the war – accomplished that. Onokhin was guarded so there was a person able to take pictures for party membership cards that were absolutely essential at war.

Meanwhile former editor started his speech over. Listening to his nonsense was unbearable, and I pointed this out to the dyed blonde:

–He got very agitated, calm him down else he might have a heart attack!

Blonde and Shub who kept continuously thanking the colonel sat him down in the armchair and gave him water.

A lot of time had passed. Shub decided to wrap it up, but then a public discussion arose by itself. Approximately this one:

–And do you remember how we fressed horse meat in January of forty-two?

–You have to anoint it with badger fat, bear ears also help.

–I was entitled to an order but the case file got lost.

–And while Sidorov was going to the rear area for ammunition, his FPW lived with ASO-2<sup>14</sup>.

–Major Svistunov wasn't killed in forty-two but in forty-three!

–And now I've got a three-room apartment.

–And so I tell her...

Conversation partners flushed while looking at each other with fiery eyes, they swung their arms, someone reached for validolum. It had continued for a while, then Shub thanked people who gathered, asked three rubles for current veteran needs from each person, and we parted ways, each to their own life.

In consequence of that meeting I got a beautiful “Volkhov Front Veteran” badge that looked like Persian Shah's orders of the previous century for three rubles and “Veteran of 311<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division” badge that had a star in front of a rag with hands, a bright red one as if it was drenched in blood, pictured for free. It was a very fitting badge for 311<sup>th</sup> R.D.

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14 ASO-2 – second assistant staff officer.

I had another strange meeting during that gathering: artillery commander who sent our cannon to the mine field in summer of 1943 where we safely exploded turned out to be there.

–These are all lies! – he rudely told me. – Everyone died there!

I gave him proof, facts, names.

–But you couldn't have survived there in any way! Everyone died there! – he repeated less confidently. – Well, let's go have a drink!

I didn't have a drink with him.

Later I responded to an announcement on gathering of veterans of guards howitzer brigade in which I finished the war. However I didn't want to go to a meeting anymore, I visited secretary of Leningrad cell individually, at home. It was B. Zalegaller, a very amiable elderly man, an associate professor of Agricultural Academy. He welcomed me with open arms, he told me everything he knew, and I was trying to remember whom he had been at war. And I remembered. He was a supply officer who delivered ammunition from the rear area. It could often be heard on the phone:

–Hey, Zalegaller, your mother, where are you

hiding?! Is there no ammo?.. Familiar names in Zalegaller's notebook revived characters long faded in my memory. Vanka Kramer. According to Zalegaller, he had recently died in Gatchina. He was a hefty guy with a criminal past. I ended up in his company in Schwerin once. We had been playing cards all night long. Candles were burning, tobacco smoke was wreathing under the ceiling. That first and last gamble in my life brought me a gain: a cow and pants. Pants were black and long. Obviously, a two-meter tall German wore them. I had to cut ten centimeters off below. Those pants helped me a lot during difficult student years. I had worn them for two seasons, holes wore out behind them during the third one. I had to resort to the marvel of Soviet chemistry of the time – “BF” (“Baltic Fleet”) glue. I did everything by the book: I spread glue over the pants, applied the patch, ironed it through. Something hard like a frying pan that loudly clattered over the seat when I sat down on the chair appeared. In two days those hardened patches neatly tore along the edges and fell off making large round holes behind.

And the cow was taken to the butcher by Vanka Kramer. It made for a great lot of tasty sausages that we



either ate or bartered with Germans for vodka. Vanka Kramer made vast connections with German criminals and he did some hustling with them. Once they set up a card game together with Bagrad Bezhanov, a handsome Georgian, with German friends that had been going on for three days after which Germans were left with their drawers only, and all their junk was wheelbarrowed to us. It can't be helped! A game is a game! I can't remember much about Bezhanov except that he had clap three times and syphilis one time – those facts overwhelmed me back in the day.

German criminal company quickly recovered from devastation and continued its business. Once I needed some alcohol – I took a can of food, went to a basement I knew and found our buddies there with some strangers. The room was a mess. Without thinking twice, I addressed the German:

–Hey, kamrad, give me schnapps!

German looked at me with barely restrained disgust:

–Nicht schnapps. Ich bin polizei!

I understood that our buddies were toast and I had to beat it before I got cuffed. German police that had just

been organized and did not even have a uniform besides red armbands had no right to touch our soldiers, but it was undoubtedly connected with Soviet commandant's office. I disappeared in half a second and I had never seen German outlaws anymore. And they looked mighty fine too! One had no fingers on one hand, the other had an eye gouged out, the third had his whole mug covered in scars. They had probably been on the front too.

One more name in Zalegaller's notebook reminded me of something. Guards senior sergeant Bugaev. He was a ranked sportsman and he was given a delicate assignment by command together with other trusted people during the last days of the war. The fact was that many people who would not like meeting with Soviet authorities remained in the forests, in our rear area. There were SS-men, and different Nazi superiors, and Vlasovites, and our deserters. They were caught and locked up, yet many still slipped through to the West and over the Elba, into the open arms of Americans and Englishmen. Our counterintelligence came up with a way to "neutralize" those people. Seasoned folks such as Bugaev went into the woods, looked for runaways, joined them explaining that they were also escaping to the West,

and then, at night, silently – stabbed them under the ribs – thus liquidating their new buddies. They had no orders to sort out who was right and who was wrong. If one runs away West, he is an enemy – kill him, and that's that. There will be no mistake. They said that Bugaev had valiantly accomplished his mission...

What is waiting for me in the meeting of artillery regiment veterans whom I started the war with? That meeting is still to come...

While observing veterans of my unit as well as any others whom I had come across I found out that majority of them is extremely conservative. There are several reasons for that. Firstly, mostly rear area soldiers and officers, not those who were sent into battle but rather who sent them, survived. So did political officers. The latter are Stalinists at the bottom and by their upbringing. They are simply unable to perceive the war objectively. Their stupidity multiplied by senility became impenetrable. As for those who are thinking over something and are concerned over what happened (and there's a fair amount of those), they're forever traumatized by fear, they don't talk too much and keep silent. I can see the same ineradicable fear inside me too.

An automatic stop that doesn't let me exceed certain limits is working inside my head. These lines are written with familiar secret fear too: I'm going to get into trouble for them!

