Sasha Krugosvetov

TRY LIVING IN RUSSIA

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Аннотация

The autobiographical prose of the talented writer who uses the pseudonym Sasha Krugosvetov is aimed at the widest possible audience. The author talks about those events he happened to witness and be part of, as well as about others of which he knows from tales and stories, and about the people whose actions and fates left a trace in the history of the last decades…

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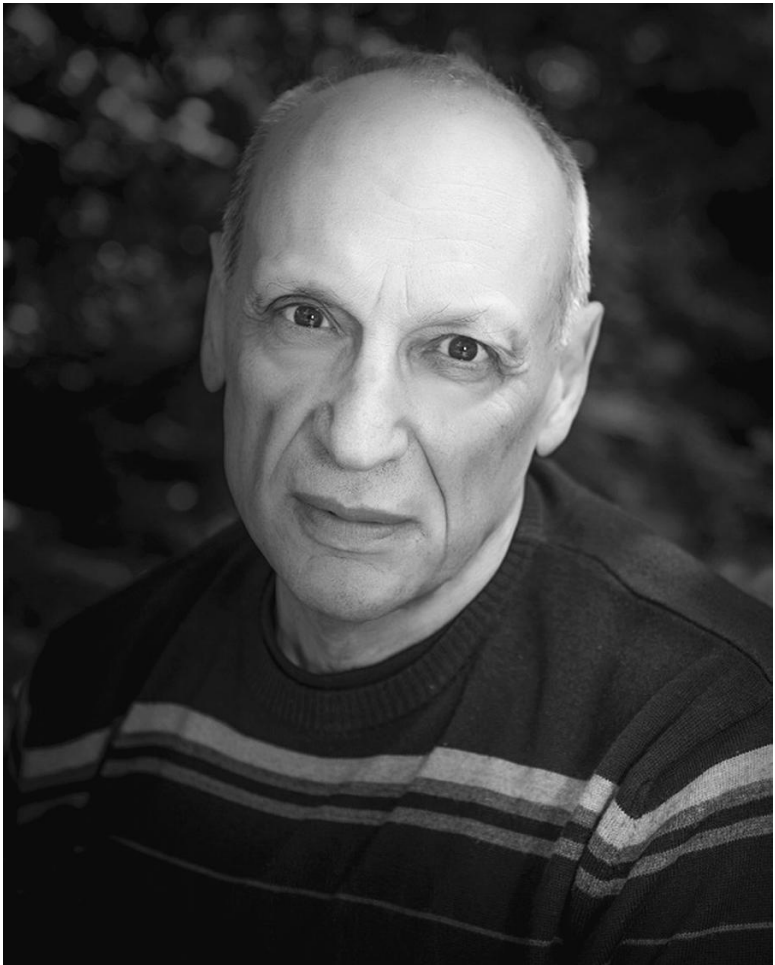

Sasha Krugosvetov is the pen name of Lev Lapkin, a Russian writer and scientist. Born in 1941, he worked in science research and began to write fiction in the early 2010s. For his books, he was awarded several prizes at the Russian-based International Science Fiction and Fantasy Convention, «RosCon» (including 2014 Alisa Award for the best children's fantasy book, 2015 Silver RosCon Award for the best short story book and 2019 Gold RosCon Award for the best novel), the International Adam Mickiewicz Medal (Moscow/Warsaw, 2015) and other prestigious Russian literary awards. His novel, «Dado Island: The Superstitious Democracy» was translated into

Blessed is he who lived
In the world at its fateful hour
He was called by the gods themselves
To join them at the feast.

Fyodor Tyutchev

Orenburg

I've been living in Russia for a hundred years. Since 1913. Although I was born much later.

A hundred years ago my father lived at the edge of Orenburg, a small provincial town in tsarist Russia. Grandfather Mendel, a pious Jewish tailor, had a large family to support. He had five children from his first marriage, three boys and two girls. My father was the middle child, the third. He was right in the middle, with one older and one younger brother and sister each. After the death of my grandmother, whom I never met, my grandfather married a young peasant woman. My parents, uncles and aunts called her Auntie Musya. Auntie Musya bore Mendel a daughter. My father grew up like a selfseeding plant in the steppe. Not very tall, well-built, muscular, opinionated. The winds of the times tried to bend and break him, but he drew himself up and grew strong. Nearby was the Ural River. He would go fishing and swim tirelessly. In the vicinity there were Cossack villages. The boys from these villages would lie in wait for the Jewish kid to teach that infidel a lesson or two about life. He apprehended his offenders one by one and paid them back in kind. The adults were more benevolent. Many had their uniforms made by his father. The family might by yids, but they could be good people nonetheless. Look, they would say, how Yashka vaults his horse. He was able to jump off at a full gallop, touch the earth with

his feet and jump back into the saddle with his backside facing forward. And then sit up straight. It's hard for me to imagine what life was like in my grandfather's family. I know that Mendel observed the Jewish feasts strictly. For Easter he would read the Torah, hiding the matzo on the chair under his bottom. The children would try to steal it. That was their custom. If a child managed to steal the matzo, he or she would receive a ransom for it. Grandfather pretended to be angry and did not allow anyone to get close, but somebody would inevitably manage to reach the matzo. Grandfather ostensibly failed to see that person. Did my father spend a lot of time at home? Did he master many of the patriarchal Jewish family customs? I don't know. He mastered neither the Law of Moses, nor the Jewish festivals, nor faith in his Jewish god, nor Yiddish, the second language of Jewish families in tsarist Russia. But for some reason he learned to sew a bit from his father. That I know for sure. There was a period after WWII during which we led a very modest life; I was a schoolboy and my father sewed me several pairs of trousers. His sewing was quite good, and he ironed the trousers exquisitely. And he taught me how to do it myself. I still know how to do it now. He also somehow managed to finish primary school. He finished his school education only after he'd been on civvy street for a bit. And I don't get how he managed to get out of his father's family with cut-glass Russian, no accent at all. And not a single foul word! My father, who lived through three wars… you would hear my uncles and aunts speak the same correct language. They were

very simple people, with primary education and then secondary school. That they received a secondary education is entirely to the credit of the Soviet government, which offered opportunities to simple people regardless of their nationality. I never heard anyone in my family use the word «bum» or «piss», not even «take a leak», nothing of that kind, neither words nor jokes nor hints nor indecencies nor euphemisms. My father only ever spoke correct Russian. I can't figure out where he looked for it, how he filtered it out and mastered it in the draughts of the troubled and tragic twentieth century.

The Soviet Regime

My father was fourteen when the Civil War started. He ended up in the Red Army. They made him a mounted orderly. Now it came handy that he knew how to vault. He had a Red Army book that I have kept to this day. He had to fulfil difficult tasks and there were pursuits, too, but the lord spared this nimble, clever lad. Afterwards he worked in a factory. He studied. He took up singing. People kept pushing him, telling him that the opera was beckoning. My father had an amazing bass-baritone voice. «Neither sleep nor rest for the tortured soul. Night brings me no comfort, no forgetting. All that is past I experience again, alone in the silence of the night.» What a mix! Everything was in there – the revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, atheism, the accursed bourgeois culture. My father became a Soviet *vydvizhenets,* a low-ranking worker promoted to a leading role.[1] That's understandable and natural. He was of working class origin after all. What is a tailor? Not a peasant, not a landowner, not a general, and not a clerk either. That means he's a worker. My father finished school and found himself in a factory in Petrograd. Then he helped his own ageing father and his siblings to make their way there. How did they live

[1] A vydvizhenets was a young person with politically correct background and past who was recommended by the communist party for a leadership role in the national economy.

back then? The huge flats that had belonged to members of the bourgeoisie were being cleared of their inhabitants. Rooms that were 30 or 40 square meters in size were partitioned off. Each room was then allocated to a large family. One single flat might consist of ten or even twenty such rooms. To the present day I remember the phantasmagoria of communal flats. I remember my grandfather's flat (or rather, his room in a communal flat) on Borovaya Street. I used to go there after the war, when my grandfather was still alive. What singing career? Forget the opera. The country was seething. There were so many things to do. My father joined the party. Lenin's summons. My father's belief was fierce; everything was now being done for the sake of the working people. As he was hardworking, organised, respectable, a Civil War veteran and a party member, he was quickly promoted to a leadership role. My father wanted to get an education and started a college degree. I'll ran ahead and say that his dream of higher education didn't materialise – there were the communist construction projects, special commissions by the party… «Tell me, Yakov, what is more important to you – college or your party card? You need to go where the party needs you.» The construction of Khibinogorsk. Apatity. Then came the Finnish War. And WWII was drawing near at full speed already. The trumpet kept calling. And then even the trumpet could no longer be heard. In its place came the roar of guns, explosions and friends dying; the everyday military labour that could end only in an early grave or the longawaited victory. But that was

later. For now there was the dawn of the young Soviet regime, a happy time for a Jewish lad of modest origins. The fact that a host of atrocities had already been committed by that time, while many poisonous vipers were fighting under the carpet,[2] that the founders of the «radiant future» were embroiled in a long straggle to get even with each other, that by that moment the dark Eastern genius of the Kremlin had emerged fully-fledged and shown his insidious power… All this was so far away, so entirely incomprehensible to those who were the green shoots of the new Soviet land. The young vydvizhentsy did not reflect on all this; they neither saw nor understood. For them everything was simple. There it was, the bubbling, young ordinary life, so open, so naive, so selfless and honest. Work and turn the fairy tale into a true story. All paths are open to you. You are young and strong. Everything you do will turn out well. A wonderful young country. «We were born…»[3] What remained behind were years of destitution, humiliation, the Jewish pale. National inequality. Now there was no oppression. No religions. No nations. We are Soviet people. The party leads us, and Stalin is its leader. He is just like us. Simple and easy to understand. But also wise and far-sighted. Do we now have the right to judge those who were young, ardent, genuine, naive and inexperienced then?

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[2] Cf. the remark that Russian politics resembles «dogs fighting under a carpet», attributed to Winston Churchill.

[3] The first words of the official hymn of the Soviet Air Force: «We were born to turn the fairy take into a true story, to overcome space and expanse».

