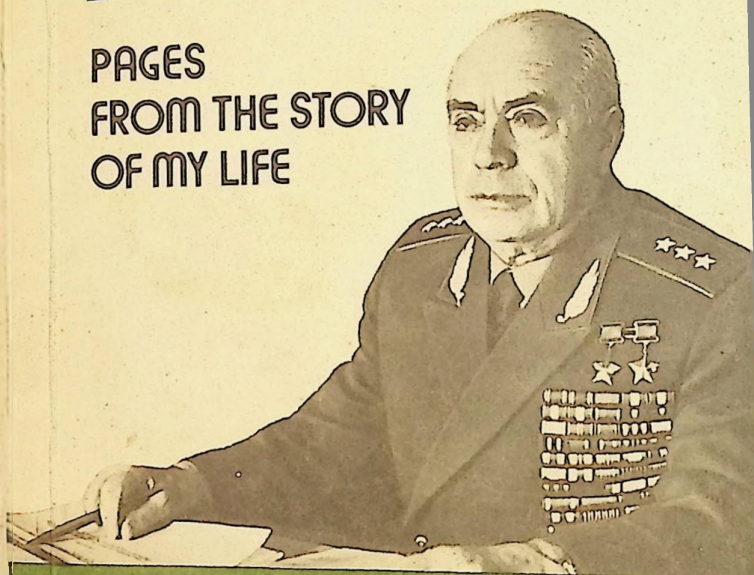


David

# DRAGUNSKY

PAGES  
FROM THE STORY  
OF MY LIFE

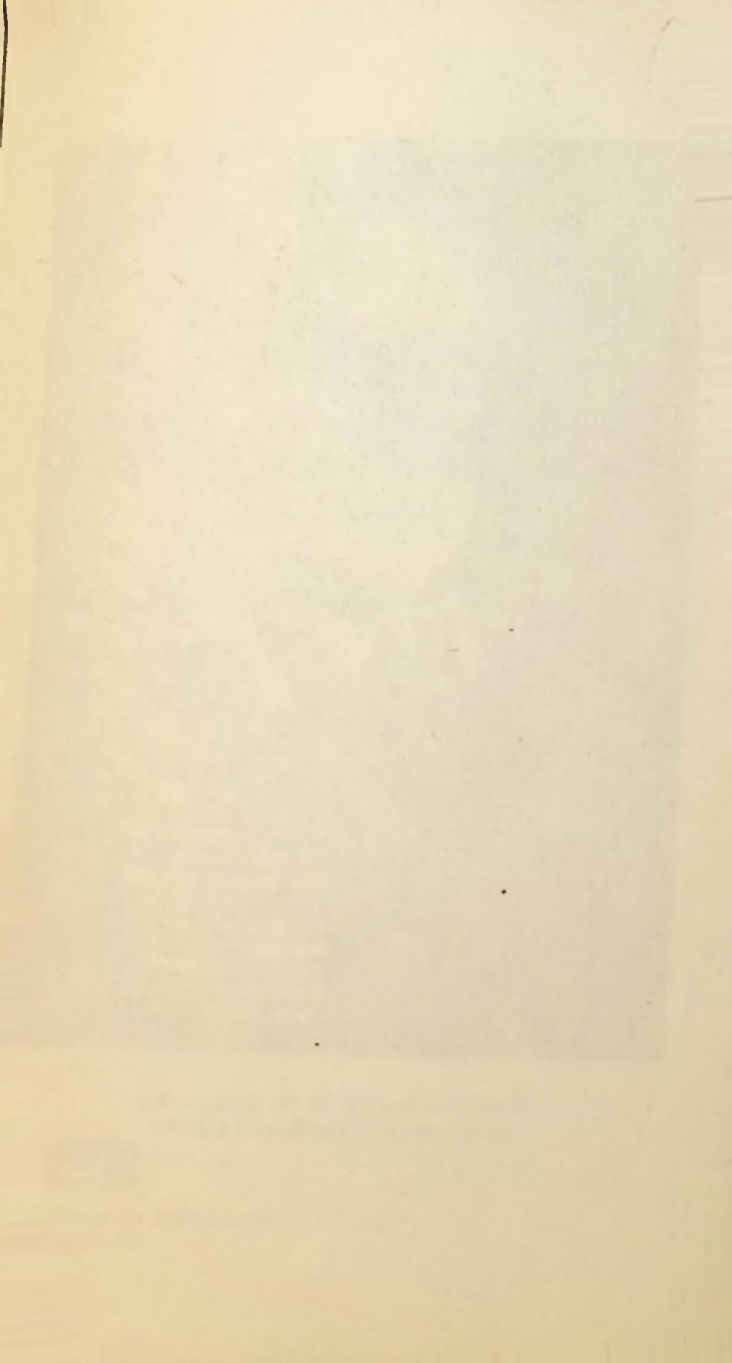


## A SOLDIER'S MEMOIRS



Progress Publishers







Colonel-General D. A. Dragunsky,  
twice Hero of the Soviet Union



**David  
DRAGUNSKY**

**A SOLDIER'S  
MEMOIRS**

**PAGES  
FROM THE STORY  
OF MY LIFE**

Translated from the Russian  
by *Vic Schneierson*



Progress Publishers  
Moscow

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## A FEW WORDS ABOUT MY FRIEND

He is known to thousands of people in the Soviet Union. But readers abroad are about to meet a man they have not met before, and I want them to know that he is a heroic personality whose life has in many ways been out of the ordinary, though in many other ways it has been typical of his time and country. In this brief foreword I will only say what my friend has out of modesty omitted to say in his memoirs.

Some of the pages in this book pack great emotional force. Surely, no reader will be left unmoved by the narrative of a Jewish village tailor's large impoverished family from Sviatsk. Paying homage to the memory of his parents, sisters, and uncles put to death by the nazis, the author portrays the life style and the principles that reigned in his father's home, in the homes of neighbours, and speaks with filial affection of his mother.

David Dragunsky was seven when the October Revolution ushered in great social change in Russia. It also wiped out the notorious Jewish Pale, that classic attribute of chauvinism and tsarist discrimination. The road to the big life was opened for millions of young people, irrespective of property status and national background.



The big road opened, too, for young David Dragunsky. And he was swept away by the heroic of building a new society not seen in history before.

His mother Rachel wanted him to be an accountant. That, indeed, was the most a village youth could aspire to in the days before the Revolution. Yet he became a renowned general, a graduate of two military academies—the Frunze Academy, and the Academy of the General Staff.

When Hitler Germany perfidiously attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the Soviet people rose to repulse the invader, tankman Dragunsky was among the defenders. He fought in the war from the first day to the last.

His recollections of the war years, it seems to me, are dear to him. He writes fondly of his comrades-in-arms, of their heroism, dedication and loyalty. He writes of men and women with whom he went into battle to save humanity from fascism and to assert the triumph of reason and peace. The general cherishes the names of the men who did not live to see the glorious day of victory.

Time and again, Dragunsky had stared death in the face. He was seriously wounded, trapped in a burning tank, and each time returned to active service.

After the war, many of Dragunsky's mates told me of his bravery and dedication. For his courage he earned the respect and affection of the men under his command, who were ready to follow him wherever he led them.

On reading the manuscript, I reflected again on why we Soviet people cannot forget the war:

it had taken the lives of 20 million of our countrymen.

The grief that the war brought us is not the only reason why we remember it. In the spring of 1945, when the long-awaited victory came at last at the price of incalculable sacrifices, millions of people had believed, and believed fervently, that war was buried for good. But events show that peace is again in jeopardy. To remember the war, therefore, is to defend and fight for peace.

This truthful portrayal of the great battle against the aggressor is not simply a fighting general's indulgence, but an ardent address to the present day and to present-day problems.

David Dragunsky is still full of vigour and energy. His life's experience has brought home the fact that there is nothing more valuable than man's sacred right to life and peace. A professional soldier, a man who has lived through countless battles, a man who knows the destructive power of modern arms, he devotes all his strength to the noblest of all causes—the battle of the peoples for peace.

“I have devoted my life,” he writes here, “to making today and tomorrow, and all the days that will follow, days of peace for my little Sviatsk and for all our great country.”

For Soviet people their commitment to peace and their love of country are compounded with a sense of friendship and respect for other nations. This they call their internationalism.

Dragunsky's intolerance of all forms of nationalist extremism and chauvinism (including anti-

semitism and Zionism) is his political creed and second nature.

We have been abroad together many times, my friend and I. I saw how people, often people who wanted no part of his communist ideals, were attracted to him. He has won the respect of people of various nationalities.

Though a convinced atheist since his youth in the Young Communist League, Dragunsky is invariably tolerant in his dealings with religious people, hearing out their arguments, explaining the Soviet constitutional principles in relation to religion, and demonstrating how these principles are being carried out.

I refer to this because David grew up in a pious family that had for centuries followed prescribed ritual. Indeed, at a dinner in Washington the host rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz, observed that the guests, Dragunsky among them, were being served typically Jewish dishes—chicken Kiev, stuffed cabbage and kasha. The reporter of Washington's *The Evening Star* wrote of his surprise that the general and his companions (I among them) did not object to eating *kosher* food. And truly, why object? I might add that *gefilte fish* and other dishes of the traditional Jewish cuisine are frequently served at the Dragunskys, prepared by David's wife, Yevgenia Vladimirovna, a Ukrainian woman of warm and hospitable disposition. And *peisakhovka*, the Jewish variety of vodka, is also almost always available at the Dragunskys.

To conclude this brief foreword, I would like to cite my friend's own words:

“Now, I am in my seventies. Behind me is a life abounding in various happy and sad events which, for that matter, can be true of anybody’s life. In my heart, I cherish the memory of my native village. Thank you, dear Sviatsk and my paternal home. You brought me to the great highway and sent me out into life, having infused me with love of country, having made me patriot and internationalist.”

Prof. Samuel Zivs, Doctor of  
Law and Merited Worker in Sci-  
ence of the RSFSR

## Impregnated in My Memory

I was in the military fortress of Osovets when the war broke out. That spring, we students of the Frunze<sup>1</sup> Military Academy had been brought in a troop train to the local garrison for military practice. It so happened that I was attached to the 4th Rifles Regiment of the 2nd Byelorussian Jan Fabricius<sup>2</sup> Division. That had been a stroke of luck, for I found myself with the unit in which I had served as private at the beginning of my military career eight years before. It was deployed in Krasnoye Urochishche, which is now the site of the giant Minsk Motor Works, maker of large lorries.

I had finished the Saratov tank school, the first tankmen's school in the country, and had fought as a young lieutenant against the Japanese at Lake Hassan. Now, as a student in my last year at the Academy, I was back in my regiment.

Here, in the border zone, my mates from the

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<sup>1</sup>M.V. Frunze (1885-1925)—prominent Communist Party figure, Soviet statesman, general, and military theorist.

<sup>2</sup>Jan Fabricius (1877-1929)—hero of the civil war that was fought in 1918-1920 by the workers and peasants of Soviet Russia against internal and external enemies of the Revolution for the survival of the world's first socialist state.



Academy and I became more keenly aware of approaching holocaust.

The weather was clear, sunny, warm. On Saturday, June 21, 1941, our chief, General Yakub Chanyshhev and his top political officer and deputy Alexander Chepurnykh, ordered us back to the fortress. We had been in the adjoining forest, acting out "troop actions in wooded and swampy terrain".

We had never seen Chanyshhev looking so grim. He had the reputation of an optimist, a convivial man full of joy and fun. His order to get back to the barracks alerted us. Something was wrong, we thought, but back in the garrison things seemed to be as usual: a motion picture was being shown at the officers' club, young lieutenants were dancing with their girls in the auditorium, while the beer devotees were mobbing the counter in the canteen...

Heavy shells burst near our barracks. The sky over the town was virtually blotted out by enemy planes. An indiscriminate bombing began.

Responding to the general alarm, the regiments of our division were leaving the fortress for their earlier designated sectors to engage the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

The enemy's surprise attack caused countless casualties. The ambulances were picking up wounded children, women, and soldiers, and taking them in the direction of Grodno. People began

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<sup>1</sup>In the early hours of June 22, 1941, nazi Germany mounted its treacherous surprise attack on the Soviet Union.

evacuating the town. They were heading east in vehicles and on foot. Having scrambled out of the fortress, which was burning like a torch, we of the Academy were anxiously waiting for further orders. Not until the afternoon of that day, however, were we told what we had to do: get back to the Academy in Moscow. We left burning Osovets with heavy hearts. It was not easy to pass through Belostok. The town had suffered badly from enemy air-raids. Troops were marching to the front-lines, while refugees poured through the narrow streets in the other direction, pulling carts with sick and wounded people, with old men and women, and with children. We were eager to grapple with the enemy, though all we had were our pistols, and we knew perfectly well, of course, that pistols were no weapon to halt the invader.

Besides, orders were orders. And we had been ordered to get back to Moscow at any price.

The war had only just begun, and ahead of us were gory battles, the bitterness of setbacks and defeats, and the joy of victories.

The road to Slonim and Baranovichi was taken up by a stream of refugees. Fascist planes showed no mercy, strafing women, children, and old people. Groans, pleas for help, and curses... Billows of black smoke eclipsed the sky. Still, the sun was blisteringly hot. We were gasping for air. There was no water to quench our thirst. Tired out and weary, people were dropping to the ground at the wayside. Many lay without signs of life.

Our column was making its way forward with

great difficulty. Finally, we passed Baranovichi. Nazi planes bombed us in Minsk, and caught up with us again at Smolensk. It was not until a week later that we finally reached the outskirts of Moscow.

The entire country, and the Frunze Academy, of course, were immersed in the business of war and nothing but war.

Thoughts of the battleline did not leave me for a minute. On the map of the Soviet Union, the little blue flags denoting the nazi troops were being moved farther and farther east each day. They had reached the environs of Smolensk, they covered all of the Baltic area, they were closing in on Odessa. My eyes focused with alarm on the spots denoting Smolensk, Gomel, Briansk. Would the Germans reach them? There, in the triangle formed by the three cities, in the Briansk forests, lay my native Sviatsk where I had my mother, father, sister Sonia and her three children, my younger sister Anna, my grandfather, mother's sisters, and all the many other relatives. Those with the Dragunsky surname alone totalled 74.

Years later I was told that my father had categorically refused to take the family out of the village. Poor father. He did not know the meaning of nazi occupation. He did not know that fascism stood for war, for racism, for deliberate killing. He was reluctant to abandon the house, the furniture, the cow, all of which had been earned at the price of so much hard work.

When alarming news reached our village from Minsk, Vilnius, and occupied western regions,

Jewish families and the families of Party workers, of local officials and collective-farm managers began leaving for the east. Our family was large, but not resourceful. Four of my brothers had already enlisted. Only the old, the women and children were left. I kept sending telegrams from Moscow, pleading with the family to move to the interior. But by then it was too late. The routes of escape had been cut. Sviatsk was in the enemy rear.

Of the hell of nazi occupation, of the martyrdom and death of my dear ones, of people who had no thought of national distinctions or strife or racism, I will write in a later chapter...

The Academy seethed with patriotic fervour. "To the front, at once, as soon as possible..." The thought gave us no rest. How could we, fledglings of the Academy, raised and educated by the Party and the Komsomol, remain on the fringe of the events in this hard hour? Applications were addressed in batches to the Commissar of Defence. But none were being accepted. The Party branch at the Academy raised its voice against the "war fever". We were told that our view of the events was incorrect.

All the same, little by little, our senior-year group began to melt away. Those of the infantry, cavalry, artillery, and the engineers, were lucky. Some were sent to the active army, and these we considered the extra-lucky ones, and others to points where new units were being activated.

We, the tankers and fliers, had worse luck. At that time the demand for our services was anything but high, for there was a shortage of

tanks and planes. The tank and aviation plants that had been dismantled in western regions and would resume operating in the Urals, Siberia, Central Asia, and Bashkiria, were then still en route to their new sites.

Lectures and drill alternated with watches on the roof of a ten-storeyed building. One night I, too, assumed my first watch. It was an unusually dark and silent night, quite unlike those in Moscow before the war. The giant city had put out all its lights, and seemed to be holding its breath. Stars twinkled in the cloudless sky, and searchlights groped among them for stray incursors.

I was lucky to stand my watch with a classmate and friend, Volodia Beliakov. We talked all through the night, remembering our mates who were in active service, discussing the latest war reports, jumping mentally from one sector of the front to another.

The nights in July are short, but ours seemed endless. Down in the street cars with blacked-out headlights slid by like swift grey shadows. The general black-out made the city look lifeless. The outlines of tall buildings hulked in the distance. Beliakov turned to me, his eyes flashing coldly:

“No quibbling now, d’you think they’ll reach Moscow?”

What could I reply? That minute I was thinking of the same thing.

“Listen, David,” he said in an unusually solemn tone. “Let’s swear we’ll go through the war side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as we have done so far.”



His mood was contagious.

"If we must die," I put in, "we'll die as men and soldiers do. D'you swear?"

"I swear it," Beliakov said and embraced me. Then he remembered the third member of our threesome: Pavel Zhmurov.

"We'll have him take the oath, too," I said.

"How soon will the lights of Moscow shine again?"

"Rest assured, they'll shine again," I said.

The night was ending. The dawn lit up the view around us. A refreshing breeze drove away sleep. The sun's rays gradually banished our oppressive thoughts. We went off watch and walked slowly to the Khamovniki barracks, where the Academy had its hostel.

A month later, the war was raging in the Baltic countries, Byelorussia, the Ukraine, and Moldavia.

The latest reports said one more nazi line of advance was shaping in the direction of Smolensk.

The little blue flags were moving inexorably eastward. I turned away from the map and headed despondently for the auditorium. Colonel Yevgeny Leoshenia was lecturing on what engineers had to do to back up a rifle corps offensive.

The shrill ringing of the bell interrupted my thoughts. A current of agitation ran through the hall as the secretary of our course, Olga Petrovna, entered with rapid strides. In a ringing voice, she called out a few names:

"Major Grigoriev, Major Fedorov, Captain Kotkin, Senior Lieutenant Dragunsky, you're wanted at the personnel office."

The suddenness of it made me start. Had my wish come true? Volodia Beliakov and Pavel Zhmurov, who were beside me, leaped to their feet and began embracing me.

Grigoriev, Kotkin, Fedorov and I were seated in different corners of the lecture hall. We got up at once, and the others made way for us. I looked back in farewell at my classmates. Slowly, as though on parade, we walked across the hall.

In the corridor we shed our restraint and ran for the personnel office. How laconic the order had been, but how determining for a man's future. Grigoriev was appointed commander of a tank regiment, with Fedorov his chief-of-staff. Kotkin and I were put in command of battalions. Before nightfall we were to leave for the Western Front.

We dashed from office to office getting all the papers made out and, finally, to say good-bye, faced the chief of the Academy, General Nikolai Verevkin-Rakhalsky. He scrutinised us through his *pince-nez* as we sat round the long table weary and excited.

However eager we were to join the fighting, that minute it was hard parting with our instructors and mates, with our tightly knit academic family.

"We trust that you Frunze Academy men will acquit yourself well in battle," the chief said solemnly.

We rose to our feet. Major Grigoriev replied just as solemnly on our behalf. Then the general walked round the desk, shook our hands, and said warm words of parting. As we were walking out of his office, he added:

"Don't worry about your diplomas. You'll get them after the war's over. We'll take your prowess in battle into account and will be pleased to give you top marks."

Volodia Beliakov was the man of means among us. He had a room of his own at Trubnaya Square. We used it to dump things we did not need. That day, he was the most worked up among us. The reason, certainly, was my departure for the front. He, Pavel Zhmurov and I had been friends for a long time.

We had met years ago in the 4th Rifles Regiment of the 2nd Beylorussian Division. I had come from Akhmatovo village in Kalinin Region, Beliakov and Zhmurov from Noginsk where they had finished secondary school and later worked at the Elektrostal Plant. We became close friends. Together, it had been easier bearing the long treks and forced marches, and all the other hardships that a soldier must learn to bear.

In the autumn of 1933, the three of us had been sent to the Saratov tank school.

The day before New Year's 1937, having successfully finished our course, we had arrived at our new station near the Manchurian border.

The tankmen of the 32nd Separate Tank Battalion took us into their midst. We served in different companies, but lodged in the same room. When we came home late in the evenings, uproar and merriment filled our lodgings. Pavel would tell us of what had happened to him in the taiga. Volodia would speak of faults in the practice field. With a thirty-kilometer ski trek behind me.

I would be nodding from fatigue. Then our loud-speaker would come to life. The hoarse voice of the club chief would announce: "At 21.00 the amateur dramatics circle will hold a rehearsal, then there'll be dancing."

We would get into each other's way dressing and shaving, and would then rush off to our crowded little club. The first sounds of the waltz, "On the Hills of Manchuria", would banish all weariness.

A year hence I was in command of a tank company, and was even among the first in the Far East Army to have taken a tank and crew across a river under water. This was on 13 June 1938. As the division watched, our tank, fitted with two air-pipes, hatch screwed down tight and smeared with grease, drove into the turbulent stream and emerged on the other bank after fifteen minutes under water. That was when I received my first award: Divisional commander Major Nikolai Berzarin presented prize watches to me and all members of my tank crew.

One Sunday I took my company to the river. It was a glorious day, and our fishing was a complete success: the fish soup was quickly coming to a boil over the fire we had laid. The fragrance of pepper and laurel leaf was pleasantly tickling the nose. We had ravenous appetites. A tight ring of men gathered round the cauldron. The spoons that soldiers carry with them wherever they go, sparkled like bayonets. But we never came to tasting the long-awaited soup. The duty officer came running and announced the battalion

had been put on alert — no, this time not a practice alert. A few hours later we were driving full speed to the Soviet-Manchurian border.

Some two hundred kilometers later, in thirty-degree Centigrade heat, we came face to face with the Japanese incursors in the Lake Hassan area.

The general assault on the enemy positions was mounted on 6 August. The men, roused by the example of their commanders and inspired by the heroism shown by Communists and Komsomols, went bravely into the attack.

My company was to take Bezymiannaya Hill. We were accompanied by a hundred tanks. Thousands of infantrymen were climbing up the hillsides. High-explosive bombs were being showered on the incursors from planes under the command of Hero of the Soviet Union Pavel Rychagov.

We were locked in battle on the hillsides, atop the hills, and along the shore of Lake Hassan. It was past mid-day, but the battle went on and on.

On 11 August our troops completed the rout of the incursors on Zaozernaya and Bezymiannaya hills. A strip of our native Far Eastern soil was cleared of the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1939, Pavel Zhmurov and I, and Volodia Beliakov, who had just recovered from a wound, crossed the threshold of the Frunze Military Academy.

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<sup>1</sup>On 11 August 1938, in the Lake Hassan area, Soviet troops defeated a Japanese army that had tried to seize Soviet territory between Lake Hassan and the state border.



We wore identical dark blue breeches and serge blouses, and each sported an Order of the Red Banner on his chest. "Three tankers, three merry friends—a battlegon crew", our mates called us, citing the keynote line from a popular song.

The years of joint study at the Academy flew by swiftly. Lectures alternated with practice. Camping, drilling, social work, ski marches, and visits to Moscow theatres filled our lives. Now had come the day of parting. Would we ever meet again?

We walked to the coach in silence. The driver flung open the door and invited us in. It was drizzling. Out of the coach window I saw Beliakov and Zhmurov take off their caps and wave to me.

Darkness was falling fast. It was dark in the coach, and no one saw the uninvited teardrop that rolled down my cheek.

On leaving the barrack square, the coach sped along Sadovoye Ring, and joined the stream of cars flowing along the wet surface of Leningrad Highway.

The headlights formed two thin strips of light. The rain drummed on the top of the coach and ran in rivulets down the window-panes. Huddled in our seats, we were immersed in our thoughts.

My dream had come true at last. I was going to the front, and of all places, to the Smolensk sector.

The Smolensk land, the land of Briansk—my

native land. I would be a stone's throw away from the door of my home.

Alarming thoughts ran through my head. The fate of my dear ones—I had no idea what had become of them. I closed my eyes and my memory took me back to Sviatsk. Out of the night's darkness appeared visions of the village, of Father's house, and Mother's dear, loving, sad eyes.

## The Paternal Home

The village of Sviatsk where I passed my childhood and youth lures me always.

It stands on the border between Russia and Byelorussia, where the two republics are divided by the Chesá, a little stream. Two hundred metres west of Sviatsk are the copses of Byelorussia, and a little farther away, in a southerly direction, are the lands of the Ukraine, its Chernigov Region.

In the summer, pines and firs rise like little green islands among the boundless fields, and in winter the shaggy boughs of the firs bend right down to the earth under their load of snow.

The windows of our house are frosted over with a bizarre pattern of stars, while inside it is warm and cozy. My brothers and sisters are all doing something, and Father is working away at an old Singer sewing machine. Mother has boiled the potatoes, and is spilling them into a large bowl in the centre of the table. We children fall to, snatch up a steaming spud, dip it in the salt, and bolt it down. I am still a small boy, the fifth in the family, with another four who came after me. Ours is a family of twelve.

At night the blizzard howls, the forest groans, and weird shadows creep in through the chinks in the shutters. My heart contracts from a sweet

disquiet. I hear someone's footsteps, or someone knocking on the window—perhaps the young oak-tree planted beneath it. My eyelids droop, and I fall asleep.

In spring, no sooner has the snow melted, the log houses of Sviatsk begin to sink in a sea of raspberry, gooseberry and currant bushes.

The large potato fields round the village are covered with white and pink blooms. It seems that they stretch far beyond the horizon, so the eye can hardly take in their boundless expanse.

We people of the local villages were called "potato people". Potatoes were our daily bread, our meat, our prime and exclusive provender. I remember the taste of the various dishes that Mother made of potatoes. And not Mother alone. All the five hundred households of Sviatsk made the same potato delicacies.

Before the Revolution, Sviatsk had been a large village. It was peopled by Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Byelorussians, and Poles. It was an international bee-hive. Appropriately, the co-operative that we set up in the thirties was called International Collective Farm. In the olden days there had been no mixed marriages. And if a mixed marriage did occur, it was associated with a sweet love and became a Sviatsk sensation. But after the Revolution, the Ivanovs became in-laws of the Goreliks, the Solomykins of the Rakhilins, the Usov of the Hermans, the Dragunskys of the Tikhomirov, and the Sangurskys of the Nesterenkos.

The villagers were friendly to each other. There

was mutual respect. It was a village of hard-working people who knew the price of labour. Russians were mostly shoemakers, Ukrainians mostly coopers, and also made carts and sleighs. Byelorussians were tillers, while Jews were tailors and furriers.

My father Abram inherited the tailor's trade from his forebears but, to be entirely frank, he had not been much of a tailor, just fair to middling. But he was a hard worker. He and his old sewing-machine could cope with the needs of an entire village street in one day.

In autumn, after the harvesting, when the fragrance of ripe apples wafted in the air, and the late winter varieties of apples and pears were still strung on the boughs, came the time of weddings, each attended by nearly the entire Sviatsk population—Russian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Polish. My father was always a welcome guest—tall, broadshouldered, always in high spirits, always witty and kind, he was in great demand as a maker of toasts. I remember the wedding of our neighbour. Guests in their finery, village girls in gaudy skirts, ribbons and flowers in their plaited hair. An accordion playing, and young men and girls starting a merry round dance, then my father rushing into the centre, the tails of his coat flowing, turning and turning, and the others shouting, laughing, and egging him on.

And next morning, at the crack of dawn, while all of us slept, he would rise from his bed, dress quietly, wash his face and hands, and go off with



his Singer sewing machine to the penurious villages of Vereshchaki, Yalovka or Negliubka, where he would ply his trade day after day, a whole week away from home.

The villages round Sviatsk had been "divided" among the four Dragunsky brothers and the elder sister, who was a seamstress. None could contract work in the "concession" of the others. My uncle Moisei had the richest villages—Zakruzhye, Gromyky, and Bertsovka. The eldest of my uncles had Staro-Vyshkov, Bobovichi, Katichi, and Zhuravki, which were the richest in the neighbourhood.

Time and again, some poor peasant would come to our house, ask for Mother, and go into long explanations why he did not want her brothers-in-law, and why he would rather that her husband did his sewing.

"It's alright overcharging the rich, but me—I want your husband to do our sewing."

My mother, a kind soul, explained that Bobovichi was the "concession" of her eldest brother-in-law; no, how could her husband rob his own brother of his earnings—that would be unfair.

"Unfair?" the peasant would say. "It's unfair to overcharge a poor man. Your husband charges but a quarter of what his elder brothers charge."

Mother always found some solution.

"D'you know what?" she would suggest. "My husband cannot come to your village. But I could pick up your things, and we'd do them here."

The peasant would offer profuse thanks, wishing her health and happiness.

Father wandered from village to village, remaking old overcoats into new jackets, old jackets into sleeveless vests, and worn skirts into blouses for the daughter or trousers for the son. The village folk were delighted with Father's inventiveness.

And he would rattle away at the sewing machine, and hum some old tune while he worked. He would have his meals with the people he was sewing for: green borshch for breakfast with a strip of lard and a clove of garlic, borshch again at midday, this time with millet gruel or fried potatoes, and potatoes again in the evening, but grated and baked in a hot pan. And if, to boot, he was offered a glass of home-made vodka, he would entertain the whole village. Young and old gathered outside, and Father told them his stories, joking and laughing away. The merry tailor was always a welcome guest. If the sleeve did not sit right or pulled at the armpit no one fussed, for the patch on the trouser-seat was just right.

Fridays, before dark, after a hard week's work, Father would come home. When I grew older, I would run off on a Wednesday or Thursday to visit Father, and would stay the night with him, and we would walk back home together.

I loved those days. There was swimming in the river with the village boys, and diving from the steep bank. We would roam in the woods, swing on the boughs of the willows, gather nuts and berries in the forest, or pinch apples, pears or cucumbers from someone's orchard or vegetable garden: they tasted so much sweeter.

Father would thrash me for stealing.

“Pinching apples—that’s a job for a good-for-nothing. Better try planting an apple-tree or a pear yourself.”

At night, after I would fall asleep by his side on the fragrant hay in the barn loft, he would put his hand on my head and softly stroke my hair. I would feign sleep, and smile in the darkness, knowing that though he had punished me, Father still loved me.

Father was fond of people. He bore no grudges for long. The neighbours knew that Dragunsky could always be touched for a few coins. And if he had none himself, he would borrow and lend them to them to the asker.

He judged people by their work, and detested idlers. Us children he taught the tailor’s trade from the day we were old enough to hold a needle.

He used to say to Mother:

“They will be good tailors.”

His eldest son, Zinovy, was apprenticed to the best tailor in the village, one Isaak Eshchin.

Two of my brothers, a few years younger than I, died when they were little. Sickness was a frequent visitor in a poor man’s house. Mother took it very hard. She grieved, grew haggard, and her beauty faded. She wanted the rest of her boys and girls to grow up and live happily. But the Revolution was still far away. Mother helped Father to remake or patch the clothes of her children and, indeed, those of our neighbours’ children.

It was the children’s job to bring home the

foodstuffs the peasants gave us in payment for Father's work.

I had a long linen bag for the various cereals and the flour: first, say, they'd pour in the millet, then tie the bag across with a string and pour the flour in, and after tying up the bag once more, let someone else who owed Father pour in their grain. The long bag, once it was filled, looked to me like a weird animal, almost like a snake. I would hang it round my neck or waist, and shuffle off home.

Usually, I was accompanied by my eldest sister Sonia. Her burden was heavier—a sack of potatoes tied across the middle, with the heavier part on her back and the smaller and lighter part on her chest. And if our little Ania was with us, her frail shoulders would carry the bag with the beet-root, carrots and, sometimes, a huge pumpkin.

It never occurred to me that children of seven or eight could have any other kind of life.

Father was strongly built, but was never considered handsome or distinguished as a craftsman. But he had a liking for anything of beauty, and especially for well-tailored clothes.

"Look, how beautifully made the jacket is," he would exclaim, examining a suit made by Uncle Moisei for my literature teacher. "The rake has hands of gold."

Father often roamed in the woods, admiring the springtime flowers and the blue of the sky. He never tired of saying:

"How wonderful is God's earth, how beautifully adorned it is with fields and woods, seas and rivers."

He was a simple man, a villager eternally occupied with the search of the daily bread for his family. But he was also a sensitive soul, thirsting for beauty. And he married a beautiful girl.

My mother Rachel was born in a little town called Chechersk, near Gomel in Byelorussia. The whole village agreed that she was a prime beauty. In my memory she is young, shapely, and kind — her roundish face framed with coal black hair, and her almond-shaped eyes forever smiling. Her deft hands could do nothing wrong. I always wondered where she took the strength to feed us all, to wash us, to patch the holes in our shirts and trousers, to darn our socks, to help Father in his work, and then still find for each of us a kind word and a tender caress.

It has always been my feeling that all of us, no matter what our age is, are eternally indebted to our mothers, the mothers of the whole earth.

The villagers knew that in need one could turn to Rachel, the tailor's wife, or, as they called her, the beautiful Rakhil. A child fell ill and the worried mother ran to her for advice, for a remedy, or for the loan of a few coins. Mother gave bread and milk to the needy, who always found shelter in our kitchen. Putting potatoes or carrots into their satchels, she would say:

“Don't forget us, come again, God willing, on Friday...”

When we grew up and learned about life, we wondered why our mother, so beautiful, so clever, so educated (we were convinced that she knew everything under the sun, though she had really



had only three years of school), had chosen to marry an ordinary tailor.

We knew that even after the marriage, after the birth of my elder sister and brother, there had been many men in Sviatsk who could not take their eyes off her.

We asked her why she had preferred Father to the others, and she replied:

“I fell in love with him for his easygoing ways and his kindness. Oh, he was an extraordinary man —”

There was a hint here of the drinking bouts Father indulged in from time to time. Later, when he came home a little under the weather, we, the bigger children, would speak our mind. Mother, embarrassed, would take his side:

“Leave him alone. He could not refuse a drink from Ivan Rozhkov and Grigory Usov. Good thing he'd been on just one street. Imagine if he'd gone to all the streets in the village? Friends who want to treat him—your father, thank God, has them everywhere —”

Mother loved Father dearly. She remembered all her life that he had taken her with a child, that he had stood up for her like a man. He could, of course, have married some other pretty girl in Sviatsk or Novozybkov, even Gomel or Chernigov, but the only one he had wanted for his wife was her, Rachel.

Mother, orphaned at fifteen, had had a hard life before her marriage. The responsibility for her three younger sisters and an infant brother, with their mother dying on the day he was born,

fell on her frail shoulders. The stepmother, who soon entered the house, was a young woman trivial in her ways and unkind by nature.

Young Rachel, our future mother, had a heart of gold and would not abandon the little children. She would not think of marrying.

Not until her sisters grew up a little and Sioma, her little brother, was four, did she take him along with her to Yuzovka in the Donets Basin. Here, for a while, she had been seamstress. Later, she moved to her aunt's in Sviatsk. Her aunt looked after the boy and worked the vegetable garden, while Rachel made dresses.

When Father first saw her in Aunt Fania's house he was "struck dumb". He felt as though he had been "nailed to the table", as he said.

Mother had come out of the kitchen in a calico dress and a lace-trimmed apron with narrow shoulder-straps. Her black hair was plaited into a heavy braid, which lay carelessly on her bosom. Before putting the bowl with the steaming potatoes on the table, she stole a glance at Father, whose wide-open eyes were fixed on her, and walked hurriedly out of the room. A few minutes later she returned, with Sioma in her arms, seated him at the table, put a plate of potatoes before him, and said fondly:

"Eat, my child, eat."

Aunt Fania, who sat beside Abram, my future father, was saying something to him, but he was like deaf. When she left the room, Father followed her, put his hands on her shoulders, and began questioning her:

“Who’s the girl? And who’s the boy? She looks too young to have a son like him—”

“Don’t you know?” Aunt Fania said. “It’s my niece. Pretty as a picture, isn’t she?”

“Yes, very pretty. But who’s her husband?”

“What are you talking about? What husband? She isn’t even nineteen—”

“Who’s the boy, then?”

“The boy? Sioma? He’s her little brother.”

Father sighed with relief. Now he knew he would not let Rachel slip out of his hands.

That was how it began.

Not an evening passed but that Father came and stood under Rachel’s window. Each day he was more and more convinced that she was ordained to be his wife. And, finally, came the day of their wedding.

People in Sviatsk did not know then that Sioma was Rachel’s brother. They said: “A pretty girl, but hearty Abram could have married a girl, not a widow.”

They say that during the wedding ceremony, to which the whole village had turned out, little Sioma pushed his way to Rachel’s side, seized her by the wedding-dress and cried that “Mama”, as he called his sister, should put him to bed.

Some guest observed loudly enough for all to hear:

“The groom has done well—came to the wedding with a ready-made son.”

Father had called back:

“You’re envious, no less, that I have a good boy.”

Ever since, Sioma was one of the family. And Mother was ever grateful to Father for his compassion.

\* \* \*

I was nine when I first went to school. I didn't much care for it. Father said nothing would come of me, that I was empty-headed, and should best learn tailoring.

No, classes did not attract me. I liked going to the villages with Father much better. Not that I was of help, but at least there was one mouth less to feed at home.

The village boys and I roamed the woods all day long, fished in the river, and took the horses into the field at dusk for overnight grazing.

The nights were fun. In the depression close to a gurgling brook, the fog shut out the view. We made a large fire to drive off the mosquitoes, then dug potatoes into the hot ashes. The baked spuds we broke into halves, then, burning our fingers and lips, consumed them with savage delight. The darkness grew denser, the air cooler. We would climb under the goatskins and fix our gaze on the star-lit skies. Horses neighed some distance away. They were grazing in the close-by gully, while we, under the goatskins, told each other stories of ghosts, devils, and wild beasts...

We also found amusements for ourselves in Sviatsk. I recall how one night, with a bunch of boys, we changed the signboards over the shops. Pharmacist Kazakevich's signboard we hung above Pevzner's barber-shop, and that of shoemaker Nesterenko over Magid's butchery.

That was when Mother said:

“Your elder brothers and sisters had no opportunity to go to school. Nowadays, schooling is free. It’s time you stopped cooling your heels. From tomorrow on, you’re going to school.”

Mother stuck to her word. She did not let me out of her sight, made me do my lessons, and saw to it that I did not play truant.

Little by little I got to like school, the teachers, and especially the literature teacher, Nikolai Zhdanov. I was envious of those who learned better than I, who knew and understood more than I. This made me pull up my socks.

My best friend at school was Grisha Sapozhnikov. He was a handsome fair-haired child with chiselled features. His blue eyes were always smiling. I thought, and it was true, that Grisha knew much more than other boys of his age.