Contacts with veterans made me want to visit the battlefields. How do they look like now? It took little more than an hour on the train for me to get off on Pogostye platform. Suburban train car rumble disappeared far away. Unexpected silence overwhelmed me. The sky is blue, sun is shining, forest around me is green – and there is not a single sound! Only heavy scent of forest herbs and flowers is filling the air. The railway embankment – how low it is! Yet it seemed like a mountain when one had to crawl and roll over it while lying like snake under bullets and frags whizzing from all sides. Remains of German firing points can still be seen somewhere in the embankment, but one has to intentionally look for them among the grass. Everything crumbled, became overgrown, and the forest came right next to it, almost to the rails themselves. “Death Valley” that used to be stuffed with corpses became overgrown with bushes. It's covered with cornflowers and forget-me-nots. And the forest is the same: there are aspen trees,

alder trees, birches, rare fir trees, – it's low-growing, overgrown with thick shrubs. One can't scramble through the thickets. Branches are reaching in your face, cobweb veils the eyes, flying ticks are creeping into your ears and under your hat – what disgusting vermin. Snakes are crawling on the ground squelching under your feet. Yes, this Pogostye is a godforsaken place! It remained the same until now. Our dugouts and graves disappeared but plenty of others remained intact everywhere, interspersed by craters, moats, pits. Going through a forest like that is a real nuisance: you're constantly sinking into something. Every now and then one can come across a decomposed log flooring – these are remains of an old road that we laid in 1942. However I could not find traces of a pit in railway embankment through which that road came to Pogostye. Yet meanwhile that was a giant hole in which we hid from shelling all too often. Once, I remember, we were sitting there in comfort while devouring iron rations for two days that had been given out before attack – they had canned food, dried bread, fatback bacon. Simple hungry soldier's wisdom taught you: one has to eat all the supplies before the battle – else you might get killed

without having a taste!

Here's the bridge over Mga river. Here I was caught by terrible shelling in 1943. High-caliber shells exploded in close grouping but I managed to dive into a narrow trench. Guards captain Ryzhenko, a lanky tow-haired fellow, pounced on me heavily while wheezing. I was more or less accustomed to shelling yet he who had rarely been to the firing line got very scared. I felt captain's knee caps twitching up and down. That was what they call: "weak at the knees".

Captain Ryzhenko was our morale officer and he educated the public.

–Well, khloptsy, let's sing! – he said, and we sang: "Sun is rising over the forest, Voroshilov is coming to us", also we sang about Halya who was young and who was tied "to the pine tree by the braids" and there also was "hai under the mountain". We also sang ideological couplets about an old incapable husband. Captain Ryzhenko didn't do his job abstractly, he didn't talk too much about high ideals. He applied it to specific circumstances, and his efforts were successful. For example, when we got completely exhausted after a sixty-kilometer march and were tapped out, he said:

–Hey now, khloptsy, lysten here! We lystened.

–What is this thing that if it had existed, then nothing in the world would exist?

–We don't know, comrade captain! – we said in unison, very intrigued.

–Can you see the height? – he pointed at the hill about a kilometer ahead. – I'll tell you once we get there.

We got there, fell on the ground almost into a dead faint, threw heavy equipment off the shoulders and after catching our breath asked:

–Then what is this, comrade captain?

–And that is if that place where children come from had teeth...

Somewhere here near the bridge over Mga a torn off hand, white one, seemingly artificial, had lied for a long time, and there, further away, in fifty meters, a disfigured corpse that got thrown there by a shock wave hanged from the tree stump that got cut off by a shell. Now not even a tree stump is there – there are bushes and bushes. Somewhere near I was dragging a sledge with a wounded person over the railway embankment in winter of forty-two. His lung was pierced by a bullet and with each his breath air with bloody bubbles came out of the bullet

hole. Knocked out tanks were over the railroad and our tractor driver was courageously pulling them out by hooking them onto his tractor while paying no attention to shelling. Those tanks got repaired and sent into battle again. Now only grass is here. Not even craters can be seen. And there, at some distance where the road to Maluksa village is, our crashed fighter plane “Eeyore” lied on smooth surface of the frozen swamp. It lied with its skis upwards, and we buried a dead pilot in the snow nearby.

The Pogostye village has ten run-down houses. Ground between them still holds the traces of war in spite of thirty-five years that passed. It's covered with crusts and scabies like a face corroded by smallpox, although green grass softens the picture. Trenches are overgrown with flowers, there's water in the dugout holes. Coils of barbed wire lie in the grass, decomposed logs stick out of the ground – these are remnants of anti-tank barriers and concrete blocks. Here and there helmets are still lying around, there are quite a few rubber gas masks and boot soles with half-decayed leather on top of them. I can see a black telephone wire leading to the marsh in the grass. Grass is more thick



there, and a hefty skeleton wearing boots, helmet and a belt is lying there. It holds a telephone handset near the skull. These are remains of a signaller who was establishing connection and has been fulfilling his duties for thirty-eight years now. One can rarely come across skeletons now, there are more separated bones – skulls, hips, ribs, vertebrae and so on. They're everywhere. Especially where ground was stirred up for whatever reason: tractor came, ditch was dug, road was repaired. And forest is blossoming wildly over everything, filling the air with its scents.

A shoaled Mga river disappears in the thickets. It can barely be seen. I heard a purl only in one place and turned my attention to a dam with a pond. It turned out to be beavers' household, they came to local wild places from Finland after the war. We were building a second fortification line near this very river in 1943. We were placing concrete caps, digging trenches, bumping into shallowly buried dead bodies over and over again. Now nothing is left from these constructions... And here I was wandering around the overgrown swamp grass after lunch, hunting out juicy thick scapes and devouring them. Animal instinct told me what was edible and what

was not. I was famished... And here, in the cabin, an elderly Siberian called Kabin, former teacher, was sitting and boiling giant white mushrooms with black fringe that looked like Oriental minarets in the pot. I figured those were amanitas and discouraged Kabin from what seemed like a deadly plan to me, frightened. Kabin was calming me down while calmly looking at me through glasses in iron frame wrapped in wire: "I'm not eating them for the first time, and I'm starving anyway!" But then cartridges that got into the bonfire by accident started exploding, and the brew blew up, showering us with hot spray. Kabin lighted a pipe vexedly... In many years after the war I saw those mushrooms near Leningrad, at one academician's holiday cottage. I was told that they're quite edible, only they need a long boil and they are called "Fallus" in Latin, or a "common stinkhorn".

Somewhere here, in the swamp, our battalion commander's log cabin was situated. Once I was on the lookout as a sentry at dawn nearby, holding an SMG in my hands. A maiden figure popped out of the house in the predawn mist, like a shadow, and disappeared in the thickets. That was beautiful, as if it had been a fairy tale, and that remained in my memory for a long time.

Many decades had passed. I ended up in Leningrad hospital for disabled veterans as an old man already – it was a vale of sorrow where elderly heroes were taken to die. There I met a lame cripple who once used to be a surgeon's assistant in our division once. Turns out he knew both our battalion commander, captain Podgorny, and his sweetheart, a nurse from health support battalion. Their fate was strange. Podgorny was a sergeant in 1941 near Pogostye. He was the sole survivor from the whole battalion, he got promoted, became a lieutenant. In 1943 he was a captain, and in 1944 he got killed nonetheless. And it turned out his ladylove possessed a strange and terrible power. She was pretty, she was courted but as soon as it came to intimate relations, her darling died. Her fourth, not counting Podgorny, partner died from a stray shell when the war was essentially over and there was no fighting anymore.