How many people in the West were taken with the new Russian idea of universal brotherhood! There it was – the city of the sun, about to be built. The Comintern (the Third International). Everybody was waiting for the worldwide proletarian revolution. The communist idea was popular all over the world. Take the French communist and writer Vaillant-Couturier. Or Henri Barbusse, who wrote «Joseph Stalin». «He was a genuine leader, a man whom the workers discussed, smiling with joy at the fact that he was both their comrade and their teacher; he was the father and older brother, really watching over all of us. You didn't know him but he knew you; he was thinking about you. No matter who you were, you were in need of precisely such a friend. And no matter who you are, the best elements of your fate were in the hands of this other person, who was also keeping watch on behalf of everybody, working; this man with the head of a scholar, the face of a worker and the clothes of a simple soldier.» When Henri Barbusse, the French writer, journalist and public figure, the laureate of the prestigious French Prix Goncourt, sang the praises of the Great Stalin, he wrote from the heart, wrote what he was thinking. So what do we expect of our inexperienced, simple-minded fathers?

The New Economic Policy and Khibinogorsk

My mother is from Odessa. My maternal grandfather was a huge, pure-bred, handsome blond man. His surname was Koch, let's face it, not a popular name during the war. Running ahead, I'll tell you that my mother didn't change her surname when she got married and that, as it turned out, hadn't been the best of decisions. There were three daughters and one son in the family. The children were well dressed, the girls all in ruches. My grandmother was a real character, the pillar of the household. There was nothing Jewish about that family apart from its origin. Neither language nor religion. I don't know why. Everybody spoke wonderful Russian, not even a Ukrainian accent. I can't tell you the reason for that either. My mother, Lyuba, was the middle daughter. The most accomplished one. The one everybody loved best was Galya, the youngest, who was considered the most beautiful. When I began to understand certain things, this didn't seem obvious to me at all – my mother is significantly more interesting than Galya, perhaps because her entire character was more animated. The oldest daughter, Dora, who was also the oldest child, was, naturally, the first one, and was loved out of habit and inertia. Dora was unlucky; she was pitied, watched over and protected. Semyon, the son, my uncle, was tall as his father,

clumsy, bashful, with no real predisposition for any one thing, although he was a good student and the only one in our family to gain a degree in engineering. Nobody paid attention to my mother in her father's house – she was clever, joyful, resilient, independent, lively, sociable, balanced, pretty, she would make her way regardless. During the evacuation in the war, when my grandfather was gone already… The husbands of her daughters were at the front. My grandmother remained behind with three daughters and three grandchildren… Everything fell onto her shoulders, which were no longer young. Grandmother suffered from high blood pressure; the high mountains of the Urals were not for her. Poor grandmother. In the evening the whole family was sitting at the table, she was laughing, joking… and suddenly it all came to an end in front of her daughters. Life was cut short in flight. Her speech faltered, she only managed to say one thing: «Lyuba, look after Dora and Galya.» And then she was gone. She had managed to say the most important thing. She knew that she could count on Lyuba for anything. But that will come later. For the time being all was well in the family of my grandparents. The children were going to school. The country was ruled by the New Economic Policy – NEP Grandfather had his own «business». A tragic story that is comic at the same time. Grandfather's business partner was a sprightly young lad. He used to come to the house frequently, spending time in the company of the three marriageable young ladies. Perhaps they weren't the most beautiful, but they were pure,

neat and intelligent. A real pleasure. He managed to turn the oldest girl's head, promising to marry her and seducing her on the sly. Then he took the cash register and that was the last we saw of him. Gone. The oldest daughter in tears and with a broken heart. The business bust. The disgrace to be seen by the whole of Odessa. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps for another, the family scraped together the last of their money and left for Petrograd. That was the script of providence. At first they lived in a communal flat on Mokhovaya Street, then on the Old Nevsky Prospekt. How they made ends meet is hard to say. The children were grown, the daughters were going to school, the son was working already. The inconsolable girl who'd been «jilted and abandoned» was married off upon arrival. The parents found an unprepossessing Jew, kindhearted, plump and no longer young. He had an amazing instinct for business, a characteristic that is common among the people of the Book. He was the commercial director of a furniture factory and rather well-off for by the standards of those dark times. He was glad to be married. How they made Dora agree I don't know. Perhaps she understood that such a marriage was necessary in order to solve the family's financial problems. She never looked happy. I never saw her smile. But she was a good wife. She was faithful and maintained her family as best she could. The daughter she had was the first granddaughter in a large family and everyone's darling. But with her husband she was strict. This tradition to keep one's husband under the thumb was subsequently passed down to every single

woman in Auntie Dora's lineage.

My grandfather was soon arrested by the secret police. They were arresting all the NEP-men and confiscating their gold. And he, the unsuccessful NEP-man, was arrested, too. He, the NEP-man who had had his «business» stolen, together with his money and the honour of his elder daughter. What did that matter to those guys? Give it to us here and now! Not long ago I visited the Solovetsky Islands. I walked around and thought about where my grandfather might have been. Where was he locked up, in which building? My mother abandoned her studies. She made the rounds of the official channels, travelling to Odessa and, for some reason, to Rostov-on-the-Don. She collected many certificates, went to different offices, trying to prove that they had ceased being bourgeois NEP-men long ago and were now honest members of the working class. I don't know whether it was her efforts that did it or whether the screws at that point still hadn't totally lost their mind from the smell of blood. Anyway, my grandfather returned home. Why did they forgive him, why did they leave him alive? Perhaps the screws had made a mistake. I know that many screws of the first wave were shot on the Solovetsky Islands. Perhaps because they sometimes released somebody's grandmothers and – fathers. Without conforming to the important principles of supreme proletarian justice.

However, the good times didn't last long in the old communal flat on Nevsky Prospekt. The problem was that my grandfather had been repeatedly put through the «steam room» when he

was on the Solovetsky Islands. Narrow benches were placed into a small room and the prisoners were made to sit astride these benches, very close together, belly to back. Then they'd fill the room with steam. To make the prisoners suffer. To make them realise that they had to surrender what they had unrighteously amassed to the country of the working people. My grandfather returned from the Solovetsky Islands suffering from severe asthma. He died shortly afterwards.

My mother was the next candidate for marriage. We've kept a portrait of hers, drawn in red sangina pencil by an unnamed suitor who had made, as they say, a spectacular career. In the family album there is the portrait of an elegant man with a violin, who apparently had also shown interest in my dear mother before she got married. But for some reason she married my father. He was of very modest means, not very educated, not at all handsome and eight years her senior. Perhaps my mother, wise even in her youth and frightened by the unpredictable turns and harsh reality of the dictatorship of the proletariat, consciously chose a successful and, in those years, fairly influential Soviet riser-through-the-ranks. Or perhaps she had discerned his generous nature, the strength and courage of his character, and his particular masculine type. It's hard for me to tell. The photographs from this time, taken when I wasn't yet born, during my parents' holidays in the Crimea, in the Caucasus, among the snowdrifts of Khibinogorsk where my father was sent on party orders, show an absolutely happy couple. Against the

backdrop of glittering snow my father, torso naked, pushes his treasure in a huge wheelbarrow – my mother, clad in a thin crepe-de-chine dress. Life was smiling at them. This was a couple, a family, a union of two complex individuals who faced a very difficult fate. Their relationship, open, kind, selfless and devoted during happy moments as well as life's harsh trials, has been and will remain to me the exemplary, ideal relationship between a man and a woman.

The Northern Caucasus

The Soviet regime provided many people with the opportunity to receive a previously inaccessible higher education. Samuil graduated from medical school in the 1920s and left his native Rostov-on-the-Don on an assignment to the Northern Caucasus. He worked in hospitals and sanatoriums in Sernovodsk, Zheleznovodsk, and Piatigorsk. The clan from Rostov dreamt that the boy might finally settle down and marry a nice Jewish girl. Samuil had his own ideas regarding life. Medicine came first. Medicine was his calling. Behind the plain exterior there was a strong, resolute character. He was a good doctor, organised, knowledgeable and capable of holding his own when it came to treating a patient. He had instinct and intuition. And, most importantly, he loved his patients. That's why he could intuit what they felt. That's why he became a good doctor. And an excellent administrator. He was head of several sanatoriums, one after the other. With regard to having a Jewish wife – no, please don't start. I know what these wives are like. They sleep until midday, and around 2pm they utter the first words: «Syoma, everything hurts!» Samuil loved Tonya Fedotova, who came from an educated, well-to-do intelligentsia family. Every conceivable ethnicity was mixed into this family: there were Russian roots, Terek Cossack influence, Georgian blood and possibly a drop of Turkish blood, too. Tonya was the younger of

two sisters. She was not as beautiful as the elder sister, Tanya. But my god, what a woman she was. Delicate and feminine. Slim, well-proportioned, with the Madonna's sad face. Just like Vera Kholodnaya. She played the piano and sang in a quiet voice, kept a diary and wrote poetry. Syoma knew exactly what he needed from life. How could he not have fallen in love with Antonina? If there is a young man among the readers of this sketch, listen to your older comrade. If you happen to meet a woman with a quiet voice who is not talkative and modestly averts her pensive eyes, concealed behind long lashes, don't dismiss her, don't walk past this rare stroke of luck. The strongest, most faithful, selfless and fervent female natures are hiding behind such lowly beauty, such quiet charm. It is them who bestow upon their chosen one the most passionate embraces and become his faithful support for life.

Samuil and Tonya got married. Tonya bore two sons, Vova and Misha, two years apart in age. The chief doctor was a well-respected man. His family received a flat with three rooms. Samuil gave one room to a woman without a family, a fellow doctor at his sanatorium. He had decided that two rooms were enough for his family. Antonina was very hospitable. The doors were always half open. The house was furnished with ascetic simplicity: hospital bunks, a wardrobe, table and chairs. No other furniture whatsoever. In their place a piano, a splendid library and many guests. Antonina, slow by nature, would get up at six in the morning, run to the market, then cook. She managed to

feed everybody. Anyone could turn to her family and ask for help. Some insolent women came regularly, asking for money. And Antonina would slip them something. When she had no money, she would give them food, milk, eggs, everything she had. She was incapable of turning anybody away. Acquaintances and others who had come to the resort but didn't know her well would stay at the house. Everybody, apart from Samuil's relations. They couldn't forgive his choice of a wife. They still refused to recognise Antonina and her children. The children hardly knew their father's relatives. However, all their life the children entertained a very close relationship with the beautiful Tanya, Auntie Tanya. I'll charge ahead and tell you that Misha told Tanya things he wouldn't have told his own mother.