There was something wrong with his right leg, and he always had a stick to lean on when he walked. An avid reader, he loved telling me of the books that had captured his imagination. The physically weak boy was fond of book heroes who were brave and daring. The Gadfly was his idol.

Though I didn’t realise it at first, Grisha had a strong influence on me. I took to reading myself. I read late into the night, made notes, and loved telling my younger brothers, my sister and Mother, of what I had read. Imitating Grisha, I made a walking-stick and carried it all the time, saying it was meant to defend my friend, for was he not weaker than me?

Our friendship lasted for many years. Before



the war, Grisha was chairman of the village Soviet. He perished in forty-two, in Sviatsk, together with my parents, sisters, uncles and nephews, who were all shot by the nazis. His name is engraved on one of the marble tombstones placed in the village square.

I was sixteen when I finished the seven-year school. Father insisted that I should take up a trade. He kept saying that at sixteen he had already been his family's breadwinner, and that "learning did not sit well in my head all the same, and nothing was to be gained from reading books."

But Mother stood her ground. She insisted that I should continue my education, was prepared to deny herself and even the other children some of the necessities so long as a loaf of bread or a three-rouble note could be put aside for me. She had faith in me, was sure I could make something of myself.

A few months passed in debating whether I should go on with my schooling, or sit down at the sewing machine. When my classmates learned that I had not applied for admission to the Novozybkov secondary school, they came to our house and tried to reason with my parents. Grisha Sapozhnikov said to Father, who was insisting that I should be a tailor:

"Be a tailor? That isn't good enough. Your David is a capable boy, he should study on. Don't be a worm that eats horseradish and thinks there's nothing sweeter on earth."

Father was outraged. How could he be compared to a worm?

“If that’s what you learn at school,” he thundered, “then I don’t want my son to go to any such school.”

Next day, my teacher Nikolai Zhdanov looked in at our house. Mother served tea and hot potato pancakes. He sipped the tea and kept talking to my parents, and the rest of our family, who had all gathered round the table.

“Don’t you see that times have changed. The Soviet system...”

He held the hot glass of tea in his two hands, looked closely at all my brothers and sisters, and added:

“Must all your children follow your trade? Your boy has a good head. He is inquisitive, full of life, and his classmates elected him secretary of their Komsomol cell.”

Then, the teacher, Nikolai Zhdanov, spoke a phrase which made so big an impression on everyone that it settled the issue.

“Don’t clip David’s wings,” he said. “Let him fly farther and higher.”

The following day I took my application to the secondary school in Novozybkov.

Mother dreamed that her favourite, her Dima — as she called me fondly — would learn to be a book-keeper and in due course take a position like that of Foma Dalenkin, the accountant of the local consumer co-operative.

The lessons in the Novozybkov school came easy. The physical part was harder, for each Saturday I walked thirty kilometres from Novozybkov to Sviatsk, and back again at daybreak

on Monday, carrying a canvas bag with a large loaf of bread, a pot of milk, and a dozen or so flatcakes made of curds. To earn a little money, I worked nights as porter or stevedore at the railway station, while my mind was absorbed by episodes from Tolstoy's novels. I reflected on the characters in Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, and was excited over Maxim Gorky's stories "Chelkash", "Old Izergil", and over his *Italian Tales*. Deep in my heart I carried the dream of becoming a writer.

School was over. In 1929 I applied for admission to the Gomel Railway Institute, but low marks in maths at the entrance exams made me turn to the Klinty specialised secondary school. Here, too, I failed. And off I went east, stowing away in the Gomel-Moscow train.

I remember Moscow's Sokolniki Park. Not Muscovites alone are fond of its wide alleys, the shade of its limes and birches, and firs. In the old days it had been a hospitable haven for those who came to Moscow with their little plywood suitcases and had no place to stay the first night. I, too, found shelter in it.

In Moscow, in the square outside the railway station, I was swept away by the whirlpool of humanity, and felt lost. I put down my suitcase, sat on it, and began looking at the people rushing past. My confused, weary look attracted the attention of a peasant woman with two children. She had spread a white cloth on the pavement, cut a few thick slices of bread and thin slices of bacon, and put out a few eggs. The children

began to eat, and watched me with interest. The woman had seen to it that I, too, got a slice of bread and an egg.

"First get something into you," she said. "Then think what you'll do next. *Nitchevo*—the exams won't run away."

She swallowed a little piece of bread and bacon, and said:

"Suppose you fail the exams; it won't be the worst that can befall you. In Moscow there's work for everybody. My husband has taken a building worker's job, and as soon as he gets a place to live in, we'll join him."

After helping my first Moscow acquaintance and her children aboard their train, I set out for the city, found the institute I wanted to join, handed in my papers and, taking the advice of knowledgeable people, walked off to Sokolniki Park with a lad who had come from the Ukraine. Night after night, for a week we slept on benches on the open-air stage where a brass band played in the evenings. We would spend the day in the library cramming, and after dark went to our "lodgings".

Luck was against me again at the Moscow institute. But I did not take my failure close to heart. I had learned that what the peasant woman had told me was true. Besides, I met Bardadyn, a young man whom I had known in Novozybkov, where he was secretary of the Komsomol district committee. He was with the Krasnaya Presnia Komsomol committee in Moscow, he told me, and shoved a five-rouble note into my hand.

"Come to see me," he said. "If a job is what you want — we'll find you one."

Bardadyn was as good as his word.

The Krasnaya Presnia Komsomol gave me a note to the Moscow Building Administration, where I got my start as a worker.

I carried bricks up the precarious scaffolding from morning to night, and felt no fatigue. The thought that I was being useful and that my dream of becoming a writer was feasible, redoubled my energy. A few months later I was put at the head of a team of navvies, and then at the head of a team that was commended in the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. The evenings I spent in the Gogol Library at Krasnaya Presnia, near the district bath-house, reading Esenin and Mayakovsky. I learned dozens of their poems by heart, and remember them to this day. At our amateur concerts, the builders always called on me to recite them: "Let's have Esenin," they shouted.

And at work, from higher up in the scaffolding, I would often hear someone yell for me:

"Hey, Mayakovsky, let's have some bricks and mortar."

At the hostel we often sang Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and Tatar songs. The young men I lodged with had come from villages near and far, and had brought along the good cheer, kindness and charm of their native land.

I had more than enough energy to run the Komsomol cell at the building site, to speak at meetings, and to contribute to the wall newspaper.



And I was deeply pleased with the respect and the trust in which my team-mates held me.

Some time later I was elected deputy to the Krasnaya Presnia district Soviet. I was hardly twenty then. That year, 1930, I became a candidate member of the Communist Party. That was when I finally understood that I would never make a journalist or writer until I got a real education. All my free time I devoted to studying and reading. My changing books so often planted doubts in the librarian's head. She subjected me to a regular examination, asking me in minute detail about Tolstoy. I was happy to speak about the novel *Resurrection*, and about *Father Sergy*, and the *Sevastopol Tales*, and *War and Peace*.

Moscow's many museums began drawing me like a magnet. I began reading up on art and history. My little village suitcase was filled with the classics and with contemporary books. Nights, I covered the desk-lamp with a newspaper so the light would not disturb my room-mates, and sat up reading until the early hours of the morning.

One winter day I was summoned to the Krasnaya Presnia Party Committee. In the corridor outside the first secretary's office I saw some forty young men. From time to time, the girl typist would open the door and call one of us in. The Party was calling on its members to go to the villages and help in collectivising agriculture. We waited for our turn in silence, and each of us probably wondered what good he could do in a village.

Then my name was called. The girl typist glanced

at me questioningly. Short and skinny, I did not look my age.

The district committee secretary, too, looked at me closely, but the expression on his face was a little different. It seemed to say: "Young! Very young! Doesn't matter, we need them young! That's the kind the village needs."

Smiling, he told me that he had heard of me, and that he was sure I would cope with my assignment.

At twenty I had made it a rule, which I never breached for the rest of my life, to take on anything that was required of me, and to do my best. The only question I asked was:

"When am I supposed to go?"

"Tomorrow," he replied.

He walked up to me, put his hands on my shoulders, and looked me in the eyes:

"You start tomorrow, Comrade Dragunsky. We have faith in you. Make a good job of it."

The cold in Moscow was ferocious. Frost covered the windows in the tramcar. By breathing on the ice I managed to melt a "peephole" the size of a five-kopek coin. That gave me a view of the street, deep in snow. We passed Miuskaya Square, Tverskaya Street, Bolshaya Gruzinskaya, and finally houses eight and nine in Shmittovsky Lane which I had helped to build. I loved them dearly, and Moscow too, as though that was where I was born.

The din at Saviolovsky Railway Station was overwhelming, as it is at any station. But this time I was no stranger to Moscow. I found the

car number, and then the seat that was mine. The train began to move, setting out for the heart of Kalinin Region, the village of Akhmatovo, somewhere off the railway, the closest station being Krasny Kholm some fifty kilometres away.

My contemporaries will remember those hard years, especially hard in the countryside, where the Party was promoting collective farms. The novelty was catching on with great difficulty. The kulaks rendered it desperate resistance. They did not hesitate to attack and kill the Party members sent to the villages to organise kolkhozes.

I am not going to describe the atmosphere into which I was thrown, nor the difficulties that faced me as chairman of the village Soviet. The reward came on 7 May 1931, when the people of Akhmatovo village went into the socialised fields of the first collective farm in our Molokovsky District of Kalinin Region.

Ribbons had been woven into the manes of the horses pulling the ploughs and harrows. It was a warm and sunny day, and I, who had never held the handles of a plough before, stood first in the row. I walked behind my grey mare and looked at the layer of black earth rising from under the ploughshare at my feet. After the first hour's work my hands were covered with blisters, but I did not feel the pain. A young woman pulled off her thick mittens, and offered them to me:

“There, Comrade Chairman, take them—your hands aren't accustomed to the plough.”

I glanced at the girl. It was Olga Bykova, one of the prettiest girls in the village. That May night,

in the village square, the young people held a dance. I took Olga by the hand, and invited her. The accordion played late into the night. We danced, and I was probably the happiest man in Akhmatovo.

As I danced with Olga, I heard someone say: "Look, the chairman's a good dancer, and has his way with the girls."

To be accepted in the village meant that your work and good behaviour was recognised. In a village everybody sees your every move, and if you make a false step, people will never forgive you. I managed to "strike root" in Akhmatovo, and was a welcome guest at weddings and other family festivities. Despite my youth, elder people came to me for all sorts of advice.

A year later I was elected secretary of the local Party branch which consisted of nineteen Communists from the sixteen neighbouring villages. We had a big job on our hands, especially me as secretary.

In my two years in Akhmatovo I got to like the land. I learned to respect the tiller for his hard work, and knew the price at which people got their daily bread. That served me in good stead for the rest of my life.

I grew fond of the evenings in the village. In winter, when I had more free time, I read books until late at night in the light of an oil-lamp. Next door, the people I roomed with, the Morozovs—the old man, his son and his grandchildren—were long since asleep, while I sat on a stool beside the wooden bed, and read and read.



Summer nights, back from the field, the young people held dances. I, too, would come to the high bank of the river and listen to the mysterious sounds of the night reaching me from the fields and meadows, and my thoughts would take me far away...

\* \* \*

Then came the time of my service in the Red Army. I was sorry to part with the collective farmers, with the young people I had grown fond of, and with Olga Bykova.

A new chapter began in my life.

A troop train took us, new conscripts, to Minsk. Ahead lay a year of service in one of the units of the city garrison.

After my stint in the army, I expected to enrol in Moscow University or in some institute. My spell of village life was swinging the scales strongly in favour of the Timiriachev Agricultural Academy for all my thoughts were still focused on the village. And, really, I saw no reason why the profession of an agronomist or veterinarian would suit me less than that of writer or journalist.

Those were my thoughts in those early months of my army service as I fell asleep on my soldier's cot wrapped in a cloth blanket, on top of which I had my greatcoat for extra warmth.

But the course of events took me in a different direction:

"Private Dragunsky, you are wanted by the commander of the 4th Rifles Regiment immediately."



I pulled on my blouse, checked the buttons and the belt, and walked to the command point.

Commander Bobkov was not alone. Political officer Medvedev was with him. The commander rose to his feet when I entered, and spoke almost pontifically:

"We know you as a model soldier. We also know that you have done well as a building worker, and have coped excellently with your job in the village. So we've decided to send you to the Saratov Tank School."

Commissar Medvedev added:

"The best of the best are picked for the tank troops."

At first, I couldn't make out what they were saying. Why Saratov? I had made up my mind to go to Moscow. In a few months, as I figured, I would go to Sviatsk, see my parents, brothers and sisters, then call at Akhmatovo for a few days, and go back to Moscow. The doors of higher educational establishments would be open to a man back from the Red Army.

Then I recalled Mother's words: "Never flinch in face of difficulties. Never shift your burden on to someone else..." After a minute's silence, I asked:

"When? When am I supposed to leave?"

The commissar glanced at the commander, and said:

"Tomorrow".

He shifted the papers on the desk, looked at them, and added:

"You'll take a hundred men to the school. I

appoint you Party organiser. The necessary papers will be given to you before your departure. Best wishes."

Early in the morning of the following day we boarded the Minsk-Saratov train. It brought us to the military school. We toiled daily for three years, learning the art of war. Classes in the history of our country and in Party history alternated with instruction in the use of tanks and weapons. We spent much time at training fields and shooting ranges. Gradually, my hands got the feel of the driving gear.

Trainees were taken for practice to army units. We knew there was no time to waste: the ominous shadow of the swastika was already spreading over Europe. Bonfires were being lit in Berlin to burn the works of Marx and Lenin, Tolstoy and Stefan Zweig, Gorky and Feuchtwanger, Chekhov and Becher. Dimitrov's trial in connection with the Reichstag fire was in full swing. Concentration camps were springing up all over Germany for the finest sons of the German nation, Ernst Thaelmann among them. In Berlin, Nuremberg, Leipzig and Hamburg men of the SS were on the rampage in the Jewish quarters. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was becoming the bible of those befogged by chauvinism and nazism...

On 7 November 1936, the Saratov Tank School held its first graduation ceremony for tank lieutenants. I say the first, because only a year before new ranks had been introduced in the Red Army, including that of lieutenant.

Colonel Shipov, the chief of the school, read out the orders of People's Commissar Kliment Voroshilov. We waited impatiently for our postings. Those who were finishing the school with honours, and there were more than forty of us, were granted the privilege of choosing where they would serve. I counted on being posted to a tank brigade somewhere near Moscow.

Suddenly I heard the following:

"Lieutenant David Abramovich Dragunsky is appointed commander of a tank platoon in the Far Eastern Military District." After being dismissed, the graduates crowded round Commissar Murkin and showered him with questions. Those who had graduated with honours wanted to know why they were being sent east and not to Moscow or Leningrad.

Tank school commissar Murkin, well on in years, a wise and experienced soldier, had anticipated that the postings would strike us like a bolt from the blue.

"Friends, it smells of gunpowder in the Far East," was all he said.

The Moscow-Vladivostok express took our group east. Pavel Zhmurov, Volodia Beliakov, and I, along with Slava Vinokurov and Andrei Barabinov, had been posted to the same tank battalion. The journey took nine days and nights. We watched the scenery flashing past us. There were short stops at Yaroslavl, Sverdlovsk, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Chita and Khabarovsk. The train crossed the Urals range, the Baraba Steppe, then swept past the Baikal

and the adjacent lakes, and through the Far Eastern taiga.

At long last, we pulled up, for a mere three minutes, at the remote Razdolnaya station. We had come to our destination, and soon found ourselves, clasping our suitcases, in quarters where officers and their families were seeing in the New Year.

I took a few steps forward, stopped before battalion commander Mikhail Alimov, and reported.

The officers' wives invited us to join in the celebrations.

The following day, which was 1 January 1937, I began my service on the Manchurian border.

Now, I am in my seventies. Behind me is a life abounding in various happy and sad events which, for that matter, can be true of anybody's life. In my heart, I cherish the memory of my native village, the memory of its coppices and meadows, of its little river, and of our good neighbours, and of my Komsomol friends. Thank you, dear Sviatsk and my paternal home. You brought me to the great highway and sent me out into life, having infused me with love of country, having made me patriot and internationalist.

## The First Battle

The little bus snorted like a live creature and gathered speed. We were driving into a picturesque pine forest in Rzhev Region which the war had not yet scarred with its cruel talons.

Tanks of different systems stood in disorder at the forest's edge. Guns, lorries with ammunition, and mobile kitchens were lined up in the clearings. A group of girls was pushing an old ambulance. Never before had this forest heard so much noise, the roar of hundreds of engines. Everyone was industriously and hurriedly busy.

"The devil wouldn't make head or tail of this," said Kotkin, the eternally gloomy and phlegmatic commander of the 1st Tank Battalion.

"He wouldn't, indeed, but we will," Grigoriev, our regimental commander, snapped back. "In the meantime, let's get on to headquarters."

We could barely keep pace with him.

Colonel Pyotr Chernov, the commander of our division, was not entirely cordial. His unshaven haggard face showed signs of fatigue. He had had no sleep for several days. We learned that he and his staff had just arrived from Briansk. Tanks, guns, vehicles had begun streaming into the forest today, bringing provender, ammunition, and medical supplies. The commanders, the tank and



gun crews, the doctors, quartermasters and technicians had come from different cities.

They had all to be received, and sent to their units, and a battalion had to be formed and despatched to the frontline this very night.

"Who will you make battalion commander?" Chernov asked Grigoriev.

"I reckon, Senior Lieutenant Dragunsky. He has some battle experience."

"Fine. You know best. Let him activate the battalion, and march it off after nightfall."

We were busy all day long. The tanks were brought to the edge of the forest. There were a few T-34s, one KV, but most of them were obsolescent T-26s and BT-5s which we jokingly called "knights in plywood armour".

"Andrei Tkachev, commissar of your battalion," an officer introduced himself, giving me his hand. "I'll start forming the Party and Komsomol branches at once, and see to the newspapers."

Forming the battalion took us until late in the evening. The divisional commander was annoyed, and kept urging haste. He, in his turn, was being egged on by his superiors.

At long last, the column of tanks and vehicles was lined up.

"The Motherland is in deadly danger. You are the first from our division to go into battle," Colonel Chernov said to us. "I wish your Komsomol battalion success."

The men cheered.

Grigoriev said his goodbye to me with fatherly warmth. I knew him for more than three years.

In the east he had had a battalion, and we fought together on Lake Hassan. He was decorated with two Orders of the Red Banner, which was a rarity in those days. At the Frunze Academy he was the monitor of our group, very strict but fair, and very kind.

The silence of the night was ripped by a loud command. The tank engines were started, the hatches screwed down. Exhaust fumes rose in clouds to the starry sky.

“Forward!” The battalion formed up in single file as we came to the Rzhev-Bely highway. We moved slowly, with headlights switched off. Here and there ahead of us we would see the red backlights of the tank in front.

The forest lined the highway on both sides like a wall.

Riding in a car, I was summing up the labours of the day. The responsibility for the lives of my subordinates and the weaponry weighed heavily on my shoulders. Battalion commissar Tkachev, who was sitting beside me, sensed my state of mind:

“Chin up, commander,” he said warmly. “We’ll share the joys and sorrows equally.”

I asked him to tell me of himself. The commissar’s life story was the same as that of hundreds of thousands of young Komsomols of those days. He was born in a village in Ryazan Region. At eighteen he came to Moscow and was a building worker. The Party sent him back to the village to organise a collective farm. Then came service in the army. Later on, he had been a locomotive engineer.

“How did you get to the front?” I asked. “Aren’t railwaymen exempt from military service?”

“Yes, they are,” he replied. “It hadn’t been easy. They even waved a Party reprimand in my face. But I don’t scare easily.” He smiled. “The Party district committee secretary stood by me. I talked him into it.”

He shook a pinch of tobacco onto a scrap of newsprint and rolled a cigarette.

“What about you? What’s your story?” he asked.

But I did not get a chance to tell him. My senior technician, Dmitriev, overtook us in his jeep, bringing bad news: two of the tanks had lost their tracks. Besides, the old T-26s and BT-5s could not keep up with the T-34s.

“What am I to do?” Dmitriev asked me.

“Halt the column and have them catch up.”

The engines fell silent. The grinding of the tracks ceased. A light breeze cooled the motors. The crews got out of the tanks and were greedily breathing the chilly night air.

Commanders of companies and platoons came to me, with torchlights in their hands.

We went over our itinerary once again.

Someone yelled: “Enemy planes!”

High above our heads a flock of nazi bombers was heading for Moscow.

Soon came the order to resume movement. In less than two hours we saw a few German planes flying west in broken formation, one by one.

“They’ve had it: running away like hares,” my chief-of-staff observed.

From behind a turning a little armoured car

came right at us. Liaison officer Levochkin, just as volatile as his car, brought us urgent orders: "Concentrate in the forest south-west of the town of Bely at 7.00 hours. Kovalenko."

"Who's Kovalenko?" I asked.

"Commander of the division, our future chief," Levochkin replied. He showed me a spot in the forest marked in red. "Here's where you have to be at 7.00 hours."

We did not manage to reach the place in the dark of night. It was dawning. The tanks were stretched out in a long column. As before, the T-26s were lagging behind.

"Looks like we'll never reach the front," Tkachev said with annoyance.

"We better not go to see the divisional commander without the tanks," I said, and ordered the battalion into the forest to refuel the tanks, wait for the lagging ones, and to use the opportunity to reconnoitre the roads.

The commissar and the chief-of-staff joined me on an inspection tour.

Waiting for the kitchens, the weary and grimy tankmen were taking a rest. Some slept in the tanks, some under the bushes, others on the chests of ammunition. The drivers, as usual, were puttering about with the engines.

"We're lucky," Tkachev said.

"I don't see why. I'm afraid the enemy will spot us at daybreak, and give us hell."

"Why did you say we're lucky?" Chief-of-staff Kokhanyuk asked.

"Why?" Tkachev replied. "Ninety-five per cent

of our battalion are Komsomols trained at the Kharkov tank school. I had a chat with them last night. They're spoiling for a fight, and I expect they will acquit themselves well."

An elderly man in uniform walked past us.

"What about this 'Komsomol'? Is he also from Kharkov?" Kokhanyuk wise-cracked.

Those who heard him smiled. So did I. And I stopped the man.

He was the battalion medic, by name of Laptev. It was clear that this was the first time he had put on a uniform.

"How did you get to the front-line?" I asked, smiling.

"I volunteered, comrade commander," the medic replied angrily. "And how did you?"

"I volunteered, too." I was embarrassed for I knew that I had been tactless.

The cooks were slow. They had no experience yet in preparing meals on the march, and the breakfast dragged out.

Meanwhile, the July morning sun had warmed the air. Refreshed by our hour's rest, we gathered speed and roared down the open Rzhev highway.

The town of Bely was near. Signs of recent bombings were all round us. We saw gutted vehicles and overturned guns. Chests and barrels were scattered along the wayside. Bluish smoke rose from the still smouldering tyres of smashed vehicles. The last stretch of our route turned into an ordeal for us: nazi planes were keeping the roads near the front under close observation.

I abandoned the car, and got into my tank.



On a windless day the tank tracks raise a tall cloud of dust. That is why I could not make out where the colonel had come from who stood at the side of the road, blocking our path with his car.

A vigorous wave of his arm ordered us to stop. I faced an infuriated man. His angry dark eyes, the frowning thick brows, and even the shaven head reminded me of Othello for some reason.

"What d'you want me to do—shoot you right here or have you tried by a military tribunal?" the man thundered.

"What has happened? What have I done wrong?" I asked.

"What has happened? You have not fulfilled the divisional commander's orders. You have not come to the concentration area. You have been spotted by enemy planes, and betrayed the location of our force."

Tkachev and I stood before him in guilty silence. Now I knew that we should not have stopped for a rest. But hadn't I wanted to do things by the book, and get the battalion together?

"Who are you, after all?"

My commissar's question took the colonel by surprise.

"I? I am Colonel Arman, deputy commander of the tank division, and I am responsible for getting you to the front-line."

"And where were you at night?" Tkachev asked angrily. "Are you aware that the T-26s and BTs that you gave us can't keep up with the rest of the column?"

“That’s a lame excuse. You and the battalion commander got cold feet.”

I had not spoken so far, restraining myself, as one must before a superior. But when I heard the charge of cowardice, I could no longer keep silent.

“Allow me to carry on, colonel? And don’t scare me with the military tribunal. A Soviet tribunal will know what happened.”

Colonel Arman raged on.

But I no longer heard his words. A company of tanks clattered past us. Then we heard the roar of planes and raised our heads. A group of enemy aircraft had appeared high above us. I thought that they had not noticed us. But soon the lead plane turned and flew over the road, followed by a second and a third.

I leaped into my tank and issued the order: “Pick up speed, increase distance between tanks, get going.”

Dust rising in their wake, the tanks turned off the road at top speed.

Bombs began dropping. They burst by the wayside. But the crews of the T-26s worked up a velocity that these tanks had never shown before. Leaping across ditches, they raced for the town.

The earth shook from the explosions. I stopped my tank at the wayside, lifted the hatch, and watched the enemy planes with alarm. Fear for my own life seemed to wane. My head was full of other things. Will the battalion be wiped out without seeing battle? The angry colonel had been right. We should have slipped across this dangerous stretch of road in the dark.

The bombing continued for a few more minutes. Then the roar of the plane engines gradually faded away. The nazi planes headed west. Only then did I see Arman and Tkachev nearby, beside a solitary tree. No longer did the colonel look so threatening. His clever, expressive eyes shone from under his thick eyebrows.

"Well, battalion commander, who was right?"

"Yes, I admit it, I was wrong. The raid could have been avoided."

"I presume you'll never repeat your mistake?" A barely discernible smile flitted across Arman's severe face. "Your men did very well. They didn't lose their heads. They took their first air-raid bravely. I expected worse."

"It's a Komsomol battalion," Tkachev observed.

"I was scared out of my wits," our battalion doctor, Liudmila Fedorova, said in a thin voice. "This was the first time I was in an air-raid, comrade colonel."

On hearing Fedorova's words, I took a closer look at the colonel. On his chest I saw the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. At last I recognised him. We had met at the Academy. He was in his last year when I was in my first.

The eldest tankman in our Academy, Paul Arman was a man with a redoubtable past.

To us younger men, his story seemed romantic and enticing. He hailed from one of the Baltic countries and had wandered about the world for years. He had also lived in France. After the Revolution he came home and joined the Communist Party,

and dedicated himself to the armed forces. As a tankman he had done a lot for the advancement of armoured troops.

A man of fiery temperament and irrepressible energy, Paul Arman had to be in the thick of the stormy events of our era. When General Franco's fascists began shooting in Spain, he was among the first volunteers to the International Brigades. He was seen at the head of a tank battalion at Guadalajara, and had fought courageously in Madrid. He came home a Hero of the Soviet Union.

Parting with Paul Arman, I caught up with the battalion and put my tank in the lead of the column, heading for the rendezvous with the rifle division.

We heard explosions from the direction of the town. Smoke and flames were rising to the sky. The nazis were attacking for the third consecutive day.

The log houses had all been burned. The few dozens of two-storeyed brick houses, too, were engulfed in flames. The battalion scouts returned with discomfoting news: the town cannot be by-passed from the north. The only thing we could do was to race through the narrow streets lined with burning houses. Again, planes appeared overhead. An air battle ensued. Soviet fighter planes had come just in time, and instantly attacked. We made the most of it. Hatches down, the tanks plunged into the blazing town. In their wake came the lorries, covered with canvas sheets and soldiers' capes.

We made it to the highway. The front-line was

nearing. At a forking, one road leading west and the other south, we were met by the same, recently so awe-inspiring, Colonel Arman. He gave me a smile, and gestured that we should follow him. He brought us to the required spot. That was the end of his mission. He would be going back to his division—in the Rzhev forests. We, our battalion, was now part of the Western Front's 242nd Rifles Division.

\* \* \*

Major-General Kirill Kovalenko, the divisional commander, received me jovially. On learning that the battalion had thirty tanks, he gave me a broad smile: for him it was a pleasant surprise.

Kovalenko introduced me to a group of staff officers gathered in a forest glade.

"Victor Sergeyevich," the general addressed a lieutenant-colonel standing by his side, "let's take your suggestion and send Poliakov and the tank commander to reconnoitre in force. Then we'll know where we stand."

What a small world! Victor Sergeyevich Glebov, whom the general had addressed, was an old acquaintance of mine. He was among the first from our Academy to go to the front.

A minute later, the moment General Kovalenko had moved away, we were embracing each other and, in the old habit of men, beating each other over the shoulders from an overabundance of emotion.

"Never fancied you without Beliakov and Zhmurov. They must have taken it hard."



Glebov and our other classmates knew of the years of friendship that bound us, the three Far Eastern tankmen.

Getting down to business, the chief-of-staff told me of the planned divisional operation, and of how they expected to use our battalion.

“Stay around for an hour or two, and we’ll have the battle orders ready for you.”

I made use of the time to inspect the various staff services, and to put my fiscal, food, and supply papers in order. Tkachev brought copies of the divisional newspaper, *Defend the Motherland*, to our car, and got in touch with the political officers.

The operational duty officer found me and brought me to the divisional commander. The tall general barely fitted into the low dug-out. Glebov was seated beside a collapsible table, signing the battle order.

General Kovalenko invited me to look at the map.

“We’ve just received word from army headquarters: the enemy has seized Dukhovshchina, and is developing the offensive on Lomonosovo. That’s a railway junction. We expect him here before nightfall tomorrow.”

The general then turned to Glebov: “Please have Poliakov get in touch with the tankmen. Tell them what they are to do tomorrow.”

He then turned to me, and added: “I expect you to fight and fight well. If Poliakov’s infantry gets stuck, keep going, keep pushing on. And bring back a prisoner. Three days of fighting and

we still haven't identified the unit we're up against."

Bending low, Kovalenko left us through the narrow dug-out door.

We departed from the divisional command post after dark. I huddled up in the corner at the back of the car and tried to sleep.

The road was bumpy. We were thrown from side to side. Tkachev kept fidgeting. Lieutenant Pyotr Moskalev, a platoon commander, sat beside the driver. He said he hailed from these parts, had grown up here, in the Smolensk region. His native village Churkino was only a few kilometres away. The nazis had taken it, and the lieutenant's mother and two little sisters had not managed to get away.

We came to Baturino. Moskalev asked the driver to stop, and showed us a large brick building, the secondary school he had finished a mere two years before. The Komsomol district committee had sent him to the Kharkov Tank School. He finished a crash course, and was made a lieutenant.

Moskalev told us many interesting things. He spoke warmly of his family and his native collective farm.

"I've walked every little path here," he said. "I know every tree."

"Fine, fine," Tkachev mumbled. "Tomorrow we'll test your knowledge."

The dawn in the forest came slowly. At first, strips of grey light appeared between the trees, then light came to the glade, showing the contours of the tanks and the people fussing around them.

That night, Tkachev did not come to my headquarters. But his absence surprised no one. We knew his restless nature by now. He reappeared in the early morning, as though from the bowels of the earth, begrimed with oil. But his large grey eyes sparkled mischievously.

"Where d'you spend the night, commissar?"

"In a tank."

"Wasn't there room in the coach?"

"It's not that, my highly esteemed battalion commander. The night's been like an academy for me. I was learning the tankman's abc." He then told me how in a few hours he had learned to open and shut the breech-block, to reload the machine-gun, and to take the range.

"Who was your instructor?"

"Platoon commander Moskalev. I'll no longer be a deadweight. I've also learned to start a tank, and to stop it. Though I must say that I handle a locomotive much better."

I looked at Tkachev and thought he was the kind of officer the men would follow without hesitation.

The sun had risen to its zenith when the tanks joined Poliakov's infantry battalion.

It did not take us long, Poliakov and me, to work out our plans for the day. The infantry commander impressed me as a sensible fellow. We had no radio contact with divisional headquarters, and would get the jump-off signal from a staff officer. That was why the two of us kept glancing towards the edge of the forest: any minute now the staff man would appear.

"Why are they so damned slow?" Poliakov said. "What are we to do?"

"Wait patiently, and do nothing until we get our orders," I replied.

The operational plan was clear. The tankmen and the infantry were in combat formation, and ready for battle. The time dragged. Artillery fire resounded at some distance, and we heard the hollow bursts of air bombs.

Finally, the little hunchbacked armoured car hove into view.

Chief-of-staff Kokhaniuk was the first to notice the arrival of the liaison officer. He ran to meet him, snatched the file out of his hands, and raced back with it.

The divisional commander wanted us to start at 15.00 hours. We were to take the villages of Lukino and Demiakhi, then concentrate in the Baturino woods as part of the reserve.

A deafening command resounded: "Take your stations!"

The crews waited with bated breath for the green flares—the jump-off signal. My heart was beating fast: we were heading for our baptism of fire, our first encounter with the enemy. I took another close look at my young companions. They were full of energy.

At last, the green flares rose into the sky.

"Forward!"

Crushing bushes and young pines, the tanks set off. Hanging on to the rings on the turret, the shortish, broad-shouldered infantry commander stood behind me.

We were through the forest, out in the yellow, unharvested rye field, with grey log huts coming to view beyond the slope.

We crashed into Lukino without a shot, meeting no resistance. Everything seemed dead. No one in the streets, and none of the sounds that indicate the proximity of battle.

Poliakov shook his head. Trying to outshout the roar of the engine, he yelled into my ear:

“Call that reconnaissance! That way we’ll probably reach Smolensk.”

The tension slackened gradually. The tankmen were lifting the hatches, sticking their heads out, and filling their lungs with fresh air. The infantrymen were shouldering their rifles. The battle formation was breaking up, a few men were even lighting cigarettes. The golden dome of a church sparkled on the horizon. We glimpsed the roofs of the houses in Demiakhi village.

But the disarming silence did not last long. Shots, bursting shells and a deafening noise shook us out of our state of calm. The battalion engaged the enemy on the march.

In the sector of the flanking company on the left intensive nazi firing cut off our infantry, forcing it to take cover.

One by one all the companies were drawn into the clash.

A roar issued from Poliakov’s lips, “Forward!” He leaped off the tank. The men followed him.

In an instant the field, lifeless just a minute before, was teeming with men. Panzers concealed on the other bank of the little stream, and the



German guns and machine-guns hidden in the bushes opened fire all at once. Enemy planes appeared overhead. The nazis had trenches and foxholes. We were out in the open. Besides, we had no air cover and no anti-aircraft guns to drive off the planes. But even in these unfavourable conditions the Komsomols were ready to fight to the last man: this was their baptism of fire.

"Which way to attack?" the muted voice of company commander Sidorov came across the wireless.

"Straight ahead! We've got to take Demiakhi."

Tkachev and I had the same wavelength. He heard my orders, and began passing them on to the tank crews.

The tanks picked up speed. We knew that any stop, any slow-down, any hesitation would be used by the enemy against us.

The artillery fire grew more intensive. Enemy shells burst in front of the tanks, ploughing up the earth, throwing it on to tanks and the infantry. Our tanks returned the fire.

A fierce clash occurred in the sector of the flanking company on the right, which was advancing north of the village across open terrain. Our tanks were within range of enemy guns. The company fought ferociously and was suffering considerable casualties. In the central sector, however, the enemy was rendering weak resistance, and we took advantage of this at once. Accompanied with tanks, the infantry broke into the village, cheering loudly. The fighting shifted from the outskirts to the heart of Demiakhi.

My tank hugged the wall of a house near the church. I wanted to climb out and hold a council of war with Poliakov, but was instantly compelled to duck back into the tank: German machine-gunners had spotted me, and opened up. The nazis were installed in the attics and lofts, and in the bell-tower, and were shooting for all they were worth. A hail of bullets hit the armour of our tank. Our gunner, battalion Komsomol organiser Tsybulsky, had raised the barrel of his gun high and fired several shells at the bell-tower. The other crews, too, opened fire on the attics and lofts, and at the basement windows. The village was soon cleared of the enemy. The infantry dug in along its outer perimetre.

Our people on the right flank, where commissar Tkachev had chosen to be, had a harder time. The battle there raged on and on for the third consecutive hour. Enemy planes bombed and strafed tanks and people. German panzers, backed up by artillery, mounted a counter-attack. The forces were unequal. Our tankmen were suffering heavy losses. The T-26s and BTs, which had gasoline engines, burned like torches. A few T-34s and the one KV were fighting on.

I decided to give them a hand. Sidorov was ordered to take his company to the right flank, and the five tanks at my disposal, with me in the lead, moved north to Tkachev's and Melnikov's aid.

As we emerged from the village, our tank came under heavy fire. A shell hit the turret and it jammed. Another shell destroyed the gun screen.

But the tank lived on. One more shell hit the turret. We smelled burning rubber. The wiring had caught fire. We used our fire extinguishers. Our breathing came harder. Suddenly, a shudder went through the tank, and it came to an abrupt halt.

"We've had it, comrade battalion commander."

"What's happened?"

"The transmission is out, and the tracks."

Tsybulsky scrambled out of the tank, and lit a large smoke-pot. We were instantly enveloped in black smoke. The other tanks dashed past us and disappeared over the slope. Suffering from burns, deafened by the noise, we took along the machine-gun, the flare guns, the boxes of cartridges, and made it back to the church. Poliakov had already installed himself there, and Kokhaniuk arrived as well.

The enemy artillery fire, which seemed to have died down, was renewed at dusk with added force. Messerschmitts attacked us. The nazis rushed a battalion of infantry against Demiakhi, but failed to regain their lost positions. Our tankmen and infantry hung on, and safeguarded their first, so costly, success.

Night fell. The fires in the crippled tanks were dying, and the rye fields were smouldering.

Late at night we got word of the heavy defensive battles fought by the rest of our division against attacking nazi forces. General Kovalenko ordered me to withdraw my battalion to the Baturino woods. This was anything but easy, for we were close to the enemy.

Hundreds of flares kept lighting up the sky. German artillery and machine-guns kept firing on and on. A reconnaissance plane circled overhead. Poliakov and I kept puzzling how to outwit the enemy and withdraw the tanks to the woods unnoticed. My technician, the taciturn Dmitriev, finally came to our aid.

Somewhere in a village yard he had run across a large Voroshilovets tractor. We started it up to distract the Germans' attention. The furious snarl of its diesel engine compounded with the gnashing of the metal tracks seemed to do the trick. Enemy mortars and guns fired in the direction of the village, while our tanks, platoon after platoon, withdrew to the woods. Kokhaniuk took charge, and led them to the pre-arranged spot.

Seeing the tanks depart, the infantrymen were deeply upset.

"I'll miss you badly," Poliakov confessed.

"Defending a position is easier than taking it," I said, trying to cheer him up. "Dig in securely, position your guns, and before you'll know it the regiment will relieve you."