Fortification building work at our Mga section was led by a company starshina. Having an average height, tightly built, swarthy-faced, black-haired, he was notable for his quick reaction, cool head and precision in movement. He wasn't that starshina who is only in charge of foodstuffs and lives near the kitchen. The least

thing he cared about was doing his own business and he had never aimed to appease command. I had rarely seen people who did so much for common benefit, sometimes at their expense, while never flaunting their virtues at war. There were legends about him. During a German offensive in autumn of 1941 when Germans wanted to finally crush our resistance to the East of Leningrad, a common blunder for those days happened: forces held the flanks yet a key position in the center of defense remained open. Having issued an order from the logistic rear via the map, generals either mixed something up or didn't think it through or did it half-heartedly. Apparently they poorly understood what was going on on the firing line. And a German squad on APCs moved out straight down the highway onto an undefended position there. Starshina was near by chance. After running his eyes over what was going on he instantly understood the situation: if Germans are to break through here even with a weak force, our whole defense will begin to crumble down, the whole front will snap! He didn't wait for command's orders, understanding that it would take hours for talks and gaining momentum, he started acting at his own judgment. After quickly gathering all soldiers

who were at hand together with lightly wounded people he put them into trenches that crossed the highway, he stopped a fire truck that turned out to be there for some reason, and he mobilized firefighters for defense too. He stopped artillerymen who were going into the woods with two light cannons. In other words, he set up a group for repelling a German assault and closed a gap that appeared due to someone's idiocy with it. The group had held out for two hours until command gained momentum and sent a battalion there. Starshina burned an enemy APC with an anti-tank rifle himself. Front had stabilized there for a long time. Essentially, that small battle had not only tactical significance: it prevented a frontal penetration and, I think, in the end it contributed to the failure of German attempt to take Leningrad. Starshina himself, having done his job, humbly stepped aside, he came back to his usual business claiming neither decorations nor glory. Nobody even remembered a person who fixed the mistake of big brass. I had never heard a sound about that episode from starshina himself...

At first glance, he was strict with the soldiers, he didn't sentimentalize but as I understood later it was the

one right manner of behavior during the war, it had true concern for people hidden behind it. Starshina was highly experienced, he knew how to snag the best foodstuffs at rear area warehouses, he knew how to procure everything one could get at the time, and he stopped at nothing. But it was done for the common benefit with rare unselfishness that astonished me.

He had his own aphorism for all occasions, sometimes scathing and salty but always hitting the bullseye. We had remembered those aphorisms forever... I had recently come across a postwar book called "Soldier Proverbs and Sayings". It started with something like that: "Officer you should respect, and your work do not neglect!" Starshina was far from the official folklore. For example, when looking at us barely tossing the ground with the shovels, he said: "Eating – sweating, working – freezing!" And when our smoke break with napping was going on for hours, he asked: "Are you hitting a pear tree with your... again?" Or: "Stop kicking... against a wall!" Once during winter when we were poking frozen ground with pry bars, freezing and turning up our collars to protect ourselves from wind, starshina ordered: "Yo-ho, take off them overcoats! You can't marry in underpants,

you can't work in overcoats!", and he took the pry bar up himself. The other time Germans cut us off from supply bases. We were sitting in the forest near Pogostye without eating for three days. Starshina who was used to doing everything himself went for the foodstuffs. He had been gone for two days and came back gloomy, blackened, unkempt.

–Well, comrade starshina, did you get some grub?

–Yes, I did. Ears!

–What kind of ears?

–Ears from that very place! – starshina said spitefully.

He had innumerable quantity of those proverbs.

He was wise, he had a sensible look at life, he didn't cry due to injustice, he didn't muse over meanness, muddling and disorder but rather tried to correct them with his actions. When once in the trench I tried to talk to him about disgrace happening all around, he made a brief remark, having given the surroundings a good look: "Don't peel off!"

Our starshina had done many good deeds, often risking his head. He had saved many lives, he had fixed many moronic blunders that war had consisted of. I think

that in the end we won thanks to people exactly like those. There were few of them but they were the backbone of everything. He was an exceptional person, and a whole book should have been written about him. I would much like to know whether he managed to survive the war. Doubt it. He wasn't used to hiding behind other people's backs...

We had lived near Mga river in the hole, stretching shelter-half over it, for some time in summer of forty-three. I couldn't find that place even though it had a distinctive mark: near the large hole where eight people slept – an infantry squad that I commanded – there was a small one, for two. We isolated our crazies in it. Their names were Kedrus and Kachkalda. They were big handsome folks thirty years of age. They had door-wide shoulders and wide hips, they were fleshy even during that starving time. They had thick mugs and thick necks. Both were very stubborn, stunningly lazy, they liked fressing and sleeping. Both were strong-voiced and sang often. “Why am I not a falcon, why cannot I fly!”, “I look at the sky...” or “Oh, Dnipro-o, Dnipro-o!...” But the first one wet the bed, meaning the neighbor too when they slept together. He always stank unimaginably since there



was nothing to change into. Second, however, screamed terribly, he howled, croaked while sleeping, he flailed his arms and his dugout neighbors suffered a lot due to that. When he drew blood from the nose of Pashka Pronichev who had been sleeping peacefully, soldiers decreed making a separate compartment for crazies. This separation of living space was going on until the end, that is until fighting near Tortolovo where my squad ceased to exist.

Kachkalda started screaming while sleeping since his first days on the front since he instantly got into a funny commotion. That day or rather that night my squad was sent to cover sappers who were clearing the way for scouts in no man's land somewhere here too, near Pogostye. I told company commander that newbies shouldn't have been taken there, for they had no experience, but got a response: "Then let them gain experience!" Kachkalda ended up with us. We crawled into no man's land almost next to German trenches and lied down in darkness listening to rustle, ready to open fire if sappers revealed themselves. Their work is rotten, the moment you press something wrong you can say goodbye! You'll instantly end up in heaven! But the guys

were experienced, they worked skillfully, quietly so we couldn't hear a sound, as if nothing had been going on. We could hear clatter and hushed guttural voice from German trench. Hanses seldom launched flares, then we pressed our noses into the ground, freezing in place, and everything got quiet on the firing line. German machine gun fired every so often: Germans on duty in the trench had to shoot a certain amount of times at our side – just in case. We had the same order of work.