The boys were taught music and drawing. They were very capable children. Their school grades were excellent, and both had a gift for the exact sciences. The elder, Volodya, played the violin. He was a fine draftsman, able to create with a single stroke, a single line, the image of a person or outline a landscape. The younger brother, Mishka, played the piano. However, the boys weren't mollycoddled or kept indoors. Let's remember the atmosphere of a warm, southern resort town – the atmosphere of perennial feast. A host of holidaymakers, visitors from the large cities. An abundance of fruit. And an abundance of temptations. Just as all other local children, the boys ran wild in the street, made friends with the people from Caucasus, went to the mountains, climbed trees and collected mulberries. They

grew up real tomboys. Once they were chasing each other and Vova slammed the door in Misha's face, bam! Now his brother had a huge conk where his nose was meant to be. And so Misha went through life with a broken, squashed nose. Another time Misha was running after Vova, threatening him with a hot iron, and when he caught up with him he pressed the iron against his bottom, and so Vova was left with the imprint of the iron for life. Antonina decided to get an education and enrolled at the Medical Institute. On the very first day of her course her neighbours told her in the evening that they had seen her dear boys walk along the cornice of the fifth floor. There could be no talk of lectures or study. Oh, it seems that Tonya's dreams of a degree, her dreams to raise her boys to become musicians, writers, artists or doctors, were all in vain. These dreams weren't meant to come true. The younger, Misha, turned out particularly sprightly. He was lively, always laughing and very kind, and as a result everybody loved him, his peers as well as the adults. And whether through constant exposure to the sun or by nature, he was not just sun-bronzed, but downright black. Black like some Indians. Mishka-the-Black, his friends would call him. And that nickname stayed with him to the end of his life. Misha loved to play billiard. He reckoned that he had to know how to do all things better than the others. Sometimes, professional billiard players would come to the sanatorium. One of them became the boy's patron and trained him rather well. Before the outbreak of the war the short ten-year old boy was a very decent

player already. Whenever someone came who wanted to play for money, some new artist on tour, Misha's billiard mentor would deploy his favourite trick. Not so quick, he would say. Why don't you first play the lad over there. People would quickly gather for their favourite spectacle. The «lad» would clamber onto a chair, as he couldn't reach the balls standing on the floor. And then he would tear the guest artist to shreds, to everyone's amusement. Yes, it didn't look as if Misha would become a pianist or writer. The country was troubled. Sometimes there was trouble in this god-protected house, too. The terrible year 1937 began to ramble and roar and then exploded in claps of thunder. «Oh how I want to fly away, unseen by anyone, fly off after a ray of light and not exist at all», wrote Mandel'shtam. We won't manage to fly away, Osip Emil'evich, we won't manage to hide or turn into an invisible ray. The local NKVD was given an order; they had to uncover and arrest several thousand hidden enemies of the people. A number of them were to be executed, the other part to be sent to the GULAG. Committees of three NKVD-members were formed, arrests prepared. Lists were compiled of Trotskyites, anti-party groups, kulaks, accomplices of the White Army, spies, war specialists involved in subversive acts, saboteurs, other alien elements. Let's have a heart-to-heart with them, they will confirm everything. Sernovodsk is a small town, everybody knew at whose house the black police car would call next during the night. In the chief doctor's house they were expecting visitors, too. The family was saved by the Chechens.

They loved Samuil and decided to help. Old men in burkas came and sat down in the sanatorium's courtyard. «Samuil, don't go home. Stay here for a bit. We've told your family. They won't worry. We'll see what happens.» Every child in town knew about the Chechens in the sanatorium. For the NKVD this was an unexpected turn. There could be unforeseen disturbances. They'd get a rap on the knuckles in Moscow for this. To hell with that Samuil. May he live and work for the good of the proletarian state. He's a good doctor, isn't her? Well, let him work then. We'll manage without including him in our report. Perhaps it really happened like that. Perhaps the Chechens simply hid the chief doctor, his wife and children for a while. Whatever happened, the storm passed by Samuil and his family. But for how long? Hard to predict how the events would have unfolded further. A huge, cruel, merciless war appeared at the threshold, a war that jumbled everyone and everything and destroyed all plans to build a «peaceful» life in the land of the Soviets. During the war, a torrent of casualties flooded from the frontline into the North Caucasus. The sanatorium was transformed into a war hospital. Samuil, the sanatorium's chief doctor, became head of the hospital. His non-proletarian origin didn't stand in the way of his appointment.

The Great Fatherland War

I know little about my father's involvement in the Finnish war. Perhaps he fought only for a short time or not at the main stretch of the front. My father didn't talk about it much. He told something about Finnish snipers at the top of the fir trees and about how dexterous the Fins were at throwing knives. All the rest is muddled. By contrast, WWII, the Great Fatherland War, affected us to the full extent. Just before the war my parents received their own living space. As a fairly highly positioned leader, my father was assigned a flat with two rooms on Liteiny Prospekt. My mother was already pregnant with me. My father decided that a certain colleague of his, who already had a child, needed a separate flat more urgently and ceded the flat. For his own family he took a room in a communal flat, also on Liteiny Prospekt. True, there weren't many other people in that communal flat, which also consisted of two rooms. Our room was large, more than thirty square meters. On the third floor, without a lift. With a stove for heating. My parents only spent a very short time there at first. The war had broken out. My father was preparing his factory's evacuation to the Urals. He sent my grandmother's entire extended family (my aunts, their husbands and children, my uncle) to Sverdlovsk – that was the name of Ekaterinburg in Soviet Russia – and then he sent my mother with her baby bump there, too. She delivered me en route. Well, not

on the train, naturally. When she went into labour she was swiftly made to disembark in the town of Galich, Kostroma region, where I came into this world in August 1941. Thus I saw the ancient town of Galich only once. In the following my mother made her own way to Sverdlovsk, with a nursing infant. The food was terrible. She would travel in a heated goods carriage. There was no opportunity to wash. The baby – that is, me – was covered in scabs. Instead of a crib I slept in a wooden trough. She was surrounded by men, soldiers, who had been sent down from the front for various reasons. The soldiers, who were occupying the upper levels of the bunks, picked out lice from under their armpits and dropped them. My mother cried. A wounded officer with heart disease, on his way to a home visit, lowered his head from the second bunk and said, «Don't cry, dear mother, when you son grows up he'll be a Hercules.» As if he'd looked into the future. He was almost right – I grew up to become a big, strong man. With time. Back then what was there was there.

When my mother rejoined my grandmother everyday life became easier, it seems. Although the issue of food remained, of course. It was the same for everyone at that time. Soon afterwards my father moved to the Urals with his family. My mother proudly presented him her cachetic, malnourished baby boy, evidently. Women always show their newborn babies to their beloved husbands in this way. And of course my parents' family joy was once again short-lived. My father, who would always give in to my mother in all matters and consider her opinion

in literally all matters, became a very decisive man in those critical moments in life. He was vice director of a huge factory of defensive significance, exempt from military service due to his obligations at the factory and, at 38, was entering middle age. And he enlisted as a volunteer. As a rank-and-file soldier. He told my mother only when he was about to leave.

What do I remember from that time? Almost nothing. A dark stairwell. Some logs that had been stacked on the landing for some reason. A white cat playing among them. Looking at me. My future life, the bright bits and the troubled ones all together, were looking at me through that cat's child-like feral eyes. I remember stories. How my mother took up smoking. Makhorka, rough-cut tobacco. There was nothing else. How my grandmother died. How we waited for the rare letters from the front. How we listened to the song «Wait for Me and I Will Return», how we hoped and cried in silence. How the children greedily snapped up food when there was any in the house. How they swallowed quickly and growled, unable to wait for the next spoonful of porridge. The entire country lived like that. Some faded photographs from that time have survived. My mother, haggard and almost unrecognisable. Huge eyes, a prematurely aged face with a tortured expression. And a terrible puny creature, all skin and bones. That is me. In my eyes, the same suffering as in my mother's.

In 1944 we returned to our flat on Liteiny Prospekt. All our things and furniture had been taken away. By our neighbours

from upstairs. My mother didn't argue with anyone. She started again, from scratch. Her sisters and brother came to her aid. Then the war was over. The men returned from the front. In the streets there were flowers, songs, accordion tunes. No news of my father. One joyful soldier in a shirt turned to me in the street, smiled at me and waved. I ran towards him, screaming 'Uncle Daddy!' I didn't know my own father after all. Then the news came that the units of the Second Ukrainian Regiment were still in Prague. That's where my father was. There, the war was still going on; people were dying. While here, peaceful life was beginning. Shops opened. One event that has stayed with me is the opening of a bakery on Liteiny Prospekt. I can still remember it. For some reason my strongest childhood impression was a loaf of white bread on the table. Bulka, as they call white bread in Leningrad.

My father's commander was travelling through Leningrad. «Wait for your husband, Lyubochka, he'll come soon. Your Yasha will return as a Hero of the Soviet Union. All documents are prepared already.» If only it had happened that way. Perhaps many of the subsequent problems in my family would never have arisen. But it turned out differently. Somewhere in the headquarters they had changed the nomination for the Gold Star of the Hero and my father was awarded the Order of the Red Banner instead. My father never pleaded on his own behalf and did not appeal to his front commander.

Who thought of those things back then? The war was over.

My father was safe and sound. Almost everyone was safe. The only person in my father's huge family who had died was his older brother. His beloved younger brother Borya returned from captivity. He had pretended to be Tartar and thus saved his own life. What joy that was! My grandmother's entire family, all together. The only one missing was my grandmother herself. My father was jolly and strong. He would sing arias, everybody would start dancing. He would hug my mother and her two sisters to himself, lift them up and waltz around with them. Everybody idolised my father. He was a real hero, his chest covered in orders. Twelve military honours. He would drink a whole bottle of vodka in one go, to the Victory.