Poliakov nodded, but said he would be much obliged if I helped him.

And help him we did, leaving behind two tanks which he used as a mobile reserve. I also ordered the crews of three of the crippled tanks to stay, for their guns were still intact.

This heartened the infantry.

While Poliakov and I were positioning the tanks and machine-guns, the medics headed by Laptev



were taking the wounded to the rear, and picking up the dead. In the meantime, technician Dmitriev and a crew of repairmen crawled cautiously to the crippled tanks, attached cables to them, and had them towed to safety.

Two of the tanks, however, including the one manned by the battalion commissar, could not be evacuated. They were in no-man's land: between the stream, across which the nazis lay in wait, and the heights where one of Poliakov's infantry companies had dug in.

Dawn was nearing. It was no longer possible to tow any crippled tanks off the battlefield.

We were troubled by the absence of news about Tkachev's whereabouts. Some said that he had been trapped in a burning tank, others that they had seen him badly burned, pulled out of a blazing tank a minute before it exploded.

Unfortunately, we had no time to do anything about him. The battalion was waiting for my return. I parted sadly with Poliakov. Fate had thrown us together the day before—two young battalion commanders taking their units into battle for the first time. Now, we had to part.

Poliakov broke the silence.

"Whatever you say, we've given the nazis a bad time. Four panzers destroyed. The Germans driven out of the village. We've taken the heights, inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy, and taken three prisoners. Jolly good results."

I nodded my head, though my heart was heavy: we'd paid a high price. About a dozen crippled and burnt tanks, more than twenty men killed



and wounded, company commander Melnikov dead, and battalion commissar Tkachev missing.

"For me," Poliakov went on, "the battle was special. I've seen action. Admittedly, the casualties are high, but we've proven to ourselves that the nazis can be beaten, that they are vulnerable, and that they run when it gets hot. Now I know: they're not going to win. Listen, friend, if we survive, let's meet again some day and remember this first battle in the Smolensk woods."

The turretless tank we were using to tow in its crippled brothers brought my tank to the battalion's positions. We crossed the Bely-Baturino highway. Artillery was moving along it in a southerly direction. Lorries with ammunition and food rushed by, raising clouds of dust. Infantrymen in loose lines were marching along the wayside. But the moment enemy planes appeared in the sky, all movement died instantly. The men concealed themselves at the forest's edge, in the deep wayside ditches, the pot-holes, the tall unharvested rye and wheat. Vehicles and guns took cover, disappearing from sight without a trace.

Diving into gullies and scrambling through dense thickets, the tow-tank delivered us to the battalion by mid-day. Our appearance was sudden, and everyone was overjoyed. We were ringed by the commanders of companies and platoons, and by the tankmen.

Glimpsing the approaching battalion doctor, Liudmila Fedorova, I asked her about Tkachev.

"Not to worry, he's alive," she said, then added sadly: "It's just that I can't manage him. He

refuses to be evacuated to a hospital. Help me if you can."

"What can I do to help, doctor?"

"Talk him into it or tell him it's an order. There may be bad complications if he isn't hospitalised."

Among the trees, in a tent with raised flaps, on a high stretcher, lay a man with a bandaged head.

"There he is," Fedorova said.

Tkachev's face was covered with black blisters, the eyebrows and lids were singed, one of the eyes was bandaged.

"Do you recognise me, Andrei?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he nodded. "The girl is raising a panic."

"That isn't true, commissar. I am not raising a panic. But there are serious grounds for alarm. You are badly burnt. Besides, you've had a bullet through your arm. I beg you, comrade battalion commander, put some sense into his head."

"What about it, Andrei? Go to the army hospital for a couple of weeks, and come back when you're alright."

"Won't do, my dear commander. I'm going to stay right here—in service. Four or five days in the coach, and I'll be as good as new. I have no fractures, and the little burns are nothing."

"Nothing? Nothing, you say?" Fedorova exclaimed. "Besides, you aren't of any use here—in service, as you said—stretched out in the coach."

Tkachev jerked his body, sat up, straightened his back, his one unbandaged eye glaring at us.

"I'll not go anywhere, remember that, doctor. I'll not leave the battalion."

Losing strength, he fell back.

Fedorova took a glass of water, and offered it to him. He shoved her hand away. A silence ensued that none of us wanted to break. Tkachev was the first to speak.

"Tell me, commander, was I a burden to the battalion yesterday?"

I bent down and embraced him. My decision was made.

"Doctor," I said. "Let the commissar stay with us a week. Then, we'll see."

The wounded man gave me a pleased smile. But Fedorova glared at me. I realised that from now on I could hardly expect our battalion doctor to be on my side.

\* \* \*

General Kovalenko looked in at dusk. He was on his way back from the army commander. The division had been given a new mission.

"What is the mission?" I asked, half expecting to be told that for the moment it was none of my business.

"It's the same as before: to give the enemy no rest—day and night."

The general was perched on a canvas stool, surrounded by tankmen. He told us in a quiet weary voice of the situation on our Western Front.

"Will the tankers see action soon?" Tkachev asked.

The general shook his head.

"We need you, but we'll make out without you for a week."

Learning from Dmitriev that two of the crippled tanks had been salvaged, Kovalenko took his hand and shook it warmly.

"D'you realise what two tanks mean to us right now?"

"Certainly, or we'd not have risked our lives towing them off the field."

"How many tanks are intact?"

"Eleven."

"That isn't so bad, battalion commander. But I'm not going to send you into action right away. We'll need you a lot more towards the end of the month."

The divisional commander inspected the companies, had a glass of hot tea, and departed for his command post.

Not more than 24 hours had passed after his visit when a new order reached us from Glebov: get ready for combat.

"Something's happened at the front," Tkachev sighed.

The tanks crept out from under their hoods and lined up in formation in the forest glade. The night was fast approaching. It was awesome in the forest. The tankmen waited in tedious suspense for the orders. The telephone line was cut the second day running. Divisional headquarters had moved to a new location, and the signals chief had probably forgotten about the existence of the tank battalion.

Late at night, a motor-cycle drove up to the forest's edge. A man leaped out of the side-car, and handed me an envelope.

Kokhaniuk held his torchlight to the sheet. It was an order to move to the Yesenaya area and interdict access to the enemy.

"Why are you so nervous?" I asked the liaison officer who had brought the order.

"The Germans have breached our lines. I barely managed to get to you."

"Who has Baturino?"

"I don't know."

I saw that I would get no coherent information from the man, and ordered the tanks to move.

The lead tank with Tkachev and me roared off in a southerly direction. Our column made a long line along the twisting road.

A second note from our divisional commander reached us as we approached Baturino.

"Don't stop en route and be in position at dawn," it read.

Tkachev tugged at my sleeve.

"Let's clear up the situation. Why are people moving the other way?"

We stopped a group of soldiers. The senior among them was a platoon commander.

"What's happened?"

"The front is breached. The Germans are in our rear—they've reached Baturino."

"How many of them?"

"Who knows."

"Why are you withdrawing?"

"Battalion commander's orders."



I jumped off the tank, followed by Tkachev, and ordered the platoon commander to come along.

Ahead of us, in the dark, loomed the houses of Baturino.

Soldiers were running from the town. Horse-drawn carts and ambulances were coming at us at full speed. We heard sporadic machine-gun and rifle fire.

Catching sight of our tanks, the soldiers scattered. Many dropped into the wayside ditches.

Someone shouted:

"Panzers!"

Tracer bullets were fired our way. The lead tank halted, and the rest lined up behind it.

"Comrades, those are Soviet tanks!" Tkachev and I yelled as loud as we could.

The firing stopped. Commanders of the tank companies crowded round me. They wanted to know what to do next.

I consulted my commissar, and said the battalion would do what the divisional commander had ordered: capture Yesenaya. Still, I was assailed with doubt: What if Baturino is really in enemy hands? Senseless fighting a night battle without infantry support. We'd all be knocked out.

Suddenly I knew what I had to do.

"Get out of the tanks!"

The hatches clanked. I was surrounded by the tankmen.

"Drivers and gunners stay with the tanks, the rest follow me to Baturino."

The hastily formed company, dressed in tank-

men's overalls and wearing tank helmets, armed with pistols and flare guns, set out for the town, entering it at a double. The tanks, led by Kokhaniuk, crawled slowly in our wake.

The shooting in the town continued, black shadows flitted past in the sidestreets, and horse-drawn carts with wounded men in them raced up and down.

The moment our tanks entered Baturino, the "infantry" company combed the streets, and found not a single German...

By dawn we came to the appointed area.

We were met by General Kovalenko. He asked why we had taken so long. I told him the story, and confessed the embarrassing precaution I had taken at Baturino.

"There's never smoke without fire," the divisional commander replied. "A downright misunderstanding there—in Baturino."

That was when I learned the facts of the night's events. In the afternoon reinforcements had come to the defence perimeter. The march companies did not bother about concealment, and joined the battalion in the forward trenches right before the enemy's eyes. That was not all. The commanders who had come with the reinforcements had no idea of the location of our sub-units, and had marched up and down along the front for a while. The enemy noticed the unusual activity, and opened up with all his mortars and machine-guns. A little later, a group of panzers sortied against the left sector of our line, broke through to the rear of one of our battalions which was then

changing shifts, and the newcomers, who were mostly newly enlisted, lost their heads.

"Off with you to the river's bank," the general ordered. "And don't let the nazis across. Beef up our line with tanks. Their appearance alone will hearten the men. They're mostly people with combat experience. Not the kind you met at Baturino. There we had newcomers."

The tanks under Kokhaniuk headed south.

I had been told to stay at divisional headquarters. This was the first time I saw the divisional commander so gloomy and irritable. He paid no attention to me, and berated Glebov and his staff.

"I'm not blaming the retreating soldiers, they had no one to control them. But how could *you* let matters reach that pass?"

Glebov felt guilty and did not try to justify himself. Luckily, the operational duty officer arrived that moment.

"Comrade General, the commander of the army is on the line."

A hush fell over us. Kovalenko headed wearily for his dug-out.

Glebov and I were alone.

"He's right, I made a blunder," Glebov said. "I know it. Should have inspected the sector. There wasn't anybody there but the newcomers."

I tried to console him.

Strong tea restored our strength and calmed us. Glebov's usual optimism returned to him.

"Luckily, the outcome wasn't as bad as it could have been. That's where you learn real warcraft.

You know, I often think about it: we wasted too much time on theory..."

"But theory is essential, Victor," I said. "No, I don't agree with you. The Academy has been generous, but you can't have ready solutions for all occasions."

The September weather turned cold at night. The little streams and puddles had a thin coat of ice in the mornings. During lulls in the fighting, the men were busy making their dug-outs warmer, and the trenches deeper. They were out to turn the heights, and forest's edges and glades into a more comfortable place to live in.

In the past week we had mounted a few abortive attacks. All I had left were five tanks. We lost many of our men, some killed, many wounded.

The division was at a disadvantage. Its sector was 16 kilometers long, the reserves had been used up, and no reinforcements were expected.

It was stuffy in Glebov's dug-out. Dry twigs crackled in the red-hot stove. A narrow tongue of light came from the lamp—a spent oil-filled shell case.

"We'll have to put your tankmen in the trenches," the chief-of-staff said, his eyes fixed on my face.

"Listen to me, Victor," I pleaded. "The war's only starting. We'll need trained men for the tanks. It takes time to train them. The trainees are tomorrow's officers. They are the ones who'll finish the war. We mustn't squander them."

Glebov, who heard me out without interrupting, phoned the general. The conversation lasted only



a few minutes, but to me they seemed like eternity. Finally, the chief-of-staff put down the receiver, and walked up to me.

"It's out of my hands. The divisional commander won't retract his order. You man the defence line in the Yerokhovo-Zhidki sector."

The fate of the battalion was settled. The tankmen were being converted into infantry, and were to hold their perimeter at all costs.

I followed barely distinguishable paths to the edge of the forest, where the battalion's ambulance was waiting for me. The men were huddled in it, taking a rest.

"Wake up," I shouted.

The complement gathered in a deep gully.

The hush before dawn was broken by the ringing voice of the commissar, Andrei Tkachev:

"Komsomols, friends, we've got our battle orders: to dig in, to get into the trenches, into foxholes, and not let the enemy get past us. That's the orders, that's what the Motherland wants us to do, and there's no higher authority. Since we're short of tanks for the moment, we'll fight as infantrymen: with rifles and tommy-guns. Fliers who have no plane go to the trenches. Sailors have left their ships and are fighting for Leningrad and Odessa on the shore. Are we tankmen any worse than they are?"

The reply was simple and clear: "We'll do our best."

Just last night I had been trying to prove to Glebov that the tankman's place was in a tank. And today...



Tkachev came up:

"Well, what's there to say?"

"Three-nil for the boys!"

The tankmen crowded round us.

"Will they take our tank helmets away?"

"Will they make us take off our overalls?"

"No, no, boys," I reassured them. "You'll stay as you are—in tankmen's uniforms."

For nearly a fortnight, the tankmen held their defence sector. They had machine-guns, sub-machine-guns and rifles, and repulsed enemy attacks with the backing of mortars and guns. On our flanks and behind us stood the five tanks—our last mobile reserve.

Nights, we scouted, laid ambushes, or stood guard. And in the daytime, like a blight, an elongated height lay before us, held by the enemy the second month running. The German infantry had dug in deep, reinforced with panzers, and with observation posts that had a clear view of our rear, of all the approach lanes to the front, of all our movements and shifts.

One day I was summoned to the general. Raising his eyes from the map, Kovalenko asked:

"How's the 'infantry' making out?"

"Fine," I said.

The divisional commander gave me a friendly smile.

"Don't you think it's time to get out of the foxholes. High time you did some exercise."

He led me to the map and pointed at the elongated height we had learned to hate.

"Aren't you fed up with it?"

"Up to the gills, Comrade General."

"Well, what d'you suggest?"

"Let's take it," I uttered impetuously. "Our Komsomols will do it. Just tell them to."

The divisional commander came closer and embraced me.

"I was counting on that. Make out the battle order, Lieutenant-Colonel Glebov," he turned to the chief-of-staff.

Tkachev and I hastened to the forest's edge where we had left our ambulance, which the tankmen fondly called jack-of-all-trades.

"Things are humming, battalion commander," Andrei Tkachev remarked. "The boys are spoiling for a fight."

\* \* \*

We were jumpy the night before the attack. It was a hunchbacked height, long, with countless gullies and depressions. All our attempts to scout out the hillsides had come to nothing. A few days before, the nazis had stopped all movement along the front. They had dug in deep, and had their guns and machine-guns well concealed. We heard no panzer engines sputtering. By all evidence, the enemy meant to hang on to this key position at all costs.

The divisional commander summoned me to his command post and examined the battle plan. We had decided to deploy our five tanks in broad formation, with a company of riflemen following each of them.

The companies, depleted in previous scrim-

mages, had thirty to forty men each. A separate company had been formed of tankmen who had lost their tanks. There were more than a hundred of them, with Pyotr Moskalev in command.

The general approved my proposal, which meant that I should take charge of the joint infantry battalion, while the tanks would be taken into battle by Tkachev. We took a few days to scout out the paths and clearings in the woods. Each tank was given the landmarks it was expected to follow.

We also came to terms with Major Semashko, commander of the artillery regiment, who got all his guns and ammunition ready. His artillery opened up at 6.30 hours. We were in our foxholes, submachine-guns and carbines on the ready. Each of us again checked his incendiary bottles and anti-tank grenades.

Tkachev, company commander Sidorov and I embraced each other before the jump-off.

"Don't lag with the tanks," I said to the commissar.

"Don't worry, brother. I know what to do. And see that you and your footsoldiers keep up with us," Andrei smiled back.

Pyotr Moskalev, who was in command of the tankmen turned infantry, looked at the luminescent face of his tankers watch and issued his order. Green flares went up over the forest's edge. That was the jump-off signal.

The tanks started, followed by the infantry.

We advanced to the height in short rushes, backed by the fire of our artillery.

It was past 7.00 hours. The open field was lit up by the rising sun. I saw our tanks reach the peak of the hill, firing away. There was a long cheer. But that moment the enemy artillery began firing. Luckily, the shells hit the forest's edge we had abandoned a good half an hour before. The nazis had been caught napping. Our plans proved right. The precipitous attack and our massive shelling paved the way to success.

In retreat, the nazis abandoned a mortar battery, two good panzers, a dozen machine-guns, and hundreds of hand-grenades. We also captured some prisoners.

Instantly, we began organising our defence, installing machine-guns, digging in, and getting two battalion field pieces ready for direct shelling. Our five tanks we deployed in a depression to cut all the main roads.

The relatively easy victory was gratifying, but it also put us on our guard. We were aware that a desperate fight was in the offing.

It was past ten o'clock, and silence still reigned. The signal men put the phone into operation, and we had our first conversation with the general.

The divisional commander was obviously pleased.

"Comrade Dragunsky, my best to you and to your boys. They've done very well. Now hold on to the height. Our artillery will back you. You can count on that. In the afternoon, Samoilovich's regiment will mount an attack to draw the enemy's attention from you."

"We'll hang on, Comrade General. Our only

request is that you order Semashko to join us. Have him put up his command post next to mine, that'll make things much easier."

"Fine, fine. In fact, Semashko could not wait, and is already on his way to your CP. Now, divisional commissar Kabichkin will speak to you."

The commissar said many nice things, congratulating us on our victory.

"Your battalion has done well. The army's military council is pleased. But the day is only beginning, so be on your toes."

Enemy planes roared overhead — first a scout, then a low-flying observer. That minute, artillery commander Semashko arrived.

"Now, watch it," he said. "They're going to start in a few minutes."

Unfortunately, he was right. At first, the nazis hit the woods where Maximov's regiment had its quarters. Then, they focused on our height. Shells and mines burst all round us. And before we could recover our breath, enemy bombers appeared. The earth shook from the exploding bombs. One blast tore off the roofing of our dug-out. Scrambling out of the hole with some difficulty, we moved to a neighbouring dug-out.

Then a relative silence set in at last. The hill was mutilated and scarred with shell-holes.

Our phone line to divisional headquarters was torn. Just the little transmitter Major Semashko had brought with him was intact.

The nazis had lost pace. They were on a treadmill. And we took advantage of it to restore order and to get the firing line ready. I had a quick talk



with Tkachev on how to co-ordinate our actions. The medics were attending to the wounded.

A little later, we moved our CP to the dug-out of the battalion's chief-of-staff, which had escaped damage. No sooner had we moved in than we heard our artillery booming. Our guess was that Isaak Samoilovich's regiment had gone in to distract the enemy.

"We aren't alone. That means we'll hold," I thought.

The lull in our sector did not last long. Little billows of blue smoke appeared over the woods. We heard panzer engines roaring. Then hundreds of white flares burst above the tree-tops, and we saw dozens of little black spiders detach themselves from the forest and scurry towards our height. I glanced at the artillery commander. He said:

"Too early to start firing."

The enemy panzers were followed by armoured personnel carriers with the infantry. Each minute they came closer and closer.

Now it was Semashko who glanced at me.

"Suppose we start?" he asked.

"Let them come a little closer—say, abreast of those three pines."

A wave of my hand was the signal, and our positions came to life. The battalion field pieces and mortars opened up. So did the T-34s. Semashko's guns went into action a few seconds later.

The enemy infantry, caught unawares, fanned out and dug in its heels.

Two panzers and a personnel carrier burst

into flames. The enemy seemed to falter. But that did not last long. The nazis came to their senses, summoned the air force, and again sent the panzers forward. Once more our firing forced the enemy to stop. The Germans sent the infantry into an attack. The assault lasted for two hours.

The sun was slowly sinking in the west.

We had set fire to one more enemy personnel carrier, and had managed to cripple one more panzer. But that was not going to halt the nazis.

Our supply of shells was running out. The field pieces, which had been firing at close range, were out of commission. All our hopes were pinned on the surviving four tanks, and on Semashko's artillery.

"Let the panzers past and shell the infantry. That'll cut it off from the panzers," I said to Semashko. "And after dark we'll hunt down the nazi tanks with our incendiary bottles."

And that's what we did. All our firing power was directed at the infantry. It flinched, and lay low. But the damned Messerschmitts appeared again, and ploughed up the height with impunity for all of half an hour.

After they flew away, a dozen enemy panzers charged us. The infantry that followed them soon reached our trenches. Hand-to-hand fighting broke out.

A deadly clash went on in the trenches, the dug-outs, and all over the hill-side. It was senseless retreating to the woods, and all seemed to be lost. Darkness was our only hope. But the sun still hovered on the horizon and would not hear our pleas.

Semashko's guns, those that were still intact, were firing at a furious rate.

Suddenly, the picture changed. It was as though someone had reversed a reel of film. The din of combat weakened. What had happened? I popped out of the dug-out and watched the enemy soldiers running for the woods.

Then I saw what it was. Tkachev, sensing the desperate situation we were in, had taken his surviving tanks and hit the enemy flank. The tanks had rolled over the enemy infantry, and crippled two panzers. The enemy broke and ran, followed by the panzers: they were afraid to operate in isolation in the rapidly approaching darkness.

I ran along the trench to Moskalev's position. He led his company over the top. Cheering, it dashed off in pursuit of the nazis. The height was swiftly cleared. Tkachev's brilliant manoeuvre had saved the day. But the commissar was still in hot pursuit of the nazis.

Finally, the sun took pity on us and vanished behind the horizon. Panzers and personnel carriers were burning brightly in the dark. Tongues of flame leaped high to the sky.

Kokhaniuk was busy with the radio set.

"Where's Tkachev?" I asked.

"Three times I've ordered him back—back to our positions."

"Well?"

"He said he got my message, that he's fighting, that he's surrounded on three sides, and can't break out."

Another hour passed. Tkachev's radio had stopped responding. The firing had died down. Moskalev came up to me.

"Comrade battalion commander, let my company go look for Tkachev. I know the terrain."

I let him go, and he plunged into the darkness.

A few hours later he appeared in the door of my dug-out. The pale light of our oil-lamp fell on his haggard face.

We knew at once that something awful had happened.

"Our commissar—the commissar," Moskalev mumbled inaudibly.

They say men at war get accustomed to death. There is, indeed, a bitter piece of truth to that. But word of the commissar's death hurt us badly. The burden of our grief was heavy to bear.

The phone rang. The signals men had managed to restore the connections, and got the general on the line.

The divisional commander's voice seemed far far away.

"How are you?"

"Poorly, Comrade General."

"Why?"

"All the tanks are knocked out. So are the guns. Heavy casualties. The commissar is dead..."

The general was breathing heavily.

"I had no idea you were a pessimist, battalion commander. Don't lose heart. Your men have done well. Tell them, we'll fight for our country as they have fought today. Now, listen carefully. The army commander said you and all your

subordinates are being cited for decorations. I want you to make out the papers. I've got to have them tomorrow. In the morning you'll be relieved by Maximov. I'm giving him an artillery regiment and a battalion of panzer destroyers. You are to take your battalion to the Baturino forest. New orders will be forthcoming."

We marched off the battlefield in a column. On a stretcher lay Andrei Tkachev's burned and mutilated body. We took turns carrying it.

Next morning, the battalion lined up beside the one surviving tank. A coffin, covered with red and black cloth, was placed on its turret. The tankmen had made it of empty shell boxes. Shaped out of spent copper cartridge cases were the words:

*Andrei Tkachev — commissar and friend  
1909-1941*

The ceremony was short. Komsomols of the three badly depleted companies all spoke beside Tkachev's grave. Pyotr Moskalev, his arm bandaged, climbed atop the tank, which was our rostrum. The breeze ruffled his fair hair. He stood in silence for a minute or two, and began to speak:

"Last night here, on my native Smolensk soil, we destroyed several nazi panzers. I know the time will come when panzers will burn like torches on German soil, in Berlin itself. The sacrifices we'll have to make won't stop us. The difficulties won't stop us. We'll come to Berlin in the end. D'you hear me, Andrei? We swear over your



body that we'll avenge you, and the grief of our mothers and sisters."

With blazing eyes, Moskalev looked at the men:  
"Let's swear it, Komsomols."

"We swear, we swear," we heard in reply.

Moskalev continued: "When the war is over, I'll come to Baturino, and I'll bring the young people to this forest, to this hundred-year-old oak tree, and I'll tell them: be like him, like this splendid lad from Ryazan. He lived a simple life, and died like a hero for his country."

The coffin was gently lowered into the grave. A volley was fired in Tkachev's honour.

\* \* \*

Glebov came to our battalion with a pile of news, not all of it good. Divisional commander Kovalenko had been seriously wounded. Divisional commissar Kabichkin was shell-shocked. Nikolai Kozlov, chief of divisional artillery, had been killed.

"We have our hands full with that height of yours," Glebov said. "The fighting there hasn't stopped in two consecutive days. But Maximov is doing fine. He's hanging on. You'd be of great help to him."

"Well, what's the problem? Send us in. We are 131 strong. You'll see, Victor, we won't let you down. We have grown used to fighting on foot."

"Too late now. I've no authority over you any more."

He took me aside and showed me a despatch:

“The battalion is being taken out of your charge. Send it to the Urals—the tank training centre there.”

I was flabbergasted. Though there had been rumours of an order that tankmen were to be kept out of danger, the ceaseless fighting we had been engaged in prevented us from taking advantage of it.

“When are we expected to go?”

“Tomorrow morning. You’ll get your provender papers made out today. I’ll try and look in again before you leave.”

Glebov departed. Our minds were turned to what lay ahead for us.

That day we had visitors from divisional and army headquarters. They brought half a dozen lorries, provender for ten days, changes of underwear, and new uniforms. Grigory Gurevich, divisional quartermaster, was unusually active.

“Take whatever you need, battalion commander,” he said to me. “And tell the people in the Urals that we’ve got everything, that the one thing we need most is tanks.”

The woods were full of life, petty officers running up and down, storekeepers fussing, loading dried bread, canned goods, soap and tobacco.

The ambulance had again become our headquarters.

Moskalev kept at me:

“Let me ask the divisional commander.”

“What about?”

“I want to stay. I can’t leave my land, the collective farm, my mother and sister. If I go with

you I may never return to the Smolensk area.”

“How will you leave the Komsomols? Don’t you know there’s lots of fighting still to come?”

Dejectedly, Moskalev shuffled away.

The night before our departure was filled with activity. It was fairly cold. The companies lit campfires, no one slept, the men were reminiscing about the events of the past two months. The Komsomols had arrived at the front mere boys untested in battle, and were now manly, battle-steeled soldiers capable of commanding tanks and platoons.

They fell asleep shortly before dawn, nestling close to each other for warmth. In the morning, they lined up in their parade splendour, eyes fixed into the distance. It was a sunny September morning.

Lieutenant-Colonel Glebov, acting divisional commander, arrived to see us off. He read the army commander’s order, and thanked us and the entire complement for our prowess of the the past two months.

Our hearts beat faster when he read out the names of those cited for government awards. Among them were the names of those who would be decorated posthumously.

“Tankmen,” Glebov addressed us, “tell the people in the Urals that we’ll not spare our lives to defend the Motherland. Off with you, lads. Get new tanks, and come back to the front. The war is only beginning. We’ll end it in Berlin.” Glebov paused, then continued: “I hate to disappoint you on a day like this, but I have to: you’re

getting a new battalion commander. Dragunsky has been promoted captain, and, by decision of the army's military council he is to be divisional chief-of-staff as of today. Your new commander is Senior Lieutenant Kokhaniuk."

A murmur rippled through the ranks. All eyes turned to me, on the right flank of the battalion.

"I know you're surprised." Glebov went on. "But you are aware of the losses the division has sustained in the past few days."

Kokhaniuk shouted: "At ease! Break rank!"

I walked up to Glebov:

"Victor, I hadn't given my consent, have I? You have no authority to leave me in the infantry. Don't separate me from the battalion. I formed it, I fought with it, and I want to be with it in the battles to come."

Company and platoon commanders approached. Someone said: "Let the captain stay with us."

Glebov stood hard by me and said, lowering his voice:

"I have no right to retract the orders of my superiors. Besides, you ought not put tankmen above the others. As far as I'm concerned, the words 'infantryman', 'flier', and 'gunner' sound as good. On one condition, of course: if the men fight well."

Glebov left for his command post. Our parting with him was cool.

It was past mid-day when my comrades-in-arms got into the lorries.

I walked from lorry to lorry and said good-bye. Kokhaniuk shouted: "Attention! Start up!" And the vehicles set off along the same Rzhev highway by which we had come to the front two months before.

Three people stayed: Liudmila Fedorova the surgeon, Laptev the medic, and I.

The lorries turned in due course into little black pinpoints, while the voices of the tankmen kept ringing in our ears: "Until we meet again in Berlin!"

\* \* \*

In my memoirs I will try to describe my friends and army mates. For the moment, however, I would like to run far ahead and speak of a meeting I had in October 1961. I had the honour of being elected delegate to the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> I stayed at Hotel Ukraine, and from the windows of my suite a resplendent view opened on Moscow sparkling in evening lights. That night a man stood beside me, pressed against my shoulder, whose friendship I have enjoyed all my young and adult life. He asked:

"David, remember our watch on the roof? Remember night-time Moscow in forty-one?"

"Yes, Volodia, and remember our oath?"

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<sup>1</sup>David Dragunsky was elected delegate to the 22nd, 25th, and 26th congresses of the CPSU. At the 26th Congress (in 1981) he was again elected to the Central Auditing Commission of the CPSU, one of the Party's top governing bodies, whose member he has been since 1971.



The reader will probably have guessed. Yes, it was Volodia Beliakov. He and I had sworn in 1941 we would fight the war shoulder to shoulder. Colonel Beliakov was still slim, straight-backed, without a single grey hair on his head.

Had he even turned grey, as I have, for me he would still be the same Volodia.

I have not said yet that we were not alone. At my other side, there by the window, pressing up against the window-pane, stood young Volodia Beliakov—Volodia junior, my friend's son.

"Father, Uncle Dima, what roof, what oath?" he asked.

Volodia senior put his arms on my shoulder and his son's, and said:

"Uncle Dima and I swore in 1941 that you would see these lights."

"But, daddy," the boy said disappointedly, "as though I don't know I hadn't even come into the world then."

My friend laughed but said nothing more.

I wanted to tell this frail boy who looked so much like his father everything I knew about Volodia, our friendship, the "three tankmen", and, of course, about the war. But would it be right? Or would it be better not to shield young Beliakov from the things we had seen and experienced? To be sure, why should he not know what his father and I were thinking that moment? And we were thinking of our never to be forgotten friend, Pavel Zhmurov.

He got his appointment to the front right after I did. In war it is not possible to consider

all the friendships and attachments, or the three of us, our trinity, would have been together.

All the war long we tried to meet, but in vain. Beliakov and I were able to maintain regular contact, but we lost trace of Zhmurov. Volodia preserved all my letters, written in foxholes and dug-outs, in tanks and lorries, in hospitals, and even on a stretcher.

That night in 1961 I had not seen the bundle of letters, and was even squeamish about reading them, though Volodia kept assuring me that they were as good as a diary and would help in writing my memoirs.

A happy thought occurred to me that instant: "Say, Volodia, let your son read my letters. There isn't anything in them that he should not know."

"No, first you read them yourself. Then you'll know if he ought to see them," my friend said firmly.

"As you wish," I nodded. "One day, Volodia, I'll let you read my book—that's if I ever write one."

Beliakov's son was obviously disappointed.

"Everybody thinks I'm still little," he said resentfully. "Yet I understand much more than you think. Don't you realise, Uncle Dima, that I dream of a friendship like yours and daddy's? Don't you realise that I want to be like Uncle Pavel Zhmurov?"

A lump rose in my throat, the lump that is for men the substitute of tears.

Zhmurov, Zhmurov! There you were, not dead.

Not dead at all, not for me, not for Colonel Belia-  
kov, not for his son Volodia.

Years later we had finally learned how he lost  
his life.

Zhmurov was wounded. The medics put him  
on a stretcher, and bandaged his wounds. Yet  
the enemy was near, and coming closer.

Our Pavel pushed the medics away, got to his  
feet, and strode firmly to the wayside, where  
he had a better view of the depression.

Head bandaged, upright, tall, he stood beside  
the road and hurled anti-tank grenades at the  
approaching nazis.

I can picture him, his prominent cheekbones,  
and the eyes, which his anger and fury turned the  
colour of steel. German panzers were rolling  
at him. They fired point-blank.

He died like a man.

If I had a son, I would want him to be like  
Pavel Zhmurov.

And the more I think of it, the more convinced  
I am that Volodia junior was right. There is nothing  
wrong about his reading my letters to his father,  
or these notes that I wrote about our young years.  
In fact, it is essential that he do it.

These days, Volodia Beliakov and I work in  
the same city, and live in the same neighbourhood,  
even in the same house, and, what is more, on  
the same flight of stairs: at Smolenskaya Embank-  
ment 5, Moscow. My flat is on the third floor,  
and his on the seventh. Frequently, over a cup  
of tea, we talk about our past.

The month of September 1941 was running out. The autumn in Smolensk region had come early that year. The nights were frosty, a vapoury haze stood over the marshes, and yellow leaves fluttered to earth in the woods. It was bitterly cold in the trenches and foxholes.

The painful days of retreat with the counter-attacks and the hard fighting were behind us. Our 242nd Rifles Division had been holding the line north of Yartsevo for over two months. The enemy had not been allowed to take Bely, or Rzhev, or Vishny Volochek, or to cut the Moscow-Leningrad railway.

The battles of July and August had worn out both sides. The nazis lay low: we had made them go on the defensive.

We, too, were in a sad state. The regiments were badly depleted. Some companies had no more than a few dozen men.

The seriously wounded divisional commander, General Kirill Kovalenko, had been evacuated to the rear. The same lot befell divisional commissar Kabichkin. Chief of divisional artillery Kozlov was killed in action. Many of the company commanders were out of commission. Still, the enemy, who had been straining north, was brought to a halt.

There was a lull in the fighting—no more than the usual exchange of fire, the usual shells landing now and then behind the lines. From time to time, it is true, the nazis opened up with all their guns.

And we paid them back in the same coin. The war reports said: "Battles of but local importance in the Smolensk sector."

We made the most of the operational pause to buttress our defences.

Now that I was chief-of-staff of a rifles division, I, a tankman, was engrossed in things of the infantry. What was worse, I did not know enough about many of the things the staff had to do.

Acting divisional commander Victor Glebov, the chief "culprit" of my transfer to the infantry, never lost an opportunity to say that he thought me a born infantryman. To which I never failed to reply that all the same, sooner or later, I would rejoin the armour.

In the latter half of September, the enemy in our sector of the front got busy. Panzer units were being moved in, guns and mortars brought closer to the frontlines, and enemy air scouts snooped overhead.

One night Glebov summoned me.

"I have just had a call from the Army Commander," he said. "By all evidence, the nazis are up to something. You're to go to the right flank of the army at once, see how things are, and arrange for co-ordinated action with the 248th Division in case of a nazi attack. I expect you back in the morning."

By nightfall I got to the command post of the flanking division on the right. A forest path led me to the divisional commander's dug-out. I was met by his aide-de-camp. Going down the steps wet from the rain, we entered the dug-out.



At the table, head bent low over a map, sat my former Academy instructor, General Karol Swierczewski. He had changed little, only the crow's-feet at the edge of his eyes had grown more noticeable.

I was struck dumb by the suddenness of our encounter. Seeing my confusion, the general gave me his hand and said jovially:

"Glad to see you, Captain, glad to see you hale and hearty. Tell me about the fighting. How come you are with us?"

The first impression some people make on you is so lasting that you retain it all your life. General Swierczewski was one of them.

I got to know him in early 1939 at the Frunze Military Academy when he was appointed senior instructor of our group. He had just come back from Spain, where he had been commander of the 14th International Brigade, and later of a division. We had learned soon enough that the redoubtable General Walter, the hero of Republican Spain, and Karol Swierczewski, our instructor, were one and the same person.

Swierczewski had been in charge of our classes and laboratory work, he took us to army camps, and he helped us learn the art of war. And the better we got to know our instructor, the more we admired him, this remarkable man, this internationalist who had dedicated himself to the struggle for the ideals of communism.

Late at night I departed from General Swierczewski's command post. In parting, he said:

"It's still a long way to victory, I know, but we will meet again, I'm sure we will."

Then, slowly lighting a cigarette, he said:  
"We'll meet in the land of the vanquished enemy."

And he was as true as his word. On 8 May 1945 on the Elbe, not far from Dresden, the 55th Guard Tank Brigade, of which I was commander, met the troops of General Karol Walter Swierczewski's 2nd Polish Army.

I was reporting to divisional commander Glebov on the previous day's events.

Late into the night, our heads bent over the map, we were occupied in deciding how to strengthen the flanking regiment on the left. We finally made up our minds to give regimental commander Major Samoilovich a battalion of artillery, and to deploy our anti-tank reserve in his sector. The divisional engineer was ordered to mine all approaches with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, to mine the depressions and roads leading north.

But our line was vulnerable all the same, because we had no tanks.

A blast of tremendous force, accompanied with an unidentifiable roar, hit our dug-out. The hefty logs of our four-layered roof groaned. One of the walls caved in, the oil-lamp went out, there was the smell of fire.

We clambered out of the dug-out with great difficulty, gasping greedily for air.

A large group of nazi bombers was sweeping past. It had dropped a few bombs and hurried on north in the direction of Bely and Rzhev.

Our division, on the army's left flank, was in trouble, for it had been outflanked on two sides. Nazi panzers had thrust into our rear, and were driving on towards Bely.

The enemy was advancing east, leaving us behind.

## Fireworks Salute Us

We were well into 1943, an important year for us.

The triumphant battle for Moscow had become history. I had seen fighting in the mountain ranges of the Caucasus, in the swamps of Kalinin region, and in the snow-clad land of Novgorod. The glorious battle of the Kursk salient was over too.

The fortunes of war flung me from one sector of the front to another. I had been wounded thrice, and shell-shocked once. The best cure was our victorious march west.

The wound I got at Kursk kept me in bed a long time. But all the desperate efforts of the doctors and nurses to keep me any longer in the Kharkov military hospital were in vain. Moscow celebrated the liberation of Belgorod and Orel, Poltava, Kremenchug, and the Donets Basin with fireworks. I couldn't bear it in hospital any longer. On a dark September night, with a group of recuperating men like myself, I escaped from the hospital and headed for the active army. On the way to the Dnieper I visited my corps, which had been withdrawn for a rest to the environs of the city of Sumy. My place was occupied. Besides, I did not want to stay in the reserve.

Corps commander Semyon Krivoshein handed me the Order of the Red Star and the Medal for Valour that I had been decorated with for the fighting in the Kursk salient, treated me to a dinner and a little vodka.