Two-three hours passed. Everything was calm. The work was nearing the end. Then suddenly a heart-rending shriek could be heard: “Baaaalls got torn off!!! Baaaalls got torn oooff!” Turn out, Kachkalda who got tired of lying got up and started wandering around the firing line at the risk of stepping on a mine. A stray bullet hit him between the legs. Instead of quietly crawling to rear area or hiding in cover, he started shouting and jumping. Germans who were at a stone's throw from there instantly opened fire and lit up the sky with flares. Some of the soldiers knocked Kachkalda to the ground with a punch, and we started quietly crawling away together with sappers while returning fire. Kachkalda was dragged on the ground by the collar. Germans fired

cannons and mortars. The result was two wounded and a disrupted operation. One couldn't even think about scouting the following day. Command was roaring. Company commander got a reprimand. I got pardoned because my objections before the operations were remembered. But the most astonishing thing was that Kachkalda, having gotten a bullet between the legs, remained completely in one piece! Bullet passed all the important places by, only touching the skin. He wasn't even sent to a medical unit... All of us, both sappers and command, were scolding Kachkalda brutally, yet he didn't give a damn. However the fright wasn't forgotten: nightmares were the result of it, and our hero started screaming at nights, thus tormenting the neighbors.

There used to be several graves near Pogostye station buildings before, some even had names and ranks of the deceased marked. Those were rare exceptions – graves of those few whose bodies were managed to be dragged out of the fire and buried. There were neither people nor time to do something like that in 1941 and 1942. Yet by then I hadn't found anything. Old man who was collecting mushrooms at the railway embankment said that graves were moved to a neighboring Maluksa

station and a memorial of sorts was constructed there. Locals did that on their own initiative using small funds given by state farms and logging operations. Looking at myriads of dead people scattered all over was hard for a Russian man.

Memorial in Maluksa is a small one – it's a stone obelisk and several granite slabs with the names of those who could be found. There are also three-four hundreds of oval enameled portraits brought by relatives of the deceased. I found several familiar faces and several names among them. Overall about 20 thousands were buried in that cemetery. I think it's twentieth of those who died near Pogostye and its vicinity. Coffins were made in Mga, bones were piled up in there and buried. Pioneers are bringing skeletons and filling cemetery to this day. However, there is no sign of tragedy that occurred there in Pogostye itself.

In 1990s memorial in Maluksa was reconstructed using Ministry of Defense funds and now, as they say, remains of 60 thousands of people from Pogostye are collected there. (Pogostye is twelve kilometers from Maluksa!) Veterans told me that Minister of Defense Yazov was the initiator of reconstruction, he fought at

Pogostye and he was wounded there. His father died there too.

That memorial that required large expenses is far from flawless from architectural point of view: it's a mass of concrete, granite boulders, a giant star lying on the ground – everything is done according to preceding era's traditions. Several tens of thousands of names carved into metal plates and stone slabs covering the memorial throughout astound. Yet as it turned out those names do not correspond to the names of buried soldiers but are rather just taken from archives in the majority of cases. But even that is nice. After all, it is some kind of memory, even though remains of people mentioned in the lists are lying somewhere in the woods. I hadn't found a single name of ten people killed in Pogostye Cul-de-sac whom I had buried myself. And recently there has been a message on the radio that metal name plates of Maluksa memorial were torn off and sold for scrap by some kind of scum.

I came across a German mortar battery position while walking in the woods near Maluksa. It was situated in deep craters connected by small corduroy roads with railings made of coarse birches. A watercloset with

comfortable seats was laid out with same birches – Germans had settled in with maximum comfort everywhere. A rear area base of some German regiment looked even more lived-in and cozy. There are former dugouts on the forest hill, under ancient pine trees, among the white reindeer moss. Officer houses are separate. There is a mess hall, tables for eating, a club. Usually two German regiments from among division were on the firing line, third, however, was resting on a base like that, brushing up, washing in the steam bath. Then regiments changed each other. We, however, were continuously rotting in trenches for a long time. Only totally battle-bled units that had only the number left from them were withdrawn to rear area.

I recalled a tale of our scouts about such a forest base. They had gathered important information in German rear area and were coming back when they stumbled upon a sleeping German camp. They decided to see what was in the nearest house and, having waited for German patrols to walk away, crawled there. Turns out, Russian gals lived there, and the house was a regimental brothel. Brave scouts put a bold face on and immediately started getting to know the girls. That was their undoing.

One of the house dwellers managed to tell Germans what happened. Fighting started, and only one starshina who got to friendlies while bleeding profusely survived and told command about that... Perhaps such memorable events happened here, in this very forest!

Being near Sinyavino, Gaitolovo, Tortolovo in 1942-1943, I could poorly imagine where those places were situated in relation to Leningrad. However, in 1946 when I had to go to Murmansk, I saw a familiar bridge over river Naziya where our trench had started from the train car window. Hundreds of knocked out tanks, craters and trenches could be seen right from the train: Tortolovo hills adjoin the railway embankment. Grass couldn't grow there at all for five years after the war. Sickly bushes died having barely risen above the ground poisoned by explosions. Everything had still lied in its place then: there were mines, shells, destroyed cannons, corpses, machine guns, SMGs. Two tanks in a frontal collision: our and German ones, – are frozen hundred meters from the tracks. Corpses, our and German ones, handles from exploded grenades and intact grenades are near them. There are rifles, piles of casings. In short, there are traces of violent fighting. Then I saw several dozens of rusty

tanks – surrounded by thousands of corpses, obviously a tank brigade. Taking a look around, I understood that Germans let attackers into a cul-de-sac and then shot them from nearby hills. One doesn't have to be a professional soldier to understand the idiotic pointlessness of our attack. Later I was talking to an accidental companion in the train, a lieutenant colonel from an engineer unit that had been clearing the mines from that place for ten or twelve years. Pained, he was talking about numerous traces of similar battles. War was waged stupidly, wastefully, talentlessly, unprofessionally. They let Germans kill and kill them to no end.

Lieutenant colonel was talking about the abundance of mines that not only had saved their power after years but also gained even more sensitivity: they exploded after a smallest touch. There is a whole cemetery of engineers who died after the war in Mga. Mine field plans weren't preserved. Both friendlies and Germans laid mines when attacking and retreating. A puff pastry pie of sorts, the one forced with explosive devices, appeared. And the shells millions of which are everywhere, sometimes whole warehouses, are dangerous as well. Many people, especially children from nearby villages, fell victims to



that hell's kitchen. In fifties there was a grave with this writing on the place where Voronovo village used to be: "Here... family that died on the mine on the remains of their house is buried". Now this grave doesn't exist anymore, and everything is forgotten.

In 1978 when I visited those places for the last time land had already been cleansed from metal. Hills got overgrown with thick and impassable forest. Yet still there turned out to be more marks of war than in Pogostye. Marsh there quickly closed the craters and here, on a sandy area, they are still deep. Not only that, the scope of fighting here was wider than in Pogostye. In 1942-1943 artillery fire and air bombing reached unseen force there. That is why craters here are monstrous – as big as a house, and trenches are deeper: the place gives the impression it had been maimed by volcanic cataclysms. And that is thirty-eight years after those events! There are more bones, helmets, gas masks and soldier boots here too than in Pogostye.

At the very top of Tortolovo village's hill there is a skeleton wearing shoulder belt and fancy spurs in a shallow hole. Obviously, these are remains of a regular officer who was buried here. The grave is really shallow,

he was buried in a rush, in winter. And nearby there is another grave with a cross (that, however, has already decayed) and writing: “On this place Germans in 1942 murdered a family...” – father, mother and three children are listed. Obviously, relatives or fellow villagers are tending to the grave. Each grave like that holds human fates, tragedies of many lives crushed by the war...