So many things remained in the past. He had suffered concussion when a mine exploded next to him. The left side of his body was left paralysed. He'd only just recovered a bit in hospital when he left in a hurry to catch up with his unit. The left side of his face remained immobile for a long time. On one of the photographs from the front his face looks contorted. My father was older than the other front soldiers; they used to call him 'batya', father. Fate saved him from the bullets. But his life could have come to an end for a different reason. My father was a signalman. Once, near Kursk, he and a group of fighters were given the task to set up communication links between our sub-units. With spools of wire on their backs and submachine-guns they had to fight their way through this layer cake of Russian and German positions and return to the position of their unit. Several

groups had already been sent on this mission; all had perished. The fighting lasted several days. They completed the task. My father returned and went to the staff quarters to report. An officer he didn't know held forth: «We are risking our lives here while the yids are taking cover behind the front line.» My father threw himself at the officer and hit him in the odious face with a brick. So he came to face trial. According to martial law he should have been shot. What his commander did in order to save him I don't know. They hushed up the story somehow. How they managed to get past the «smershevtsy» – Soviet counterintelligence – I don't know either. God averted them. And the commander. A courageous, noble man. Moreover, he took the risk upon himself. My father received the next award. And in winter 1945 he was nominated for the Star of the Hero for the forced crossing of the river Oder. The Red Army had captured a bridgehead on the other bank. My father's men had to establish a signal connection. They were crawling across the ice with their spools. A mine exploded next to my father, the ice broke, and the massively heavy spool dragged him down, underwater. A very young boy, a signalman from his section, held a pole into the water, which my father managed to grab. Lucky him. He clambered out of the icy water. The section moved on. They established the connection. That's what my father told me. For this action he was nominated for the Hero.

Recently my son found a copy of the original documents nominating my father for his awards on the website «Openaccess

database of documents 'The People's Victory in the Great Fatherland War 1941-45'». Look, he said, grandfather was a «terminator». This is what's written, in black and white, in careful handwriting, in the official document on the grounds of which my father received the Order of the Red Banner:

«Sergeant major – surname, name, patronymic – displayed extraordinary courage, self-control, bravery and heroism during the forced crossing of the river Oder and the storming of a heavily fortified defence position on German territory.

In command of a telegraph unit, he inspired his subordinates to military feats by personal example.

Several times he personally removed interruptions to the signal line.

On 26 January 1945 he shot five Nazis at point blank while on his military mission and the signal connection was established in time.

For the forced crossing of the river Oder and the storming of a heavily fortified enemy defence position sergeant major – surname, name, patronymic – is deserving of the Highest Government Award, i. e. the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the Order of Lenin and the token of particular excellence, the Gold Star Medal».

Let us return to those post-war years. It's all in the past now. The only thing that matters now is to live. Perhaps these were our family's best years. But they were also very difficult years.

The Blockade

No questions here and no decisions
But abundance and a steely order:
Whether you chose the thick of things or lived on the side
Lie down now, someone will stand beside.

E. Kliachkin

Dusya, sturdy, strong, full of vitality, with small eyes and clear traces of the Tartar-Mongol invasion in her face, was left to her own devices during the Blockade, with two girls of ten and twelve to look after. At first the girls had been in the evacuation. Then rumours appeared that the trains full of children were being bombed. Dusya threw herself at the feet of her boss, imploring «I won't ran away, let me go and get my kids!» She managed to get permission for a trip, located her daughters in Valdai and took them back to Leningrad. There they lived through the entire blockade together with their mother.

Dusya came from the town of Torzhok, from a prosperous peasant family. In the past they had been «middle peasants», not rich, but well-to-do. Dusya was sullen and silent. Muscular and strong. With large, unfeminine hands and feet. Her education consisted of four years of parish school. Her husband, Nikolai, was tall and very handsome. With large brown eyes. They had

been introduced by Nikolai's mother, a smart peasant women with business sense, a former innkeeper who sometimes travelled from Petersburg to Torzhok. Dusya was 22, by the standards of the time an old maid already. She had had a groom once. A good-for-nothing, when he was drank he would ran through the streets with a rifle and fire at random. They had to get rid of such a groom. On top of that Dusya didn't love him. It would be good to marry her off to a man from the city. Their parents matched Nikolai and Dusya up and married them. They spent a lot of time apart. Nikolai in Petersburg and Dusya in Torzhok. They lived without love. But they managed to have two daughters who, naturally, lived with their mother. Only right before the war did the family manage to find housing in a suburb of Leningrad and started living together. At that time Nikolai had just finished technical college. He became a production engineer. They were very different, Nikolai and Dusya. Nikolai used to read books and wear eyeglasses. Even with his glasses his eyesight was zero. Dusya thought little of her husband. A man who was good for nothing. Incapable of lifting stuff. Of getting things done. Of taking a decision, hammering a nail into the wall. He kept forgetting everything. A bungler. Constantly thinking about something. Lazy and useless. He brought his food ration home, at least something. Well no, Nikolai wasn't quite as useless and clumsy. Before he graduated from technical college he had been a worker at the Putilov Factory, and he'd coped well with the workload. He hadn't been sent to the front because of

his eyesight. Certificate of exemption from military service. And suddenly… In the changing room someone took his documents from his clothes. Stole them. Perhaps it didn't happen in the changing room; perhaps someone picked them from his back pocket in the street. Somebody was very keen to help himself to a passport with an exemption certificate inside in these war times. Just at that moment recruitment was underway for the emergency volunteer corps. For some reason recruitment was always underway for the volunteer corps. Come on, Nikolai. We must defend the city against the enemy. We need to get a company together. That's an order. What exemption certificate? Where is it, your exemption certificate? Oh, you don't have it? Where nothing is, nothing can be had. What do you mean, you don't see a thing? Can you see five meters ahead? Do you see the rifle in the corner over there? Take it, and into service with you. There. We'll put a tick there. Nikolai Oref'ev the fighter. What kind of a fighter was he when he couldn't see further than his own hand even when wearing his eyeglasses? So he left with the emergency volunteer corps, to fight in the Siniavinsk swamps. And he didn't send a single message to either Dusya-Evdokia or his girls. Not a single triangular envelope. Not a single message. And no «killed in action» notice either. He vanished just as he had left. What kind of a fighter was he? His eyesight was zero point zero. He disappeared without a trace. He vanished to rot in the icy cold slush of the swamp. And left Dusya to fight for herself with the two girls. No, there is no monument to the fighter

Nikolai Sergeevich Oref'ev anywhere in the world. To him who was fashioned from different stuff. For a life in a different space and a different time. Who ended up in this incomprehensible, terrible world and lived here as best he could, preserving his immortal soul as best he could. He chose a woman, not the most beautiful woman, but one who was strong and stubborn and capable of saving and protecting two thoughtless, long-legged girls. What could he have done? He joined the emergency voluntary corps to shield the city against the enemy with his own body. In order to… «lie down in peace when the time comes». «The green leaf from the dead head will cover them all – the gentle and the violent alike.» He left two girls behind. He left fragments of his genes to his offspring. The pensive penchant for quiet reflection. Great sensitivity. And unusually beautiful, eastern, slightly slanted eyes. Those were passed right down to my youngest along the generations.

Dusya and Nikolai's daughters turned out very likeable. Both of them were strong and stocky, taking after their mother in build. Tamara, the older one, looked like a proper Tatar with her broad face and small, slanted eyes. She was always laughing, nimble and lively. And ruling the roost. The younger one, Vera, also had black hair, not black in fact, but blue-black. She took more after her father, that was visible in everything. Light skin. Large brown eyes, soft features – a foreign beauty out of an Italian film. She was pensive and shy, evidently. She loved books, just like her father. But both girls had inherited their

mother's tough-as-leather character. Decisive. The knew what they wanted. They wouldn't miss out on what was theirs. But all this would become evident later. When the girls grew up. When their teeth had cut through.

For the time being they were simply two girls, two adolescents. Left in the care of their mother. How to survive, how to feed them? They were living on the Petrograd Side. The girls went to the 'Lightning' cinema. They were watching a film when suddenly the lights went out and the film stopped. Come back tomorrow. They came back the next day, but there was no electricity, and the day after there was none either. When will you show the film? Why do you keep coming, girls? Do you have electricity in the house where you live? No electricity. See, we don't have any either, how silly you are. This was the war. There would be no more electricity in Leningrad until the early winter of 1942.

Dusya was working at a factory for packing materials. Sometimes as a packer. Sometimes as a stock keeper. She received food rations for herself and the two girls. The first year of the blockade was very hard. During the second year her enterprise set up a farming co-operative. They were allocated a plot of land in Kuzmolovo and went there in the summer to farm. Dusya, who came from the countryside and had worked in agriculture before, was appointed head of the co-operative. They grew vegetables, herbs, pumpkins, marrows, sunflowers, and turnips. In their free time they would go into the woods

and collect mushrooms and berries. They put away stock for the winter. Her girls Dusya had sent to children's summer camps, Tamara to Ozerki and Vera to Koltushi. For weeding the fields during June and July. What kind of weeding I don't know. But the children lived fairly well in the camps. Some food always came their way. Moreover, their mother would come and bring them food from the vegetable patch or from the woods. During the winter the girls went to school. At school they received food on ration cards, breakfast and lunch. The city was making an effort to look after the children. Lunch was two courses, sometimes there was even stewed fruit. But what kind of food were they given? Skilly.

During the winter life was very hard. Inside the houses the temperatures were below freezing. The heating was destroyed, everything was covered in blocks of ice. People were using small wood-fired stoves for heating. The storeroom at the factory where Dusya worked was warm. There were packing materials, so there was always something for firing the stove. That's where the family went to warm themselves up. Often they would stay there for the night. There wasn't enough food. The fear that there would not be enough food remained with the girls for life. As did the habit to buy too much, to stuff their children and grandchildren with food. The girls became emaciated. Dusya gave blood to receive additional food. But many didn't survive. It was mostly men who died, as they needed more food. In the family next door the father and a 14-year old boy died from

hunger. The girls saw that nobody removed the dead bodies for a long time. Their relatives kept the deceased in the house until the end of the month to retain their ration cards and receive their food. Then they took the bodies of their loved ones on a sledge somewhere near the empty People's House in the Lenin Park. From there the city services would take them to different cemeteries.