"I'm going to recommend you to my friend General Shtevnev," he said. "For commander of a tank brigade. Hope you'll live up to the trust that I put in you."

He took a piece of paper and quickly scribbled a note. He sealed it in an envelope, and gave it to me:

"You're to go to Trebukhovo, where you'll find General Shtevnev."

I thanked General Krivoshein profusely, and set off for the check-point. I boarded a lorry that was going my way. This was how I got to the Voronezh Front.

To be honest, I was apprehensive. I had run away from hospital, I had no papers of any kind—neither for the issue of clothes and food, nor any posting order. All I had was General Krivoshein's note. But the world, as they say, is not without good people. Here, among the tankmen, I met officers who knew me from the early months of the war on the Western Front. Some knew me from the Northern Caucasus, others had been with me at Belgorod and Bogodukhov. They took me to a little hut, the quarters of the armour commander of the Voronezh Front, General Shtevnev.

At the entrance I was stopped by a captain. He wanted to know what I wanted, and a few minutes later invited me into the hut.

On entering the room, I saw the general sitting at a table, and reported to him. He rose, gave me his hand, and asked me to sit down. He opened the envelope, read the letter, then glanced at me, and said:

"What is it you want, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel?"

I told him of myself, and of my part in the fighting. The interview was short. He asked me of my physical condition, and said:

"I approve of your wish, and I'll suggest to the Front's Military Council that you should be put in command of a brigade."

That day I was taken to see General Vatutin, commander of the Voronezh Front.

"The Military Council has decided to put you in command of a brigade. Will you manage?"

"I'll do my best, Comrade Commander..."

"Judging by his decorations, he should manage," General Shtevnev observed. "Besides, my tankmen speak well of him."

"In that case," General Vatutin said, "he'll fight under Rybalko's command."

Turning to me, he added:

"There's heavy fighting at Bukrino. You're to go to the Dnieper today."

It didn't take me long to find a lorry. I climbed in, and was off for the river crossing. The vehicle bumped and lurched on the uneven, broken road. It would lurch into water-filled potholes, and lurch out of them again, and keep going to my destination—the Bukrino sector a hundred kilometres south of Kiev.



Each minute the front came nearer. Enemy planes popped up overhead. The Luftwaffe hung like a thundercloud over the Dnieper. There were dogfights and air battles. Our anti-aircraft guns were booming away. Nazi guns and mortars were shelling the river's bank.

I asked the driver:

"When d'you think this will stop?"

"When the war ends," said the bold fellow smilingly.

I liked the way he put it.

"If so, make tracks for the crossing," I said, "since the end is still far away."

The driver looked at me inquisitively, and changed gears.

"Still, it would be best to wait a little," he said, "lest we get killed."

"Whatever you do, buddy," I said, "you won't die twice, and whatever you do, one day you'll die all the same."

"Sharp, aren't you," he replied. "Who are you anyway?"

I identified myself. The driver grew serious and, to my disappointment, also less talkative.

At the bridge an officer from the personnel service was waiting for me.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Dragunsky?" he asked me politely.

"Yes."

"I'm to accompany you to the commander of the Army."

We walked across the bridge. The freshly planed

boards and the smell of wood tar showed that it had been laid only recently.

The shelling grew louder. On the Dnieper's right bank, the splutter of machine-guns added to the din.

A group of nazi planes appeared overhead. We dropped into the nearest shellhole, and lay there in silence, each thinking his own thoughts. What my neighbour had on his mind I do not know, but the thing that worried me then was: no, not to die here—nothing could be more stupid—before ever taking charge of the brigade.

Before my mind's eye I saw General Vatutin's severe eyes, and seemed to hear his voice again: "Will you manage?"

Army commander Rybalko's command post was in a deep, overgrown gully, and consisted of about ten dug-outs. Around them stood camouflaged coaches, lorries and motor-cars.

The army commander's dug-out looked fairly spacious. Maps were scattered on the table. Raising his eyes from them, General Rybalko got to his feet.

He scrutinised me for a long time, in silence, probably still pondering the matter he had been thinking about a minute before.

"Do you know the sector?"

"No, Comrade Army Commander, I'm just out of hospital."

"How are you now?"

"Nothing to brag about, Comrade General, but strong enough to fight."

What I was afraid of happened. Rybalko came up to me, and asked point-blank:

"Why did you leave the First Tank Army? It is rightly considered one of the best."

I told him the facts of the case honestly. And my reply seemed to satisfy him. He took another close look at me, and bent over the map, explaining the situation:

"Here, south of Kiev, hard fighting is going on night and day. The enemy has brought in considerable reserves. We've lost the element of surprise. It's hard now to take Kiev from the south. We've drawn off the enemy's main forces, but we've still got to outwit him, shift quickly to the north, and deliver the main blow there."

I was listening intently, and watching the army commander's gestures.

"The brigade you're going to get is badly depleted," he said, striding up and down the dug-out. "The surviving tanks are few. It hasn't had reinforcements since the Orel battle, where it acquitted itself very commendably. Its commander, Colonel Leonid Chigin, has been killed, and posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Lose no time, assume command at once."

A signals officer led me across depressions and gullies to the positions of the brigade. It was getting dark. The crimson sky, torn into cloudy shreds, was cut by flares of all colours.

That night I inspected the battalions, companies, and platoons. In foxholes and tank sheds, in the trenches and at emplacements I made my acquaintance with the tankmen, the tommy-gunners,

scouts, engineers, and artillerymen. I inquired into the state of the units, and the enemy positions. Here, under enemy fire, in fact, I assumed my duties of brigade commander.

We had to prepare for the battles to come. But to our surprise, the enemy did not seem to be active. Seeing the futility of his counter-attacks, he had gone on the defensive.

The few days that followed convinced our command that a head-on attack south of Kiev would not dislodge the enemy. It planned to shift the main blow to some place north of Kiev. We began regrouping forces.

To outwit the enemy, we put up wooden dummies of tanks. A few artillery pieces were moved up and down the lines, and we fired our guns from different spots. Some of our radio transmitters, too, kept sending messages to confuse the enemy.

In the daytime, the pontoon bridges were put out of the way, and the usual shelling continued. After nightfall, however, we crossed back to the other bank, and gathered in the woods. In this way, at the end of October, in a matter of three nights, General Rybalko's tank army moved from south to north of Kiev.

General Kravchenko's tankmen, the infantry of Moskalenko, Baranov's cavalry, and our brothers of the Czechoslovak army had had to make room for us in the crowded northern sector. The brigades and corps of the tank army arrived, and with them our 55th Guard Tank Brigade.

On 30 October, a fine day that was a little too

warm for the autumn, army, corps, divisional and brigade commanders were summoned to the village of Novo-Petrovtsy.

We gathered in the old village school.

In the large classroom where we would hold our conference I saw the tank army commander, Pavel Rybalko. At some distance from him sat army commander Kirill Moskalenko. I also saw General Andrei Kravchenko, former instructor of the Saratov Tank School and now commander of the 5th Tank Corps, and General Victor Baranov, commander of the 1st Guard Cavalry Corps. Near-by sat our friends, the Czechoslovaks. I recognised the grey-haired smart officer among them. It was Ludvik Svoboda.

We had been summoned to hear the orders of the Front Commander, and to get our combat assignments. The 1st Ukrainian Front had been entrusted the offensive on Kiev.

General Vatutin set forth the operational plan curtly, in clear and precise terms, and set each of us—the armies, corps, and divisions—our missions.

“The Supreme Command has ordered us to launch the offensive on 3 November,” he said in conclusion. “The Ukrainian capital is to be liberated not later than 6 November.”

We were in high spirits as we filed out of the classroom. Waiting for their cars, the officers chatted. I was a newcomer in the 3rd Army, and stood a little apart, excluded from the conversation. Suddenly, a smart-looking colonel in an unbuttoned greatcoat strode up to me.

"Golovachev is my name," he said, offering me his hand.

We got introduced. I gazed inquiringly at the brigade commander of whom I had heard people speak commendingly. To be frank, that first time we talked I did not particularly like him: it seemed to me he was overdoing it — imitating Chapayev's dashing ways.<sup>1</sup> But the encounter had been very short. Golovachev's car arrived, and he yelled out in parting:

"Until we meet in Kiev, friend."

I did not stay in Novo-Petrovtsy long either. My aide, Pyotr Kozhemiakov, who hailed from Leningrad, and my driver Pyotr Rykov, a grey-eyed young man from Kursk, pulled up before the school building. After I got in, the car roared off along the village street. Near the village well I saw a number of cars, and beside them, some way off, the mobile kitchens of my brigade. I got out of our jeep and found myself surrounded by the cooks. They gave me some cool well water to drink.

Near-by, two fair-haired blue-eyed boys in light-khaki uniforms were gesticulating and explaining something to the Soviet soldiers who crowded round them. They were men from Colonel Ludvik Svoboda's 1st Czechoslovak Brigade, who had also come to the well for water. I saw a battalion quartermaster from my brigade and called him over, ordering him to let the boys

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<sup>1</sup>Vassily Chapayev (1887-1919) — a hero of the Civil War portrayed in Dmitry Furmanov's novel, *Chapayev*, and in a film of the same name.



take the water out of turn. Instantly, the lorries came to life, some backing away from the well, others moving up to the side.

I lighted a cigarette, and waited.

A Czechoslovak officer came up to me hesitantly.

"Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," he addressed me, "we're going to fight for Kiev with you. We were told so today. Tell me, please, is Kiev a large city?"

I understood what he said, though he spoke a broken Russian. The question stumped me a little. I had never been to Kiev but had heard and read a lot about it. So I strained my memory. I recalled the Kiev-Pechery Monastery, the Kreshchatik, which is Kiev's renowned main street, and Vladimir Hill. My story must have pleased the young officer. In any case, he listened attentively. And when I finished, he shook my hand, and said:

"Hope we'll meet in Kiev."

"Hope we'll meet in Prague," I replied.

"Yes, yes, in Prague. But how soon will that be?"

As I was jumping on to the footboard of my jeep, I shouted loudly to be heard above the noise of the engine:

"Soon enough. The road to Prague lies across the Ukraine. Until we meet again in Kiev."

"Until Prague."

My words were destined to come true.

In the morning of 3 November 1943 our artillery opened up full blast. More than three thousand guns went into action along the ten-kilometre-long front.

The "softening up" lasted for more than 90 minutes. In addition, bombers and attack planes belaboured the enemy from the air. Clouds of smoke and flames enveloped the countryside.

General Kravchenko's tanks entered the breach made by the bombardment, followed by General Moskalenko's troops. Our brothers, too, the Czechoslovaks, went into action. General Rybalko's tankmen were poised to develop the success of the forward echelon that stormed the enemy positions. Their turn came in the afternoon.

The fighting shifted to Belichi, Pushcha-Voditsa, to Sviatoshino and Bernovo railway junction. The enemy was bringing up reinforcements, the second echelons, clinging to the outskirts of the city. General Baranov's cavalry moved along Irpen river, while we tankmen straddled Zhitomir highway.

To take control of the highway meant trapping the enemy in Kiev, cutting off his escape to Zhitomir and Belaya Tserkov.

In Pushcha-Voditsa, at the fourth clearing, I caught up with my 1st Battalion and ordered Captain Kovalev, its commander, to make better time.

Standing upright in the turret, hatch lifted, I motioned to the driver and my tank advanced. A few minutes later, Kovalev's tankmen passed me.

The radioman kept repeating my order: "Bypass Sviatoshino on the right, and get to Zhitomir highway."

Dozens of tanks from other corps and brigades were approaching the Kiev-Zhitomir road. Kova-

lev's battalion was already on it, having taken Belichi and Bernovo junction.

It was foolhardy to attack Zhuliany with just one battalion. Doubly so, because we hadn't scouted out the enemy. And I had no right to give orders to the fifty or so tanks from other units. Still, something inside me, an inner voice, kept saying: "Take control of all this mass of tanks and lead them against Zhuliany." It was a tempting idea, though I might get it in the neck for abusing my powers. My thinking was interrupted by the corps commander's voice in my earphones:

"What's holding you up?"

To tell the truth, nothing was holding us up. And the enemy's resistance in this stretch of country had slackened visibly. The corps commander's question spurred me to action. I summoned the commanders of tank companies and officers near-by for a short palaver, and issued the order for all tanks to head for the airfield in Zhuliany.

The short November day was fast running out when our tanks approached Zhuliany. Burning German aircraft were scattered about the field. The airfield's huge fuel tanks were exploding. In my earphones I again heard the corps commander's voice: "Don't stop, drive on, drive on."

We came to Vasilkov. The fighting at the approaches to the town was at its bitter height. The nazis flinched in face of our massive assault, and retreated. Tanks were converging on Vasilkov. It was slow going because everywhere, lining the streets, the pavements, and right in the middle

of the thoroughfares, stood people, rejoicing.

"Why so many people in this little town?" I asked the little boy who ran up to my tank.

"We don't live here."

"Where do you live?"

"We're from Kiev."

The boy told me that the nazis had begun taking it out on the people of Kiev, and that to escape death old men, women and children had taken refuge in the surrounding woods and neighbouring villages.

The rain, which had begun in the morning, was gathering force each minute. But the people would not disperse. Many were searching for their kin among the soldiers and officers who had just liberated Vasilkov.

The brigade headquarters was quartered in a cold, neglected elongated room of a two-storeyed house. The torches cast a weak light. The belly of the little iron stove was red from the heat. A few officers were studying the map.

General Suleikov, the corps commander, was to arrive any minute. We had been warned that towards the close of the day he would be sure to visit us. To our surprise, it was army commander Rybalko and General Melnikov, member of the military council, who came to our headquarters.

"Well," the army commander snapped without preliminaries, "is the brigade ready for more fighting tomorrow?"

"Yes, Comrade Commander. All we need is a short rest."

"Fine. Rest up until morning. Tomorrow—"

Rybalko approached the map and pointed with his finger at a black spot on it, the town of Pavoloch. "Your brigade, acting as the vanguard, must detour Fastov in the south, thrust far into the enemy rear, and take Pavoloch. Avoid any spun out battles, and don't go any farther than Pavoloch until the main force catches up with you. To the right of you, Colonel Lupov has an identical mission: he is to take railway junction Popelnia. Clear?"

I hesitated, and delayed my reply as I tried to figure out the mission we had just been given.

"I have no contact with corps headquarters," I said. "I have no idea where it is, and how to report the mission you have just assigned us."

The Army commander stared at me for a minute, then observed:

"Don't worry. I'll let them know."

We walked out into the open. After the lighted room, it seemed we had come to a bottomless dark pit.

With arms outstretched, we groped our way to the car. The driver switched on his handtorch. Gradually our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. We could see the shapes of the men, the contours of tanks, lorries, guns, and kitchens.

"Move out of here at dawn or the enemy will catch you," Rybalko said, and lowering his voice added: "The front commander is pleased with what you've done. As far as I know, he's applied to have the 55th named the Vasilkov Brigade. We

expect the order to that effect to come through from Supreme Headquarters tonight."

I stood silently before the Army commander.

"I trust you, and hope that tomorrow the brigade will take Pavoloch. That'll be our gift on the 26th anniversary of the October Revolution. You haven't forgotten, I presume, that it's tomorrow."

The brigade's chief political officer Dmitriev, who stood beside me, spoke up in a ringing voice:

"Certainly not, Comrade Commander. How could we forget?"

After the Army commander's departure everything in the brigade began to hum.

We had had a hard day. Tanks got trapped in the mud. Lorries stalled. But there's a silver lining to any cloud. It was no day for flying, and no enemy planes bothered us.

On abandoning Vasilkov, the nazis withdrew towards Belaya Tserkov. Battling against the muddy roads, we followed in their wake. Riflemen were perched on the tanks. They had covered themselves with canvas sheets and took comfort in the warm air wafting from the engines.

I remembered Rybalko's order to act boldly, to stay out of spun-out clashes, and to take Pavoloch at any cost.

At the time, that town was of crucial importance for the success of our offensive. In the vicinity of Pavoloch were roads leading from east to west and from north to south in the direction of Kazatin and Berdichev.

Colonel Lupov's mechanised brigade was ad-



vancing to the north of us. His brigade and mine were to thrust forward, crush enemy resistance, overcome the muddy roads, seize the Pavoloch-Popelnia line, and hold it until the arrival of the main forces of the 3rd Tank Army.

Following steadily in the wake of the scouts and the lead guards, the brigade turned southwest a short distance from Fastov.

Along a stream and the gullies lay the villages of Berdniki, Polianichentsy, Korolevka and Chervonny, forming a barrier many kilometres long that was hard for us to pass.

Our first halt was beside a wooden bridge across Kamenka river. It had been mined by the enemy, and while the engineers were disposing of the mines, our main force arrived, lining up behind the vanguard units.

At mid-day we received a radio message from our scout, Serazhimov, who informed us that he had run into enemy scouts and had taken prisoners.

I did not wait for the brigade to finish crossing the river, and hurried off to meet the scouts.

In an abandoned unheated hut we interrogated the prisoners. A tall, freckled sergeant-major looked at us with frightened eyes. Instead of answering our questions, he kept mumbling:

"Hitler kaput, Hitler kaput."

"To hell with Hitler. Answer, what is your regiment, your division, where did you come from?"

"Goering also kaput," the prisoner said.

We shouted at him, and he finally told us that

a few days ago his 25th Panzer Division had been rushed from its defence sector on the English Channel to the Eastern front. At Berdichev, the 146th Motorised Regiment, and then a panzer regiment, had detrained and were now moving to Kiev.

"There's no Kiev for you anymore." I couldn't restrain myself. "It's been liberated two days ago."

The nazi blinked, fear in his eyes.

"Oh, but our captain said we would be quartered in Kiev."

We sent the prisoners to Army headquarters. They testified that fresh units of the 1st and 25th panzer divisions had come from France to our sector of the front.

So that was why generals Vatutin and Rybalko had wanted us to take Pavoloch and Popelnia as soon as possible. Pavoloch would be a staging area for a further thrust to Kazatin and Berdichev.

The presence of fresh German units in our sector made me review our further actions. It was clear that the brigade would not cope with a strong enemy force. But should we withdraw or wait here for our main forces? We would lose time both ways, which might cost us dearly. The thing to do was to outwit the enemy, to outflank him, to hit him from the rear. A risky business, but the risk was worth it.

The rain and fog complicated matters: it was difficult to follow the enemy's movements. Not encountering resistance, the enemy and we were each following our own route. We were moving

in a westerly direction to Pavoloch, the Germans eastward to Kiev. We were on a parallel course, and did not engage each other. But suddenly we heard guns blasting away. Vasily Uskov, commander of our lead guards, reported excitedly over the radio:

"I'm firing. Some two kilometres away panzers are lining up for an attack."

"Hold them for half an hour," the chief-of-staff instructed.

Uskov managed to keep the panzers at bay for a whole hour. This enabled us to slip past them. It was getting dark when we reached the village of Maloye Polovetskoye. A smell of smoke—someone was lighting a stove, and sparks rose from the chimney like a golden hail.

Somewhere near-by we heard the sound of explosions. Flames shot up into the dark sky. I heard battalion commander Nikolai Lordkipanidze's voice in my earphones:

"Fire! Fire!"

A little later, scout Saveliev reported that the skirmish was over: Lordkipanidze's battalion had wiped out the rear forces of the Nazi 25th Division's panzer regiment.

The picture I saw was indeed impressive. Dozens of gasoline vans were aflame, tongues of fire rising high to the sky. German soldiers were running about in confusion among the burning vehicles. They were trapped. The enemy's carelessness had cost him dearly.

In the early hours of 8 November we called a halt on the eastern outskirts of Maloye Polovet-

skoye. I had to know where my battalions were. The absence of any communication from corps headquarters troubled me. The radio was silent. Evidently, headquarters was far away.

After midnight, Captain Roy, battalion chief-of-staff, returned. He reported that the prisoners we had taken had given important information. Rybalko himself had interrogated them, and immediately after the questioning had them sent to Front headquarters. We learned from Captain Roy that it was impossible to pass Korolevka, because panzers had appeared south of Fastov. This news was highly disturbing.

"Does that mean that we're in the enemy rear?" I asked.

"Looks like it."

"Have you brought any orders?"

Roy pulled out a map. His finger pointed at Pavoloch.

Now that we had established the nature and, roughly, the strength of the new enemy group that had arrived in our sector, I expected that the brigade would be told to halt on the bank of the Kamenka or withdraw to somewhere around Fastov. But the Army commander's orders had not changed.

Dmitriev and I sprawled beside the stove. We pulled off our muddy boots, and instantly fell asleep. But our sleep was light. We listened intently to every sound.

A siren howled at dawn, and we heard shouts, noises, and machine-guns bursts.

In a minute we discovered that a large group

of nazis had been spotted on the western edge of the village. There was no time to lose. Tank battalion commanders and the commander of our artillery battalion had already come to me. I ordered them to attack the enemy, to give him no time to dig in, to drive him into the open, and charge.

As we emerged from the village, we saw the following. A few of our tanks were stationed in the huge field. At varying distances from them stood some 500 German soldiers and officers with arms raised. They stood without moving. My comrades and I gaped in astonishment. Then we got the story.

The 146th Motorised Grenadier Regiment of the 25th Panzer Division that had been rushed in from the Atlantic seaboard fully armed and excellently equipped, had been marching to Kiev. It was raining, the roads were washed away, and the nazis had decided to spend the night in Maloye Polovetskoye, the village we had entered that night.

Meanwhile, our scouts, sent in a westerly direction, had lost their way. The noise of engines had not disturbed them, for they took it to come from our own tanks. Nor had the enemy scouts been any more vigilant. Some nazi officer told the commander of the 146th that their panzers had already entered Kiev, and that the burning tanks were the remains of defeated Soviet units.

The pleased nazis went to sleep. In the morning they discovered that Soviet tanks were driving about calmly in the village. Hastily, the Germans

began to withdraw to the near-by woods. But they did not make it. Our tanks overtook them.

That morning, after we opened fire, the nazi 146th Grenadier Regiment ceased to exist. We took 450 prisoners.

Towards mid-day, a light breeze drove away the lowering clouds. The brigade, deployed by battalions, set out for Pavoloch.

A long column of German lorries and cars was moving along the Popelnia-Skvira road, escorted by several panzers. We mounted a surprise attack. We learned later that this was the headquarters of the 25th Panzer Division.

As I write these lines, I have before me the book of F.W. von Mellenthin, a former nazi general, *Panzer Battles 1939-1945*. It is an interesting book in parts: a testimonial by an enemy who is compelled to admit the superiority of the Soviet Army over the Wehrmacht, to admit the failure of Hitler's plans. Examining the fighting in the Zhitomir area, Mellenthin wrote:

"On 6 November Manstein decided to concentrate all available panzer divisions in the area Fastov-Zhitomir, with a view to thrusting towards Kiev... On 7 November I set up the Headquarters at Belaya Tserkov, approximately fifteen miles south of Fastov...

"Unfortunately 25 Panzer Division was prematurely involved in the fighting at Fastov. This division had an unfortunate history; it was formed in Norway and since August 1943 had been training in France... At noon on 7 November the advance guard of P.G.R. 146 ran into T-34 tanks



south of Fastov and was thrown into a panic. Unused to any fighting the troops streamed back in great disorder, and although they were rallied by the personal efforts of General von Schell, the divisional commander, yet they had great difficulty in escaping from the Russians.”<sup>1</sup>

Witness and participant in these events, I can only smile at this description. “Rallied by the personal efforts of General von Schell” indeed! He could not have rallied anyone. For the simple reason that he had saved his own skin by fleeing in a lorry in a southerly direction abandoning his subordinates to their fate.

That day, we fulfilled Army Commander Rybalko’s orders and entered Pavoloch.

In the morning of 9 November we still had no connection with corps and army headquarters. This put us in a quandary.

Not until the evening of that day did the situation clear up. Through the interference and noise we made out the following words of our army commander in our earphones: “Proud of you. Congratulations. Organise perimeter defence. Crush enemy in the rear. We’re coming.”

We spent hours over the map, analysing the situation, studying each hillock, all the woods, every cluster of trees, and every little village.

“Here’s where we’ll fight to the death, in the enemy rear, and wait for the rest of the corps. That’s orders,” I said.

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<sup>1</sup>F.W. von Mellenthin. *Panzer Battles 1939-1945. A Study of the Employment of Armour in the Second World War*, Cassel & Company Ltd., London, 1956, p. 245.

There were no dissenting voices. Battalion commander Lordkipanidze, a handsome figure of a man, straightened his back. Pyotr Fedorov, the stocky Siberian who hated long speeches, nodded approvingly. Dorosh and Bak, commanders of the partisan detachments that had come to Pavoloch that morning, said:

“Now we’ll show them —”

That night we decided to send three tanks under Captain Kovalev to reconnoitre Vcheraishe railway junction, which was 23 kilometres away, for we had information that Germans were detouring there.

Saveliev had taken a group of scouts along to see how things stood at Popelnia, and to make contact with the advance guard of Colonel Lupov’s force.

At dawn, the little boys of Pavoloch had gone off to the near-by villages to spread false rumours that a large force of tanks and artillery had come to the town, and that it also had “katyushas” — the lorry-mounted multiple rocket launchers dreaded by the Germans. All we really had was 17 tanks, four field guns, two mortars, an anti-aircraft battery, and one “katyusha”. But we had to deceive the enemy and win time until the arrival of the rest of our corps.

Soon the whole area was filled with news that Soviet troops had come to Pavoloch and Popelnia in force.

Heavy fighting had begun at the approaches to Fastov. A German panzer group was trying to break through to Kiev. Along the way it at-

tacked troops of our 1st Ukrainian Front and Rybalko's Tank Army, which had advanced far west.

The tank battles at Fastov were really ferocious. New trainloads of enemy reinforcements were arriving from the Western front—the English Channel, Holland, and Belgium. But failing to gain ground and suffering heavy losses, the nazi troops reverted to defensive tactics.

The continuous fighting for Kiev, the Dnieper, and Ukraine on its right bank, had fatigued our forces. Failing to breach the panzer barrier, Rybalko, too, went on the defensive for a while along the Kamenka.

The attempts of the 7th Tank Corps to come to our aid proved in vain. We were alone—Lupov's motorised brigade in Popelnia and the 55th Tank Brigade at Pavoloch. Some twenty kilometres lay between us. We were deep in the rear of Manstein's army, far from the frontline (it was some 60 kilometres behind us). The situation called for self-possession, a cool head, and resolve.

In the meantime, the enemy had massed hundreds of armoured cars round Pavoloch. The weather had improved, enabling the Luftwaffe to harass us. Nazi planes circled over our township from dawn to dusk. The bombs they dropped demolished the houses. Fires broke out. We were pressed to the ground. And we knew the enemy's tactics all too well: the air-raids would be followed by ground attacks.

Events took a stormy turn in the afternoon of 13 November. Soon after an air-raid and an

artillery pounding, three panzers appeared on the horizon. Behind them we saw the contours of armoured cars and personnel carriers. Through my field glasses I counted ten, twenty, thirty—

“Don’t shoot! Don’t give yourself away! Let them come closer,” I said into my transmitter.

Our ammunition was running out. The fuel tanks were half-empty. The tanks had less than a dozen shells.

To the right of the road fields stretched to the horizon. The rain of the day before had melted the thin shell of ice, and made the terrain impassable. To the left lay deep gullies and depressions, with streams running along them.

Battalion commanders Lordkipanidze, Kovalev, and Fedorov were waiting for my signal. I clenched my teeth, and said nothing. The temperamental Lordkipanidze kept begging for permission to open fire. I would not reply.

I could see the sinister crosses on the nazi vehicles through my field-glasses. Each second the faces of the Germans were more and more clearly outlined. The barked orders of their officers could be heard more distinctly.

“Give them the signal, brigade commander!” my deputy, the ever calm Ivan Kalenikov, pleaded. “They’ll come so close we won’t have time to strike back”.

A panzer came to view from behind a mound some three hundred metres away. Now was the time to act.

“Fire!”

My order was picked up not only by Fedorov,

Kovalev and Lordkipanidze, but also by the company and platoon commanders.

The guns of our tanks hit the enemy at close range. The artillery, too, went into action. Two of our heavy machine-guns joined in. So did our only surviving mortar.

The lead panzer blew up. We had hit the very centre of the nazi swastika. One more tank burst into flames, then was engulfed in thick black smoke, shutting out half the sky in front of us. The infantry in the armoured cars, personnel carriers and on motor-cycles saw they had run into a trap, and scurried for cover in a gully. The panzers, too, withdrew there. That was what we had expected, what we had counted on. They would stall and sink in the marsh at the bottom of the gully.

Lordkipanidze and Fedorov headed for them, with three tanks from our reserve, our tommy-gunners and the partisans under Dorosh and Bak, following in their wake.

A loud, triumphant cheer rolled across the field, the road, and the depressions.

Riding a horse-drawn peasant cart, Dorosh, Bak and I descended to the bottom of the gully. The tankmen and partisans were busy collecting the booty—dismantling machine-guns and artillery pieces, and taking charge of the ammunition and the radio transmitters. It was a moment of boundless elation. We had seized 39 German personnel carriers and armoured cars, plus one good tank.

It is common in life that something bad is fol-

lowed by bad, for it never rains but it pours. And something good is followed by good. Hence the Russian proverbs, "when trouble comes open wide the gates" and "joy is hitched to joy".

While we had been fighting the enemy group, our demolition gang had blown up the railway bridge at Popelnia. An enemy train with arms and ammunition was blasted out of existence.

Encouraged by our initial successes, we and the partisans redoubled our activity. The enemy's communications were now constantly threatened. Meanwhile, we were being continuously reinforced by paratroopers.

Our presence in Popelnia and Pavoloch was not a thing the nazis could suffer for long. They decided to wipe out our two brigades. By 15 November, they managed to disperse Colonel Lupov's motorised brigade. It had fought back fiercely for more than 24 hours, then, having suffered heavy losses in men and arms, bereft of ammunition and fuel, it was cut in two. One group headed by the colonel went north into the woods and joined the troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front a few days later. The other group, under Captain Shumilov, breached the enemy ring and joined us in Pavoloch. At that time, too, a battalion of tommy-gunners of the 54th Tank Brigade, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Moskalchuk reached our positions. This was both good and bad—good because now we had more than a thousand and a half men, and bad because we had few vehicles and still less fuel and ammunition.

A critical time had come for the brigade.



Prisoners confirmed that the nazi command had decided to envelop us from east, north and west, to drive us into the lakes and marshes south of Pavoloch, and thereby gain a free hand in the Fastov area.

What we needed most in those uneasy days and hours was clarity: where did the enemy intend to hit? whence were the nazi troops going to close in on Pavoloch?

Should I let the tanks reconnoitre the lay of the land? What use would that be? They wouldn't get through. Should I send a few soldiers? They, too, would be instantly discovered. The partisans? That was it. They would help as they had done so many times in the preceding several days.

Two girls came to the classroom of the village school where we had our headquarters. They had been sent by Dorosh, the partisan commander.

Slim, dark-eyed Galina Chernukha scrutinised me and my mates in complete silence. Beside her fidgeted a short girl, blue-eyed and golden-haired, by name of Masha Sotnik. It was hard to believe that this little girl with laughing, mischievous eyes could cope with a serious and dangerous assignment.

On getting their orders, the two girls left. We heard nothing from them for two days and nights. At dawn on the third day they returned. Seated at my table, interrupting each other, they told us what they had seen.

Masha was the first to speak. And her story was anything but consoling. The Germans were deploying tanks and mortars on three sides.

Panzers and infantry in large numbers were concentrated north and east of us.

South of us were lakes, marshes and woods. Now, it was easy to guess the enemy's intentions. The nazis meant to drive us into terrain where we would be trapped.

The other girl, Galina, who had kept silent before this, spoke only one sentence:

"I heard the nazis will not attack until tomorrow morning. They intend to send in a large number of panzers."

"Thank you, girls. Now, we'll try to figure things out."

"Will they really wipe us out?" Masha asked.

On hearing her question, Grushman, a political officer, joined the conversation.

"We are not going to surrender. That, dear girls, is out of the question. And if we don't manage to smash the enemy, we'll at least outwit him. So there's nothing to be afraid of."

Later developments confirmed the accuracy of what the girl scouts had told us. The two young patriots had done us an inestimable service.

We still had hope of relief. Rybalko knew where we were, he'd not abandon us, he'd come to our aid. All the same, we were in an unenviable predicament—cut off from our main force, and facing the prospect of tangling with the enemy in the absence of requisite stocks of fuel and ammunition.

We had to think of some manoeuvre that would help us hold our ground and do the enemy the greatest possible damage.

The chief-of-staff, the deputy chief of the

political department, and I bent over the map, that ever-present, eloquently silent companion and helper to whom we turned for answers to many of our questions.

“What are we going to do next?” I asked the officers in the room in a deliberately loud voice.

The question was all too clear: how to act, considering that we had no fuel, no ammunition, and no contact with either our corps or the Army.

There could be just two answers: either we withdraw into the woods that night, taking along all our weaponry and abandoning the tanks, join the partisans, and operate against the enemy jointly, or we break out of the enemy ring, hit him from behind, and make contact with our main forces.

The first to speak was Major Kalenikov:

“We’ll not break the enemy ring. We aren’t strong enough. Butting against the enemy all those sixty kilometres—that’s inconceivable.”

He was backed by the chief-of-staff, young Captain Erzin:

“We won’t make it, brigade commander. We’ll only lose our men. And we’ve got more than a thousand. What if we operate with the partisans and paratroopers?”

The political officer, Grushman, was looking at me intently from under his bushy black eyebrows:

“What about it?” I turned to him. “What have you got to say?”

“All I can say is that we’re in a fix.”

Silence reigned in the stuffy room.

I did not like the idea of going into the woods

with the partisans. Not because I under-rated the partisans. Having spent ten days and nights with Dorosh and Bak I had acquired a sound respect for these brave and fearless men. But I, a professional soldier, a tankman with dozens of hard tank battles to his record on the Western Front, at Kalinin, and in the Kursk salient, was determined to carry on as before—fighting the enemy in a tank. Besides, the brigade had hundreds of tankmen who could take their battlewagons into battle. That is why, weighing the two propositions, I was firmly opposed to taking refuge in the woods. Meet the enemy head-on. Take a chance. Those days, risk was unavoidable. Every battle was a risk, a life and death gamble. And any risk was justified in the struggle to beat the nazis.

I spoke in a hoarse, inflamed voice. I spoke slowly, as though verifying each word:

“We can and must help our army. We are going to try and break out. We are going to do as much damage to the enemy as we can. There is only one option: not to sit it out in the woods, not to sink the tanks in the marshes and lakes, but to try and break through.”

Ivan Kalenikov was again the first to jump to his feet.

“The discussion’s over,” he said. “We’ve got our orders.”

I felt in my heart that the others approved of my proposal, and this bucked me up.

The officers left, heading for their units. Nazi planes appeared again. One more air-raid. Pressing up against the walls of the houses, heads raised

to the sky, the helpless men gazed at the attackers. Our anti-aircraft guns were silent: their supply of shells was running out. The enemy planes flew lower and lower, reducing velocity, spotting targets for their bombs. On the ground everyone had found some concealment. Not a movement was to be seen. Then the first plane turned, followed by the second and third, and, forming a ring, they let loose. Clods of earth and red-hot bomb fragments flew in all directions. Buildings were set ablaze, the panes in the windows rattled plaintively.

At long last the raid was over. The bombers flew away. Only a few fighters still circled in the air. Suddenly, we heard the sound of a U-2, the famous low-flying slow Soviet spotter-plane. Two enemy fighters were instantly poised to attack it. But the U-2 flew still lower, disappeared behind one of the houses, and landed in a backyard. The nazi fighters circled in impotent fury, then gained altitude and flew off to overtake the bombers.

A crowd of people ran to the backyard. All of us expected good tidings from this winged messenger. And we were not disappointed. The two young fliers handed me the Army commander's order. As always, the general was brief:

"Tonight, hitting in a northerly direction, breach the enemy's defence line. Reconnoitre enemy units, and take to the woods north of Stavishche. You will be met. Artillery will back up your breakthrough. The signals for passing our lines will be orally conveyed by the fliers. Gromov." (Gromov was Rybalko's code name.)

This meant the decision we had taken that

morning was right. What was more important, the Army commander remembered us. He remembered and had made arrangements to ease our breakthrough. I was more than ever proud of my Army commander.

A covey of village boys saw off the plane. They crowded round it, and some daring kid had even climbed into the cockpit.

"Hey, you whelps, away from here!" shouted the old man in whose backyard the plane had landed.

A young woman brought the fliers some milk. They drank it gratefully, pulled on their helmets, and climbed into the cockpit. The U-2 bumped over the furrows of the vegetable plot, jumped once, then rose slowly, heading for Fastov. We watched it go, until it became a small black spot in the sky and finally disappeared among the clouds.

The short November day was fast ending. The anxiety that had been gripping us, faded away. A dark night was dropping over Pavoloch. In the schoolhouse where we had our headquarters, people kept coming and going. All of them had their specific missions to clear up, to get the final orders.

The town came to life. Soldiers were dragging guns out of their emplacements. Machine-guns were being readied for action. The tanks and other vehicles were being concentrated in the northern part of the village. Units were lining up, and reconnaissance groups were being formed.

The people of Pavoloch stayed in their houses,

anticipating the bitterness of another parting. But what could we do?

The hostilities were developing contrary to what we would have preferred. And we knew what bitter trials lay in store for the peaceful populace after our departure.

The large classroom was crowded with officers — unit commanders, staff officers, and commanders of the partisan detachments.

The order of the day was brief. It amounted to the following: to cover 60 kilometres in the course of the night, breach the enemy line at Kamenka river, and reach Rybalko's Army by morning.

To confuse the enemy, we had decided to breach his line not in the east or north, but in the west — where the nazis least expected us. The enemy was sure that we would choose the shortest, eastern, route. That was why we were surrounded north and east with tanks and infantry. The nazi preparations had not passed unnoticed, for dozens of partisan scouts had been busy observing them.

Our manoeuvre would enable us to get some 10 or 15 kilometres out of Pavoloch in a westerly direction, then thrust into the enemy rear, and then make a sudden turn north or east.

Dorosh and Bak said they would distract the nazis' attention. They counted on moving south into the woods, taking along the young people and all those of the Pavoloch populace who were able to bear arms.

Our parting with the partisans was a moving affair. We knew they would have a hard time



without us. We knew, too, that they would do their duty. A firm handshake, a silent, manly embrace. And the partisans set out on their mission.