There used to be Estonian settlements To the North of Apraksin Post settlement where numerous holiday cottages of Leningrad gardeners are now. During the war Estonians shot us in the backs and they killed soldiers of 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army that got encircled here. There were particularly many marks of the war. In fifties I found destroyed cannons and tractors belonging to one of divisions of our regiment that disappeared in entrapment on the road that was going under a high-voltage line. They were destroyed by aviation.

Three years ago forest here was uprooted. Bulldozers, tractors came and leveled the area. However, construction had to be halted near Chernaya Rechka – where 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock's demise was concluded.

As bulldozer driver told me, three vehicles in a row exploded together with mechanics.

–It's scary digging the ground here, – he said, – several skeletons always end up in every excavator bucket...

Gaitolovo and Tortolovo used to be situated to the North of Leningrad-Volkhovstroy railroad. Porechye and Voronovo, places just as memorable to me, were to the South. A road goes South from Apraksin Post station among the marshes. It goes through a high sand dam that prisoners built in thirties for a narrow-gauge line: peat delivery from swamp peateries was planned here but, as it often happens here, the project was abandoned but the road remained. And so did the dam. Germans used it for defense. Many our soldiers met their death while fighting for this dam.

You walk seven kilometers down the road and you get to the area where Porechye and Voronovo villages used to be. There were several hundreds of houses, a church, a mill, three vacation retreats, rich farmsteads all working smoothly... Everything was swept away by war. There are no traces of life either. Only a cemetery where old residents take their relatives to even after the war can be seen. One has to get to home ground at least after death! There are no traces of a large grave in the

Southern part of Voronovo where Germans shot several hundred POWs in 1941. That has also been forgotten. After all, three hundred souls is a drop in the bucket in comparison to corps that died here.

Even now this place astounds with its beauty. You get out of thick tall forest onto the riverbank, and there is green field expanse over it. Lilac is blooming in former front gardens. Red briar flowers are flaring on trench edges where blood was spilling. Market gardens where futile attacks were performed so many times and where our regiments met their demise got overgrown by red fireweed. There's a red field in front of a green forest and the sky is blue. Such beauty! And it's easy to breathe. Air that was cleared over the nearby Ladoga's vastness is fresh and clear. River Naziya is babbling in the gulley with steep limestone sides, just as it used to during the war. But peat water in it is coffee colored now, yet I remember it being red from blood. Overcoming this gulley was a complicated problem, and here piles of corpses lied.

Tunnel shafts in the riverbanks where first Germans and then we were hiding from bullets and frags had collapsed. There is no trace of a vacation retreat that had

been assaulted for more than a month with several divisions killed. A stone bridge over the river was exploded. There are only holes, trenches, giant craters and bones, bones, bones, bones everywhere. Here's a clearing covered with heather. There's a skeleton in the hole. A nice-looking red cap mushroom grows from between its ribs. It's a large, hearty one – the place is fertilized, after all!

And again, once you look at former lines of German defense, at their fortified places on the hills, a thought about dumb, talentless organization of our attacks comes to mind. Head on against machine guns! Artillery softening-up was firing at an empty space to a considerable extent, offensive was using obtuse cliches. And further on it started from scratch: there was an even more fortified German position held by fresh troops, and there were mountains of corpses again. This being said, it seems that Germans figured the process and result of the operation better than our command. And that is how the war was waged here from 1941 to 1944. I hadn't noticed any particularly strong fortifications in German positions. Everything was made of ground and wood, there was almost no concrete. Yet Germans thought

everything through and calculated everything so well that our grandiose effort turned into dust, into corpses. Of course, best German professional divisions died here in the end, but at what cost! You see a field with bones scattered all over it and remember how regiment after regiment, division after division, tanks, cannons, carriages went along the frontline roads – all going forward. And only wounded, on feet, on carts, on sledges and on stretchers went back. All these fields near Voronovo, Porechye, Tortolovo, Gaitolovo, railroad near Pogostye were that abyss where force that seemed so formidable was vanishing, having turned into corpses. In the end Germans couldn't be crushed here: they retreated from here themselves when they got hit in the mug in other front sectors.

Now one can rarely meet people here. Only during mushroom time hordes of mushroom pickers get here. They're polluting the woods with dirty paper, cellophane bags, empty bottles, tin cans. They're making bonfires, starting forest fires. Nobody cares what kind of place that is, nobody knows anything about deadly fighting that occurred here. Teenagers are digging human bones out of the ground while looking for gold teeth, hoodlums are

burning and breaking wooden monuments that were installed here and there by surviving combat veterans. A steel plate had to be installed on Tortolovo hills and names of divisions that died there had to be made with a welder in order for that sign to remain in one piece. A granite obelisk in memory of an unknown soldier was installed near Voronovo, at the crossroads . A retired general who fought there early in his life was the initiator of its creation. By now this monument has been exploded.

All in all, nobody is seriously working on perpetuating the memory of the fallen. Life goes on, it has new problems, new concerns, new challenges and goals.

Where does this indifference to fathers' memory come from, then? Where does this blatant obduracy come from? And this state of affairs is like that not only near Leningrad. Everywhere – from Murmansk tundra, through Karelian forests, in Novgorod, Kalinin Regions, near Staraya Russa, Rzhev and further to the South, up until Black Sea, – everywhere it is the same. Indifference to the memory of the fallen is a result of general brutality of the nation. Political arrests of many years, camps,

collectivization, famine have destroyed not only millions of people but also have shattered the faith in the right, justice and mercy. Violence to one's own people at war, millions of victims who had been sacrificed at battlefields with ease are events of the same caliber. How can a nation that had had Pavlik Morozov made its national hero even respect their deceased?! How can one fault people for indifference to bones of those fallen at war if they have destroyed their temples, neglected and defiled their cemeteries?

War that was waged with methods of concentration camps and collectivization discouraged development of humaneness. Soldier lives were held cheap. And according to a concept made up by political workers our army is the best in the world and fights without losses. Millions of people fallen on the battlefields did not correspond to that scheme. They were not allowed to be talked about or noticed. They were dumped into pits like carrion and covered up with ground by burial parties or they were just putrefying where they had died. Talking about that was dangerous, one could be put up against a wall "for defeatism". And to this day this official concept lives on, it's firmly beaten into our people's heads. A



number of 20 millions was declared out of thin air, and archives, lists, burial ground maps and all the records are a dark secret.

“No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten!” – this claptrap seems like a mockery. Amateur searches by pioneers and select enthusiasts are a drop in the bucket. And official monuments and memorials were by no means made for the memory of the fallen but rather for perpetuating our slogans: “We are the bestest!”, “We are invincible!”, “Long live communism!”. Those stone, and more often concrete flags, fanfares, standardized motherlands frozen in ostentatious grief that you don't believe in, – they're cold, cruel, soulless images devoid of genuine grief.