This is how the sisters lived. School during winter, camp during summer. When the war was over they entered technical college. Tamara studied to become a cinema technician. Fidgety as she was, she wanted to be close to the film world. She was soon thrown out, as at college one needs to think and Tamara wasn't too good at that. Vera joined food college. Closer to sustenance, so to say. They lived comfortably, one might say. But all three of them were capable of yelling. Tamara and her mother would gang up against the younger sister, or Vera and Dusya would rally against Tamara. All three were sharp-tongued and slightly rude. Dusya received a large number of awards and recognitions. This didn't save her from trouble. In 1947 she started working in a bakery. The spiteful manager with the crooked teeth gave food to her young lover. And three bakery assistants were found with a deficit. In Dusya's case an entire 600 grams were missing. Prison, then got parole. But she was inside for ten months. She doesn't like talking about this now, and not about the blockade either. That's completely understandable: these memories are very painful.

My Nanny

Post-war life was coming together. My father got a comfortable job. He was still fairly influential then. My mother had a secondary technical education. She was working in the Hypronickel Institute and designing beneficiating equipment for Norilsk Nickel. At that time the Institute was situated in the house of Vasilii Engelgardt, adjacent to the Small Hall of the Philharmonic Society. My mother loved walking to work. What a wonderful route she had, from Liteiny Prospekt past the Circus and the Mikhailov Castle, along Nevsky Prospekt to the baroque Engelgardt House.

It was the first summer after the War. We all lived together at the dacha, my father, my mother and I. Of course the dacha was rented. A small wooden house at the shore of the Razliv with a small wooden jetty. In the morning I would ran outside to greet my father. He was fishing already, using a rod and a worm. Next to him a bucket of water full of perches and breams. In the evening my father, together with my uncles and some local men, would pull a drag net across the lake. A wonderful catch. After the war the Razliv was full of fish. My parents bought eels from the fishermen. The big slippery fish escaped from the basin and crawled across the entire allotment. These were my first impressions of a happy childhood.

Of course, not everything was easy. Something was going

wrong at my mother's job. Sometimes she would cry because the management was so strict. They started taking me to kindergarten. The kindergarten was situated in a very beautiful building with a wonderful landscaped courtyard off Liteiny Prospekt. My mother used to bring the unattractive nursery teacher makhorka, rough tobacco. When the makhorka was late I would get punished. Evidently the relationship with the teacher wasn't too good. One «misdeed» I remember well. We children were playing hide-and-seek. And I «hid» under the short skirt of a girl. I couldn't understand why the teacher got so angry. I had to stand in the corner for the whole day; I wasn't even allowed to go to the toilet. I wet myself. And in the evening my mother, who came to pick me up on the way home from work, somehow managed to sort it all out. I can't remember that she told me off for the «story with the skirt». But anyway, how could all this have been even remotely serious in comparison with the war that was behind and the 1950s that were drawing near?

My parents were earning comfortably. They decided to hire a household help to do the shopping and cooking and to look after me. That was common at the time. The paradoxes of those days. A family with a child and a household help in one room. In a communal flat. In summer, when I was still very little, I climbed onto the wide sill of the window that opened onto Liteiny Prospekt. And I looked down from the third floor onto the street. Our household help, a jolly, fat girl from the countryside, held me tightly and said: «Alexander Yakovlevich, come down from

the window, please. If you fall, your mummy will be angry.»

Later there was another busty girl past her prime. Lyuda, Lyudmila. Before she came to us she used to work for Shapiro, the cinema director. She lived at his place at the corner of Nevsky and Vladimirsky Prospekt. My father remembered that he met the future director of LenFilm when he himself was involved in amateur theatre. The girl would tell us with great abandon about the actors who came to see the director. She especially liked Vitsin, «he's just so funny, no matter what he says, everybody is rolling about laughing». She was very observant, our simpleton girl. Vitsin became famous a lot later, when the film «Barbos the Dog and the Unusual Race» came out. In the end, our Lyuda was after one thing only: to finally find a husband. She evidently disliked the boy she was supposed to look after, i. e. me. No matter what I did, everything irritated her – my escapades, my clumsiness, typical of a child used to being indoors. And the work in our house was not to her liking either. She stayed for a short time only, like the others before her. My mother had the rare ability to maintain good relationships with all of them. I heard that she managed to stay in touch with Lyuda, too, until the latter left for the virgin soil of Kazakhstan a few years later. Probably in the hope to sort out her private life. What happened next isn't very clear. At first something worked out, then it all went bad somehow. Upon returning from the virgin soil she came to see us once on Liteiny Prospekt.

Our family's life changed greatly when Nadezhda Danilovna

appeared. I'll begin with a story about Margarita Alekseevna, one of my mother's closest friends. My mother used to call her Margo. They worked together. Margo had no family. She would holiday in Sochi or Yalta. These were the most fashionable holiday destinations for government employees at the time. It seems she also had admirers. The photographs inevitably show a splendid Margo, in her thirties, standing in the foam of the surf with an armful of roses. It's well possible she didn't holiday alone. Margo was an easygoing person. She was always smiling, delicate, well-educated, pronouncing her «r» the French way. She'd evidently seen better times. Margo asked Lyuba and Yasha to help a distant female relative of hers. Perhaps she was not a distant relative but a close one, I don't know. There are many details that I don't know. In those years people knew to keep their mouth shut.

This woman was Nadezhda Danilovna. The only thing that is known about her husband is that he was a Soviet worker at some point; it seems he worked at the savings bank. He vanished before the war, disappeared in the basement torture chambers of the secret police that was so piously guarding the security of the first country of the victorious proletariat. He had evidently been a dangerous man. We don't know what would have happened to his wife and daughter had the war not started. The woman and her daughter, Lyusya, adolescent at the time, ended up under German occupation. They were put in a camp and deported to work in Germany. There, they worked on a farm. Naturally,

the mother was afraid for her daughter. She dressed her in a shapeless garment, rubbed dirt and manure into her face and taught her to behave like an old woman. And so they spent the entire war in alien lands. Nobody saw that the scrawny, awful-looking old woman was in fact a pretty young girl. Then the war ended. Everybody returned home. But for those who had been interned in a German camp, new sufferings lay ahead. If you'd been interned that meant you were potentially an enemy of the working people. All of them were sent to the North or to the East for a long holiday in the resorts of the GULAG. The women returned to Leningrad. They wandered about, hiding somewhere, afraid of every policeman in the streets. They were obliged to register. Register and receive a «warm» place in a heated goods carriage going to the Kolyma. Returning citizens were guaranteed a warm welcome by the entire might of the victorious state.

Such a warm welcome the country prepared not just for former camp internees, but also for war invalids. The leaders didn't want to spoil their mood after the Great Victory with the sight of hundreds of thousands of armless, legless, despondent war invalids who were supporting themselves by begging in train stations, in trains and in the streets. How shameful! His chest is covered in medals but he is begging at the street corner next to the bakery. We need to get rid of them as fast as possible. In only a few months the streets were cleansed of this «disgrace». Out of sight, to the islands of Valaam Monastery. To

the Kirillo-Belozersky, Goritsky, Aleksandro-Svirsky and other monasteries. So that they weren't in the way of the proletarian leaders building socialism. So that we could all sing together: «I know of no other country were mankind can breathe so freely.» The country of the Soviets punished its victorious invalids for their sufferings, their mutilations, their lost families and homes, for their villages burnt down by the war. Here come your war heroes: a food ration fit for a beggar, barracks, loneliness and complete hopelessness. And later peace and silence in a nameless grave, sometimes in a ditch, with no headstone, no inscription, no cross and not even a Soviet star. Forgive me for getting carried away, I couldn't keep silent about this disgrace of ours. And about the famous post-war toast of the Great Leader, «To the health of the Russian people!»

I don't know how my parents arranged this cover operation. I assume that my father, a war veteran who had distinguished himself before the authorities, somehow managed to get passports for Nadezhda Danilovna and her daughter and register them in our flat. Fact is that they were legalised and thus vanished from the field of vision of the vigilant powers that be. Alas, not for long. During these years, one could only hide for short, very short time from the long arm of those guarding the dictatorship of the victorious proletariat. This is how the women came to be in our room, 30 square meters in size. Nadezhda Danilovna was ten or fifteen years my mother's senior, a simple Russian woman. That's how I saw it. A simple woman with a village woman's

headscarf and the intelligence fate bestows on those who are strong and wholesome by nature. And then her daughter. Dressed in simple and elegant clothes made by her mother's skilful hands. Not beautiful. But very pretty and very pure, and at that time very joyful. Exuding that special charm of immediacy and maidenly purity. Where Lyusya lived I don't know. Perhaps at Margo's. But she would often come to our house. And Nadezhda Danilovna moved in with us and became my nanny. At the very first day she questioned me in detail about what I liked and whether I already knew how to read (I wasn't going to school yet then but could read quite well). She cooked soup for me. The plate was large and I finished only half of it. She asked me whether I spat into the plate while eating. I was very surprised at the question – of course not! After that she finished my soup herself.

She soon became one of us. She spent a lot of time with me. And she sewed children's suits from old clothes. Very skilfully. My parents rented a dacha for the summer, and I went to live there with my nanny. My parents would come for Sundays or for the holidays. Nanny taught me many things. She taught me to love the forest and how to tell apart mushrooms, berries, plants and birds. She taught me and the gaggle of the neighbours' children games and tricks. She helped us organise feasts and stage plays. She baked treats for us little ones. When I finally turned seven she prepared me for school and took me there together with my mother. As an adult I often remembered her tactfulness, intelligence and natural wisdom. As if this simple, semiliterate

woman had imbibed them from Moist Mother Earth herself. Sayings and tricks. Wisdom she had learned and deduced from her difficult, hard life. I never saw her read. That's how I decided that she must be illiterate. She only looked on from the side when I read my children's books, when I sometimes cried over the fate of the hero of a heroic tale who had died and then was miraculously resurrected with the help of holy water. Do you believe in god, nanny? Sasha dear, for me god is under every bush. The Lord hears my prayer everywhere.