The scouts, installed in ten of the captured personnel carriers, assembled on the northern edge of Pavoloch, waiting for the signal. Captain Shumilov, who was in command, had an unusual mission: riding German vehicles, his group was to penetrate the enemy lines, open fire, causing a panic and drawing off the main enemy forces, and enabling the brigade to jump off in the westerly direction.

The good cheer that reigned among the scouts heartened me. I only asked them to try and not speak Russian.

"Don't worry, comrade brigade commander," Lieutenant Andrei Serazhimov responded grinning. "We'll not utter a single Russian word. We'll communicate in German, but we'll hit the nazis in Russian."

We knew all the boys well: Andrei Serazhimov, Nikolai Novikov, Alexander Tynda, the Riabov brothers, and all the others who were standing around that dark night waiting for the signal. It came at midnight.

The scouts set off north, and a short time later machine-guns and tommy-guns were heard from an easterly direction, red and green flares burst in the sky, two guns roared somewhere, a crippled tank, whose gun was still intact, fired a few shells. That was the partisans' show of force.

The Germans were stunned. But their confusion

did not last long. Tracer bullets criss-crossed the dark sky, aimed at the partisans. Mortars rumbled hoarsely. The main force of the brigade, taking advantage of the situation, set out in a westerly direction, unnoticed by the enemy.

Crashing through the weak covering force of nazis, we found ourselves in their rear in a matter of thirty minutes. The enemy encirclement was breached. The tank engines roared loudly, as did the engines of our other vehicles. Hanging on to the rings of the turret, to the gun-barrel, or simply to the fellow alongside, we stood on the tank, peering into the darkness. There was a lot of shooting far away. Some personnel carriers of our scouts were aflame, and the red tongues of fire licked the low autumn sky.

A compass on a dark night was not much use. Fortunately, we had good guides: the girl partisans Masha Sotnik and Galina Chernukha, who were perched beside us on the tank. Above the roar of the engines, I heard Masha's voice:

"We're approaching Andrushki. It's time we turned north."

The column veered, and a few kilometres farther we took an easterly direction. Now we were moving parallel to the enemy lines. The enemy had guessed our manoeuvre. The nazis saw they had been outwitted and outflanked. The shooting to the right of us ceased. Instead, mortars and machine-guns opened up in our direction.

Our column, some five kilometres long, was like a fire-breathing serpent. The tanks and vehicles were racing east in top gear. And we had the good

luck of running directly into enemy artillery emplacements. The nazi guns were crushed. The tanks opened fire on the enemy. We fired from tommy-guns, carbines, and threw hand grenades. Someone even used a flare pistol. We fired without aiming, but that, too, paid off, for it created confusion in the enemy camp.

Meanwhile, the column was driving on to its destination, and the stunned enemy took cover, afraid to betray his positions.

The scouts made the most of the situation. They disengaged themselves from the enemy, losing a few of the personnel carriers, and soon took their place in the tail of our column.

The partisans, Dorosh and Bak at their head, had completed their mission, and were quickly withdrawing to the woods.

The brigade was driving to its goal at top speed. We hit our first snag when crossing the Popelnia-Skvara railway line: a lorry at the head of the column stalled. We were compelled to halt. Trying to pass the stalled vehicle, a personnel carrier turned turtle. This resulted in a jam.

The tommy-gunners and staff officers dragged the vehicle out of the way, clearing the road. Off we went again.

"We're off course. Turn a little left," the girl partisan said. And we did as we were bid. But no sooner had we turned than strong firing resounded behind the column. The nazis, having come to their senses, had opened fire, hitting the tail of our brigade. A few vehicles went up in flames, but Pavoloch was now far behind us. We had laid

back dozens of kilometres with practically no enemy resistance. Our headlights turned off, we kept going. The front lines were closer and closer.

We passed the large village of Parissy.

Another five kilometres and we would reach Pochuiki. It took us a few minutes to make it. On the edge of the village, we regrouped. The last nine of our tanks, including the brigade commander's, formed up at the head of the column just behind the scouts. They were to be our battering ram.

In Pochuiki, the Germans had neatly lined up their vehicles, some fifty of them. They had prepared the bridge across the river for mining, and had then wandered off to the villagers' homes for a rest.

We entered the village in high gear, and crashed into the German vehicles. The paratroopers, gunners, and riflemen did not need orders to fire at the engines and tyres. Gasoline tanks began blowing up. The flames leaped on to the houses. Nazis in various stages of undress were jumping out of windows. Firing at them, we hurried to the bridge. A few minutes more and it would be in our hands. But the German miners and riflemen guarding it, had recovered their senses. As the lead tank was crossing the bridge there was a loud explosion and the structure collapsed into the river. The way to the other bank of the Kamenka was cut off. Now, losing no time, we had to get out of the holocaust and look for a crossing somewhere east of here.

Among the debris of the blown-up bridge we found Lieutenant-Colonel Moskalchuk. He was mortally wounded. We only had time to say a few words to him, then I ordered everyone to follow me out of the village. I straddled the mudguard of the tank, hanging on to the gun barrel. Beside me were brigade engineer Pisarenko, scout Saveliev, and the staff officers. The tanks began turning round in the narrow village streets. The houses lining them were engulfed in flames. Seeing that we were in trouble, the nazis took heart. Machine-guns and tommy-guns fired at us from barns and vegetable gardens.

The commander's tank slowed down at a turning. That instant, two German soldiers sprang at us, firing their tommy-guns at pointblank range. Bright spots swam before my eyes. I felt as though a red-hot iron had been applied to my neck.

I regained consciousness a few minutes later. Beside me lay brigade engineer Pisarenko. He was dead. And I heard people shouting:

"Save the brigade commander."

By some miracle, I was alive. The bullet had grazed my neck, and the wound was not serious. The medic made me swallow a little alcohol. The fright that had gripped me faded away at once. I was back atop the tank again, hanging on to the rings on the turret.

The column was heading for Stavishche where, we figured, there should be another bridge.

Dawn was nearing. We had to break out and reach the frontlines before it was light. In daylight,

out in the open, we would be in a devilish predicament, for we were badly outnumbered.

The scout tank entered Stavishche at top speed, but here, too, we had bad luck. The bridge was blown up right before our eyes.

The enemy had been alerted all along the line. The surprise element was no longer working.

Yet daybreak was approaching inexorably.

The roar of the engines died down, the headlights were switched off, the vehicles lined up close to each other. People walked up to my tank, which had halted by the wayside—unit commanders whose battalions had two or three tanks left with no fuel at all, artillerymen and anti-aircraft gunners whose batteries had just one gun left with five or six shells. The brigade's staff officers were there and the girls who were our guides, and the medics, all who were part of the 55th Brigade and all who had joined it in the past ten days.

I expected a lot of questions: "What are we to do now?" or the resonant voice of Captain Fedorov saying, "I'm waiting for orders!", or the rumbling low voice of Andrei Serazhimov asking, "Where d'you want me to reconnoitre?"

But I was wrong. No questions were asked. Now that the bridges had been blown up, now that we had practically run out of shells, now that our fuel tanks were empty, the vehicles could no longer be of any help. There was only one thing we could do: demolish the property, and wade across the boggy marshland to the northern bank of the river, where we would rejoin our main force.

But what would Rybalko say to me when he learned that all our armour and artillery were lost? Might he not think the brigade commander had had cold feet or, at best, that he had been incompetent? Well, come what may, my conscience was clear. I looked at my subordinates and instructed them first to bury our dead.

Having done this sad duty, we dismantled the tank machine-guns, collected the flare pistols and disks of ammunition, gathered the breechlocks of the tank guns, threw earth into the tank engines and sand into their fuel tanks, cut up the tyres of our lorries, and lined up in formation thirty minutes later, ready for our final march.

Detouring Stavishche, the tank brigade crossed the marshes to the bank of the Kamenka. The men were carrying the wounded, the surviving machine-guns, and the radio transmitters. And beside me I kept hearing the now hoarse voice of our guide, Masha Sotnik:

"Left, left, a little more to the left—there's got to be a bridge there."

She was right. Behind a turning we saw a mutilated but still serviceable narrow wooden bridge.

Across the river we spotted dug-outs and trenches. The scouts we had sent ahead were fired upon from the woods. But when green flares burst in the grey dawning sky we knew we had reached our own.

The brigade's raid of the enemy rear was over. We were back with the tankmen of Rybalko's 3rd Guard Tank Army.

Rybalko received me in a small house on the





Dragunsky, honorary citizen of Novozybkov, is handed a symbolic key to the town



Visiting his native village



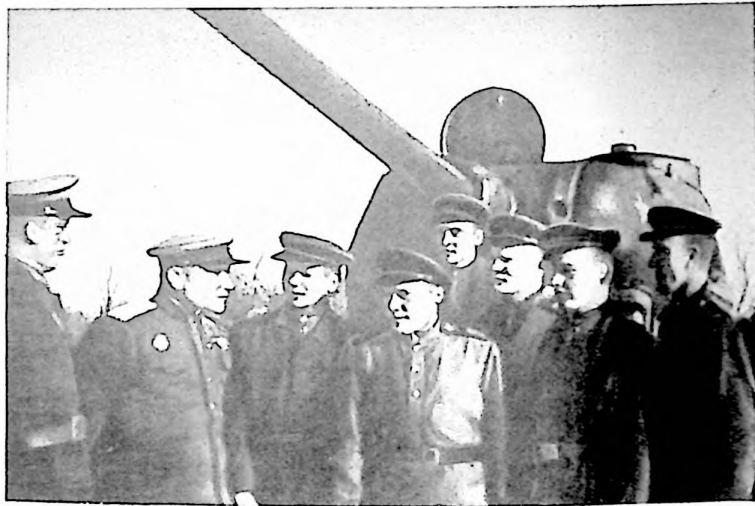
The eternal flame is being lit beside the memorial to the fallen in the Great Patriotic War, 1979

Rachel Dragunskaya, who was shot  
by the nazis with fellow villagers



A memorial to the war dead in Sviatsk village

David Dragunsky when attending the Saratov Tank School, 1935



David Dragunsky snapped with his mates at the front.  
He is second from left



David Dragunsky in May 1945



Meeting his wartime friend Djalalov, who was decorated with three Orders of Glory for bravery in battle. At present, Djalalov is chairman of a collective farm in Uzbekistan



V.V. Kuznetsov, First Deputy Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium, hands David Dragunsky the Order of Lenin, February 1978



With a visiting delegation from the German Democratic Republic at the Vystrel school



Dragunsky meets Erich Honecker in Berlin, October 1979





Receiving a military delegation from Mozambique



Wartime friends Colonel-General D.A. Dragunsky and General of the Army I.G. Pavlovsky during an intermission at the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

outskirts of Fastov. He heard my story of what the brigade had done in the past ten days, and wanted to know what was going on in the enemy rear.

I gave him a detailed account. While I was talking, the army commander kept looking at me appraisingly. Then, when I finished, he picked up the telephone and reported to the front commander.

"The 55th has broken out of the enemy rear. It's back after a long raid. I have its commander here. Will report about the state of the enemy rear later."

The conversation lasted a few minutes. Then, hanging up the receiver, Rybalko gazed at me with kind eyes.

"The front commander has asked me to thank your brigade," he said. "He is pleased, and instructs you to draw up the list of those meriting citation."

Pausing, Rybalko asked: "Who were your guides? It's astonishing how unerringly you came to the designated area, and at night too."

I told the general of the two partisan girls, Masha and Galina. He said I should thank the girls and have them decorated. Then, cautiously, he asked how much time the brigade would need to rest up, to get new tanks, and reinforcements.

"Five or six days would be fine," I said, cutting it as thin as I could. Would we manage in so short a time?

Rybalko took his time to reply. When he did, it was in a firm voice:

“Much too slow. The situation has deteriorated. You know that as well as I do. Manstein’s panzer group can be expected to attack in force. Two days is all I can give you. New tanks will arrive before tomorrow night, and I’ve given orders that you’re to get all the vehicles you need. You’ll get your battle orders from the corps commander. I’m afraid you’ll have to tackle the main force of the enemy’s 25th Panzer Division.”

He stood up. That meant the interview was over.

“And don’t mope about the lost tanks. The front commander said you’d done right to destroy the armour. It was the most sensible thing to do. And I agree with him. We must all remember that the enemy isn’t going to lay down his arms for many months more. Victory will be won by men, and we’ve got to spare them. Tanks, vehicles and mortars—those we can get.”

I was in high feather. Two days later, the 55th was fighting successful defensive battles in the Fastov area against its “old friends”—the 25th and 1st panzer divisions.

In early December 1943, the tank brigade was withdrawn to Plesetskoye village near Kiev for rest and replenishment. One cold sunny day I was called to the phone. Rybalko was on the line. He informed me that our brigade had been handed over to General Ivan Cherniakhovsky’s command. The fighting at Zhitomir had intensified.

“Don’t let me down, Dragunsky,” Rybalko said. “I want my friend Cherniakhovsky to see the power our tank army packs. They’ll judge

all tankmen by your brigade, remember that.”  
I said I understood and promised that the brigade would do its best.

The following day, we came to the designated area. On the edge of the village I met my old friend General Hadji Mamsurov, commander of a cavalry division. He was as vivacious as ever, and as ever his visage was lit up by his shy smile.

He let me know that the headquarters of the 18th Rifles Corps was stationed in the area, as well as his cavalry and, now, my brigade of tanks. Enemy planes were conspicuous by their absence. Enemy artillery was silent. Calm and quiet reigned.

I said to Hadji that I did not think the Germans relished the idea of thrusting into marshes and forests, and did he not think they would choose to move east of here, in a northerly direction towards Teterev river?

“I do, I do,” he said. “But why have so many tanks been ordered here in the first place?”

The situation was, indeed, puzzling. But we did not finish our conversation. I was summoned by corps commander General Afonin.

“What are you doing here?” he snapped. “Why are all these tanks here?”

I told him I was waiting for orders from army commander General Cherniakhovsky.

“I want you to know,” Afonin replied, “that you are in the sector of my rifle corps, and therefore under my command. Take up defensive positions along the southern edge of the forest at once.” He pointed to a green area on the map.

I was piqued by his manner of talking to me, and could not restrain myself.

"Comrade General," I said, "I don't understand what is going on. The enemy is not likely to mount an attack across this marshland. So I won't move until ordered to do so by General Cherniakhovsky himself."

Tension rose in the room.

Barely able to contain himself, the corps commander said I'd get confirmation of his orders from Cherniakhovsky soon enough. He picked up the telephone, and in a minute was connected with the general.

"A brigade of tanks is loitering about in the village. I've told the commander what to do, but he refuses to carry out my orders until they are confirmed by you. Besides, in my view, the lieutenant-colonel is behaving tactlessly."

I heard Cherniakhovsky's loud voice through the telephone receiver. "Really? Rybalko has just phoned and said he had sent an undepleted brigade, a good one, and spoke in glowing terms of its commander. Where is he?"

"By my side."

"Give him the receiver."

I was excited and hurt. The receiver trembled in my hand.

"Did you hear?" Cherniakhovsky asked me.

"I did, Comrade Army Commander."

"What have you got to say?"

"Nothing."

"How am I to read that?"

"I'm ready to take any punishment you may

see fit to mete out, but I am firmly convinced the Germans aren't going to send their panzers to this area. On the contrary, they will be only too happy to lure as many of our tanks as they can into the forests and marshes. They are much more likely to move against Malin and Radomyshl."

"What do you suggest?"

I took the map out of the hands of my chief-of-staff, and reported in a firmer voice:

"I suggest that the brigade should be relocated during the night to the northern bank of the Tete-rev, that it should straddle the roads to Malin, and stand by to hit the main panzer force as your reserve."

The army commander did not reply. The corps commander stood silently by my side. I was more dead than alive.

At long last, Cherniakhovsky's voice came over the phone:

"Your suggestion wants looking into. We'll examine it here, and you'll get our reply in half an hour. Don't stray away from the phone."

Soon, the corps commander's aide called me to the phone. The army chief-of-staff, General Ter-Gasparian, relayed the order for me to take my brigade to the Malin area and cross the river.

I asked General Afonin's leave to depart.

"I'm not holding you," the corps commander replied rather softly. "You may have been right —"

My thoughts were confused. Having calmed down, I realised that it had been improper to condemn the corps commander for wanting to keep a tank brigade in his sector. I was troubled by the

thought that I may have been tactless to the renowned general. I had promised myself so many times I would control my temper. And now, again —

The forest was filled with the roar of the tanks. I was lolling in the staff coach. A pleasant warmth wafted from the red-hot stove.

The brigade was on its way north, to the Malin crossing on the Teterev. At that time, a mere two kilometres east of us, a large panzer force was also heading north for the same crossing. We followed a parallel course to the same destination.

The din made by our tanks drowned out the noise made by the panzers, and vice versa. Our scouts were roaming about in the forest, and the nazi scouts were not making out any better. We and the Germans both kept to our northerly course.

The first to reach the river was the battalion under Pyotr Fedorov, of whom it was said that anyone who outwits him won't live another day. One of the tankmen looking for the best place to ford the river noticed that tanks with headlights turned on were heading for the same crossing from the south-east. "Funny thing," the battalion commander thought. "In our brigade they'd chop my head off if I did that."

Fedorov devised an ambush, and when the tanks had come near enough for him to see that they were German, he opened fire. Three panzers were set alight. The rest made an about-turn and, having now switched off their headlights, raced for the safety of the forest.



By morning the brigade had crossed the river and concentrated in the place assigned to it. I reported to General Cherniakhovsky.

Young, dignified, handsome, with black, eagle-keen eyes, the general listened attentively to my report. He was pleased that the 55th had made it to the northern bank of the river. He was pleased with our nocturnal engagement, which confirmed the presence of the enemy, and pleased also with the decision to move the brigade out of the forest and marshland.

People spoke of General Cherniakhovsky in glowing terms. He was a born tankman. He was a brilliant theorist of tank warfare, and no less brilliant a practitioner. He had been in command of a tank division before the war, and had finished the Tank Academy.

The general took my map and drew red rings round Malin, Pinizevichi, Yaltsovka, and Zarudnia. I was to station a tank company in each of these points.

"That means you'll have a front of twelve kilometres to hold. Mind you, not a single panzer is to get across to the north bank. Have a strong reserve force at your disposal in Yaltsovka. A regiment of anti-tank gunners will arrive there soon to back you. We have reliable information that the enemy will try to break through in your sector today. I imagine you'll see that for yourself."

General Cherniakhovsky shook hands with me, and left the room. I stayed behind with Ter-Gasparian to iron out a few kinks in control and communications.

Back in the brigade, I saw to it that the battalions and companies took their stations the same day. Brigade headquarters was set up in Yaltsovka, in the central point of our line.

Calm reigned in the morning. The enemy did not betray his positions. But an hour later we heard shells bursting in the distance. It was somewhere to the left of us. Gradually the firing came closer. Soon, I was able to see the bluish bursts in my fieldglasses. Each minute the roar of panzer engines came nearer.

I called Fedorov on my transmitter. He did not reply. Luckily, the situation became clear very soon. Two self-propelled guns came rolling along. We learned from the senior gunner, a lieutenant, that the Germans had crossed the river and had taken Zarudnia. I could not believe it.

"Are you sure, lieutenant? We have a battalion in Zarudnia, you know."

"The battalion has moved out."

The moment I finished talking to the gunner, a tank stopped beside us. It was the tank of Captain Roy, chief-of-staff of our 1st Battalion. He leaped out of the tank, and showed me his map.

"Fedorov sent me for help," he said.

I examined the map, and glanced at Ivan Kalenikov. I knew my deputy since 1935: we had both attended the Saratov tank school, and, not surprisingly, always knew what the other was thinking.

"Quick, Ivan, take the reserve company and go to Fedorov's aid. We've got to re-capture Zarudnia at any price."

Things got hot on our right flank as well. The 2nd Battalion commander reported by radio that he had engaged a force of 50 panzers.

That was when I blessed Cherniakhovsky's foresight in letting me have the anti-tank artillery regiment. Ten minutes later it was wreaking havoc at the river crossing. Our tanks and the artillery opened up. Three panzers were set afire, and that turned out to be enough to make the adversary back away.

Having failed on the right flank, the nazis concentrated their effort in the centre of our line.

The first to spot the mass of enemy panzers in our sector of the line was scout Serazhimov. He told us by radio of some 70 panzers in the woods opposite Yaltsovka. The Germans were looking for a suitable ford. Six-barrelled mortars were being sited along the bank.

My deputy Kalenikov, whom I had sent to Fedorov's aid, returned an hour later.

"Zarudnia's in order," he reported cheerfully. I learned that three panzers had been destroyed, and that the Germans had leaped back across the river in a southerly direction. Kalenikov had brought the reserve company closer to headquarters.

The situation all along our stretch of the line was gratifying. Not one panzer had broken through northward. As we told the army commander of this by phone, he kept egging us on:

"Fine, fine. Keep it up. But mind, after dark the enemy is going to try again, at some other point."

And that is exactly what happened. Nazi aircraft appeared overhead. They dropped bombs and strafed us. But the biggest casualties were caused by a ten-minute bombardment. German guns shelled us from across the river, supported by the six-barreled rocket mortars.

Our communications centre was put out of commission. Our medical unit, stationed near-by, was badly hit. We had deployed 2nd Battalion along the river bank. Ranged in a line, the tanks waited for the enemy. The move was very fortunate. The fog that hung over the river hid our positions from enemy eyes. When the shelling stopped, the nazis went into the attack. An avalanche of panzers rolled out of the woods, approached the bank, reached the river, and then crossed it.

It seemed the wave of armour was unstoppable. A tank duel ensued. Our rapid tank guns fired hundreds of armour-piercing and tracer shells. We saw fires. The gasoline-powered engines of the German panzers burned brightly. But our brigade, too, was suffering losses.

Dmitriev, Kalenikov and I raced to the bank, and had the reserve company moved there as well. The artillery commander, smart as ever, did not wait for special orders to move his guns on to the heights, and fired pointblank at the enemy armour. A battery of lorry-mounted "katyusha" rocket-launchers appeared from nowhere, and in a few minutes rockets were flashing over our heads in the direction of the enemy. The nazi six-barrelled mortars fired back.

Just when the hostilities in our sector of the

line reached critical intensity, battalion commander Fedorov reported that the enemy was withdrawing from the sector held by his tanks.

We heaved a sigh of relief. From the right flank, too, reports arrived that the fighting in the Pinizevichi area was abating. Now we concentrated all our fire power—the tank guns, the artillery, and the “katyushas”—on the central enemy group. Leaving behind something like a dozen hit or burnt panzers on both banks of the river, the enemy seemed to have abandoned the idea of another assault. Saveliev, the scout, reported: “The Germans are packing off in columns in a southerly direction.”

Dmitriev, Kalenikov and I began embracing one another. My friends' faces were beaming. At the height of our rejoicing, signals chief Zasimenko came running up to us. Telephone connections had been restored, and General Cherniakhovsky was on the line.

A group of officers followed me into the extreme house where we had our telephone.

“All I can say is a big thank you to all your tankmen,” I heard Cherniakhovsky say.

In the pause that followed, I finally asked what the brigade was to do now.

After a minute's silence, Cherniakhovsky said:

“We'll start our offensive early in the morning. Rybalko's 54th Tank Brigade under General Lebedev will arrive today, and will operate beside yours. I expect you at my command post at 20.00 hours.”

But I was not destined to carry out Chernia-

khovsky's order. Excited and happy, I walked out of the communications centre and set out with rapid strides for my tank. The brigade's staff officers surrounded me, and wanted to know what the Army Commander had thought of our performance. Unfolding my map on the mudguard of the tank, I began to indicate the routes of our possible operations. The German mortars let go somewhere, and suddenly the air was rent by an unpleasant screech. "Take cover", someone shouted. But it was too late. Something stung my chest with frightening force. The earth, the sky, tanks, people, and houses reeled before my eyes. I fell.

As in a sleep, I heard faint noises, and the words: "Get him into the car, he's alive, he's alive—"

Dmitriev and Kalenikov stood over me. The surgeon, Liudmila Fedorova, was administering first aid.

I came to 24 hours later in a field hospital. Here I learned that a 17-cm fragment had torn through the thick hide of my goatskin coat, had bored through the Red Star Order on my chest, and embedded itself in my liver.

The hospital I had been brought to was in a school building of a small railway junction near Radomyshl.

Consciousness returned slowly. I began recollecting the events of the past several days. What I could not recall was how I was brought to the hospital. Surgeon Fedorova told me of the difficulties we met en route. It had grown bitterly cold the night before. The mud along the roads had

frozen. The bumping tore at my wounded liver. I was brought to the operating theatre unconscious, more dead than alive. And one more mishap: the young surgeon saw the splinter sticking out of my chest and did not wait for the head surgeon to pull it out. She did not know that the ragged end of it had penetrated deep into my liver. I was moved to a ward for the critically wounded. The haste of the hospital surgeon soon produced a disastrous effect. I began to bleed dangerously. Doctors and nurses appeared in the ward. Surgeon Fedorova, my aide Kozhemiakov, and the drivers Rykov and Gasishvili did not leave my bedside. Blood spurted steadily from my wound. I barely managed to catch what was being said.

Again, they put me on the operating table where I had lain a few hours before. The surgical department was in a large classroom. The windows were boarded up with plywood. A bitterly cold December wind roamed about in the room. I was being given a blood transfusion. A large needle was stuck into my spine: the pain of the further proceedings was blocked. Then they tied me hand and foot. A metal ring swung over my head. They covered my face with gauze. I smelled ether.

A grating voice kept repeating into my ear:

“Start counting, count, count.”

I recovered consciousness somewhere in the morning. Tongues of light from paraffin lamps danced before my eyes. People in white gowns stood at my bedside. Someone's familiar eyes were gazing at me.

“Haven't I died?”



“For a short while,” someone said. The surgeon took my left hand, found the pulse, and said loudly: “The syringe, and a shot of camphor.”

At once I fell blissfully asleep.

Someone was pulling at me, and saying: “Wake up, wake up.”

I strained to open my eyelids. They were heavy as lead. Again people in white surrounded me.

“Why are the scouts in their white camouflage gowns?” I wondered.

Liudmila Fedorova was bent over me. I nodded my head. I smiled. At my bedside I saw Pyotr Kozhemiakov, Fedor Romanenko and Pyotr Rykov. I recognised them.

For three days and nights—for 72 consecutive hours—they had taken turns at my bedside. All these sleepless days and nights they had waited and hoped.

A week later, when life was coming back to me and death was slowly receding, the surgeon, a man by name of Kowalsky, who was also chief of the hospital, said to me:

“You have won. Life has won where death seemed to be in almost complete control. Do you know what you had?”

I shook my head and looked up at the surgeon’s strong-willed face.

“Now that you are out of death’s clutches,” he said, “I’ll be frank with you.”

He told me they had operated twice in one day. The first operation had failed, but the second, by all evidence, seems to have been successful.

“Do you know what a liver is? Roughly, its

structure is much like that of thick porridge. And we had had to sew it up—to apply four interrupted sutures. It was the first time I performed the operation in field conditions.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

Kowalsky patted my shoulder with his strong hand, and strode out of the ward.

The pain in the area of the liver was unbearable. The big wound in my chest, too, bothered me badly. It was big enough to stick your fist in. The winter nights were agonisingly long. In the evenings my temperature would rise to 40<sup>o</sup> C. When the fever shook me they tied me to the bed. Weary of the pain and the nightmares, I would fall fast asleep in the mornings.

The ward I lay in was a bad one. It was for hard cases only, and few of its inmates ever escaped death. In those December days, indeed, they were fighting for the life of a pilot in the bed opposite mine, beside the window. They were to amputate his leg, but he pleaded with the surgeons not to do it, because he could not conceive his life without flying. The amputation was performed all the same. And the following day the pilot died without regaining consciousness. Two days later one more inmate, Senior Lieutenant Arkhipov, commander of a mortar battery, died from chest wounds.

Just two of us remained: a regimental political officer and I. He had lost one of his legs and was to be evacuated to the far rear.

The days and nights passed slowly. The end of the month was near, and so was that of the year 1943.

Many thoughts flitted through my mind as I lay there, in hospital. I thought of the battles I had been in, the towns and villages that I had been lucky to help liberate, and of my friends who had been killed or wounded. I also thought of my own fate. Would I survive this, my third wound in half a year? And if I did, would I go back to my brigade?

One day a commotion broke out in the hospital. Not until mid-day did I finally learn the reason: the door to our ward was flung open, and a few men in snow-white gowns crossed the threshold.

A stocky, broad-shouldered man of about sixty, with grey downward-looking moustaches and thick black eyebrows, stopped beside my bed.

"This the one?"

"Yes," my surgeon replied hastily.

"Is the pleura alright?"

"No, injured. It was a penetrating wound."

"How deep did the fragment bury itself in the liver?"

"Nine centimetres."

Kowalsky barely kept up with the questions which the man shot at him.

"I cut the seventh, eighth and ninth ribs, and applied ointmental tamponage."

"What about the ticker?" The stranger felt for my pulse, put his ear to my heart. "I've been told this is the third time you were wounded in six months."

I nodded.

"A good ticker—like a heavy tank's."

Kowalsky smiled.

"He's a tankman himself, Comrade Lieutenant-General. Commander of a tank brigade."

"That explains it."

During the ensuing pause I quietly asked who he was.

"I'm deputy of the Red Army's chief surgeon, by name of Girgolav. Ever heard of such an animal?"

"Could I ask you a question? Can one live with a patched up liver?"

Academician Girgolav drew up a chair, stroked my head gently, and smiled:

"My dear man. You'll live. Optimists like you don't die. But we're going to putter about a little before you leave us. We'll pack you off to a hospital in the interior, perform a plastic operation, and close up the hole. But stay away from the tanks from now on."

Then he asked Kowalsky why I had not been shipped off to a rear area hospital before.

"He wasn't transportable all this time. We'll let him go in a few days."

"Fine," Girgolav said. He turned to the other doctors: "I want to thank you for a good job. The operation was a classic. Any surgeon would be proud to have done so well."

On 30 December, bandaged and wrapped up in blankets like an infant, I was brought to a hospital train. My friends had come to see me off: the doctor Liudmila Fedorova, my aide Pyotr Kozhemiakov, driver Georgi Gasishvili, and pri-

vate Fedor Romanenko. The train was heading east.

Kilometres and kilometres across the Ukraine left of the Dnieper. A mere few months ago the stations, towns and villages that flashed by had been fields of battle. Ravages of war all around. The once flourishing land was laid waste. But already bridges were being restored, new railway tracks laid, and water-towers rebuilt.

How much labour, energy and money it would take for this tortured land to recover, for the fields to billow, for life to come into its own!

This was our second day en route. At each station we were held up for several hours to let through the trainloads of tanks, ammunition and food heading for the front. Companies of infantry hurried by. Young soldiers and young officers were in haste to reach the right bank of the Dnieper and take over from those who were out of commission, like me.

Ours was a special coach, for the badly wounded. Here people groaned, cried, and called for help. A naive and fetching young nurse tried distracting us from our pain by talking to us.

My temperature kept leaping up and down. Nights it climbed to 40.2° C. But it wasn't much lower mornings and afternoons. Doctors gathered in my compartment. They read my case record, shook their heads and frowned. A tall, bespectacled surgeon, his whiskers making his resemblance to a walrus only more distinct, said ferociously, addressing no one:

“Why was the man taken into the train?”

He put his ear to my heart, felt my pulse, touched my distended stomach.

My thinking was confused and vague. All I saw were the people in white. Raising my eye-lids I searched for Fedorova, Kowalsky, Rykov, Kozhemiakov. But they were not here.

"We'll never get him to Saratov, let alone Cheliabinsk."

"Pity we hadn't left him in Poltava."

"Let's hope he'll survive to Kharkov," said the bespectacled one with the walrus moustache.

Nothing bothered me any longer, not the smell of ammonium chloride, not the endless injections. I was indifferent to the world around me.

The other patient was moved out of the compartment. I was left alone. The cheerful young nurse sat sadly in a corner. Her anxious, frightened eyes were fixed on my face. More and more often her soft hand touched my forehead. A frightening, agonising night was closing upon me. Again a few people in white entered the compartment. One of them told the walrus moustache, who seemed to be their chief, that the railway people had promised not to hold up the train until it reached Kharkov.

Again they swaddled me in blankets. My head was wrapped in a towel. Something soft and warm was put over my feet. The nurse was at the centre of attention: people addressed her, handed out instructions, stuffed pills and little bottles into her pockets. Two elderly men appeared, and put me on a stretcher. The train lost speed.

The coach jerked, the wheels screeched and

stopped turning. The walrus moustache came up to me, put a bottle with a revolting smell to my nose, bent over me, and I heard him say:

"The nurse will take you to the Kharkov hospital. You'll be better off there. Get well, old man. The girl is from Kharkov. She'll stay with you. And happy New Year. It's begun."

An ambulance with blacked-out headlights took us that New Year's night through the deserted and badly ruined streets of Kharkov.

A sleepy and dishevelled doctor waved his arms in dismay.

"What's brought you here? We don't expect a hospital train until the fifth. I've no idea what to do with you. We haven't any more beds. Put him on the floor for the night. We'll see what we can do tomorrow."

But he had not reckoned with my girl nurse. She gave him a piece of her mind. And, wasting no more time, the doctor, who turned out to be an oculist, carried me with the girl's help to the operation theatre. Here the girl removed my bandages, washed the wound carefully with a wad of cotton wool dipped in alcohol, washed my face, and let me have a little water.

The pale rays of the January sun reached into the room, and it soon grew light. Awakening, I again saw a gathering of doctors and nurses, and among them my dear snub-nosed Kharkov girl with smiling black eyes.

Catching her eye, I nodded and asked where I was.

That instant I heard a loud voice whose owner



pushed past the others closer to my side, a man of medium height, dressed in a white gown, brown eyes shining, his head grey.

With untold pleasure I recognised the wonder-working surgeon, chief of the hospital, Isaak Kugel, who had treated me only a few months before when I had been wounded in the belly. That time, in October, I had run away to the front before I had been pronounced well. Luckily, I had had companions: there had been something like a score of men like me, recuperating patients who could not wait to get back to their units.

Recalling this, I understood at once that I had again landed in the Kharkov hospital. This was enough to hearten me. They had saved me here once before, and will surely do it again.

At last in April I was allowed to sit up. I was overjoyed, and so was my mate in the ward. He had been brought some days before—a young major, commander of a rifles battalion, by name of Vassily Dubkov. A shell fragment had shattered his collar bone. The first few days he had groaned incessantly, and could not lie still. But after he was put into a plaster cast he quietened down. I, too, was feeling a lot better of late, and only the nights were still long and exhausting. In the three months and a half that I had been in this narrow, long, high-ceilinged room I had seen dozens of recovered men leaving for the front.

In January I had shared the ward with a tank brigade commander, little grey-eyed Colonel Kolesnikov. He was succeeded by Zabello, a well

put together blue-eyed young man from Byelorussia, commander of an artillery regiment. He had shared the ward with me until the end of March, and was then allowed to return to the front.

All I could do was envy my mates.

Our physician, Nina Barabash, and the severe doctor Kud, the neuropathologist, promised they would let me walk about in the garden some time in May.

I learned from the letters my friends sent me that Rybalko's army was active at Ternopol. Our brigade was now under the command of Colonel Borodin. The tankmen, however, had not forgotten me, and often referred to me with warmth.

Our army commander had visited the brigade recently, had asked where I was, and wanted to know of my condition. Which, to be sure, was far from good. The medics had discovered curvature of the spine, and that on top of the increasingly bad case of osteomyelitis of the ribs.

Three renowned professors, Filatov, Minkin and Kogan-Yasny had examined my humble person most closely for as long as two consecutive hours. They turned and twisted me, auscultated, and palpated. And the conclusion they arrived at was in no way reassuring: the patient is to be treated at the sanatorium for war invalids in Zheleznovodsk, and thereupon dismissed from the army.

That was probably the first time in my life that I felt such despair. That sleepless night I ruminated on my fate. And I made up my mind that I would return to the front at whatever the

price. The fate of an invalid that the doctors had consigned me to was not for me. Yes, quite true, the wound had been grave. Perhaps the very fact that I survived it was a miracle. But what was the good if the denouement was to be so sad. I was alive, and I would fight to be an able-bodied man again in spite of what the doctors said. We'd see who was right — they or me.

One morning, for the first time in five months, I slowly climbed off the bed, slipped my feet into the huge cloth slippers at the bedside, and tried to move about the room.

Need I say what it took me to circle the ward three times.

Strange as it seemed to me then, doctor Kugel lauded my attempts to fight my own helplessness. He said from now on he would permit me to move about, and even to do light manual work. The next day, he promised, they would fit me out with something to straighten the curvature in my spine. But he set one condition: I was to promise that I would go to Zheleznovodsk.

I clung convulsively to the hem of Kugel's gown. I had not been mistaken in the old kind surgeon: he understood, and did everything in his power to help. He kept his word. A device we called a "dog's muzzle" was fitted over the door of my ward, and each day, about a dozen times, I was lifted by it to the ceiling, to straighten out my curvature. Slowly but surely, the curvature straightened. This was a big event for me. The liver, too, was doing better, my jaundice faded, I was gradually regaining a normal look.

One day at the end of April people from the Kharkov military command appeared in the ward. They handed me an Order of the Red Banner and an Order of the Red Star, and a full colonel's shoulder straps.

All this had been arranged by our clever and thoughtful army commander, Pavel Rybalko.

The morning of 30 April was like any other morning. It was warm and sunny. The acacias were in bloom, and the ground was covered with lusciously green grass. The only unusual thing was the early appearance in the ward of the hospital chief, Dr. Kugel. He asked me how I was, and then wondered if I wanted to see my army friends. That instant the door opened, and in walked Pyotr Kozhemiakov, Pyotr Rykov, and Fedor Romanenko.

We kissed, and I naturally asked about Dr. Fedorova. My driver and aide lowered their eyes in confusion. Romanenko, too, tightened his lips.

"Well, where is she? Why didn't she come with you?"

The aide, stepping cautiously, approached the bed, looked at me intently, and then spoke. It had happened on 23 April. Straight out of battle, the brigade was heading for a new location for regrouping. They were being bombed. Fedorova was wounded, and lived only a few hours. He, Kozhemiakov, had himself taken her to hospital. The operation was performed by Dr. Kowalsky, my old acquaintance, but to no avail.

I could not breathe. It took all my will power

for me to regain my composure.

“Did she have any message for me?”

“Yes, a letter, some granulated sugar, and some glucose for the liver.”

“Nothing else?”

She had also said Dragunsky was to keep the promise he had made — he’d know what it was.

“Yes, I know what I promised. I know and I’ll never forget. I had promised her I would return to the front, and fight until final victory.”

The light in the ward burned all night.

My neighbour was fast asleep. Not so Kozhemiakov, Rykov and I. The two of them kept telling me of the people and the exploits of the brigade.