Let's be more precise. Existing memorials are not monuments to the fallen but rather a concept of our regime's invincibility embodied in concrete. Our victory in the war was turned into political capital that has to reinforce and justify the state of affairs that exists within the country. Victims contradict the official interpretation of the victory. War must be depicted in major key. Hurray! Victory! And losses – these are insignificant! Victors are not judged.

I understand the French who preserved a piece of First World War frontline as it was in 1916 at Verdun. It has trenches, craters, barbed wire and everything else. However, we in Stalingrad, for instance, leveled everything with bulldozer and installed a huge broad with a knife in her hand on Mamayev Kurgan – “a symbol of Victory” (?!). And graves of some kind of political workers who had no relevance to events of the war appeared in places where soldiers were dying.

I had to be in Dvinsk where our soldiers are buried. Latvians are rough, unsentimental people, generally speaking, and they're hostile to us too, however they preserved moral principles and culture that we had lost; they made a huge splendid cemetery. Every soldier has a small humble grave with flowers on it. Names were found as far as possible, although there are a lot of unknown ones. Everything is austere, humane, respect to the fallen is in everything. And horror of battles, immensity of what happened can be felt when you see a boundless sea of graves – horizon can be seen neither to the right nor to the left nor from behind nor ahead, there are only monuments! And yet we had lost a hundred times less people in Latvia during a short period of battle than we

had among Russian fields in two years! It's just that everything is concealed by forests and marshes there. And the most of the fallen will have apparently never be found.

I was told that near Kazan where in 16<sup>th</sup> century Ivan the Terrible's troops assaulted the city people had collected soldier bones and had brought them to church, to a special sarcophagus until recent years (until it got flooded in years of “great construction projects”). And yet Ivan the Terrible's losses were paltry in comparison to victims of the last war! For example, there were seventeen killed per one square meter of the ground (according to official data) on Nevsky Pyatachok near Leningrad. This is many times more dense than in a normal civilian cemetery. Thus, pioneer and komsomol trips to battlefields are noble, necessary events, yet they're hopeless ones due to the enormity of the task.

What can realistically be done now, amidst universal indifference, lack of resources and materials? I think memorial zones should be established in the territory of former firing line, what remained intact there should be preserved. It can be implemented in many areas of former Volkhov Front. Memorial signs with

designation of destroyed regiments and divisions should be installed, even if they will be humble and cheap. After all, neither Pogostye nor Gaitolovo nor Tortolovo nor Korbusel, nor dozens of other places are marked by anything! As for bone collecting... And building churches or chapels on the battlefields is long overdue.

And the most important thing is reviving memory and respect for the fallen among people. This task is connected not only with war but also with more important problems – rebirth of ethics, morality, fight against cruelty and obduracy, meanness and callousness that flooded and possessed us. After all, attitude to the fallen, to the memory of the ancestors is an element of our decayed culture. If they don't exist then neither does kindness and decency in life, in our relationships. After all, trampling down the bones in the battlefields is the same as camps, collectivization, hazing in the modern army, emergence of different mafias, spread of thievery, meanness, violence, breakdown of economy. Changing the attitude to the memory of the fallen is an element of our revival as a nation.

No monuments and memorials are capable of communicating the immensity of war losses, of truly perpetuating myriads of pointless sacrifices. The best memory for them is truth about war, a true story of what had happened, opening the archives, making the names of the ones responsible for outrages public.

They say that war theme is exhausted in our history in literature. However, for all intents and purposes

writing of the true history of the war hasn't even been started yet, and when it will be started, there will be no surviving eyewitnesses, and black spots on Victory's bright face will forever remain intact. But that has always happened in human history. The difference is only in the scales but not in the core of what happened, and does anyone really need the memory of the fallen?

Grief of the loved ones, however unbearable it is, only lasts a generation. And if one was to remember history, wars had always turned people into dung, into a fertilizer for the future. Fallen had been instantly forgotten, they had always been only a heavy weight for the memory. (Heh, if only I could forget all that too!) Battles and victories had been remembered only going by the current day's interests. Thus, 1812 in its heroic halo contributed to assertion of Russian monarchy's grandeur. Spartans from Thermopylae transformed into an abstract symbol of heroism and so on and so forth. And meanwhile heroes themselves had decayed and fallen into oblivion.

## The Other Side

Mister Erwin H. bears his fifty-nine years of age very well. Time has only bent him slightly and silvered his hair. He's quite short, gaunt, he's smiling while showing his superb artificial teeth constantly. His gestures are clear, energetic. His silhouette and habits make him look like a small bird of prey – a vulture or something?.. He's constantly on the move, managing to do several things simultaneously: he's talking to me while pitching short phrases to his subordinates, he's giving directions via a portable radio in his jacket's chest pocket. In short, he's a good man all around! Yet I imagine young mister lieutenant Erwin H. wearing a helmet, with binoculars on his chest, with light machine gun in his hands, lying on the edge of a shell-cratered trench in Sinyavino Heights. He's giving directions just as clearly. They understand him quickly they act precisely, energetically, accurately... And five Germans surviving after an artillery shelling are fending off the attack of a Russian battalion, putting it down in front of their positions...

Yes, mister Erwin H. was there. He started as a private in 1939, he conquered France, Poland, passed Southern Russia on his tank, conquered Crimea. Having been wounded seven times, he was promoted to lieutenant for distinguished conduct.

–I'm not a fascist, – he says, – we were forced, so were you.

After the fourth wound health didn't allow him to sit in the tank. New position – artillery spotter – was more calm but no less interesting: he had to reveal Russian targets and destroy them.

28<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Hamburg Division where mister Erwin H. valiantly fought as a part of feldmarschall von Manstein's army that had taken Sevastopol arrived near Leningrad in summer of 1942 with its mission being seizing the city with decisive assault. Then I had first seen that division's badge – a picture of a walking infantryman – on dead Germans' helmets.

Feldmarschall von Manstein did not take Leningrad but his army liquidated our almost successful breach to the besieged city in the region to the South of Sinyavino. Then, in August-September of 1942 vicious fighting was going on there and our long suffering 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army had



met its demise again. However Manstein had almost run out of troops too. Those days mister Erwin H. had first confronted me. Even later, in 1943, we were doing similar work: firing the cannons or fending off the attacks with machine guns. In 1944, with difficulty, at the cost of many sacrifices, having pushed mister Erwin H. and his friends away from Leningrad, we pinned them to Baltic Sea coast in Courland, in Libau where they were fiercely resisting until the end, until capitulation.

After war mister Erwin H. had spent three years in Siberia doing timber harvesting.

–Yes, it was bad. Many died. But I survived. I was a sportsman and that helped!