Soon Lyusya passed her entrance exams for the Theatrical Institute on Mokhovaya Street with flying colours. She had prepared the role of an old woman for the exam, modelled in great detail after the years she'd spent in Germany. The selection commission did not doubt her talent. Lyusya became a student, received a stipend and a place and registration in a student hostel. Life was smiling at her. I sensed her good mood. She was always full of joy when she came. She would hug me; we laughed and played a lot. Later I found out that at the Theatrical Institute Lyusya had fallen in love for the first time. Everything was great. The young people planned to get married as soon as possible. Easier said than done. The groom-to-be found out that his beloved had been in a camp. He began to tremble, the fire awakened in the flaming heart of this juvenile heir to the young proletarian culture. He simply had to tell the leadership of the Theatre Institute that he, quite unexpectedly, had found himself right at the centre of an anti-Soviet, perhaps

even international, espionage conspiracy. The maidenly dream of happiness crumbled. I don't know what explanations Liusya had to give the confidential, tender guys from the NKVD. Whether it lasted a long time. And what the cost was to her. In terms of energy, of apprehension. Anyway, she was asked to leave the Theatrical Institute. And she had to cut out her life all over again. Lyusya had a quick mind. She entered the Institute for Engineering and Commerce. After graduation she remained there as a lecturer. She had no desire to write a PhD dissertation. Everything worked out, more or less. But I've never again seen her joyful or happy since those days. Until the last day of her life her intelligent grey eyes remained pensive and mostly sad.

Lyusya's sensible mother advised her daughter how to build her life. She introduced her to a widower who had two children, a boy and a girl. Vladimir Petrovich, a bus driver and a stately, handsome man, became Lyusya's husband. He was simpler than her and more stupid. He loved her devotedly. And she allowed herself to be loved. However, apparently she was a good wife. And she managed to become a mother to another woman's children. But she never wanted children of her own. Nadezhda Danilovna decided to move in with her daughter and help her bring up the children. I had grown up a bit by then. I was going to school, year two or three. Before she left us, my nanny sent me to school on my own. For the first time. She asked me all the questions, how to cross the junction, at which light, where to look. When she wanted to attract my attention she would say

«Sasha dear, look into my eyes». I looked into her eyes, answered all her questions and left for school by myself. And she tailed me, watching furtively – she wanted to make sure that I was really carrying out all her instructions.

This was not the end of my friendship with my nanny and her daughter. While I was at school I would spend the summer at our rented dacha together with Nadezhda Danilovna, Lyusya and her stepchildren, Vova and Galya, who were younger than me. Together we would explore all the forests, lakes and shooting ranges of the Vsevolozhsk region. We would go swimming and collect mushrooms and berries. Unfortunately, Lyusya went on to have problems with her stepson. When he was older, he started working at a factory and became a Komsomol leader. Vova was a good guy, very genuine and honest. His friends loved him. But then he was invited to work for the security services, something that often happened to Komsomol members at the time. And he found the offer tempting and flattering. Lyusya, on the other hand, couldn't forgive him for working for the security services, which she hated, and cut all ties with him. She didn't forgive him until the day she died. Much later, when Nadezhda Danilovna had passed away, her stepdaughter, Galya, had a daughter of her own. She was called Nadya (Nadezhda). In honour of her grandmother. Galya always considered Nadezhda Danilovna her real grandmother and Lyusya her real mother. Lyusya remained close to Galya and later to Galya's daughter. Such closeness isn't self-evident even between mothers and their natural daughters

and grandchildren.

My memories of my nanny and her daughter have always been very important and dear to me. Whenever I told anybody of my beloved nanny I described her as a very simple person who was endowed by nature not only with goodness, but also with insight and a special kind of worldly wisdom. With Galya I was friends all my life. And ten years ago I bumped into Vova. He was an old-age pensioner already and had left the security services. We reminisced about Nadezhda Danilovna and Lyusya. I once again unquestioningly repeated my sacramental phrases about the wisdom of a simple Russian woman… «What simple woman?», he interrupted me, «she was a graduate of the Smolynyi Institute for Noble Girls. They only accepted girls from aristocratic families. Her family weren't simple at all. What do you mean, illiterate? She knew five languages. And her husband was a very senior member of the regional committee.» How do you like that? I was shocked. There goes your simple woman. Your illiterate woman. What a dimwit I was. And how the people of that time knew to keep their mouth shut. They were able to grow into a new skin. To live another's life instead of their own. And to never let the secret out. No to give themselves away with either a word or a hint. And my parents accepted the risk and kept silent. One thing offers comfort: we all genuinely loved each other, my parents, nanny, her daughter and I, the youngest. And was I really that wrong? No, I was right. She was full of goodness. And insight. And worldly wisdom. These things don't

come from the Smolnyi Institute. But from a person's own heart. From the difficult life, the hard life that falls to the lot of every person, no matter where he or she lives in the vast expanse of our motherland. From the fields and forests of central Russia's nature. Some people find all this under every bush, as my dear nanny used to say – the goodness, the insight, and the worldly wisdom, too. Just as they find our father in heaven.

Post-war Romanticism

For Samuil the war meant work and more work. Every day, day in, day out. In the hospital there were the wounded, bandages, dressings, operations. The sick had to be fed. He organised a farming initiative farming on a personal plot of land. They had eggs, chickens, herbs and vegetables. There were melons and gourds. They listened to the summary reports from the front. The treated and discharged the wounded. The war subsided. The boys grew up unnoticeably. Antonina felt that her Syoma had developed a roving eye and decided to «strengthen» her family. During the last year of the war, when she was 42 and Syomochka approaching 50, she gave birth to her son Sasha, our baby. The parents were no longer young and Sasha turned out a weakly child. Like Nabokov's Cincinnatus, he was born into and lived his life in spheres not from this world. He pushed just a tiny part of himself out into our world. Which is why he was so fantastically thin that he appeared transparent. He wouldn't undress in the sun so that people wouldn't see that he was slightly translucent. In return his abilities were not from this world either. He knew by heart excerpts from hundreds of volumes, reference books and encyclopaedias that he had read. He would read anything he could get his hands on – prose, poetry, plays – in addition to studying painting with the help of art albums. He had encyclopaedic knowledge. He was a good pianist.

All his mother's most romantic dreams for her children's future came together in Sasha. Antonina invested her entire soul into her youngest son. But Sasha was not from this world. Not of this world. Unsuitable for our rough and sinful life. Once he'd finished musical school he was sent to the regional central town to enter the conservatory. At that time Samuil had already been sent to the sanatorium in Zheleznovodsk as chief doctor. Sasha never made it to the conservatory. He spent the money. Got stuck somewhere in the back of beyond. Fell in love with an insolent, useless, simple girl. For life. Without reciprocity. All she needed was money and presents. That's why he sacrificed his marvellous library. Then he worked as a pianist in a restaurant. The other musicians brought him a tipple of vodka, then some more. Weak as he was, Sasha didn't need much. Random people would take him home. Once his parents had left this world he threw everything to the wind – the flat, the instrument, his mother's dreams, his undeveloped talent. His brothers were worried for Sasha and wanted to help and support him. They tried to remonstrate with him. What could they have done, far away as they were? They had no choice in the matter. They had to work. They only met up during the holidays. Sasha had no strength to fight. He let himself go. Ended up in prison for a silly matter. When he got out he vanished. Perished at the hand of a random passer-by. Our dreams are in vain. Our highflying impulses are in vain. Our world is no place for highflying impulses. This is a world for those who are strong and full of vitality, and even

more for those who are cruel, greedy and merciless. This is no world for Antonina, «Our Lady from Zheleznovodsk», or Sasha, the Cincinnatus from the North Caucasus. But all this is for later. For the time being Sasha was a child. His parents, advanced in years, worshipped him.

The war was over. Victory. The first postwar years in Zheleznovodsk. Soldiers were returning home from the front. Everybody was doting on them. Every boy dreamed of serving in the army. Vova joined the infantry school. They didn't let Misha go. His father wanted him to become a doctor. What were they talking about? You can't hold back a mischief maker. He was dreaming of becoming a sailor. He travelled to Baku to apply to the Naval Institute. His elderly father followed him, picked up his documents and returned him home. But all the efforts were in vain. Misha ran away to Leningrad and entered the Frunze Higher Military Naval Institute. He passed the entrance exam with ease. And he was a good student. No problem with mathematics and physics. What he needed was physical training.

Misha's dream had come true. He was a student at one of the country's best naval institutes. Well-built, smart, sinewy. The uniform fitted him perfectly. As if he'd been wearing a sailor's cap all his life. Joyful and mischievous. A brilliant storyteller. A master at various tricks and pranks. Prepared to do everything for his friends. To give his last shirt. Misha was popular straight away and became part of the inner circle of those who were lording it over the others. The centre of their friendship group was Volodya

Maslov, naturally. He was older than the others and had been at the front. Later he had been a commander of the Pacific Fleer. The others were… friends. No friends were closer than them. Friends for life. Friends to the grave. The fleet and his friends. These were the most important things to Misha. More important than wife and children. The sailors' brotherhood was the highest thing.

He came home on a visit. Friends and neighbours came to have a look at the naval student. The girls would whisper to each other: «Did you see? How handsome Misha has become!» His parents were proud. His father loved seeing him in uniform. Vovka also came home on a visit. Infantry! A good-for-nothing and a scoffer. Sailors were the military elite. Vova was preparing for a rendezvous. Too embarrassed to buy condoms. Don't be shy, Vova. Misha went into the pharmacy. «Miss! There's a young man here, he needs condoms. Choose a fashionable style for him. They must have a black heel!» The salesgirls giggled, charmed by the dashing student. Vova was so embarrassed that he wished for the earth to swallow him up.

Misha loved witticisms, and he loved to make an impression. During the exam on the high bar – «I'll show you how to do turns!» One turn, another, a third… he lost his grip, flew into the rows of seats and broke his arm.