For force-crossing the Dnieper and liberating Kiev, the brigade had been decorated with the Order of the Red Banner. Rybalko had come in person: the tankmen received the battle standard making us a guard brigade and the Order out of his hands.

And Rykov added solemnly that the General had said the awards were earned along with all the others by the brigade’s former commanders, Chigin and Dragunsky.

“So I’m not forgotten.”

“Certainly not, Comrade Colonel. We’re expecting you back—”

A few days later, Kozhemiakov and Rykov returned to their unit. And I was shipped off to Zheleznovodsk. There, at the war invalids sanatorium, I was to get back into shape.

Zheleznovodsk, a renowned health resort, is

a picturesque little town. And that sunny month of May it was like paradise to us. Lodged in a cradle of mountains, surrounded by green woods, bathed in the sun's rays, it was like nature's blessing to the wounded.

The sanatorium was in an old park, and the heavy boughs of a lilac tree brushed at my window. The town was regaining its former festive air. Yet only recently, as in the neighbouring resorts of Kislovodsk, Essentuki, and Piatigorsk, the nazis had promenaded there and in the few months of their stay had sown death, hunger, poverty, and ruin. Tens of thousands of peaceful inhabitants had been shot, many of the sanatoria demolished. The traces left by their evil hand were to be seen everywhere.

Rehabilitation works began the instant the nazis were driven out. Dozens of hospitals and sanatoria were opened in all the four towns. Wounded soldiers and officers needing long treatment and convalescents were already being brought to Zheleznovodsk in large numbers.

All hopes were pinned on the benign sun, the mineral water, and the health-giving hot springs. I, too, put all my trust in them to get rid of the complications that resulted from my grave wound.

A fine doctor by name of Milchev was in charge of the sanatorium. A Bulgarian by birth, he had chosen the Soviet Union as his second homeland, which he served faithfully, knowing that if the USSR won the war, his freedom-loving and long-suffering Bulgaria, too, would be saved from the clutches of fascism.

Dr. Milchev took me into his personal care. Examining me, he kept saying again and again:

"The surgeon who performed this operation is a man of great courage. For this one operation he should have a doctorate. I envy him his skill. As for you, Colonel, I can only say that the worst is over. You and me are going to fight a winning battle. You'll soon be back on your feet."

The southern Caucasian sun, the health-giving mineral springs, and the caring hands of Dr. Milchev and the other doctors and nurses, plus my own boundless faith—all this worked wonders, nothing less.

After nearly a month in the sanatorium I gained a new lease of life. The wounds festered no more. The spine straightened gradually. The pains in my liver subsided. With the aid of a stick I was able to walk up Zheleznaya Hill, and one day in late May I even reached the hilltop.

The letters I received from my army friends contributed greatly to my convalescence. I was briefed on everything that related to our brigade. For one thing, I knew it was in the rear at the moment, being replenished somewhere in the region of Ternopol, priming for battles still to come.

A note from the personnel chief of our Army, Colonel Merkuliev, gave me heart and faith in my complete recuperation. Rybalko had spoken to him, had wanted to know how I was, had ordered him to send me a gift parcel, and, most important of all for me, had asked him to tell me to be good enough and rejoin them and finish the war together.

On receiving the short note, all my thoughts were concentrated on getting back to the army as soon as possible.

The message was passed around from hand to hand, and finally reached our doctors. Milchev's comment was: "That General Rybalko of yours is a fine man. He has probably done more for you with this note than any of us doctors."

I was, indeed, making good progress. But a great personal sorrow was visited upon me. One June evening a childhood friend from my native village, Pyotr Usov, came to see me. He had also been wounded, and was being treated at one of the Zheleznovodsk hospitals. We had not met for more than five years. I had known him to be a cheerful young man, but when we met that night he was depressed and taciturn. I sensed at once that he was keeping something from me.

We went out on to the balcony and lowered ourselves into the wicker armchairs. The conversation revolved round our village of Sviatsk, where both of us hailed from. We recalled the happy days of our youth, and spoke of our Komsomol cell.

I asked if he had perchance heard anything of my parents. He did not reply. I asked again, and his reaction was the same. This put me on my guard. I had not had word from my family since the war broke out, though I had tried time and again to communicate with them.

Now, a school friend sat before me who had visited the village after its liberation. Would I learn nothing from him too?



But in the end Pyotr Usov could not conceal the horrid truth from me.

“No, David, I can’t keep it from you any longer,” he said later that night. “Take yourself in hand.” He told me I no longer had a family. The nazis had shot my father, my mother, my sister Sonia with her children, and Ania, and had not even spared Grandfather and Grandmother. And with them died Usov’s brother Ivan, and our mutual friend Grisha Sapozhnikov.

They say the heart is a diviner. I was beset by sorrowful forebodings when I saw the marks of the nazi atrocities in the cities and villages we liberated in the Ukraine. As they retreated, the nazis left behind a trail of graves and corpses. And I had also seen Babi Yar in Kiev.

A few days later I went to see my friend again. And heard the sad tale once more.

On 25 January 1942, the nazis lined up and shot all members of the Communist Party in Sviatsk. They also exterminated old men, women, and children without pity. Among their victims seventy-four bore the name of Dragunsky, including my parents, sisters, nephews and uncles, and the rest of my family.

I had visited Sviatsk shortly before the war. By a fortunate coincidence, four of us brothers had come to see our parents at one time—my eldest brother who was a builder in Moscow, Zelik, a student of the Moscow Institute of Chemical Engineering, who was younger than I, and the youngest among us, Mikhail, a tank school trainee who dreamed of a military career and had always followed my example.

All four of us went to the front when the war started. And our mother never learned that two of her youngest sons laid down their lives at Stalingrad. That was the thought that flashed through my mind as I listened to Pyotr Usov.

Our Russian neighbours had hidden my mother for a long time, at a risk to their own lives. Yet the nazis found her. It had been a bitterly cold day. The populace was herded into the square outside the building of the village Soviet. Then Mother was brought. An SS man shouted the question:

“How many sons have you, Jewess?”

Mother looked at him scornfully:

“Millions—the children of all mothers are my children.”

“Where are your sons?”

“They’re fighting—fighting against you, nazi scum.”

“Curse your sons, Jewess, and we’ll let you live.”

People held their breaths, waiting for the reply.

The small, grey-haired woman squared her shoulders, drew in her breath, and shouted:

“I bless my sons, I bless all the sons of Russia. I bless them in their fight against the despicable enemy.”

A burst of submachine-gun fire cut short her life.

After what I had heard from Pyotr Usov, I could no longer think of staying on at the sanatorium. I began getting ready to leave—for the front, for the active army, and if possible, for my old brigade.

## In Poland

It was a hot summer, hot in the literal and figurative senses, that summer of 1944 in the Sandomierz theatre. The earth moaned from the bursting air bombs and the ceaseless shelling. The turbid green waters of the Vistula were rising. Smashed ferry-boats and the debris of washed away bridges floated downriver. The fighting was in the vicinity of the river, on both its banks, and on the river itself.

The world watched with bated breath. The heretofore unknown names of little Polish towns, Sandomierz, Staszów, Opatów, Tarnobrzeg and Baranów, kept cropping up in the battle reports. Newspapers wrote about them, and they recurred again and again in radio broadcasts.

The battle in this theatre dragged on for nearly two months. The nazis were trying to stem the onslaught of our armies at any cost. They knew that once they lost Poland, the war would spread to the territory of the nazi Reich.

The big offensive of the 1st Ukrainian Front had been successful. The operational theatre at Sandomierz was in dependable hands. All of us— from the Front Commander, Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan Konev, to the last man— knew

that it was a staging area for our jump west into the heart of Germany.

Our 55th Brigade of General Rybalko's Army was holding a sector of the Sandomierz front.

Fatiguing battles, sleepless nights, agonising marches... The command decided to give us a rest. Unnoticed by the enemy, the brigade was being withdrawn to the delightful evergreen pine woods east of the Vistula. We were now heading the other way, to the rear, eastward.

Sleep, sleep five or ten nights running. We could think of nothing else. And during the all too brief stops en route, people fell asleep instantly—in the tank, at the steering-wheel, beside a gun, or standing upright at the wayside.

Finally, we reached the woods, the place where we were to camp. The long-awaited respite had come. The men slept to make up for the sixty preceding sleepless and troublous days and nights.

The silence was majestic. A light autumn breeze swayed the tree tops, the rustle of the gold-touched leaves was like a lullaby. Checkpoints and sentries guarded our sleep.

It turned out that a day's and a night's tranquil sleep was enough for us to recover. Spades, axes and saws were put to good use. In a few days we had built ourselves excellent housing. A field dining-room was erected. We also constructed a bath-house with the customary Russian steam-bath.

Those tireless soldiers' hands! There is nothing they will not do. Coarse from the frost and heat, from continuous handling of metal and fire, they

hit the enemy without pity, carried little children out of burning houses, repaired tanks under fire, and patched the singed overalls of their owners. They were accustomed to the steering gear of their tank, they handled sledgehammers and crow-bars, axes and saws, and during lulls in the fighting their callous fingers held pencil and paper, and wrote tender letters anxiously awaited at home by parents, wives, sisters, and sweethearts.

On the day before New Year's 1945 even the rays of the winter sun were unusual. In the morning we had all been to the bath-house. The "old-timers" had taken charge of the steambath, beating each other with bunches of birch twigs, which, all Russians attest, is a far more efficacious procedure than a massage. The ones who hailed from Siberia, the Urals and the Volga, kept running out into the open to cool down and regain their breath. Some plunged head first into the piled up snow and rolled about in it gleefully, then rushed back into the inferno.

We took our time washing and steaming ourselves, relishing the hot water. So the dinner, laid in the brigade's mess-room in the thick of the woods, began later than usual. As prescribed, the men each got their half-glass of vodka. The smell of alcohol excited our senses but, strangely, no one touched his cup.

The din in the mess-room was extraordinary. Even the imposing bewhiskered sergeant-major could not cope with the tankmen. "We won't drink", "Take the vodka away", I heard the men

cry out. I could not believe my ears. Political officer Alexander Dmitriev and logistics chief Ivan Leonov looked at me questioningly. What had happened?

Lieutenant Andrei Serazhimov offered the requisite explanations: The men had agreed to ask the colonel's permission to see in the New Year. They would dress up the fir-trees, and would see to the music. But the celebration called for vodka. That was why they wanted their vodka ration to be issued later.

A hush ensued. All eyes were fixed on me. They wanted an answer. Sergeant Nikolai Novikov, a man who hailed from the same region as me, got up to speak:

"I can speak for myself. In forty-one on New Year's night I was near Kalinin, on a night search. Celebrating was farthest from our thoughts. In 1942 it had been Stalingrad, and on New Year's eve of 1943 I was in hospital. Neither did I celebrate in forty-four: I was escorting a POW I had captured near Zhitomir. Now, things seem to be quiet, and it's high time to celebrate New Year's."

I would never have thought of turning down my mates' request. Here, far away from home, there could surely be no harm in raising a New Year's toast to our country, to the success of Soviet arms.

The preparations for the New Year's celebration were in full swing. Our girls—the radio and telephone operators, the nurses, and doctors—went about in a holiday mood. The dresses they had pulled out of their knapsacks and had carefully

pressed, looked beautiful on them. Some had managed to visit Tarnobrzeg to have their hair done. We men were happy for them.

The exhausting marches, the privations and hardships were certainly much more difficult for them to bear than for us men. Women were women, in war as well as peace. They had put on their finery, had grown prettier, and everyone felt at home.

But despite our preparations, we were denied the opportunity to celebrate here, on the glade, beside the tall firs.

After dark, a general alarm was sounded. Soon we learned that in the early morning hours the brigade would cross the Vistula by a newly-laid pontoon bridge, and was due to assemble in the woods east of Staszów by morning.

The column of tanks, guns, and lorries—all that made up the brigade and its combat capacity—entered the woods. The night was dark, cloudless, quite unlike the previous ones. The tanks stopped dead, the men stood silent. Battalion commanders and staff officers gathered beside my lead tank. We were waiting impatiently for the liaison officer, but he did not arrive. The tension increased. Minutes were like hours to us. A single wish moved all of us—to get across the Vistula, and as fast as possible.

The luminescent hands of my watch crossed midnight. It was New Year's 1945. The strained silence was ripped by the deep bass of the sub-machine-gunners' commander, Fedor Starchenko:

“A Happy New Year, Comrades!”

Somewhere at the other end of the column we heard the voice of the brigade's chief political officer, "A victorious New Year, Comrades!" Someone cheered. The cheer was picked up by the tankmen and rolled along the column. Men in overalls and cotton-padded jackets embraced one another. Dmitriev, looking clumsy in his knee-length sheepskin coat, appeared at my side. Battalion commanders, company commanders, and some of the men crowded around me. Chief-of-staff Grigory Sverbikhin pushed his way to my side. How dear and close to me were all these people. What matter that the stubbles on Fedorov's unshaven face hurt my cheeks, and that Osadchy reeked of petrol. The joy lay in that we were seeing in the New Year on the Vistula, a stone's throw from nazi Germany, on the threshold of final victory.

The sound of an approaching engine gave us notice that the liaison officer was on his way. Soon a camouflaged hunchbacked little armoured car came rolling up. The liaison officer brought us a verbal order giving us two hours, from 2.00 to 4.00, to get across to the west bank over what he described as a low pontoon bridge.

Three green flares lit up the sky. The bugler's signal brought the woods to life. Snowflakes off the trees fell in a shower on our heads like New Year's confetti.

The hundreds of engines, started in one and the same minute, emitted a deafening roar. And this unabating roar was compounded with the clanking of the caterpillar tracks, the crackle



of bushes. The column was off, into new battles, into a new, victorious year.

We came nearer and nearer the as yet unfrozen Vistula. Nearly a kilometre long, the low bridge stretched before us like a ribbon. The brigade stopped, poised for the leap across.

The procedure, established by the Front Commander, Marshal Konev, was rigid. Bridges were put up at nightfall, and at dawn the pontoons were again pulled back by powerboats and carefully concealed. In the daytime, all life on the river stopped, while at night endless columns of vehicles crossed it in haste.

By morning, the brigade reached the Sandomierz area and took up positions in the woods among troops of the 1st Ukrainian Front. Things looked quiet, not as they had a few months before.

None but the gifted generals, the experienced, daring and inventive officers, and the disciplined, well-trained men of the Soviet Army could have concentrated these large forces—tank formations, tens of corps and divisions, and hundreds of regiments—without the enemy noticing.

The woods lining the road on both sides were like walls. The silence was complete. The tops of the trees swayed in the morning wind. Nothing seemed to disturb the calm of the clear, frosty January morning—nothing but the drone of an aircraft now and then, somewhere far away.

Chief-of-staff Sverbikhin and chief political officer Dmitriev were accompanying me to Army headquarters. The open jeep drove along familiar roads. Here, in August last year, all three of us

had taken part in the fighting to extend the Sandomierz positions.

The jeep drove on to a large glade beyond which were the young trees of a sparse wood. That was where the commander of our scout patrol, Andrei Serazhimov, had set out in his tank back in August to reconnoitre the surroundings.

This morning, in January 1945, the event was still fresh in our memories. And I remember it still, every little bit of it. Why? My reader will see from what follows.

So Serazhimov set out in his tank to check out the lay of the land. He met no resistance and rumbled into the Polish town of Staszów before the eyes of its astounded populace, the dumb-founded policemen, servants of the nazis, and the terrified guards. Here he climbed atop the town hall, and hoisted a huge red banner.

This done, his scouts took along two nazis and returned.

And the following day we liberated Staszów. The Poles gave the tankmen a rousing reception. Over the town hall the red banner was still flying, riddled with bullets. Now we were to drive on to Raków and Iwaniska.

At night, in one of the large forests, we first met Polish partisans. They were wrecking east-bound nazi troop trains, attacking and wiping out nazi garrisons, depots, and warehouses.

The Polish partisans welcomed the Soviet tankmen like brothers. The girls among them instantly laid a table in the middle of a clearing, and served Russian and Polish vodka. Toasts were raised

to our common victory. Regrettably, neither they nor we had much time: the partisans were bound for the woods west of Staszów, which they were to reach that night, while my brigade had to move on in a north-westerly direction.

The situation along the route was unclear. I got in touch with the corps commander and suggested stopping until daybreak, until we had more information about the enemy. But General Mitrofanov was adamant.

"Don't stop. Keep moving. In the morning, you'll be joined by three more brigades, those of Sliusarenko, Golovachev, and Chugunkov."

At war, orders are not questioned. In the final analysis, the general had a better grasp of things. He was thinking in terms of the Army and the Front. I belong to the people who, having understood the task they are set, always try to carry it out. And this I also taught my subordinates.

I had long been aware of the caution, shrewdness, and inventiveness of my 1st Battalion commander, Pyotr Fedorov. He would never leap before he looked: once sure of his ground, he acted with certainty. The expansive, resolute, sometimes even reckless Nikolai Osadchy needed a restraining hand. He had the affection of the men, and could lead them on difficult and hazardous assignments. Major Savchenkov and Major Starchenko were calm, level-headed men, and these qualities blended with firmness and determination.

That night my choice fell on Fedorov. I let his batallion go first.

"I beg you once more," I said to him, "be care-

ful, don't plunge. Tonight, you are the eyes and ears of the brigade."

"Never fear, I don't have to be told, Comrade Colonel."

The battalion jumped off. For the next several hours I was kept briefed on what it was doing. On by-passing Opatów, it captured the village of Lagów, and cut the Sandomierz-Kielce highway. The tankmen smashed an enemy company, crushed its vehicles, destroyed warehouses, and kept going north, encountering no resistance. Yet that night, Fedorov was not his usual self. He threw caution to the winds, and lunged far ahead. His radio signals grew fainter and fainter as the distance between us increased. Finally we heard him no longer. Our connection with corps headquarters had ceased in the middle of the night. I was in the dark, and this worried me more and more. I held council with Dmitriev and Sverbikhin. What troubled me was that the other brigades were nowhere near. What was the corps commander up to?

We made a last attempt to contact Fedorov and General Mitrofanov. Seeing that neither of them responded, I decided to keep going. The 55th took a northerly course. Following on our heels was the 238th artillery regiment under Major Rusakov.

Along the roads to Raków, Iwaniska and Lagów we saw unmistakable signs of Fedorov's activity—dozens of crushed enemy vehicles.

Suddenly, as we continued on our way, the enemy hit us from the air, from the forest, and

from a near-by gully. The air bombing alternated with a fierce shelling. The brigade was in a trap. Having let Fedorov's vanguard through, the nazis struck at us in full force.

We managed to hang on to an empty farmstead and to straddle an adjoining nameless height. The units, which had gone on to a large field of rye, took up combat positions. The artillery commander deployed three batteries, and opened fire. Our company of large-calibre machine-guns under Lieutenant Nikolai Tolstykh fired at the lowflying planes and made them climb. Savchenkov's battalion arrived, and also opened fire on the march. From the loft of the farmhouse I saw our battalion of submachine-gunners digging in along the edge of a gully.

The shock of the surprise attack was beginning to pass. We managed to return fire, to win a few hours' time and, marshalling our strength, to take all requisite counter-measures. The rate of the firing, the multitude of shells fired, and the endless bombing from the air, enabled us to determine the strength of the enemy. The balance was clearly against us. Worst of all, 1st Battalion had gone far north, while Osadchy and his men were somewhere behind. I had less than half my men. The brigade was, in a way, cut up into pieces.

In the afternoon, the air-raids became more intensive. A few large bombs hit the farmstead, where we had our headquarters. The vehicle with the radio station was put out of commission. The field kitchens were damaged, the staff coach was set afire. The connections with corps head-

quarters had not been restored. The fierce shelling of our 2nd Tank Battalion, our guns, and the motorised battalion of submachine-gunners had been going on for more than fifteen minutes. Then, bombers again appeared overhead. The assault on our bit of land was conducted with a sort of desperate ferocity.

In the wake of the air-raid and shelling, as was only to be expected, began the attack. German panzers appeared on the horizon. Dozens of personnel carriers thrust out of the woods. A regular storm of our hastily arranged positions started.

I sensed the questioning glances of my subordinates. This was a case where the commander had to display self-possession, willpower, and firmness. I knew that it was essential to win time, at least a few hours, until dark, and then gather the scattered battalions. But what could I marshal against the enemy? Just the fire of the few tanks and the three batteries of my anti-tank artillery. Plus the strength of the submachine-gun battalion. Nothing but the irrepressible willpower of my force could save the day. Everyone of us knew that we had to hold out at any cost. There was no avenue of escape. To thrust in a westerly direction, into the midst of the enemy group, was senseless. To drive south or east, heading for home, was impossible. To fight, to hit the enemy, to try and strike at him piecemeal, to stem his attacks—that was the only choice we had, and the life of hundreds of people depended on how well we did it.

We managed. What the weapons failed to achieve, the willpower of the men succeeded in doing.

We stemmed the enemy attacks for a time. This enabled us to regroup a little—to position our artillery more advantageously, to place two of our tank companies in forward positions, to create a reserve, and to withdraw brigade headquarters from the farmstead, whose structures were too easily spotted by the planes and enemy guns.

My staff set up headquarters in a deep gully. By a miracle a messenger from Fedorov managed to reach us. We learned that the battalion had been highly successful. Its tankmen smashed several German units. That was not all. Continuing its swift advance, Fedorov's battalion reached Ostrowiec railway junction deep in the enemy's rear. The nazis had not expected any Soviet tanks, and did not react to their appearance. They were convinced that what they saw were their own panzers. A trainload of panzers was being unloaded, and the Germans did not realise their predicament until they came under Fedorov's shellfire. The panic was indescribable. Tanks, platforms, and lorries were set ablaze, and enemy soldiers were running about in confusion. In the square, one of Fedorov's tank companies ran into a German infantry battalion whose men were lining up beside the field kitchens for their breakfast.

It took our battalion commander a mere thirty minutes to complete the rout of the nazi garrison. Fedorov was aware that he had to get out of Ostrowiec. He turned back to meet the main force

of our brigade. But he did not find us that day. We were east of Ostrowiec, under heavy enemy attack.

As evening approached, the situation deteriorated abruptly. The artillery regiment had used up almost all its shells, and had lost many of its guns. The submachine-gunners had sustained heavy losses. My tank was out of commission, and I had no contact with Fedorov or Osadchy. I could only hope that their battalions would come up and hit the enemy from behind. That would save us.

At the height of the battle, the enemy captured our jeeps with the radio stations.

The fighting was indescribably fierce. Every one who could still stand, fought back with whatever weapon he had—pistol, submachine-gun, grenade, machine-gun, even flare pistol. We were using all our resources, and were readying ourselves for hand-to-hand combat.

Hoarse voices passed on the command, "Hit the infantry, cut it off from the panzers." This we saw as our only salvation, for panzers without infantry would not venture into the deep gully we were holding in the quickly approaching darkness. Indeed, it was growing darker every minute. Gradually the air bombing stopped, the panzers halted, and the German infantry dug in. Not until the following day did I learn the reason why the nazis halted their attack. Fedorov's battalion had hit their rear.

The long-awaited night enveloped our gully, and we gained heart again, though the situation was still far from satisfactory. I had the crews but



no tanks, the gunners but no guns, signals men but no radios, and drivers without lorries. Still, though the losses were heavy, the brigade was alive and fighting.

Starchenkov restored order in his battalion, while the returning scouts and engineers were a welcome reinforcement. Now the group I had decided to lead in a break out of the enemy encirclement had several hundred men.

We began priming for the night-time break. The Germans had their infantry along the eastern slopes of our gully. They had brought in dozens of machine-guns, a few mortar batteries, while tanks were stationed along all the escape routes. They expected us to steer clear of the panzer force, and to rush the infantry, coming under its powerful machine-gun fire which would spell our doom.

But the nazis had forgotten that they were dealing with experienced tankmen. We knew not only the strong points of the panzers, but also the weak. We knew, for one thing, that tanks were blind at night, that they could not fire with any degree of accuracy, and that control was uncertain.

I did not hesitate to plan our main thrust against the panzer group. Success depended on good discipline, good organisation, and firm resolve.

A small group of our submachine-gunners opened fire and took demonstrative action to distract the German infantry. The nazis concluded that we were falling into their artfully placed trap. In reality, we had begun to carry out our plan. At a pre-arranged signal, our several hundred men

began creeping towards the German panzers. Our clothes were drenched. The men, who had eaten nothing in 24 hours, were advancing with great difficulty, losing the remnants of their strength. It took us more than an hour to advance three or four hundred metres. Still, we finally made it. Then, having reached the panzers, coming to what may be called no man's land where their fire was far less dangerous, we leaped to our feet and charged. We flung grenades at them, threw grass, earth and anything that came to hand into the engine apertures. Our fury was so great, that we assailed everything that came our way. The German tankmen, thoroughly frightened, stayed in their armoured boxes.

Yes, we won our combat with the nazi panzers. Breaking out of the enemy's positions, we rushed on to join our other battalions. One more hard day of fighting was behind us. Oh, how many such days each of us had had! At dawn we came to a large field. Here and there we saw the bulbs of onions and turnips and carrots. We fell on them ravenously. After the meal, we were strong enough again for the 25-kilometre hike to join our main forces.

Just outside Opatów we ran into another German unit, which had taken up defensive positions along our route. But now, having made contact with our two battalions, those of Osadchy and Fedorov, it did not take us long to crush the nazis, and in the morning we were back in the camp of our 3rd Guard Tank Army.

At mid-day, in a large staff coach stationed in

a deep pit, I had a talk with corps commander General Vasily Mitrofanov. I wanted him to know the bitterness and hurt I had experienced the day before. The general listened to my report in silence. He did not interrupt me even as I was showering rebukes on corps headquarters. He seemed to understand the state I was in.

“How is one to operate without communications, without reconnaissance, completely on one’s own?” I said. “Why did you refuse me permission to stop at Lagów, and why did you require me to carry out an impossible mission? What could I do alone, without support from the rest of the corps?”

General Mitrofanov said nothing to me, his eyes fixed on my face. Then he picked up the phone and called the Army Commander.

“I have Dragunsky here. He has fulfilled his mission. New nazi echelons have, indeed, arrived. A fresh German panzer division is evidently in the act of detraining. I imagine that a counter-attack towards Opatów and Sandomierz is to be expected any day.”

Then Mitrofanov listened attentively to the Army Commander’s reply, and said he had understood what the Army Commander told him. Dragunsky was in a dark mood, he added.

“Yes, he’s here in my coach, giving me a piece of his mind. Do you want to talk to him?”

I took the receiver out of his hand, and heard Rybalko’s voice:

“I appreciate how you feel. But you ought to know, too, that we didn’t send you out for a walk.

We had to know what was going on in the enemy rear. The Front Commander wanted me to send a strong group. The choice fell on your brigade. And we are certainly pleased to hear that our tankmen did so well."

I thanked Rybalko for the trust he had shown us, but asked him for permission to speak my mind.

"Yes, go ahead."

So encouraged, I continued.

"Why did you hide the truth from me? I was entitled to know what you wanted of me and my tankmen. If I had known, we would probably have acted differently."

The Army Commander interrupted my tirade.

"Dear friend, I agree that subordinates have got to be told the truth. But sometimes it is to the general advantage to keep some of the cards up one's sleeve. If we had told you that your mission was reconnaissance, I am quite sure you would not have gone farther than Staszów. And Fedorov would have kept reporting conscientiously that he was on the lookout, that he had seen one thing or another. And that would have been all. As it was, you managed to thrust 60 kilometres into the enemy's defence lines, and have given me a fair idea of what they are like."

Now, six months later, we were again in the Staszów woods, the spot where we had been locked in mortal combat with the enemy.

We crossed the large clearing. Somewhere here, on the edge of the forest, battalion commander Osadchy had hit a Tiger panzer. The battle had

lasted several hours. It had not been easy to break through: powerful nazi rapid-fire panzer guns had put up a dense screen of shells across our path. Yet, the rasping, willful voice of Corps Commander Mitrofanov had required us to keep going. I had been groping for a solution. Osadchy's battalion was near-by—the last reserve I had. So I had sent him into one of the forest cuttings. He succeeded in getting around the enemy ambush and hit it from behind. Fedorov's fire, and then the blow delivered by Osadchy, had made the nazis withdraw. The road was open.

In the car, Dmitriev and Sverbikhin started an argument. Dmitriev maintained that this was the spot where Osadchy had smashed the Tiger. Sverbikhin said the tank duel had taken place elsewhere. Driver Gasishvili joined the argument. No, he said, it wasn't here, as they would see in a minute for themselves. He remembered the place very well, for he had taken the petrol from the Tiger's tank. It was on the edge of the forest.

Dmitriev stood his ground. He was not to be outargued. But Gasishvili turned out to be right. A few kilometres farther on, we spotted a burnt panzer on the edge of the forest—it was Osadchy's Tiger. And a little distance away, where the field began, beside several lonely pine trees we saw a little cemetery. That was where we had buried the men who had fallen in the battle for the Sandomierz bridgehead.

Gasishvili brought the car to a halt. We walked up to the graves and read the names—Androvsky, Kuzmin, Sergeant Volodia Samoilovich, and many

other people we had loved, men who had become kith and kin, whom the war had taken from us. We took off our caps and bowed. Gasishvili stood in tense silence, Dmitriev breathed heavily, and Sverbikhin scanned the little cemetery with a gloomy eye.

A little poplar tree stood like a sentinel beside the grave of our favourite, young Volodia Samoilovich. On a little copper plate was inscribed the name and surname of the sergeant, with the figures: 1927-1944.

The then 16-year-old Jewish boy had joined the brigade in the autumn of 1943. He won everyone's respect by his conduct in battle. Men who were older treated him with a fatherly affection. The younger tankmen saw in him a brave and vivacious friend. He had been a modest, dreamy, yet extremely brave young man. At times it seemed that he did not know the meaning of death, though I had been informed that at fourteen the boy had endured the horrors of the Leningrad blockade, and had seen all members of his family die one by one. He had participated in the defence of his city, fighting with the Leningrad artillery and infantry forces. Then the undernourished youth was evacuated from the besieged city and put on his feet. A year later, he strayed into our brigade, and soon became a top-rate tankman. For us he was the embodiment of youth, of a radiant future, and we took good care of him, though we knew that in war death stalked each one of us every minute. Volodia had become gunner of my tank.

The mishap occurred on August 21, 1944. It

was a hot day. Calm reigned, and it seemed that the nazis had given us a day off. At mid-day the men, drowsy from the heat, were napping in the trenches. But in the afternoon hundreds of planes fell upon our defence line in several waves, and began smashing it up. The explosions of heavy bombs, accompanied with a strong shelling, made things hot for us. German mortar shells whined madly past. Nazi fighter planes, flying low, strafed us. And panzers rolled towards us across the field, followed by infantry in armoured personnel carriers.

The Germans advanced methodically, in increasing force. Our badly depleted line was breached. A huge gap appeared on the right flank, and German panzers streamed into it. At that critical minute the commander of the neighbouring motorised brigade, Alexander Golovachev, rose to his full height and led the staff officers and the men of the headquarters platoon in a counter-attack. The retreating units stopped. I saw men running to Golovachev's side from all directions. The counter-attacking group grew in numbers every minute, and bitter hand-to-hand fighting ensued.

My brigade sent Osadchy's battalion to Golovachev's aid. I, too, joined the battalion in my tank.

Our neighbour on the left, Colonel Sliusarenko's tank brigade, backed us with fire. The nazi infantry flinched and began to roll back. But the panzers, failing to notice the flight of the infantry, continued their advance. A few panzers reached our rear.

We had to wipe them out, and part of Osadchy's battalion wheeled against them. A group from Golovachev's motorised brigade cut off their retreat. Seeing this, I sent my last remaining reserve, two tanks—the chief-of-staff's and mine—into the fray to help them. The fighting was now behind us. It was hard to see whose shells were landing around us. The combat lines were mixed. Units and clusters of tanks were fighting in isolation. Tanks and panzers were ablaze, and lorries blew up as their petrol tanks burst. Soviet aircraft appeared overhead. They circled, but could not make out the situation and flew away.

The desperate battle went on for another two hours. The riflemen of Golovachev's brigade fought heroically, so did Sliusarenko's tankmen, and the tankmen of our 55th, too, were battling courageously.

At the most critical moment, help arrived. The enemy rolled back.

Before dawn we found my commander's tank. Its one side was split, the tracks were torn to shreds, the nose was butting clumsily into a shell-hole. Some 20 or 30 metres away stood two burnt panzers with crippled turrets, their guns lowered to the ground. Beside them, on its side, lay a nazi personnel carrier.

In a little depression overgrown with weeds, lay Volodia Samoilovich covered with a piece of torn canvas. At his side we saw his faithful friends, Yevgeni Belov, chief of the tank crew, and Victor Savin, the mechanic. Both were seriously wounded, but still alive.



Belov later told us about the battle. The boys had managed to put four panzers out of commission, but had also taken considerable punishment: two enemy shells in succession had pierced the side of the tank and crippled the base of the turret. A third shell struck the tracks. The tank, now unable to move, buried itself into the sand. Badly wounded, Savin and Belov, both of them unconscious, lay flat on an ammunition chest. Yet Volodia Samoilovich would not give up: the gun was still intact, and he had about a dozen shells. So he went on firing until no more shells were left—no more shells, no more bullets, not even a flare.

So ended the life of the Leningrad boy.

He was like many thousands of youths from Leningrad and Moscow, Siberia and the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Caucasus, was our Komsomol Volodia Samoilovich, a courageous and intrepid fighter. They fell defending their Motherland long before they grew to adulthood.

They are buried in the fields of Russia, the steppes of the Ukraine, the woods of Byelorussia, in Polish and Czechoslovak soil, in the soil of many other European countries, all those countries where the Soviet Army had fought its war of liberation.

Thirty-five years later I returned to the banks of the Vistula. I came on the invitation of Poland's Minister of Defence to visit the battlefields that I remembered so well, and for a holiday in the picturesque spots of the region. I was pleased

to accept the invitation and, accompanied by my old Polish friend Wladislaw Adamek, set out in a southerly direction in his car.

We reached the battlefields of Sandomierz. People and events filed past in my memory. True, the banks of the Vistula had changed. The heights for which we had so doggedly fought, were unrecognisable. But the faces of my men, the eyes of my tankmen, would never fade from my memory. As though alive, they stood beside me on the bank of the river—Volodia Samoilovich and Avas Verdiev, Victor Savin and Yevgeni Belov. I can still hear the voices of battalion commanders Fedorov and Osadchy shouting, "Forward! For the Motherland!"

It is long past mid-day, but I do not want to leave the river's edge. It is hard to part with one's martial youth. But Stanislaw Skarupo, secretary of the Sandomierz Party branch, and city mayor Kazimierz Swiderski keep looking at their watches impatiently. And we drive back along the streets of the resurrected city.

On the outskirts of Sandomierz, in a square planted with flowers and lined with tall poplars, a granite obelisk rises, with rows and rows of tombstones around it. Many many of them, much too many. Twelve thousand Soviet men and officers are buried in this little town of Sandomierz on the Vistula, whose total population during the war barely numbered seven thousand.

We stop before one of the tombstones. The inscription on it says: "Hero of the Soviet Union Colonel Vassily Fedorovich Skopenko, 1912-1944."

None of us venture to break the silence that envelops this sacred place. We get back into the cars in silence and drive along Vassily Skopenko Street, past the Skopenko School.

What else is there to say. The true Polish patriots cherish and preserve the memory of the war, the memory of the Soviet soldiers who had liberated their land from the fascist yoke.

Not until we had left the town far behind did we break the silence.

“What is the population of Sandomierz today?”

Kasimierz Swiderski replied proudly that the town now had a population of more than 20,000, that there were new factories and workshops, a pool of farming machinery, and that a new residential quarter was going up.

Stanislaw Skarupo said:

“As I figure it, Sandomierz has more than 30,000 people, for the Soviet soldiers who fell here are honorary citizens of the town. They brought our land back to life.”

I looked squarely at Stanislaw Skarupo and saw that he meant every word he said.

The Sandomierz people expressed their displeasure at our devoting too little time to their town. They had wanted us to stay overnight at their newly-built hotel, to have lunch at the *Vistula* restaurant, where the cuisine was better than any restaurant's in Warsaw, Krakow or Wroclaw, to see a performance of the local amateur song-and-dance group, which they said was better than the world-renowned Mazowsze company

and the famous Krakow choir, to see Sandomierz after dark, its lights reflected in arrow-straight rows in the river, and to take in many of the other sights created by the hard-working local populace in recent years.

But the colonel from the Kielce voivodship had explicit orders to bring us to the Opatów Powet, the village of Wola Grójecka.

We rode up and down the Sandomierz battlefield for nearly an hour. No traces were left of the gory fighting. Where we had had our front-line, our dug-outs and trenches, our firing lines and combat positions there was now ploughland, young woods, fields of rye and wheat. Tractors were doing their hard day's work in the fields and meadows.

On reaching the edge of Opatów Powet we parted with our companions from Sandomierz. Warm words of friendship and a glass of Polish vodka "for the road", and we were on our way south.

Admiring the view of the towns and villages along the Vistula, I naturally thought back to the ferocious fighting that this land saw in wartime. For 28 days and nights we had battled for the possession of every square centimetre of the Sandomierz theatre, which then became the spring-board for the Soviet Army's leap westward to Berlin.

I had fought on Polish soil for 253 days, and was again gravely wounded hereabouts. My first Gold Star of Hero of the Soviet Union was awarded

to me in September 1944 for force-crossing the Vistula and safeguarding the Sandomierz bridge-head.

The place was dear to my heart. The people of one of the Polish towns, Bolesławic, had named me its honorary citizen.

## The Woman and Death

It was long past mid-day when we drove up to Wola Grójecka. An ordinary village of which there are so many in Poland, Wola Grójecka straddled the highway leading to Kielce. Narrow streets, bushes, little barns and woodsheds, and a mountain forest rising on the horizon like a thick wall.

We stopped in the middle of the village. I felt my heart missing a beat. I was obviously agitated. My long-time wish was coming true. I had at last come to the village I longed to see—to see the people whom the fortunes of war had thrown together with my tankmen in those faraway days.

A chapter of the combat history of my 55th Guard Tank Brigade is associated with the people of Wola Grójecka. That is why, before giving an account of Kazimierza Cimbal, I want to write about the event that had unfolded here in those remote but well-remembered days.