Then it was coming back home, to Munich, studying in Art Academy, and now he holds a nice administrative position in Bavarian capital. I am his guest and he receives me. He's polite but without enthusiasm, and I feel poorly hidden contempt within his every look and move. Had it not been for official duties, it would have been very unlikely he would talk to me. Source of mister H.'s contempt for Russian is in war time events. He's talking about everything quite openly.

–What strange people! We put down a wall of

corpses about two meters high near Sinyavino, and they're still crawling and crawling in front of the bullets, climbing over dead bodies, and we're still firing and firing, and they're still crawling and crawling... And how dirty the prisoners were! Snot-nosed boys are crying, and bread in their sacks is disgusting, it's impossible to eat!

–Mister H., – I say, remembering our fierce artillery softening-up in 1943 when we rained down many hundreds of thousands of shells on Germans, – surely you had losses from our fire?

–Yes, yes, – he responds, – drum fire (Trommel Feuer), it's terrible, one can't raise their head! Our divisions were losing sixty percent of their manpower, – he says confidently, he knows the statistics well, – but remaining forty percent were fending off all Russian attacks, putting up resistance in destroyed trenches and killing a huge amount of attackers... And what did your people do in Courland? – he continues. – Once masses of Russian troops launched an attack. But they were met with a united fire of machine guns and anti-tank cannons. Survivors started falling back. But then dozens of machine guns and anti-tank cannons fired from Russian trenches. We saw how crowds of your soldiers,

mad with terror, were tearing around no man's land and dying!

And I see disgust mixed with surprise on mister Erwin H.'s face, – those feelings had not faded in many years that had passed since the day of those memorable events. Yes, indeed, that happened. And not only in Courland. I myself cannot imagine a general who had planned an operation talentlessly and then, when it failed, who in blunt rage ordered barrier troops to fire on friendlies in order for them not to retreat, the scum!

Barrier troops' activity is understandable amidst universal dissension, panic, flight like it was, for instance, near Stalingrad, in the beginning of the battle. There they managed to bring order through violence. But even then it's difficult to justify that violence. But resorting to it at the end of the war, before enemy's capitulation! What monstrous, Asiatic stupidity that was! And mister Erwin H. openly despises me, he cuts contacts with me to a necessary minimum, he doesn't accompany me to the airport, charging taxi driver with it instead. However talking to mister Erwin H. is, to say the least, not something I enjoy either. After all, I approached him open-heartedly at first: we suffered together, we were

tormented and dying together. And now I cannot see a slightest sparkle of intellect inside him – there are only efficiency and energy. His self-righteousness and feeling of superiority over everything that exists in the world put me off. Mister Erwin H. remained the same as he was in forties! Trials hardened him while teaching nothing. What a dump idealist I was then, in forty-one, near Pogostye, I thought that a kind of sophisticated intellectual who had read his fill of Goethe and Schiller, who had listened his fill of Beethoven and Mozart was sitting in the German trench. Turns out, that was mister Erwin H. Yes, he had learned nothing, he remained himself, and me? And I started wisening up and I had gradually realized why Red Army soldiers behaved outrageously in Germany in 1945. It was vengeance on Germans who acted worse on our land. But, maybe, what caused even more hate was arrogance, impudence and haughtiness of many German soldiers and especially officers which remained even after the war.

Every time after a short meeting with mister Erwin H. I come out of his office with delight and immerse myself in the atmosphere of satisfied and seedy city of Munich. Hitler started there once, many ideas that killed

millions of people came from here... This is one of the capitals of Germany that was humbled into the dust and ransacked during Second World War. Now it's almost bursting from prosperity and well-being. Streets are shining clean, backstreets are washed with soapy solution. Plate storefronts that are carefully wiped daily are sparkling. And there are mountains of junk in the storefronts: there are clothes, furniture, jewelery, food, perfume, books, paintings, musical instruments, electronics and photo products, – all that one can wish for, and everything is of premium quality. The street is a giant exhibition of well-being and success. It's an exhibition of goods that are displayed thoughtfully, nicely, tastefully. Many talented heads have worked on this exhibition, and it dazzles, prevents from seeing something else and completely beguiles the passer-bys. It gives the impression that Germans spend a heap of their free time delightfully contemplating of their well-being. The goal of the showmen – to subdue and suppress a passer-by, – is certainly successfully reached. Only after three days I get used to the storefronts' impact, and glitter of wealth tires me. Now only something outstanding can surprise me. Here some kind of rainbow

bubbles are flying in the air – big and small, high and low. I look – a huge teddy bear is sitting on the second floor balcony and it is blowing soap bubbles. Turns out, it's an ad for a toy store. Here a giant cart of apples came, and fat woman wearing a colorful national attire starts giving them out to the passer-bys. It's just like that, as a gift – for advertising or something? Germans line up in a dignified manner and take one-two apples each, baring their well-brushed teeth. There is neither jam nor din.

A crowd is smooth, satisfied, well-ironed, it's radiating health and complacency. There are many invalids – some are with a crutch, some are with a stick. They're also satisfied, well-groomed, not mad, not alcoholics. One, with no legs that have been amputated almost up to the waist, gets a wheel of his comfortable armchair trolley on the lawn and calls me.

–Do I need to drive across the street or something?

–No, only backwards, danke.

He drives out of the lawn, presses a button and his trolley is dashing along the sidewalk, overtaking passer-bys who are giving way. Everything is portable, everything is reliable, everything is electrified. And I remember Vaska from 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Brigade. The whole

brigade had fallen in forty-one but Vaska survived, although having lost both legs. He constructed a crate on four ball bearings and he was begging, putting down a marine cap for that. Compassionate passer-bys were quickly filling it with one and three ruble notes. Then Vaska got drunk and rammed into crowd with rumble, whoops and whistles, turning either his back or his side forward while moving. That was going on in fifties in the corner of Nevsky prospect and Zhelyabova street, near pharmacy. I felt dreary and embarrassed. Having entered the pharmacy, I heard the pharmacist lady, a young and beautiful one, calling the police in order to take the troublemaker away. Can she really not understand that Vaska has ruined his young life for her, that she didn't burn in ghetto only because Vaska sacrificed his legs and those who were with him sacrificed their heads? Then Vaska disappeared...

Those years kind Motherland gathered her sons – disabled heroes who had given their health in the name of Victory – and sent them to reservations on faraway islands in order for them not to ruin the beauty of the capitals. All of them died there quietly.

And crowds of satisfied content citizens are walking

around the satisfied and seedy city of Munich, among them are clean, well-groomed and content invalids. Some of them threw the fatal grenade under Vaska's feet then, in forty-one. They have plenty of everything but life is strained like a stretched string. There's an obsession on men's faces: they set a goal for themselves (what kind of a goal, I don't know) and they are steadily reaching it. They're strong people. They're working like animals. They do it precisely, carefully, with skill, dutifully. They consider poor jobs beneath their dignity. They can't stand disorder, botchery. One can often see tired, gray people continuing to work late at night... But they're greedy and boundlessly thrifty. There are many singers, musicians in the streets. You can feel that many of them are professionals who couldn't find work. They're singing and playing music superbly. Passers-by are listening, admiring... and they are throwing nothing into the hat in front of the musician.