1950. The fourth, final year of study. They were due to graduate soon. A sailor needs to have a family. I'll only marry a girl who was born on the same day as me. Well, Mishka, you

tell them. That way you'll never find a wife. Girls would come to the Institute to join the Frunze students at their dances. They'd buy a ticket and enter. To dance. To meet young sailors. Three pretty friends turned up. Wearing felt boots. They took off the felt boots and put on shoes. Misha approached them. But what were these two youngsters from year two doing here? He was almost a graduate, a fourth-year student. He whispered to them: «Well, rookies, quietly, I haven't seen you here». The second years were gone in a flash. Mishka carried three pairs of felt boots and three coats to the cloak room. One of the friends was Vera. An unassuming beauty, two years Misha's junior. She was wearing huge shoulder pads under her dress in accordance with the fashion of those days. Misha swept her off her feet, the quiet Vera, who was simple and unpretentious despite living in Leningrad. The sailors could have Sundays off if they had finished all their work. Misha was a good student, and so the two young people would meet once a week. Vera had no telephone at home. They would write letters to each other. The post worked well in those days, not like today. Vera would sign her letters «your mischievous Vera».

Vera was mischievous yet meek. Misha wrote to Tanya, his favourite aunt, that he planned to get married in a few months time. His parents still didn't know a thing. Vera was about to finish technical college. In spring she was due to go to Petrozavodsk on an assignment. Naturally she didn't want to go. And Mishka was a dashing sailor, incredibly handsome,

about to become an officer. The first man she had kissed. Of course he was not to her taste. She would have preferred a more sedate, serious guy. This one was… such an idle talker. On the other hand, she didn't want to go to Petrozavodsk. Later, when she was old, Vera confessed to her daughter: «I wasn't the wife Misha needed. He should have found a light-hearted, cheerful woman, not one like me.» They went and got married. Two couples, Mikhail and Vera and a friend of his from the Institute with his girlfriend. Mikhail and Vera handed over their passports. And gasped – they were born on the same day. That's Mishka for you. As if he'd known. It is possible that there had been no such conversations beforehand, that he hadn't foreseen anything. Mishka was a master at spinning a yarn, a practical joker. Perhaps he made this story up after he got married and told it so many times that in the end everybody believed it. There is a reason why people say «make sure to uphold your image, use every opportunity to warm up interest for the reputation you've acquired.»

How to celebrate the wedding? They didn't celebrate at all. Where could he have taken his young wife? Not to the room she shared with her mother and sister after all. Dusya, who wasn't even 50 yet, had become old before her time. She was huge and gloomy, her grey hair covered by a scarf as worn by country women. The newlyweds had nowhere to go. They strolled along the embankments and went each their own way. Vera returned home and Mishka to the Institute. They didn't even

feel that they were husband and wife now. Nothing had changed in their lives. Mishka the student was sent on a training voyage for three months. Afterwards he went to Liepaja to begin service. Together with his young wife. Now a lieutenant, he received a room to himself. And went off on a voyage again. Thus they lived an unreal life. In some sense they were husband and wife, but they were hardly ever together. After a year they had a daughter. Then came service in the North.

Misha loved his young wife. But his naval service he loved even more. He loved the sea, his submarine, the prolongued autonomous voyages, his sailors and officers. He quickly rose through the ranks and became an officer early in life. The crew idolised him. He was generous, attentive and prudent. There was order on his boat; the boat was always in good standing. The firing exercises were all flawless. Once the big brass came to inspect the ship. No blame found with the ship's management. What about physical training? Let's start with the commander, Mikhail suggested. Without taking off his tunic, he stepped towards the high bar and did 20 chin-ups. OK, OK, 'pass' for the entire crew. The young commander was considered one of the best belayers in the North. When he was at home, he was often called to make fast other vessels during the night or in bad weather. Sailing was his vocation, no doubt. But his tongue did him no favours. He loved to make up ditties and jokes that made fun of the high brass. This did evidently not help his progress through the ranks. But everybody loved him. He

was a master of nautical tales. Later, much later, he became closely acquainted with Viktor Konetsky, the author of «Between Myths and Reefs», stories about Barracuda the Cat. People say that many topics from Mikhail's oral tales later found entry into Konetsky's stories. I don't know whether this is true, but I had the chance to hear Misha's tales. They always kept his audience riveted. Naval romanticism. We'll talk about that later.

How to become a Cosmopolitan

In 1949 there was the Leningrad Case, the straggle against the cosmopolitans; in 1951 the Minister for State Security, Abakumov, was arrested on a charge of organising a large-scale «nationalist Jewish conspiracy». In 1951 and 1952 there was the Doctors' Plot, directed against those looking after the health of the country's top brass. They were searching for cosmopolitans everywhere. It looks like my father ended up in this group in 1951 on his own initiative, at least partly. You see, he was a man of principle. The leadership were committing some kind of abuse. Somewhere they were doing something for their own profit. And he criticised this, naturally. What should those poor sods have done? They began to show interest in my father's work. He was in charge of the staff. It was him who chose people to work on new building sites. He would visit these building sites and organise the huts for the new workers to live in, sort out social matters. It turned out he'd sorted them out badly. That he had enabled «staff pollution». There really was such a term. He had hired a certain Movshovich. A cosmopolitan, that goes without saying. An enemy of the public. Nothing happened to this Movshovich. But my father was excluded from the party. A few days later he was fired from his job. He went to the regional committee. Tried to show them he was right. «Don't you know», the secretary of the regional committee said to him, «that the European part of

the Soviet Union is no place for people of your nationality? They are preparing some territories in the Far East for you. Perhaps even further away. We don't understand what it is you're unhappy about.» My father wrote letters. To the district committee, to the Central Committee. He wrote about his military feats. He wrote to Comrade Stalin in person. It did no good. We expected them to arrest him. Any day now. When you could hear brakes screeching outside at night, my mother would rash to the window. Were the «visitors» coming to us? The light would come on in many windows at once. People were looking who they'd come for. The black police car didn't come. But we had to live. Nobody wanted to hire my father. My mother taught him to draw. She hoped to find him a job as a draughtsman. My father was good at drawing. He produced wonderful graphic script. We still have some sheets on which he practiced his letters. This is what he wrote: «The Party is always right. The Party must cleanse itself. The Party must strengthen its ranks. If you hew trees chips must fly. Each case may contain errors.» He couldn't get his head round the screaming injustice and baseness of what was happening.

It was some friends who came to my father's aid. They suggested he go to the North. They found him a job as a craftsman on a construction site near Kotlas. To work with criminals. It was evidently a settlement colony for convicts. My father went to his new place of work. A difficult contingent. The work wasn't easy. Three times he was the stake at a card game. When a criminal ran out of money he would try to recoup his

losses. He would play «for Yashka». If he lost he had to finish off Yashka within a day. If he didn't finish him off he'd have to find the money or he'd be knifed himself for the gaming debt. Perhaps they applied different measures according to criminal customs, I don't know. Yashka found out in time, he evidently had his own guys in their groups, his snitches. When in Rome do as the Romans do… That was their life. My father spent the whole night near the entrance to his hut, axe in hand. Awaiting visitors. When the first sunlight appeared you could consider that the threat had passed.

That's how we lived – us in Leningrad and my father in the North.

In that year I wrote a poem for the first time in my life. A naive, childish poem: «Daddy beloved, daddy dear, I miss you so much. Please come home soon, come back here, I will make you lunch. I will grow up big and strong, fearless and courageous. For my homeland I will fight, I will fear no danger.»

The teachers at my school were amazing people. They knew that my father was in the North. But they never treated me badly. It seems they understood and felt compassion. They didn't lower my marks. And I was an excellent student anyway. The best in my class. But then the class wasn't very strong. I used to help many others with schoolwork. The boys would come to our house. I would explain the homework in the hard subjects. Later they would whisper behind my back. There was no gratitude. Understandably. The black cardboard loudspeakers

kept droning on about the doctors who were murderers. About the cosmopolitans who wouldn't let us live in peace. Once the lads asked me to stay behind after lessons. They had decided to beat me up in secret. No words, no explanations. Just so I knew. Then our maths teacher came into the classroom, Alexandra Nikolaevna, a large, rotund woman. She was beside herself with fury. She let me go and remained behind with the boys. I don't know what they talked about, but nothing of that kind ever happened again. Not even a hint. Now I understand that this act, so simple and natural at first sight, had required a lot of personal courage from an ordinary teacher. In that class we were learning Spanish. Soon I joined another class that was learning English. I was lucky. The children there were completely different. And the teachers were different, too. Wonderful people, too. I loved them very much. But I will never forget you, Alexandra Nikolaevna. I take my hat off to you.

My dad spent two years in the North. At the end of 1953 the father of all peoples left us. He was weakened, evidently, the old viper, lording it over the other vipers in the can. He'd bitten them all, strangled them all. But ultimately he received his dose of venom from someone close, perhaps the one closest to him. The entire country mourned. Huge queues formed of people who wanted to say goodbye to their beloved leader. Children created a mourning page in their exercise books where they would write of their love for the Great Stalin. They would frame the page in red and black. Children and adults alike were poisoned with the

venom of idolatry, the venom of worship before the most blood-stained figure in the history of Russia. Not everyone, naturally.

«He's the master of loud and threatening words, they help him flip the course of things. The man he sees living his own life he will suppress in a flash. Our path is straight nevertheless, he is the one who will lose. For life is ours for the taking, he's merely clinging to us», wrote «Emka», as the poet Naum Korzhavin was known, who was arrested in 1947 at the height of the fight against the cosmopolitans.

In a group of children there is always one whom no one likes. In our class this was Borka Ryaboi. Why we didn't like him? He grew up without his father. His mother was a quiet, unhappy woman. There was nothing distinguishing Borka from the others. He wasn't cheeky. A bit more stupid than the rest. A bit weaker than the other boys. Children are cruel. Borka was always guilty of everything. Now I understand why. One of the reasons was that Borka was Jewish. Just like me. The most horrible thing was that I sometimes supported the idea that «Borka is always guilty of everything» that was so popular among the boys. «Did you see that?», the children would tell each other, «Borka didn't cry when they announced Stalin's death.» Everybody cried, but he didn't. We need to beat him up. Thank God this disgraceful, unmotivated punishment didn't happen. I don't know why, but it didn't. Praise to our father in heaven that the turned the foolish children away from sin. The most repulsive trait of the marginal person is their urge to leave their social group behind. The urge

to hide and dissolve in the crowd. To get close to the dominant group. How many people like that I happened to meet. I myself did not try to disguise my Jewish origins, at least I think I didn't. Almost never. But then, with Borka, I probably disguised them. Perhaps unconsciously. Did I discuss with the others that Borja didn't cry for Stalin? Yes I did. Being a little wimp, I reasoned just like the others. And that although I didn't cry either. But I judged Borka. Borya, if you are still alive, if you happen to read this, I implore you to forgive me for I have sinned. Forgive me that I was with the crowd then and not with you. I ask your forgiveness not because you are Jewish. But also because a decent person, and that includes a boy, a child, must not side with the crowd, but with the weak person who is being insulted through no fault of his own.