It was early August of 1944. My brigade had lunged forward and was fighting to extend the Sandomierz bridgehead. I have already described the action of the battalion under Hero of the Soviet Union Major Pyotr Fedorov. He and his

men had smashed a panzer column at Ostrowiec, had wiped out trainloads of nazi reinforcements, and created a panic in the enemy rear. Fedorov had suffered considerable losses. Several of our tanks, hit and immobilised, were left behind on the battlefield. The tankmen, bereft of their vehicles, were engaged in unequal combat. The submachine-gunners we had sent to their aid had not coped with the large German force. We repulsed a succession of enemy counter-attacks, and then fought twenty-eight days and nights for the possession of the Sandomierz bridgehead. Finally, as I have already said, it had been seized and consolidated. But the fate of three of Fedorov's tank crews remained undetermined. Weeks and months passed, and we finally accepted the version that our comrades had perished.

Nearly a quarter of a century passed since those grim times when, on September 9, 1967, as our country celebrated Tankmen's Day, the newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* carried an article by Hero of the Soviet Union Pyotr Braiko, a retired colonel, entitled, "Who Were You, Four Tankmen?"

Reading it, I encountered names of towns and villages familiar to me from the fighting at Sandomierz in August 1944. The further I read, the clearer it became that the events described in the article concerned our brigade. The author wrote of the fate of a four-man crew whose tank had been crippled in an unequal clash with the nazis, and which was saved by the Polish peasants Franciszek and Kazimierza Cimbalek.

Having extricated themselves from the burning tank, and taking along their firearms, the tankmen decided to find their way back to the 55th Brigade. But all avenues of escape were blocked by SS-men and the nazi field gendarmerie. The Germans were looking for them. The tankmen rushed into the first courtyard they saw, hoping the local people would help them. And they were not mistaken.

The owner of the farmyard, Franciszek Cimbal, was busy beside the thresher. He saw the four armed men enter his yard; and by their oil-stained overalls and their firearms identified them as Russians. They were looking around guardedly, hearkening to the sounds of battle. One of them said in Polish:

“Dzen dobri, pan.”

“No pan, I’m tovarishch,” Franciszek said. “Tovarishch—understand?”

“Tovarishch! Good—hide us, tovarishch.”

Franciszek did not have to be told what the four tankmen wanted, and was thinking frantically where best to conceal them. That moment his wife Kazimierza appeared in the doorway of their house. “Those are Russian soldiers. We’ve got to hide them from the Germans. But where?”

Submachine-gun fire sounded nearby. The woman shuddered, saying hastily that the potato pit would be a good place, and headed resolutely for the shed. Franciszek and three of the tankmen followed her. The fourth ran back into the street, shouting, “I’ll draw them away”.

Franciszek pulled the boards off the ground,



raised the wooden trapdoor, and motioned to the square pit below. The tankmen looked at one another in silence, and jumped down.

No sooner had the Cimbals put back the boards covering the trapdoor and sprinkled dust over them than German submachine-guns resounded again somewhere very near.

The man and his wife hurried back to their house. They needed time to recover their senses.

A minute later a dozen nazis burst into their courtyard. They ran to the barn first, then barged into the house.

"*Wo sind die Russen?*" they shouted, pointing their guns at Franciszek, Kazimierza and her old mother, who was sitting on the bed beside the frightened children.

"We have seen no one," Franciszek was saying, shaking his head. Kazimierza, rooted to the spot, gazed in silence at the nazis, then at her children, feeling her legs giving way under her.

"I ask — where Russian soldier?" an SS-man yelled hoarsely, this time in Polish, advancing on the woman. "I ask — where?"

The children, all four of them girls, began to cry, pressing up against their grandmother. And when one of the nazis approached the bed, his face distorted with fury, and touched one of the girls' bare shoulder with the barrel of his submachine-gun, little Jadwiga screamed in terror.

Then the nazis argued over something among themselves, and strode out of the house. The moment the door closed behind them, Kazimierza dropped into a chair, then rushed to the window. Franciszek stood beside her.

During those frightening minutes they had heard nothing—neither the weeping of their girls nor the heavy boots of the nazis up in the attic. All their senses were riveted to the potato pit with the Russians in it.

Two hulking nazis stepped on the boards in the yard, looking closely underfoot. "We're done for—all of us," the woman shuddered. She put her hands to her face in horror, and closed her eyes.

A good thing the nazis could not see the state the man and woman were in. When Kazimierza reopened her eyes, the nazis were again coming out of the cellar. "Oh, Holy Mary!" she moaned.

"Thanks be to God, seems they are going," Franciszek mumbled.

"They didn't find us," he heard someone say in Russian in the pit.

"They heard every bit of what went on," Kazimierza thought to herself.

"Don't count your chickens—," she said to her husband loudly. "The fiends may come back. We won't be safe until they're gone altogether."

The nazis searched the area methodically, little inclined to give up. Some animal instinct told them that the Soviet tankmen were somewhere near. Again, a section of nazis barged into the Cimbals' house.

"Make dinner," a sergeant commanded. "We make our quarters here."

Kazimierza had expected the worst, but certainly not this.

The nazi followed her around.

"Are they really going to live here, the scum?"

What now? Good thing I'd given the Russians food. Got to warn them somehow."

Going past the potato pit she deliberately raised her voice.

"Don't worry, we'll think of something."

She discussed the matter with her husband. At night, she said, they'd have to give the Russians some food. Time would show what to do next.

After dark, she and her husband gave the tankmen food and a few candles.

The following day the people of the village were summoned to the schoolhouse. A fat major in gold-rimmed spectacles announced through an interpreter that he knew the villagers were hiding Soviet soldiers.

"If you don't give them up in 24 hours," he declared, "I'll send all your men to a concentration camp. Clear?"

The villagers kept their mouths shut. The ultimatum would not make them change their minds. No one betrayed the tankmen. And the invaders sent all the men, including Franciszek, to a concentration camp.

With her old mother and the four girls on her hands, Kazimierza Cimbala did not lose heart. Risking her life and that of her family, she stood guard over the lives of the three Soviet tankmen. Along with food, she smuggled candles to them, fearing that the long stay in total darkness would damage their eyesight, and she even managed once to let them out for a few minutes' walk.

"Thank you, good hostess, for saving us,"

said the oldest of them. "We'll not forget you as long as we live. Now we'll go."

"Where will you go?" she asked. She was frightened for them. She said that the house was under surveillance, that Germans roamed in the vicinity day and night, that the tankmen would perish if they went anywhere, and would bring perdition on her head as well. They should stay a while longer, she said.

The old tankman would not budge:

"It's time we went. We cannot risk your life and your children's any longer—and perhaps that of the whole village."

And the tankmen made up their minds to go.

But in the morning, large nazi units arrived in Wola Grójecka. A platoon of the mounted field gendarmerie rode into the Cimbals' courtyard. Worst of all, the gendarmes decided to sleep in the open, under the awning over the potato pit, near the trapdoor that was the only exit for the Soviet tankmen.

The nazis brought hay, covered it with blankets, bedsheets and other "booty" they had taken from the local people, and made use of their "bedroom" round the clock: some, who had slept their fill, went off somewhere, while others took their place. Right there in the yard, tied to a makeshift tethering-post, were their horses, consuming the villagers' as yet unthreshed oats.

The situation of the tankmen seemed hopeless. They were trapped. Kazimierza could not contact them. There was nothing the despairing woman could do to help them.

Suddenly she had an idea: here under the awning, only some eighty centimetres from the pit, was the opening to a new cellar. The Russians had to be informed at any price. They would dig a passage to the cellar, and she would be able to give them food. But how to let them know? She picked a moment when all the nazis were elsewhere—some with the horses, others out in the street.

Approaching the hiding place, she told the tankmen what to do—to dig in the direction from which they heard her voice.

The gendarmes came “home” after dark. The three guards they had left behind Kazimierza distracted in every way she could, drawing them away from the pit. During this time, the tankmen managed to dig the window to the cellar, and even had some food passed down to them by their hostess. Now she could come to the cellar on some pretext each day, and leave food, water, and a candle—and anything else the tankmen could require—on the third rung of the ladder.

In those five months, the Polish woman who was risking the lives of her children and her own every minute, suffered greater torment than at any other time in her none-too-easy life.

The three soldiers had spent a hundred and fifty-six days in the dark and crowded potato pit. They saw no daylight, sitting with backs bent most of the time, getting practically no exercise, neither washing nor shaving, nor changing their clothes. Neither did they talk much to each other, fearing to betray themselves. They could not come

out of hiding, because over their heads, on the hay covering the trapdoor, SS-men were sleeping, eating, cackling and guffawing, and singing drunken songs.

This ordeal did not end until 12 January 1945 when Soviet troops entered Wola Grójecka, bringing liberation to the fraternal Polish people.

In those 156 days and nights, the Polish woman performed an exploit that matched many other feats of heroism, without even suspecting the magnitude of her sacrifice.

On 17 January 1969, when the story had at last become known, she and her husband were decorated (the husband posthumously) by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR with the Order of the Patriotic War, 2nd grade.

After what I had read in the paper, I wanted to meet the fine Polish woman, and was overjoyed to learn that the Soviet War Veterans' Committee had invited Kazimierza Cimbala to Moscow. The tankmen she had saved, other war veterans and lots of people who had learned of her exploit from the papers, gave the woman a rousing welcome.

Her eldest daughter, Ilfreda Irek, who had been with the Polish partisans during the war along with her husband Tadeusz and her brother Michael, were accompanying Kazimierza. I had them come to my house, mother and daughter. Seated at the table alongside were the tankmen she had saved—Kirill Obozny, Vladimir Kontarev, and Semyon Berezin.

Now the reader knows why I was so agitated when we came to Wola Grójecka. Young and old gathered round the Cimbals' house. They all seemed to be speaking at once, telling me the story of our tankmen. Here we also learned that in a neighbouring village, too, people had taken care of six wounded tankmen from our brigade. We inspected the narrow potato pit where our crew had had to live 156 agonising days.

Kazimierza's eyes shone with youthful ardour. Despite her age of 78, despite the hard life she had had, she was cheerful, fussy, and active. Her cozy house was crowded with villagers. We spoke until well into the morning hours. Surrounded by her daughters, grandchildren and grand-grand-children, she seemed years younger. Proudly, she showed us the Order of the Patriotic War. Gratefully, she recalled her thrilling visit to Moscow, and to Sumy, and the Donets Basin, where she met her tankmen and many many friends. So passed the night. How short it seemed to us. We had so many more things to say to each other.

I took leave of Kazimierza with filial affection. How she resembled my mother! She was as tender, as affectionate, as kind. My mother, who had not bowed to the nazis, had been executed. This Polish mother had defied the nazi executioners and given asylum to three Russian young men, saving their lives at the risk of her own and her children's.

All mothers on earth are probably alike.

The entire population of the village came in

force to see us off. Kazimierza, her daughter  
Ilfreda and grand-daughter Elzbieta, presented  
us with a large round loaf of bread for the road.

"Do widzenia, good-bye", they shouted as we  
drove off.



## At the End of the War

Spring on the Oder arrived haltingly, in a way we were unaccustomed to. Dense fog drifting in from the Baltic enveloped the fields and woods, eating up the remnants of the winter's snow which lay in irregular islets mixed with dirt. Only a few days before, this had been a scene of heavy fighting.

In the past two months we had thrust far west. The winter offensive had brought us to the roads leading to Berlin, to Dresden, to the heart of Germany. We had fought our way forward nearly a thousand kilometres in those hard sixty sleepless winter days and nights. Behind us, behind our 3rd Tank Army and my 55th Brigade lay the Vistula and the Sandomierz bridgehead, the rivers Nida and Warta. Long-suffering Poland had been cleared of nazi scum. We had crossed the Oder and captured a bridgehead some 100 kilometres long and equally as wide.

In those foggy March days and soggy nights the soldiers' life went on as usual—we advanced, regrouped, sent scouts across the enemy lines, fired the requisite number of shells at the requisite hour, while the air force made the most of any favourable weather to hit the enemy. Bitter fight-

ing continued somewhere near-by, in the sector of our 1st Ukrainian Front.

My 55th Guard Tank Brigade had been pulled back to the reserve, and was priming for battles to come. New men had arrived to fill the depletions, petrol was being brought in from the army depots, and lorries drove up with ammunition. The long-awaited summer uniforms, too, had arrived. The grey fog that enveloped the Oder lowland could no longer shut out the sun: it was too hot in our warm overalls, sheepskin coats, and padded jackets.

All of us were fired by one and the same wish, the same thought: to take part in the Battle for Berlin. The men spoke of it aloud, and the officers, guarding the plans of the Command, did so in silence, waiting impatiently for the day of the assault. I, too, was hoping, though I knew how uncertain a soldier's lot could be.

Unfortunately, my reserve of health was giving out. The liver wound and my chest wound made themselves felt more and more often. Brigade surgeon Leonid Boguslavsky knew it, and wanted me to leave for treatment. Political officer Dmitriev, too, was putting on pressure. But how could I leave, how could I part with the brigade at such a time? How could I part with my comrades, the battalion commanders, the company officers, the tankmen, with whom I had shared the bitterness of setbacks and the sweetness of victories on the Dnieper, at Kiev, at Lvov and on the Vistula, at Sandomierz, in Silesia, on the Oder and at Buzlau?

Yet the brigade surgeons Boguslavsky and Olga

Prigoda, kept at me, supported by the chief of the political department. This massive attack culminated in a telephone call from Army Commander Rybalko. This time he was exceedingly graceless.

"I have heard of your bad discipline, your refusal to go for treatment. I am surprised. War, among other things, calls for good health, for people physically sound. I don't want you to be a burden to the brigade."

He paused, then added in a slightly kinder tone:

"By all evidence we are going to have a few weeks' respite. Take advantage of it. Go back and let the doctors patch you up. There's time enough."

My ear to the receiver, I was breathing heavily. "Burden", he had said. An unkind cut. "I—a burden?" Caustic words were on the tip of my tongue. But I recalled that, as Rybalko had said many a time, the wounded and the sick are always capricious, mistrustful, and often uncontrollable.

So I controlled myself, and drily thanked the Army Commander for his concern. Rybalko knew how I felt, and asked in a friendly voice:

"What's keeping you?"

"Berlin, Comrade General."

I heard him chuckle:

"I thought so. But, believe me, that's exactly why I want you to go and get patched up. We want you for Berlin. The war is almost over, but the finale is not going to be easy. Hitler and his intimates aren't going to step down willingly. They've gathered everything they have. Berlin is a hard nut to crack. That's why I want you to go,

to beef up a bit, and to be ready for the last spell of fighting.”

He added:

“You have three or four weeks. I imagine that will be enough for you to get well.”

“Comrade Commander, I still fear it’ll all be over when I come back.”

“I have known you a long time, and I think you should know better,” he replied crisply.

On a sunny day in March I set out south in a railway coach.

In Zheleznovodsk spring had already come into its own. The sun was hot, the grass green, and the buds glossy fat on the trees. The streets and parks of the health resort were crowded with people. I strode apprehensively along. There, I had come to my army hospital, where I had been confined for so long a time. In the reception room nothing had changed. The same neat furniture, the same white curtains, the same wicker chairs and the old ficus stretching its leaves to the ceiling.

I walked into the hospital chief’s office. A heavy-set man at the desk cast a stern glance at me. I asked:

“Where is Major Milchev?”

“There is no Major Milchev. There is a General Milchev. He is now at home, in Bulgaria, and deputy to the War Minister as far as I know.”

“My doctor, the former chief of this hospital?” I asked in surprise.

“Precisely, Comrade Colonel.”

I recalled May 1944, when I was brought here from the Kharkov hospital after six months' treatment.

Within an hour the doctors and nurses knew of my arrival. Someone wisecracked: "The escaped criminal is back." The head nurse, Maria Andreyevna, who had "fought" my indiscipline and had called me a "deserter", was happy to see her wayward patient return a Hero of the Soviet Union. She had forgotten her grievances and looked at me with motherly pride, stroking the Gold Star on my chest with her gentle fingers. Then she took me to my old ward, the one I had escaped from to go back to the front.

Here, in the spacious room, the doctors gathered for their "supreme council": they expressed opinions and made proposals as to my treatment. I was among old friends, my face shining, and thought how many splendid people it has been my good fortune to meet.

"Won't you let me have my say?" I begged.

The doctors fell silent, and I spoke in a commander's tone:

"Let me make things clear. All I have is 21 days. On 10 April I am leaving for the front. To avoid future misunderstandings, I want you to know that I am not going to stay here a single day longer. And if you try to keep me, I'll escape as I did the last time."

Everyone laughed. Someone suggested drawing up a time-table.

The general merriment continued. Whether in jest or not, a personal time-table *was* drawn up

and presented to me the following day. Someone had put "approved" in the left-hand corner.

My crash treatment began—the arts of home therapy combined with drugs, mineral water three times daily, and other medical procedures.

This time my departure from the hospital involved no incidents. Things went off peacefully. I got my travel papers, food for the road, a bunch of spring flowers, and all sorts of medicines. As old Russian custom requires, everyone in the ward sat down for a minute's silence. Then they jumped to their feet, and we went off in a crowd to the railway station. The train started, gathering speed as the friendly good wishes kept ringing in my ears: "Bon voyage! Finish off the war! Write us from Berlin!"

During the stop-over in Moscow I saw Volodia Beliakov. He put a new jeep at my disposal, and in it I set off for the west.

On our third day we came to Poland. Searching for the shortest route, we turned towards Deblin. Here we were stopped. We had had no idea that the bridge across the Vistula was blown up. And a jeep could not cross over the railway bridge nearly a kilometre long. On the other hand, the next bridge was up north, near Warsaw, and that would mean the loss of a day.

Aid came when we least expected it. The Polish railwaymen made a makeshift platform on wheels, put our jeep on it, and in this fashion we got to the west bank of the Vistula. All in all, though we had hurried, the operation had consumed six hours.

Now our route ran past familiar places — Jedrzejów, Radomsko, Wieluń, Rybnik, and Bolesławic.

We were lucky. A few dozen kilometres along the road we came across our traffic controller, Masha. I knew her from the Ukraine, and had met her dozens of times on the Vistula and the Oder, in Radomsko and Bolesławic. There she was, large as life. Had the girl ever imagined that one day, after living through the hell of nazi occupation, after fighting in a partisan detachment, she would finally come to Germany, to the approaches of Berlin?

I stopped the jeep and jumped out to say hello. The thought that I had come across this little blue-eyed blonde, who had been with us since the fighting for Kiev, made me want to leap about, shout and laugh like a boy. And since Masha Sotnik was here, controlling traffic, I needed no map, no compass, no other aids, for she would know the way, and would instruct us.

When the joy abated, Masha did not have to be asked: she told us in detail where the brigade had gone the night before. And that same day, along damaged roads and forest cuttings, bypassing German towns and villages, we reached our troops. We were making slow headway, overtaking columns of lorries and cars, and all manner of artillery. Coming in the opposite direction were men, women, and children. They were in rags and barefooted, and followed the troops going north to Berlin with their eyes, waving to us fondly. They were the people who had been driven into slavery by the chiefs of the nazi Reich,

liberated by the Soviet Army, and now on their way home. I searched among them intently, hoping to see someone I knew, my brothers or sisters, or relatives. I knew, of course, that my brothers had laid down their lives in battle, and that all my other relatives had been executed in Sviatsk. But it is human nature to hope for the best, to hope for a sudden stroke of luck.

Oh, how many were the people from the nazi-occupied lands that had been driven off to Germany! The march of the liberated slaves had begun back in January, when our advancing troops flung open the gates of the first concentration camps and prisons. In Poland, we liberated the prisoners of Majdanek, Oświęcim, and other death camps. It was more than four months since those days, yet the stream did not end.

“Victory!”, “Vive la paix!”, “Pobeda!”, “Frieden!” they shouted in different languages. And hearing them, seeing the joy in their haggard faces, I thought of the suffering the war had inflicted on us, of the toll of lives that it had taken. For the sake of liberating humanity, for the sake of these men and women returned to life, the trials endured by the Soviet soldier had certainly been worthwhile.

It was easy enough to find the way to the Army Commander's observation post. In a large room in an abandoned villa I saw Rybalko. Beside him stood a general I had not met before — a stocky man of medium height with coal-black eyes and silver-streaked hair. I was confused for I did not know who was the senior of them, both being colonel-



generals. I took a step towards my commander. Rybalko did not let me finish my report, shook my hand, and, turning to the other general, said he had been certain Dragunsky would return in time for the fighting.

To the other man, who turned out to be General Varentsov, commander of the Front artillery, he said:

“This is the commander of our 55th Tank Brigade. He had been in hospital. But is back in time. He feared he would not make it to Berlin. Now, if he enters Berlin first, he’ll get a second Gold Star, and if he doesn’t, we’ll take his first from him.”

Everyone in the room laughed. Rybalko’s words went to my heart. The Army Commander’s irrepressible enthusiasm was contagious. I felt new strength flowing into me. There was no superior that I liked and respected as much as I did this man.

In my life, indeed, as may be seen from my story, Rybalko played a determining part.

Now that several dozen years have passed since the war and I have learned some particulars of Rybalko’s life story, I can see still more clearly what an extraordinary man he was. Eminent general, gifted strategist, a man of great intelligence and wisdom—all that is not enough to characterize him.

What was the source of his strength, why were so many thousands of people attracted to him? What was behind the affection and respect that he commanded from his chiefs, his colleagues, and his subordinates?

I have been in the town of his birth—in Maly Istorop of Sumy Region, where a bronze bust of the twice Hero of the Soviet Union has been erected against the background of the famous T-34 tank. The house the marshal was born in is now a museum. The town has an agricultural school bearing Rybalko's name. The Higher Tank School is named after him, so are schools and streets in Moscow and other cities.

And as one reads documents from the war archives, as one talks to people who had known him, the image of that enormous man, that true patriot who had come from the thick of the ordinary people, endowed with the wisdom of the people, grows more vivid still.

The family of Semyon Rybalko, a sugar refinery worker, consisted of seven sons and a daughter. It had not been easy, before the Revolution, to feed so many mouths. So every member of the family worked. The younger boys were shepherds, those who were older worked at the refinery. When Pavel was 13, he was apprenticed to a turner for a wage of 3 roubles a month. To help the family, he went to Kharkov with his friend Yakov Katz, and took a job as assistant turner at the locomotive plant. There he began showing an interest in the revolutionary ideas that saturated the air at the Kharkov factories.

World War I came and in 1914 he was conscripted. For personal bravery, Pavel Rybalko was decorated with the St. George's Cross. But the revolutionary ideas he had absorbed in Kharkov had left a deep mark on his mind and heart. The

Revolution of 1917 convinced him that his lot was with those who were fighting for the freedom of the workers and peasants, the working people.

In his home town, where the young revolutionary had returned, people were forming workers' detachments and a revolutionary committee. A bitter fight for Soviet power was on in the Ukraine. Pavel Rybalko was made commander of a partisan detachment. He was elected member of the local Revolutionary Committee. At the end of 1918, wounded in battle, and losing blood, Rybalko was captured by the Whites and sent to a Kharkov prison, where he was sentenced to death. Soon, Kharkov was seized by units of the Red Army, and the doors of the prison cells were flung open. On regaining his freedom, Rybalko joined the Communist Party.

He became commander of a cavalry regiment, then political commissar of a cavalry brigade. He fought in the First Cavalry Army of the legendary Semyon Budenny. And wherever he was, he was always grown to the tasks that were assigned to him.

The hostilities ended. The guns fell silent. The civil war was over. The Revolution had won. And Rybalko got a new posting—he was made commander of the 7th Cavalry Regiment in the Northern Caucasus. He lusted for knowledge, burned the midnight oil reading, reaching doggedly for more and more knowledge. But self-education was not enough, and in 1931 he became a student of the Frunze Military Academy.

On finishing the Academy, Rybalko acquitted

himself inordinately well in all the responsible jobs assigned to him, with never a thought about his health badly undermined by wounds sustained during the civil war.

In June 1941, when nazi Germany treacherously attacked the Soviet Union, Rybalko yearned to go to the front. He appealed to all the high military instances, and wrote a plea to Stalin.

Years later, Marshal Andrei Yeremenko cited Pavel Rybalko's letter to him in his memoirs:

“Dear Andrei, greetings and best wishes. May you get well soon. I beg you most insistently, dear Andrei, help me, please, to get out of the backwoods. I am willing to take any job—divisional commander or deputy commander of a cavalry corps (they now have them). I am ashamed of not being in the fray. I want to fight. You know me. You have known me a long time. All my life I have worked faithfully for the country and the Party, and I think I will make a good fighter. I beg you once more, ask them to post me with the active army.

“I will be most grateful to you. Hard fighting is going on at the front, while I sit in the rear. If you are well again, take me with you. I will do my best. I plead with you, help me to get to the front. All my best,

“Yours, P. Rybalko

“Kazan, May 20th, 1942.”

A few days later, Pavel Rybalko's request was granted.

That was what my Army Commander was like, under whom I fought many many months of the war.

I was eager to be back, to fight until final victory. The jeep was driving north at top speed. On the last leg of the road to brigade headquarters we came under heavy shelling. Rapid-fire guns and mortars were firing all out. It took the jeep only a few minutes to crash across the shell-pitted field, but they seemed an eternity. I dreaded the possibility of being put out of commission. It was much less fear of dying, for at war one gets accustomed to it, but rather the annoying thought that one could be killed a few steps from one's destination.

At last, the shelling subsided. The shells were now bursting somewhere behind us. And in another hour we were among our own.

Brigade headquarters was in an unpeopled farmstead not marked on any of our maps. The familiar lorries and personnel carriers and my own tank, number "200", were lined up against a moss-grown brick wall.

The reunion with my friends took a few minutes only. Firm handshakes, questions, introductions to the new chief-of-staff and the officers who had replaced those fallen in battle or wounded. I was happy to find Alexander Dmitriev, my close companion who had headed the brigade's political department for more than three years, in good health.

The new chief-of-staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Sha-

lunov, reported the situation and handed me the battle order received in the morning. Attempts to force-cross the canal near Stadtsdorf had failed so far. He took me to the window and showed me Stadtsdorf, the bridge on the right, and the battalions that had dug in along the southern bank.

"I've never seen such dense firing," the chief-of-staff said.

"What about the bridge?"

"We failed to take it. The Germans have blown up part of it."

"What does the corps commander say to that?"

"He curses, and says we've got to cross the river."

I got in touch with General Novikov on the phone, and introduced myself. The corps commander said he was a mere two kilometres away from us, but that the radio and telephone could not be relied upon even at this close distance. It would be better if I came to see him at once.

To get there in a jeep or personnel carrier was impossible: the enemy was a mere 300 metres away. We had to walk or, more precisely, crawl on all fours, because of the fierce shelling. My aide, the liaison officer, and I picked our first goal: to reach the woods. But there it was still worse. Bullets whined all round us. The houses close to the edge of the woods served as a screen, but shells were being showered on them. We spurted from house to house, until an officer from corps headquarters finally intercepted us.

Though the situation was dramatic enough, we burst out laughing when the captain who had come

to show us the way, suddenly slipped into the narrow window of a cellar in a house we were then passing. A few seconds later, his hand appeared, inviting us to follow. I was a size bigger than the captain, and having pushed part of my body into the opening, I got stuck. Good-natured laughter greeted me when I finally forced my way in. An unfamiliar deep voice let me know that the window was the only safe entrance, because the approaches to the doors and the doors themselves were within the enemy's line of fire.

Gradually, my eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness of the cellar. I saw telephones in a corner of the room, and in the next room a radio station with two men puttering round it. Alongside Corps Commander Vassily Novikov, I recognised Colonel-General Nikolai Novikov, commander of our Front's armoured and motorised forces, and my old friend Colonel Andrei Novikov, chief of the corps political department.

The corps commander wasted no time to get down to business.

"It's unforgivable the brigade hasn't jumped across the canal," he said. "You've crossed the Dnieper, you were the first to cross the Vistula, you've forded the Nida, the Warta, and the Oder. And a little thing like a canal has stopped you."

He walked up to the map, and I followed.

"The Teltow Canal—the last of the water barriers on our way to Berlin. Once we force it, we'll be in Berlin."

"How much time do you give me to prepare?"

“You have twenty-four hours. Before dark on the 23rd of April you’re to report that you’re ready.”

\* \* \*

I got back to brigade headquarters by the same route, across the backyards and through the grove.

All next day was spent getting ready for the force-crossing and the breaching of the enemy defence line.

Obviously, we had to change tactics now that we’d reached the huge city. Our usual methods—flanking movements, attacks on the march, detouring, and raids in the enemy rear—were useless. The situation was unsuited for any moves that we had been accustomed to. Now the battlefield was Greater and Smaller Berlin, the suburbs of that enormous city, the far and near approaches to it, the streets, houses, canals and rivers.

Our preparations were over by nightfall. And at dawn we jumped off. Our artillery showered a hail of shells on the enemy. The air wave produced by the firing flung us to the ground. Dmitriev tried to shout the unholy din:

“A symphony! Beautiful!”

The chief-of-staff, delighted by the spectacle, commented:

“Marshal Konev has excelled himself.”

Tens of thousands of shells whined over the heads of our tankmen. Mortars rumbled from behind our backs. The fiery trails of the “katyusha”



rockets split the sky. Our bombers were heading for the frontlines wave after wave, followed by General Ryazanov's attack planes, all of them shielded high above by Pokryshkin's fighters.

The north bank of the canal and the southern outskirts of Berlin were enveloped in fires, explosions, and dense smoke. Parts of the fortifications flew high up into the air, houses crumbled, barricades and barriers erected by the nazis collapsed. The earth seemed to moan from the pain. Resistance was senseless in face of the onslaught of our two Fronts, our hundreds of regiments, the steel avalanche of six thousand Soviet tanks and the pounding of forty thousand Soviet guns, and, in addition, the armada of Soviet aircraft.

In vain were Hitler's hopes of stemming the tide with the reserves he had summoned to Berlin from the south and west. The reinforcements were being intercepted in the woods of Cottbus by the troops of generals Gordov, Zhadov, and Pukhov. And those that managed to elude them, were soon to flee in disorder when hit by Rybalko's and Leliushenko's tank armies.

The minute hand crept upwards. The fierce shelling shifted north. It would soon be time for the infantry and tanks. Suddenly I was gripped by incomprehensible nervous shakes. Was I frightened of death? Yes, it was fear, but there was something more powerful than ordinary human fear, something that drove us into battle, that multiplied our strength. Probably, it was our sense of duty to the Motherland, the people, the Party, the memory of our comrades fallen in battle,

and of our relatives and friends tortured to death by the enemy.

It was an awesome battle, lasting a few hours. All our troops acted with extraordinary dedication, coming to each other's help, until enemy resistance was finally crushed. We managed to force-cross the canal, to hang on to the bridge-head, and to cover the crossing of the main force.

A few hours later a pontoon bridge was built, and tank brigades and corps streamed across it.

The battle for Teltow was won, the gates to Berlin were open.

\* \* \*

At dusk that day, as my brigade was approaching the crossing, Corps Commander Novikov caught us up beside the bridge. He pulled out a map, unfolded it, and spread it on the fender of his jeep. He pencilled a line in a northerly direction, which then turned north-west to a Berlin suburb—Zellendorf.

“In Zellendorf you're to avoid street fighting. That's all. Clear?”

“Certainly.”

Zellendorf was the key to Berlin. It “fenced off” the south-west of the city and we were to capture it before the night was much older.

It was easy for Novikov to say “avoid street fighting”. But how if we had the lakes of Krumme-Lanke and Schlachtensee before us, and woods to left and right, and gardens, and villas, and farmsteads and palaces. Zellendorf, that picturesque

Berlin suburb of luxury villas, was the hangout of the chiefs of the nazi Reich. They had turned it into a strongpoint for the armies defending the downtown area.

The sudden silence that enveloped us was puzzling. Was there a trap somewhere? The staff officers thought so, I thought so, everybody else who was with me at the railway crossing thought so.

We discussed several possibilities, and decided to leave behind a reserve of one battalion, which we put under chief-of-staff Shalunov's command. He and the staff stayed behind. Then, at the head of the lead battalion, at the top speed attainable by tanks, I raced across the dead space round the railway crossing.

No shots. No movement. Zellendorf lay in ominous silence. Behind my tank were eight six-by-sixes, on which we had fitted large-calibre anti-aircraft machine-guns. The gunners, gripping their machine-guns, were ready to open fire at the drop of a handkerchief.

We were closing in on Zellendorf. I heard Saveliev's voice in the earphones:

"Serazhimov has come to the square. All fine. Head tank is reducing speed."

I could not make out what happened the next instant. An air wave threw our submachine-gunners off their feet. Not until a few seconds later, when bullets whined all round and a pillar of fire rose to the sky, the street shaking from the explosion, did I realise what the nazis had been up to. They did have a surprise for us, as we had suspected. And though we had expected it, though we

had girded ourselves for it, the sudden strike was overwhelming.

Finally, when the picture was a little clearer, I ordered two of our gun batteries to open fire and work over street after street. A few minutes later our heavy shells whizzed past overhead, and a little later, the mortar brigade of General Wolkenstein's artillery division joined the orchestra. Little by little, we organised the battle. And two hours later, at the price of great effort and considerable losses we attained our objective. Zehlendorf was in our hands, taken by storm.

Here, at the immediate approaches to Berlin, in its streets and squares, we had to cope with a tough assignment. The city had to be cleared of the enemy, all its streets, all its houses. That was the price of victory. We had to advance methodically, crushing each defensive unit one by one.

I had a fairly large force under my command. And all units, down to the platoons, had to get their assignments, which boiled down to taking control of the railway line and the motorway leading from Berlin to Potsdam.

We restored order in the companies and battalions, and the brigade resumed its offensive.

Towards dark the frenzied and hopeless resistance of the nazis ceased at these points. They had been pounded out of all the houses. Physically exhausted, broken in spirit, bereft of food, they could no longer stand up to our tanks, our combative, determined drive. The way to the western outskirts of Berlin lay open.

Somewhere in the eastern part of the capital

and in the downtown district flames were raging. Black pillars of smoke billowed to the sky, lit up from below by tongues of flame. Fireballs soared to the clouds from time to time, and we heard violent explosions.

It grew light. We were approaching a city that was ablaze with fire. Accompanied by scouts and submachine-gunners I ran up to the first house on the edge of the city. The white enamel plaque on the wall said, Heerstrasse. Our men cheered. We had done what we had been ordered. The brigade had come to the western outskirts of Berlin, to the very street it had been ordered to come to.

Here, in these early morning hours, silence reigned. The German staffs had not reckoned with the possibility of a Soviet force reaching the westernmost edge of the city. The fighting was in eastern Berlin, and its centre.

But within less than an hour, the silent morning was torn by the fiery salvos of heavy guns. Grenades attached to long wooden handles flew in our direction. Shells struck the armour of our tanks. The streets, attics, and cellars came to life, emitting a hail of lead. The long-range artillery of the 1st Ukrainian Front began shelling the still uncaptured western quarter of Berlin. Our bombers and attack planes appeared overhead.

The Soviet thrust to the western edge of Berlin blended with the attack mounted by regiments and divisions approaching from east, south and north. The ring round the enemy in Berlin was about to close.

By the morning of April 27 we emerged in the western part of Wilhelm-Strasse. Scouts and sub-machine-gunners crowded round me. I read the name again, "Wilhelm-Strasse". No mistake. Facing my friends, I suddenly laughed. The men looked at me in surprise. I owed them an explanation, for would their commander laugh for no good reason? And a reason there was.

The story dated to pre-war, and I related it to my comrades that early morning in Berlin's Wilhelm-Strasse, beside house No. 76.

We were taught German at the Frunze Military Academy by a Maya Mikhailovna Zabelina. Her youth, her black eyes, her slim figure attracted us all much more than the subject she was teaching. At the lessons, we stared at her, oblivious of what she was explaining. But it took her several months to realise it, and to change her teaching methods.

She became implacably strict, pedantically exacting, driving us frantic with her brutal nagging. Years ago in school I had been fairly good at German, and at the Saratov Tank School I had nothing but top marks. Naturally, at the Academy, I thought I had a large enough stock of knowledge to get by. But each passing month our "magnificent lady" grew more aggressive. My marks were getting worse. And I wasn't the only one to get poor notes.

That was when the change came. Even the most committed of Maya's admirers, the young lieutenants, began to find fault with her: she wasn't as beautiful really, and not feminine enough,

and her eyes weren't all that black, and her nature — oh, God have pity on anyone who marries her.

We boycotted our German lessons. Most of us, in fact, attached no importance to them. Tactics was a different thing, an important subject. But our German teacher kept at us doggedly, pumping the language into us. She had naturally seen through our scheme.

One day, during a lesson, when we were least prepared for it, she entered the auditorium and distributed test papers. And to prevent us from copying, she gave each one a different test.

"I'm doing it so you won't disturb one another," she said, smiling her usual smile in which we now detected malice and perfidy.

Our hopes collapsed. Previously, despite her vigilance, we had managed to help each other, to whisper an answer, sometimes even to crib. Now, we were up against it.

Ten questions were written out neatly on our test papers in Russian. And we were to write the answers to them in German. The time flew relentlessly. The bell rang. My unfinished paper lay on the teacher's desk in a pile of similar papers. And a few days later she took us over the coals, and I got the worst of it.

"What a disgrace. Three mistakes in one word — Wilhelm-Strasse! I thought you were quite good. You could even have become a fairly good interpreter."

She spoke to me in that vein for several minutes. Then, changing her tone, she began lecturing.

"What if there's a war with Germany? What

are you going to do then? How are you going to interrogate prisoners? Just think of it—three mistakes in Wilhelm-Strasse!”

I had failed the test.

That was why, finding myself in Wilhelm-Strasse, I could not help laughing. “Yes, yes, my dear *Genosse* Zabelina, my dear teacher, I’ve come to the German capital, I’ve interrogated dozens of prisoners and did so fairly well, and I’ve even managed to come to the Wilhelm-Strasse which had made me flunk my test.”

My friends laughed loudly at my tale. And never in my wildest dreams did I think that day that I would meet Maya Zabelina again.

It was a few years after the war. I was having a holiday in Kislovodsk. In the lively little street that everyone went to, in the dense crowd, I glimpsed the familiar face, and those dark eyes. The ten hard years, four of them war years, and whatever I had had to endure, had not obliterated the memory of our fond and exceedingly demanding teacher. I recognised Maya Zabelina, and walked up to her. I told her who I was.

Her glittering eyes were fixed on me in surprise. It was not easy for her to recognise the young, a little mischievous, senior lieutenant who had given her so much trouble at the Academy in the silver-haired man who stood before her.

We drifted into a conversation. Without noticing we came to the watering place, and both had a drink of mineral water. Here, I reminded her of my failing the German test.

She pretended to remember, or perhaps she



really did remember. In any case, she did not stop smiling all the way back to the sanatorium. She was especially moved by my story of Berlin, of the episode at Wilhelm-Strasse No. 76, in which she had been the main character.