Late at night, as wind was blowing sleet over the street that was empty yet ablaze with lights, I had heard a flute sound. That was Beethoven's "Elise" – a melody woven from tenderness. A crooked musician, blue with cold, wearing shades was sitting in the doorway, and



something was moving nearby. I saw a small dog wrapped in a quilted blanket. Its head lied on the owner's lap devotedly, and there was almost human melancholy, suffering and hopeless fatigue in the look of its black eyes. Further on a company of horribly dirty bearded guys was relaxing under the city gate arch. Their girlfriends were drinking wine from large bottles while sitting right on the sidewalk. All of them yelled something, and their dogs, just as dirty, were snapping at cut, brushed, prim poodles and bichons that were walked by decent citizens. Who are they, whose guys? I don't know. Round the corner a charming girl fifteen years of age, well-dressed and clean, came up to me.

–Come with me, I'll show you one thousand and one nights!

–Good gracious, girl, I'm old enough to be your grandfather!

–All the more so you'll be interested! Let's go, daddy! (Vati)

Gay drug addicts are wiggling their bums and wandering around the night cafe.

Deafening rhythmical music can be heard from behind the well-lit iridescent doors. That is the slot

machine arcade. I come in. There's Battleship, and wildlife hunting, and car racing, and just roulette. Everything is rattling and sparkling. I stumble across a dummy in the corner – it's a naked woman made with supernatural accuracy – a lifelike one! She invitingly points into the doorway while smiling. And there, as it turns out, is a sex shop. There's smut of all types: pictures, slides, magazines, film reels. Here you can buy a rubber blow-up girl who knows everything, can do everything and has switch to 120 and 220 volts at a reasonable price... Having dropped a mark into a slot, you get five minutes of color voiced pornography – supersex, with two, three, six, on top, on bottom, over the head and even on motorcycle. The remains of my hair are moving, my heart is beating, I start feeling ill and disgusted... and I remember our Soviet government that locks you up for that, at once and for a long time, with respect!

I crawl back on the street and catch some fresh air. There is a large ancient church on the other side, fast beside, you only need to make several steps. How symbolic this is! Everything is interwoven in our life – high and low, good and evil, clean and dirty! I pull a

heavy door by the copper handle shaped like a small winged angel. Quiet and cool of the cathedral inveil me. Penumbra reigns here, there are few people, they're sitting on the pews deep in their thoughts. A well-lit Crucifix is burning somewhere in the infinite dark distance, over the altar. It charms me, it removes the vague anxiety that brought me here, to the place of God, from my soul.

Fires in hundreds of small flat bowls are burning ardently to the right from the exit in a small chapel: Germans are using them instead of candles, after having put a coin into the moneybox. The statue of Mother of God is slightly above, in the alcove. Repose descends upon me. This is not our church, but we do have one God... I take the bowl, light it up, and my small timid fire is also burning near the others, it's a fire of hope, enlightenment, purification. I lift my eyes and see Mother of God's fair image...

Save us, lost ones, The Most Holy Virgin! Cleanse us from evil, calm our tormented souls...

## Afterword

This manuscript mostly emerged in autumn of 1975. It had diaries of 311<sup>th</sup> R.D.'s battles written in 1943 and Dream chapter of 1945 added. Several other insignificant details in various places were added later. At large, though, these notes are a child of sixties' Thaw when armor that had been pressing onto our souls gave its first cracks. These notes were a timid expression of thoughts and feelings that had been accumulating in my consciousness for a long time. Being written not for a reader but for myself, they were a kind of inner emigration, a protest against a jingoist image of the war that dominated then and still exists now.

Having read the manuscript after many years of its emergence, I was astonished by the softness of war event depictions. Horrors of war are downplayed in it, the most monstrous episodes aren't mentioned at all. Everything looks way more peaceful that it was in 1941-1945. Now I would have written these recollections completely differently, restraining myself with nothing, more mercilessly and truthfully, or rather how it actually

happened. In 1975 fear was softening my quill. Raised by a Soviet military discipline that punished instantly, mercilessly and severely for every wrong word, I consciously and subconsciously restricted myself. That's, probably, how it has always been in the past. Writing the truth right after the wars was not allowed, then it got forgotten, and combatants fell into oblivion. Only romanticism remained, and new generations started everything from scratch...

Majority of Soviet period war books stays within the limits defined by “History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course”. Maybe, that is why they're so similar, as if written by a single author. Now a twist to creating a truthful image of war years can be seen in military historical literature, and even a sort of confrontation between old and new is beginning to take shape. I wasn't trying to join this struggle with my recollections at all, instead I only wanted to lift the curtain that veils the dark side of the war a little bit and take a glance there.

A thorough analysis of what is hidden there is beyond my scope. A man possessing an absolute knowledge of the facts and a powerful intellect, a

professional and not an amateur is needed for that. A man of Solzhenitsyn's scale would fit, for the war is just as, or, maybe, more complicated than GULAG.

I was only solving personal problems in this manuscript. Having come back from the war mangled, shell-shocked and crushed, I wasn't able to deal with that at first. Those days there were no notions of "Vietnam syndrome" or "Afghan syndrome", and we weren't treated by a psychologist. Everyone saved himself as they could. One drank vodka, the other, having lost moral principles at war, became a bandit... There have also been ones who thumped their chest with their fists and demanded inconvenient truth. They were quickly taken to GULAG for treatment... Stalin knew history well and remembered that Patriotic War of 1812 gave birth to The Decemberists...

I saved myself with work and more work but when nightmares didn't let me live, I tried to clear them off with pouring unbearable heartache onto paper. Of course, my notes are a confession of extremely scared boy to some degree...

I have never shown this manuscript to anyone for almost thirty years, considering it to be my private

matter. I have recently carelessly given it to an acquaintance to read, and it was a fatal mistake: manuscript got a life of its own – it was passed from hand to hand. I had nothing left to do besides allowing its publication. And yet I still think it shouldn't have been done: there is too much dirt that ended up on its pages.

War is the most dirty and disgusting phenomenon of human activity, it lifts all the vile from the depths of our subconsciousness. We get a reward, and not punishment for killing a person at war. We can and we must destroy the values that had been created by humanity for hundreds of years unpunished, we can and we must burn, cut, explode. War turns a person into a malicious animal and it kills, it kills...

The scariest thing is that people cannot live without war. Having finished it, they're instantly starting to prepare the following one. Humanity had been sitting on a powder keg for centuries, and now it moved to an atomic bomb. It's frightful to think what will come out of it. One thing is clear, there will be nobody left to write memoirs...

Meanwhile, my manuscript is turning into a book.

Don't judge me too harshly...

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*Saint Petersburg, 2007*



*Nikolai Nikulin died on March 19, 2009.*