The Leningrad Affair was closed. The Doctors' Plot, too. «The inspection has shown that the doctors were arrested without good reason and illegally», and the doctors' testimonies were extracted with the help of «inadmissible methods of investigation». The question of resettling the cosmopolitans became redundant. There were prisoners' riots in Vorkuta, Norilsk and Kengir. There was a commission to inspect cases and rehabilitate individuals. An amnesty was held. «I walk towards freedom. Towards the gunshot. Towards everything that dares to interfere», Korzhavin wrote after the amnesty. The deported peoples returned home. The German and Japanese POWs were returned. Austria left the military blocks and declared itself

neutral.

A new turn began in the straggle for power in the Kremlin. Who had time for cosmopolitans? My father came home. Rejoined the party. Found a job. Not the one he'd had before. The position was lower and so was the salary. That was understandable. My father was elderly already and had no specialist education. The family was reunited. Life went on. Another three years passed. The Twentieth Party Congress took place. Stalin's monument was thrown off its pedestal. Life in the country was changing. There would be no more excesses. My father was completely rehabilitated. He wanted to rehabilitate himself at work. They talked differently to him now. Politely and respectfully. So many years have passed, dear comrade. Let's not return to the past. We can't change the past. After all many people lost their lives, too. My father once again worked in the same system as before. He built bridges. Once he met his previous boss, the one who had pushed him to the brink of the abyss. He threw himself at my father and hugged him. «Yakov, I'm so glad to see you alive and unharmed. You haven't changed at all. How are you, where are you? Come on, stop turning your nose up. Let's forget the past. You have caused us a lot of trouble, too. So many commissions turned up because of your complaints. Why are you not saying anything? Really, you haven't changed at all. Just as spiteful and stubborn as before. You're breaking the principle.» I can imagine what my father must have felt during this meeting.

Nobody talked about cosmopolitism any more. They didn't pin yellow stars to our clothes. Thank you very much. But the shadow of being second-class people kept hovering above our family for a long time. «Where can I find a photograph, for myself as well as for the public, so that nobody can guess that according to my passport I'm a…» It hovered above all the other families. Those who had previously been called cosmopolitans. Above my parents – for their entire life, until their last day. Above me – until the collapse of the communist empire in the 1990s. Until the one-party monopoly collapsed.

Alas, neither the country nor the people have cleansed themselves through repentance for these and the other crimes of the communist regime. For the genocide of one's own people. For the annihilation of millions of the most honest and capable people who rotted in the torture chambers of the revolution's guards and at the timber felling sites of the GULAG. We can't begin a new life and become a free people if we don't cleanse ourselves through repentance. And thus we continue to carry to this day the ancestral stigma of a people living in slavery. Under the heel of the carefree children and grandchildren of the screws and other heirs to the screws. But we'll talk about that a bit later.

My universities

For Gorky it was the Volga and the strap of the barge hauler. I have no experience to match that, of course. I've never had to do hard, back-breaking labour. But I wasn't afraid of physical labour and didn't avoid it. When I was still a boy I learned to do everything with my own hands – I could work with wood and metal; I could solder and build electromechanical models. Our room on Liteiny Prospekt was heated by a stove in winter. Our firewood was kept in the second backyard, in a low basement. Right next to the neighbours' firewood. Nobody fenced in or guarded their firewood. Nobody ever stole another's firewood. Since I was ten years old it was my responsibility to fire up the stove after school. I would go down into the basement, chop wood, put it into a sack and carry it home, up the steep high staircase. There was no lift in our house. Once I had entered college there was the kolkhoz. We were sent to a village with the expressive name «Gnilki» – «Rotten». The kolkhoz allocated a hut to us students. We knocked together wooden bunks. And then we lived there. We cooked our food in huge pots over the fire. Some of the food we'd brought ourselves. Tinned stewed meat and cereals. The kolkhoz gave us potatoes, vegetables, milk and bread. We worked in the fields, weeding. Everyone tried to stand out and get a larger amount of work done. That's how it was. That's what young people were like. I also made an effort. And

although I was constantly exhausted, I was Leningrad rowing champion by then already, well, I couldn't for the life of mine break out and become an exemplary worker. I didn't have the knack. Our exemplary workers were guys and gals who'd come from the provinces, most of them from Belarus. We went to work in the kolkhoz every year. On the first of September we'd show up at college. An assembly would be held during which it was announced who would go where with whom and when, which food items to buy, what things to take. And we'd be off for a month to help the country with the harvest. It was possible to avoid this labour in autumn by working on a building site during summer. In one such summer I was sent to dig pits for the foundations of future houses. The Malaya Okhta district was erected from scratch. Who could have known that a few years down the line, my parents and I would receive a flat there and would go on to live in precisely that district? I finished college. I was given an assignment and went to work straight to the kolkhoz. Those working there mostly worked to tick off a box, to have fun. Later it became customary to send employees to vegetable storehouses to pick through the vegetables. Not for long, just for one or two days. That went on until the year 1990. It even continued while I was working at the Academy of Sciences. Just to show off. Research associates, graduate students, doctors of science and professors with decent salary pretended to be doing something. They'd arrive at the vegetable storehouse at around 9am. At 10am the representative would appear and allocate the

groups to different storage facilities. Around 10.30 they'd reach their workplace. Another person would come, give a briefing and distribute packing materials. At 11 they'd start work. At lpm they'd break for lunch. At 2 they'd gradually get down to work. At 3, well, perhaps it was time to stop? They would call the representative. Well, did you get at least something done – thank goodness. Can we take some vegetables, carrots, cabbages? Take a little, that is permitted. For some reason the plan was always fulfilled. The party coordinator in person watched over the plan fulfilment; he was a doctor of science, by the way. A self-evident mockery of common sense. Oh well. Not at all like the universities of Aleksei Maksimovich. Nothing would have happened had I been spared this stupid experience. But what has been has been. I won't renounce a single thing in my life. Everyone has his own universities, his own school of life. I had mine. Let me tell you of the real universities.

My first university was the communal flat. Our neighbours there were uncle Petya, his wife, aunt Zhenya, and their adult son, Tolya. They were good people. Of course they weren't my real aunt and uncle, but that's how you addressed adults back then. In everyday life you didn't call people by name and patronymic, it wasn't proletarian to play those tricks. The first to come into the kitchen would be uncle Petya, fat and good-hearted as he was. There was a wood-burning cooker in the kitchen and a separate gas cooker. Uncle Petya would be wearing his poison-green underwear, regardless of whether anyone else was in the

kitchen. He'd light the gas cooker and stand close to it, warming his bottom. That was his obligatory ritual before leaving for work. Aunt Zhenya was a friendly, prematurely aged woman with black hair and a drawn, dark-skinned face. She didn't work and would sometimes keep an eye on what I was doing, at my mother's request. And that despite the fact that I coped well on my own after Nadezhda Danilovna had left: I would change after school, light the stove, have some food and do my homework. But my mother was calmer in the knowledge that there was a pair of eyes not indifferent to what I was up to. Tolya was a well-built blond young man, not very tall and resembling Utesov. He worked as a driver. Before leaving for work he'd always shine his shoes, but only the tips. The rest was invisible, as people used to wear wide bell-bottomed trousers. Tolya was very kind but good for nothing; he'd constantly end up in some scrape or other. He was arrested by the police many times. And he had no luck with women; his girlfriends were all bitches of the worst sort. But Tolya had one talent: he could whistle most beautifully. I think he could have performed in public. When Tolya was at home, you would constantly hear tunes coming from his room – popular songs, romances, arias from the opera. Aunt Zhenya would often ask Lyubov Lvovna, that is my mother, for advice as to what to do with this useless Tolya. And my mother, enthroned at the kitchen table, would then discuss the issues and explain something in a quiet voice. I don't know whether her advice helped them, but their relief when they returned to their room was palpable.

And then uncle Petya and aunt Zhenya were given a flat, and a single mother and her daughters, Ira and Nina, 16 and 18 years old, became our new neighbours. And communal hell began. These women were constantly fighting. For space in the kitchen, for a hob on the gas cooker, who could go to the toilet, whose turn it was in the bathroom. At some point ducks and hay turned up in the bathroom, unexpectedly. Yes, such a thing did happen. Our neighbours didn't understand that the bath was for washing oneself. How much did the electricity cost? In the end the flat had two different electric wires, two meters, two different lamps in the communal areas. These women fought for their place under the sun as if this was «their final and decisive battle». Screams and arguments. They would move our things without explanation and sometimes throw them out. Refrigerators didn't exist back then. Food items and cooked food was stored between the doors or behind the window. From time to time they would pour dirt into our lunch. A few years later the younger one, pretty and quarrelsome Irina, married a soldier. We rarely saw her husband, as he spent most of his time at his unit, but soon twins appeared, a boy and a girl. And with them a pile of nappies, hung out to dry literally everywhere. This fact provided the women with arguments in their constant fight for their legitimate rights. How could my mother endure all that? How did she preserve her calm? Wisdom, kindness and endurance worked miracles. Some time passed and the sisters were given their own place to live. Their mother kept the room for herself. She was rarely there

now. She spent more time helping her daughters sort out their lives. Over time she moved out completely. But for many years she kept visiting Lyobov Lvovna, sometimes on her own and sometimes together with her daughters. To chat. To share news and worries. To seek advice. Naturally I didn't participate in the communal battles that were now over, but with half an ear I overheard my parents talk about the problems created by our tight-fisted neighbours. And then I witnessed the miracle not of human making worked by my mother's angelic patience. Not much good came out of the exoticism of the communal flat. Now it seems an exotic thing, then it was the truth of life. And the school of life. No matter how you look at it, this was also one of my universities.

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