Glancing at my two Gold Stars of Hero of the Soviet Union, she spoke in a deliberately strict tone, playing the teacher:

“Well, student Dragunsky, I’m prepared to alter your mark for the test paper. You may consider that you have top marks. I’m giving them to you for good use of the language. But at least spell the word Wilhelm-Strasse once more, will you?”

Both of us laughed merrily.

\* \* \*

The second consecutive day we were fighting inside Berlin. The Heerstrasse area was cleared. Tanks and submachine-gunners were at grips with the enemy in the Olympia Stadium and the adjoining streets.

Unexpectedly for us, the corps commander ordered us to head north. The red arrow that General Vassily Novikov drew on my map stretched upward to Spandau, Ruhleben, a railway branch-line along the Spree and to the grounds of a large panzer repair works. The general wanted us to reach the river bank that day, make contact with troops of the 1st Byelorussian Front, and close the inner ring round the nazis in Berlin proper.

Serazhimov's scouts in their usual camouflage coats headed for Ruhleben. Gulevaty's battalion, supported by Starukhin's submachine-gunners, a few heavy tanks and self-propelled guns, swung into Reichstrasse.

It was past mid-day on this fine, warm day in spring. The sun stood high above our heads. Its rays pierced the dense screen of smoke. We got through Ruhleben with some strain, turned right, crossed the branch-line, which ran from Stresow to Charlottenburg Bahnhof, and came to a little square opening into Reichstrasse, Spandauerdamm and Charlottenstrasse. Here we came upon officers of the 1st Byelorussian Front.

Our mission was thus completed. The inner ring of the envelopment was closed. The tankmen of the 1st Byelorussian and us, tankmen of the 1st Ukrainian, had made contact. Never were handshakes firmer, and welcoming shouts more joyous. The din in the square was unimaginable. There were cheers. Tankmen's and soldiers' helmets were thrown into the air. More and more men came running from both sides of the railway tracks. Tankmen kissed the infantry, gunners embraced the engineers. All of us were conscious of the historic significance of that moment. The capital of Hitler's Third Reich was tightly enveloped!

First the Corps Commander and then the Army Commander learned that the brigade had fulfilled its mission. The thought that two Fronts had made contact within Berlin, and that my brigade had been one of the "culprits", was heart-

ening. I had an additional, personal reason to be happy: the 1st Motorised Corps which we made contact with here was led by General Semyon Moiseyevich Krivoshein, my mentor and my good friend.

\* \* \*

The night was restless. It was the eve of 1 May. The fighting had abated, but we were on our toes. Corps headquarters was silent. I decided to ring the Corps Commander. General Novikov took his time coming to the phone. Then I heard his quiet voice. I told him who was calling, said hello, and began telling him what I needed:

"Comrade General, give me some infantry. I need hands. Owing to the shortage of submachine-gunners. Please, send me at least a battalion of submachine-gunners."

A minute passed, then another. I heard no reply.

"Hallo, hallo, do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you very well. I can't give you any infantry. I haven't any."

The general fell silent. I heard him breathing heavily. Then, he said:

"Dear David, I am overwhelmed with grief. My Yura, my son—he was killed yesterday. In Berlin—"

Stunned by the news, I was rooted to the ground. And the Corps Commander continued:

"He took charge of an attack, an attack of the motorised regiment." I heard the general sigh. "I've got Yura's body here, at my command post, right beside me."

“Dear Vassily Vassilievich, I’m too confused, I have no words. Please, be brave. I promise you we’ll avenge your son’s death, we’ll avenge all those who have laid down their lives for the Motherland.”

In reply I heard just one quietly spoken word: “Thanks.”

Vassily Novikov used to say that he was a thoroughly Russian Russian. And that was no pose. His appearance and behaviour were the embodiment of the wide open Russian soul, its kindness and lofty spirit.

He was born into a poor peasant family. From a young age, when the cold winter came, he used to go to the near-by town looking for earnings. Then came World War I, he was conscripted, and spent three long years in the trenches. Then, when news of the Revolution reached the army, private Novikov became its loyal and faithful soldier.

He joined the Mounted Army, and was decorated with two Orders of the Red Banner for courage and bravery in battle. After the Civil War, the intrepid cavalryman devoted his life to the army. Years of training followed. The armed forces of the Soviet Union grew strong. Tanks replaced the cavalry. Novikov was one of the organisers of armoured troops, one of the first commanders of a tank brigade. The unfixed life of an army officer saw him first serving in Byelorussia, then in the Ukraine, and then in the Transcaucasus.

And wherever he went, he was accompanied

by a frail, blue-eyed woman whom he had met during the war, and loved dearly. They had two boys—Dmitry and Yuri.

When the nazis attacked, Novikov was posted in the south of the country, on the border. But the irrepressible, indomitable Novikov could not reconcile himself to being so far from the action. He got himself a posting to the active army. But resistance had come from an unexpected quarter. The general's wife, Anastasia, refused to let their two sons accompany him to the war.

“Let them grow up a little, let them finish military school.”

Novikov reminded his wife that they were a soldier's sons, that it was not for them to sit out the war at home.

It was agony for the mother. But there was nothing she could do. She blessed the three of them as they went off to the war.

Now and then, the fortunes of war would throw them together, then hospitals would part them. But no sooner their wounds healed than they were back in action, together, to hit the enemy in unison, the Novikov way.

All three took part in the battle for Berlin. Father Vassily as corps commander, Captain Yuri Novikov as deputy commander of a tank regiment, and Captain Dmitry Novikov as commander of a tank battalion.

Civil war veteran Novikov senior was made Hero of the Soviet Union, hero of the Great Patriotic War. Besides the two Orders of the Red Banner, he now had the Order of Lenin, one more

Order of the Red Banner, the Order of Suvorov, the Order of Kutuzov, and other decorations for his martial service.

The general's sons kept up with their father. The two tank captains had many orders and medals.

The three had run into each other at the approaches to Berlin. It was a busy time. The father was busy, and both his sons, too, were in a hurry to get back to their regiments. Novikov senior patted them on the shoulder, and scolded them for not writing to their mother often enough.

"See that you do if you don't want a hiding."

They said they hadn't the time, that they would write once Berlin was taken. The father said Yuri had always been lazy, and that he'd punish him notwithstanding his being a captain if he didn't keep his promise.

"Go easy, dad, there're two of us—two captains, and we'll stick up for each other."

The two young men embraced their father. Grinning, the general waved them away, grumbling good-naturedly.

Dmitry climbed into his armoured car, Yura into the cabin of a self-propelled gun. They drove in a northerly direction. The general remained at the road intersection. He gazed after them until they were out of sight. Tears of pride glistened in his eyes. He was proud of his two boys—two good lads, brave and strong.

Before nightfall that day, at Teltow Canal, the youngest Novikov, Dmitry, was seriously wounded. Novikov senior took the news as a soldier must, without flinching. In a quiet voice

he ordered his son to be taken to a rear hospital, and left the same night for his command post on the bank of the Teltow.

A few days later he learned that Dmitry's life was out of danger. "He'll live." These words, which he repeated all day in his mind, were a relief.

Yet on the threshold of the happiest moment of his life, a few hours before the long-awaited victory, came a terrible blow—Yuri was dead.

The old soldier, veteran of three wars, knew the price of life and death in battle. He had been prepared for the worst, but the death of his son in Berlin, in the war's last battle, was more than he could bear. The battle-steeled, gallant soldier broke down and wept.

"How will Anastasia take it? She won't want to outlive Yuri's death..." he mumbled, sitting beside the corpse of his son.

\* \* \*

The nazi soldiers hid themselves in cellars, tunnels and basements all over Berlin, waiting for whatever fate had in store for them. We continued chasing them out of their hide-outs, clearing block after block, street after street. The company of submachine-gunners that we had sent out under young Captain Hadzarakov in the morning had run into an ambush. The dark-haired captain from Ossetia was killed. Our scout Sasha Tynda, a Ukrainian, had not returned from his mission. Berlin was still in flames, houses were crashing

to the ground, the dense smoke made our eyes water.

By radio, telephone and other means of communication we had received the order: redouble your effort. At 18.30 hours all our artillery opened up in unison. The firing of many thousands of guns carried a symbolical message, warning the enemy that further resistance was senseless, that unconditional surrender was inevitable, that the Soviet troops would not stop until fascism was crushed for good.

The nazi garrison capitulated. Frightened, hungry, unofficered, Hitlerite soldiers began creeping out of their hiding places before dawn—one by one, and in groups. They threw down their arms and surrendered. All morning and afternoon crowds of haggard, unshaven German soldiers came staggering to the pow pens. Apathy in their eyes, all they wanted was water, a chunk of bread, an end to the torment.

No longer did they ask, as they used to, "What will happen to me?" They cared no longer. Our submachine-gunners brought back a fairly large group of pow's.

"Where do I take them?" a lively sergeant asked me.

I nodded at a sign with an arrow on it, showing the direction of the pow assembly point.

Meanwhile, the radio, the telephone, and elated voices all round made it known that the ordeal was over. No more offensives, no more attacks, no more shooting. It was unbelievable, though we had yearned for this hour of victory for four



long years, for nearly 1,500 days and nights.

People accept historic events in different ways. But nearly in all cases, the events are impregnated in their memory to the least little detail.

We were gathered in the large sitting-room of a miraculously undamaged villa. At my side were those who had come here through the blood and suffering of war. We were out of our minds from joy, intoxicated with elation, and found no words to express our happiness. Not that words were needed. Everyone gave rein to his feelings in his own way. Dmitriev, the brigade's chief political officer, who had once been secretary of a district Party committee, wept like a little boy and did not try to conceal his tears. Chief-of-staff Shalunov, a man of great willpower, was wiping tears from his eyes like a child with the knuckles of his fist, mumbling something that I could not make out. The clumsy, unshaven Andrei Serazhimov yelled, "Oh, what a beast we've slain!", and showered the beast with choice unrepeatable curses. Someone kept chanting, "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!" And from all sides came a loud cheering, "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!", rolling along the streets and squares of Berlin.

The first to come to his senses was our chief-of-staff.

"What next?"

His question caught me unawares. For the first time in the four years of war I had not the faintest idea of what we were to do next. And I said the first thing that came to my mind:

"Order everyone to gather in battalions, and

move the battalions closer to headquarters.”  
That moment, in Moscow, a fireworks display saluted the army of liberation, our Communist Party, our Motherland, the great Soviet people...

\* \* \*

For the first time in years I slept soundly—in a real bed, a soft bed with real bedclothes. And with my clothes off. It was the next thing to heaven.

Dmitriev woke me.

“Reveille, reveille,” he shouted loudly.

The habit acquired in the war made me leap to my feet and dress swiftly. I looked around questioningly:

“What’s up? A breakthrough?”

Dmitriev laughed.

“Nothing’s up. There’s no breakthrough. Didn’t we decide last night that we’d go sight-seeing?”

In a little while we were walking through the streets of Berlin.

We came to the Reichstag building, symbol of the Third Reich—grey, sombre, pocked with shells, burned, mutilated like the rest of the city, like the rest of Germany. Only yesterday, there had been heavy fighting in and around the Reichstag. Its capture had heralded the collapse of the nazi empire.

Inscriptions everywhere—on its walls, the floor, the columns, on every stone of the crippled building. Hundreds, thousands of inscriptions. Of all kinds. “We’ve made it”, “We’ve managed”, “We’ve won”. And alongside, the towns that

the writers had come from: "We're from Moscow", "We're from Leningrad", "I've come from Stalin-grad to Berlin", from Minsk — Smolensk — Khabarovsk, and so on. In those days, everyone felt he was entitled to carve his name on the Reichstag building. I, too, drew out my knife and carved the following words on one of the columns: Dragunsky, from Briansk region, 3 May 1945. All about me, my friends were also busy carving.

\* \* \*

At headquarters, my return was awaited impatiently. The villa was in an uproar. Shalunov met me with the news that an order had come to take the brigade out of Berlin before nightfall and concentrate south of Eichkamp beside Teufelsee.

I wondered about the reason for the order, and ventured to trouble General Novikov with a phone call. There were a few things I had to bring to his notice: in the last of our battles the brigade had suffered heavy losses, we needed replenishments at once.

The general's voice sounded calm and sure:

"I am aware of your troubles. Mind you, the enemy's no longer the same. All that's left us is to finish the beast off. You're strong enough to do it. And you can count on some help."

"Could you tell me what I can expect?"

"We'll start tomorrow, in a new sector."

"What sector?"

"I've no orders yet, but be prepared for a long march. We'll jump many hundreds of kilometres."

We departed from the still smouldering, mutilated, defeated Berlin in the deep of night. Ensconced in the front seat of a jeep, I was thinking that at last the curtain had fallen on the final act of this worldwide tragedy. The war was ending. I recalled the wise saying, "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." The retribution has been delivered. The enemy has been licked.

\* \* \*

We were going to aid Prague. The road was hard. Along the narrow winding mountain roads, the Germans had put up hundreds of barriers of felled pines, lashing them with barbed wire, and mining them.

In the foothills of the Sudetens there were no possible detours. If you turned off the road you stood a good chance of plunging down a precipice. We had had to clear the barriers, defuse the mines, and grapple with enemy units covering these points of resistance.

The Prague radio kept calling for help. We understood the impatience of the risen Czechs, and were ourselves gripped with impatience. But that did not make it easier to cross the final few kilometres of the mountain range. The brakes would not hold, the water in the radiators was boiling, the tanks kept sliding down the steeper slopes. We put our shoulders to them, dragged up guns and mortars on foot. The drivers accomplished what was next to impossible. We had ascended the main ridge of the Erz Mountains. Before us lay the picturesque valleys of Bohemia,

their wooded knolls spotted with little white houses with red-tiled roofs.

Down the column, rising above the roar of the engines and the clank and clatter of the tank tracks, came the order for the brigade commander to move to the head of the formation.

From afar I saw cars on the road and a personnel carrier with submachine-gunners at the wayside. Coming closer, I recognised Rybalko in the midst of the generals and officers of his Army's headquarters.

"Why have you stopped?" he asked in a severe tone. "Kalinin and Popov are already nearing Prague."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Rybalko spoke again, this time more mildly:

"Fine. You are to enter Prague tonight. The enemy is doomed, but we've got to save the Czechoslovak capital from destruction. Thanks for what you've done in Berlin. Good for you. You haven't let us down. Many of your men will be duly decorated."

I grew bold.

"Comrade General, you promised to come and see us at Wilhelm-Strasse. But you never came."

He smiled slyly:

"It's too hard to keep up with you—here one minute, gone the next. But I'm going to avail myself of your invitation and visit you in Prague. And God help you if I come there first."

"We'll do our best to get there before you."

The closer we came to Prague, the greater was the panic gripping the enemy's Army Group

Centre, caught between the steel pincers of our tank armies. Guns without gunners, panzers without crews, and lorries without drivers stood in confusion along the road. Uncontrolled and demoralised nazi soldiers were abandoning their arms and equipment, and running for the woods and mountains. They were trying to get to Karlovy Vary, Plzen, and Česke Budejovice. But Soviet troops rose in their path.

\* \* \*

The last night of the war was slowly fading. We spent it on the move. The dawn found us in a Prague outskirt: we had come to our goal. An hour passed, and one more, and no orders arrived from the corps commander. I unfolded a map of Prague, found the downtown area, and decided to make for the city's central square.

Hollow sounds of shelling reached us from somewhere. Submachine-gun bursts sounded in the vicinity. The remnants of the nazi troops were still resisting. Yet, happy and festively arrayed citizens were already filling the streets.

The tank brigades of Rybalko's and Leliushenko's armies were entering the city from all sides. And all of them were eager to reach the centre of the city first, to complete the liberation of Prague, to write *finis* to the Great Patriotic War.

We, too, were heading for the central square.

Thousands of elated people lined the pavements and spilled on to the thoroughfares. It was next to impossible to break out of the friendly embraces of the Prague populace.

The signals chief came running, excited, his face red:

"The radio—Moscow Radio just announced, the war's over. Unconditional surrender! Hurrah!"

Stunned by the news, we stared at one another in silence. Then we cheered all at once, and began shaking one another's hands.

The same joyous madness reigned all around us. The news from Moscow had reached the banks of the Vltava. The day had come at last. The war was over. The suffering was at an end.

\* \* \*

Rybalko kept his word. In the company of the two generals Novikov, pushing through the crowds filling the streets, he had come to Wenceslaus Square. The reunion with him was as warm as I could wish. He put his arms round me:

"Congratulations, my dear friends. We've lived to see it. A pity that so many haven't..."

He was deeply moved. His eyes were moist. And Vassily Novikov kept taking off his spectacles and wiping them with shaking hands. I had a lump in my throat.

In excruciating 1942, Rybalko had lost his only son, a 20-year-old tank lieutenant, and Novikov had lost his son Yuri just a few days ago.

To each one of us, the war had brought much grief. And the joy of the first day of peace was therefore mixed with sadness. Men were not ashamed to weep. Their tears were of joy, and at once of sorrow for those whom the war had carried away.

## Never Again Must Soldiers Fall in Battle

May 1945 was ending. The battles for Berlin were gradually becoming history.

A life of peace had begun for my brigade, stationed temporarily north of Prague. Saws and axes were at work: the men were building a camp in the forest.

One Saturday, when I was about to leave for a Prague theatre, the phone rang and I heard the corps commander speak:

“Rybalko wants you.”

“What for,” I asked in a troubled voice.

“I know nothing. You must leave the brigade and go to Moscow.”

The news was entirely unexpected. I was stunned.

“Leave the brigade? How could I? Please, don’t let me do it.”

Novikov said:

“It won’t be for long. If I were given your assignment, I’d be ready to walk all the way. Don’t forget: you’re to be at the Commander’s at 10.00 hours.”

I was decorated with the Order of Suvorov. After the ceremony, Rybalko said:

“The Army’s Military Council has decided to



send you to Moscow to take part in the Victory Parade. You will be in charge of the tankmen. What d'you think of that?"

What happened then fills me with shame to this day. It is probably true that people grow foolish when they have an unexpected stroke of luck. I had never noticed before that I could be arrogant or over-confident, yet that moment I suddenly declared:

"I'm afraid all hell will break loose in the brigade if I leave—."

Rybalko glanced at me deprecatingly.

"Don't over-rate yourself. I suppose we better summon Sliusarenko, Shapovalov and Arkhipov. Perhaps it will be wiser to leave Dragunsky here, lest the 55th falls to pieces—."

I cursed myself. My appearance must have been pitiful. My eyes lowered to the ground, I stood there, twirling the little box with the Order.

Military Council member Melnikov came to my rescue. He saw the state I was in, and knew I had blurted out something I did not mean.

"There's nothing wrong about a commander who cares for his men," he said, turning to Rybalko. "They have their hands full just now. Now that the war's over, the soldiers are converting to peacetime conditions. That isn't easy. I don't think we should look for a substitute. Let Dragunsky go—"

Bakhmetiev backed Melnikov.

"If you allow me," he said to Rybalko, "I'll take Dragunsky to headquarters and we'll settle the affair."

I recovered from my embarrassment. Rybalko walked right up to me.

“Well, what about it?”

“I can only beg your pardon, Comrade Commander. I don’t know what made me say what I did. I give you my word, we’ll not shame the tankmen’s glory.”

“That’s different.”

In the surviving military compound of a former military school in Dresden drilled the battalions of the composite regiment of the 1st Ukrainian Front. We were awaiting the Front commander for a final review before our departure for the Victory Parade. There was general excitement. And the most excited of all were probably the three colonels, one of whom was me.

We were on pins and needles, because the Front’s chief-of-staff, General of the Army Ivan Petrov, had with his typical military forthrightness told the three of us we would have to go back to our units because we weren’t tall enough. But he had not ventured to boot us out before Marshal Konev came, and had put the matter off until his arrival.

It was quite true that comparisons with the rest were not in our favour. In command of the composite regiment was tall, slim, elegant Gleb Baklanov. The battalion of riflemen was under the strapping, handsome General Ivanov. At the head of the gunners was General Sergei Wolkenstein, who was both tall and smart-looking. Alexander Pokryshkin, leading off the battalion of flyers, was also of powerful build.

At dinnertime, Petrov's remark had become the topic of a general discussion. Wolkenstein suggested lending me his excess height. Pokryshkin advised getting boots made with high heels, and someone was handing out advice how to grow a few centimetres overnight. There were jests all round.

"Atten-shun!" The Front Commander, accompanied by the chief-of-staff and commander of the composite regiment, walked slowly along the files of men. He stopped before each of the battalions, and greeted it. He looked keenly in the faces of the men and officers, many of whom he knew. Then came our turn. My heart beat faster. I introduced the tankmen of our composite battalion. The Marshal was in high spirits. He smiled, jested, and was pleased with the outer appearance of the tankmen. Here I heard Petrov ask him:

"Comrade Marshal, what have you decided?"

I knew at once that Konev had been told about us three. My eyes were riveted to his face. I pleaded with him in my mind.

The commander fixed his eyes on me, then shifted his gaze to my neighbour, Colonel Zaitsev, and grinned broadly:

"Let's leave them. They look smart enough. Not their fault they haven't the right height. When they crashed into Berlin, and then Prague, we didn't measure their height, did we? Besides, they aren't marching in the files, but at the head of their units. Look at their chests, at the decorations they carry."

I could not keep from smiling. The moment the Marshal and his companions moved on, I heard Pokryshkin say:

“Well, what d’you know!”

“Perfect,” I exclaimed. “This time we’ll manage without high heels.”

After dark I was summoned by General Petrov, the chief-of-staff. The commander put me in charge of the train taking the composite regiment to Moscow.

“And see there are no mishaps,” he said.

The month of May was ending. The grass was green, the trees in bloom. Life was stepping into its rights. The country was rising from the ruins. I stood looking out of the train window for hours on end, and places where we had only recently fought hard battles flashed past. Ha, here was the Ukraine. I recalled the lines of a popular soldiers’ song:

“Remember going West across the Ukraine,  
“Those are days we never will forget—”

Yes, we never will forget those days, not for the rest of our lives.

En route, I received happy tidings. Let me write about them in a little more detail.

When we pulled up in Lvov railway station it was one in the morning. Despite the late hour, people poured out of all the carriages: mostly those who had helped liberate the city the year before. I, too, had been in the fighting round Lvov and joined the others. The square outside the station and the adjoining streets were brightly lit up. A flyer walking alongside, exclaimed:

"Beautiful, beautiful! This is the first time I see lit-up streets since the war started."

We still had some time. I looked into the office of the military commandant, and showed my papers. They made the requisite notes. Then, entering the big station hall, I saw a signboard, "Telegraph", and was minded, as before the war, to cable home: "Coming home, arriving on ..."

But who would I cable? I would be the happiest man on earth if I had my father and mother to cable to. But they were no longer alive. Neither were my brothers and sisters—the war had wiped out my large and close-knit family.

A painful lump rose in my throat as I remembered how I came home after the fighting at Lake Hassan. I had stood before the little window of the cable office, just as now, and scribbled: "Coming home—alive and well..."

That time, the people of our village gave me a hero's welcome. They turned out en masse. I saw my mother wiping tears of joy from her eyes.

Then my turn came, and a pretty young girl across the counter offered me a form to fill in:

"Comrade officer, don't be so slow. There are others waiting."

I looked around: a queue had formed behind me. I moved aside, and wrote quickly: "Zhelez-novodsk, Invalids' Sanatorium. To my doctors. Hurray! Coming home. Have done what you told me: been to Berlin, now en route to Victory Parade. Thanks for giving me my life. Congratulations on our victory, dear friends..."

I signed it. The girl scanned the cable, and shook

her head. I hadn't given the name of the addressee, and she was afraid it would not be delivered.

"The addressee? It is addressed to good people. Don't you worry, it'll reach them."

The girl smiled, and added:

"Lots of strange telegrams are being sent these days—with no address and no name."

When giving me the receipt, she asked me to put down my name more legibly. I did.

"Is your name Dragunsky? I read in today's paper that some Dragunsky was awarded a second Gold Medal of Hero of the Soviet Union."

"Do you have the paper?"

"Yes, you can keep it."

A hush fell over the queue. People had heard our conversation. I took the paper shyly, thanked the girl, and hurried back to my carriage.

My hands shook as I read the decree of the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium. And when I saw Sliusarenko's name alongside mine, I smiled happily. The war had brought us together on the Dnieper. We had been inseparable ever since, fighting on the same front, in the same army, in the same corps. Even the numbers of our brigades were successive—his, the 56th, and mine the 55th. We had force-crossed the Vistula and the Oder side by side, had taken town after town together, and took part in clearing the Ukraine and Poland. Berlin, too, we stormed shoulder to shoulder.

In September 1944, Zakhar Sliusarenko and I were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union on the same day. Now, again, we were together.

It was a more than pleasant coincidence!

Anticipating events, I will say that these coincidences, so pleasant for Zakhar and me, recurred after the war was over. We studied together in Moscow, were both posted to the Soviet Far East, were both put in command of tank formations. To top this, we were both made generals on the same day...

We arrived in Moscow on an early June morning. The platform at Lefortovo, where our train stopped, was crowded with people. Muscovites had come to meet their dear ones or friends. There were joyous reunions, warm embraces, kisses, laughter and tears.

The patrols that had been sent to keep order were powerless. Nothing could stem this avalanche of people. Nor was there any need to. "Daddy!", "Sonny, dear sonny!" "My darling!" — these exclamations came from all sides.

My attention was attracted by a sad-looking old man in a soldier's blouse. I came up to him, we talked.

"This is the second day I am here, on the look-out for our son," he informed me sadly.

"Was he due to arrive with us?" I asked.

"Who can tell—could be. Not much chance though—we were notified that he is missing in action. But that may have been a mistake. People say such things happen..."

In those days, composite regiments were coming to Moscow from all the fronts.

The composite regiment of the 1st Ukrainian Front was quartered in the Lefortovo military school. The chief of the school, whom I had met at the Academy, Ivan Fesin, twice Hero of the Soviet Union, made us welcome in the barracks.

We drilled and drilled and drilled. Marshal Konev wanted us to be beyond reproach.

"You're to march as smartly as the Moscow Academies," he said to us.

The perseverance of the marchers, the long hours of drill, the top-rate drilling we got from the officers, yielded fruit. Our stride was firmer, the swing of the arms smarter, we held ourselves straighter, the files were nearly perfect. To win the praise of so exacting a man as our Front Commander was not easy. And yet, at one of the reviews he had a good word for our smartness, even making special mention of the flyers and tankmen.

The drilling was at its height when the officer on duty informed me that I was being summoned to the chief of the Frunze Military Academy.

My heart beat faster as I approached the familiar building. The Academy chief's parting words when we were leaving for the front came to my mind:

"Fight well, like real Frunzevites. You'll pick up your diplomas after the war."

During the war, none of us thought of our diplomas. And who could have known that we'd ever again see the Academy?

Yet here I was, in the office of Colonel-General Chibisov, the new chief of the Academy.



"Comrade Colonel," he said to me, "you have not defended your diploma, because you went to war. Considering your battle record, the Academy has decided to give you the diploma without defending it. You have done well. We have given you top marks in all subjects." The general touched the decorations on my chest with the tip of his finger. "Congratulations—".

I was deeply pleased that I had not been forgotten, that they had followed my battle career.

I stood outside in the square, holding the diploma in my hands and looking lovingly at my Frunzevka, as we fondly called the Academy.

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The long-awaited morning of 24 June 1945 came at last. The sky was overcast and it was drizzling. From all parts of Moscow, the composite regiments of fronts and fleets, along with units of the Moscow garrison, were converging on Red Square. The streets and squares of the city were filled with people. They smiled fondly as we marched by.

On the rain-wetted cobblestones of Red Square, the parade companies lined up smartly front by front, at their head the commanders, and battle standards.

Raindrops sparkled on the steel helmets of the soldiers, the lacquered cap peaks of the officers, and the moustaches of the veterans.

That minute I remembered how, during combat, we had had no time to wipe the sweat off our brows, how it impregnated our blouses.

Not all had come to Red Square. Large as it was, it could not have held all those who deserved to be there. And many had not made it to victory, the best sons of our Motherland, men of courage beyond compare. But none of them are forgotten.

The festive ceremonial of the Victory Parade began. The orchestra was playing, guns were firing the salute. One's mind could not keep up with all that was happening. Yet I wanted to take it all in, and cherish it in my memory. I looked with hope at the many cameramen: they were sure to record the occasion for posterity.

Above the columns of our composite regiment, our colours fluttered proudly, hallowed by the winds of many European countries. They were held firmly by that glorious flyer Alexander Pokryshkin, three times Hero of the Soviet Union. Beside him were his assistants—one of them a soldier of our 55th Guard Tank Brigade by name of Klim Mokrov.

At the head of the composite regiment stood Ivan Konev, Commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front. He looked solemn, suiting the occasion, obviously thrilled, and probably no less excited than he had been before any large and important operation. At his side were his close comrades—Army commanders Rybalko, Zhadov, Leliushenko, Kurochkin, Krasovsky, Korovnikov, Koroteyev, Gordov, Gusev...

At the end of the parade, to the beating of drums, the victors flung 200 battle-standards of the smashed nazi army to the foot of the Lenin Mausoleum.

That day, in the evening, I again came to Red Square. The nazi flags were still lying where they had been thrown. Muscovites cast disgusted glances at them.

Moscow, capital of the Soviet Union, was rejoicing. Elated people were embracing soldiers and officers, and rocking them as is the old Russian custom, and then carefully catching them again. Hands also seized me and tossed me up and down. All round were smiles, joy and happiness.

I spent the evening in a merry company of strangers. A group I had met in Red Square brought me to their house. I was received as a long lost brother. And in the early morning hours, walking to my hotel, my thoughts went back again and again to our kind, hard-working, glorious Soviet people.

A few days later a troop train was taking us, those who had marched in the Victory Parade, back West to our regiments, brigades, and divisions.

We were returning to take up our posts as sentinels of peace.

## The Fates of Men

After the victorious culmination of the war against fascism in which so much blood had been spilt, I wanted to leave the army and take up some purely peaceful occupation, because I assumed that the human race had drawn its lessons and would never again think of going to war.

But reactionary forces soon started the cold war. Again, peace was in jeopardy. And I decided once and for all that my life should be linked with the Soviet Army, which had delivered my country and many nations of Europe from the fascist plague and was now guarding the peace.

Time flies inexorably. During the war and in peacetime I had had various posts of command—at the head of a platoon and company, then a battalion, a brigade, a regiment and a division, and finally at the head of a still larger formation. Then came an unexpected turn in my life—I was offered the post of a teacher, chief of Vystrel, the Higher Officers' Course, the oldest of our tactical schools.

The Minister of Defence said to me:

“We need a man of strong willpower and a man who knows the troops to head the field academy. You're just the man we need.”

I left the Caucasus, of which I had grown so

found, and moved to Solnechnogorsk on the shore off the Senezh, a lake of rare beauty in the environs of Moscow.

The first thing was to take stock of the people I would have to work with, to study the curriculum and syllabuses, to see how the courses worked. It was all new and unusual to me. There was little I could say, and I mostly listened to others. The "shakedown" period in the new academic environment turned out to be hard. It was a radical change after 35 years of active service in the army.

I visited other schools, went to the training fields in Byelorussia and the Ukraine, inspected laboratories at the leading academies and at various other higher schools in order to gather experience and produce a curriculum for the Vystrel that would meet the up-to-the-minute needs.

I had the right people round me. Indeed, I have always been lucky that way. The instructors at our course were capable, competent, efficient, and friendly. We invited officers who had a good practical as well as theoretical grounding. As I saw it, men who served in remote garrisons, men who knew life and the needs of the service, were best suited for teaching.

So, hand in hand with the faculty members, we did our utmost to live up to the hopes expressed in the thirties by People's Defence Commissar Klim Voroshilov, who had believed that the Vystrel school should be a top-rate field academy.

That is what Vystrel is known as nowadays. Much of the time there is devoted to field work, to the firing range and the tankodrome. The

rudiments of instruction are briefly described by the following formula: theory—demonstration—practice. Classes and laboratory work are based on the latest techniques: broad use is made of the cinema, radio, television, videotapes, and trainer systems.

We have many trainees from abroad—officers of the armies of socialist countries. Learning and living together, Soviet and foreign officers make up a friendly family of internationalists. Indeed, Vystrel has always been known for its internationalism. As far back as the twenties, trainees were addressed at lectures by such prominent leaders of the world communist and working-class movement as Georgi Dimitrov, Sen Katayama, Marcel Cachin, Wilhelm Pieck, Béla Kun, Vasil Kolarov, Palmiro Togliatti, and Ernst Thaelmann. It is now more than twelve years since I took the post at the Vystrel school. Possibly, I will write about my work there in another book. Here I will only say that these twelve years, like the rest of my life, were dedicated to safeguarding peace, to training officers who stand guard over the peaceful labour of their people, over peaceful construction.

The day was nearing its end. A hush fell over the training centre. The engines' roar had died down, the clanging of the tank tracks had stopped, so had the thunder of gunnery practice. I was walking off the training field with a group of generals and officers. We were engaged in a lively discussion of the day's work. The results, as we

all saw, were gratifying: the trainees were making visible progress in learning the art of battle control.

It was a warm, sunny autumn that year. But it grew dark early. By the time we reached the garrison it had grown pitch dark. The duty officer made his report, then added after a pause:

"You were asked to phone at once to the General Staff."

The voice on the phone was that of a general I knew well. The conversation was brief and to the point:

"Dear friend, the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany invites you to Berlin to attend the festivities on the thirtieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic."<sup>1</sup>

"When am I expected to leave?"

"Tonight. You are to be at the railway station at 24.00."

I had an hour to spare and decided to take a short walk. The autumn leaves rustled underfoot, while my thoughts took me to those distant places that are forever impressed by the war in my memory. What tremendous changes had occurred in Germany! How many great and lesser events had taken place in the years of peace, rung in by the great Victory of May 1945. I had served in various latitudes: Moscow first as student of the Academy of the General Staff, then there was service in the Baikal country, then in Armenia,

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<sup>1</sup>The working people in the eastern part of Germany proclaimed the inauguration of the German Democratic Republic on 7 October 1949.

then Georgia, and finally in the environs of Moscow where, as sailors say, I dropped anchor at the Vystrel officers' school.

Now this pleasant and exciting prospect—visiting the GDR, for which I, too, had done my bit.

With me in the train to Berlin were well-known generals. Alexei Burdeiny and I had studied together at the Academy of the General Staff. He was a knowledgeable soldier, and a man of breeding. General Kotikov and I had met in Berlin. The people of the defeated capital had respected the city's commandant for his humanity and kindness. The general had done all he could to expedite the reconstruction of war-ravaged Berlin, and to bring the life of its people back to normal.

Among us, too, was the legendary war hero, Marshal Vassily Chuikov. I had known him a long time. We had met time and again at the front and after the war—at exercises, conferences, Party congresses, and CPSU Central Committee plenums. I was glad to see him in good spirits, gay, full of life. One would never say he was nearing eighty. He looked forward eagerly to seeing the country where he had served for ten years after the war. In the GDR, people associate his name not only with the victory over the nazis, but also with the country's postwar rehabilitation and the emergence of the worker-peasant state on German soil.

I looked at him and remembered that historic day in October 1949 when at Karlshorst, a Berlin suburb, in the very same hall where the generals and fieldmarshals of the vanquished nazi Wehrmacht signed the unconditional surrender, he



had, on the instructions of the Soviet Government, announced to Johannes Dieckmann, President of the Provisional People's Chamber of the GDR, and Otto Grotewohl, whom the People's Chamber had instructed to form the Provisional Government of the GDR, that the Soviet Military Administration was turning over the country's administration to the Provisional Government. That historic day did, indeed, become the birthday of the GDR.

People who had endured and seen a lot, naturally addressed themselves to the past from time to time, and asked each other, "Remember—?" Yes, we remembered. Nothing was forgotten.

Berlin received us well. The sun was shining brightly. There were flowers, bands were playing, and thousands of people were out in the streets, chanting "With the Soviet Union Forever!" That day our German friends were showing us their city. No, there was no Wilhelm-Strasse or Kaiserstrasse any more. They had been renamed. In the new names of streets and squares the people of the city had decided to perpetuate the history of the international revolutionary working-class movement, the history of the struggle for a better future. I would sin against the truth if I were to say that only the new names of streets prevented me from recognising the places where, in forty-five, we had had our final engagements with the nazis. New houses and their unique architecture had changed Berlin's face. The pride of the GDR capital is the Palace of the Republic, where the festivities were held. In the hall we saw those who had laid the foundation stones of the first democratic and peace-

loving state on German soil, and those who labour with dedication to consolidate it.

Applause broke out when the Soviet party-and-government delegation entered, headed by Leonid Brezhnev.

Warm, too, was the reception given to the delegation of Soviet war veterans led by Marshal of the Soviet Union Vassily Chuikov.

Addressing the festive meeting, Brezhnev spoke in calm, assured tones, setting forth new peaceful proposals.

“By agreement with the leadership of the GDR, and upon consulting other member countries of the Warsaw Treaty,” he said, “we have decided to unilaterally reduce the strength of the Soviet troops in Central Europe. In the next twelve months up to 20,000 Soviet servicemen, a thousand tanks, and a certain number of other weaponry will be withdrawn from the territory of the German Democratic Republic.

“We are sure that this new concrete token of the love of peace and good will of the Soviet Union and its allies will be received with approval by the peoples of Europe and the rest of the world. We call on the governments of the NATO countries to duly assess the initiatives of the socialist states and to follow our good example.”

By 1 August 1980, the Soviet Union had put its peaceful decision into effect.

A military parade took place in Berlin. I looked intently at the faces of the officers marching in the parade, hoping to recognise ex-trainees from the Vystrel school among them. Catching

my eye, GDR Defence Minister Heinz Hoffmann, who had once visited Vystrel, smiled:

"Yes, of course, there are men from your school out there."

"Excellently trained officers," Deputy Minister Stechbarth added.

He had said the same thing when introducing me to Comrade Erich Honecker, the General Secretary of the CC SUPG and Chairman of the State Council of the GDR.

I was, of course, pleased to learn again that the prestige of the Vystrel school, which trained officers to defend the peace, was high not only in the Soviet Armed Forces but also in the armies of the other socialist states.

We were given an opportunity to see the sights of the city, and to meet our German friends.

We visited GDR army units, and spoke to soldiers and sergeants, lieutenants and higher officers, to their wives and children.

Our German friends accompanied us on a visit to Luckenwalde, the memorial cemetery near Baruth. An open-air pantheon had been laid there after the war, where tankmen killed in the Berlin area in the last few days of the war were buried, among them men from our brigade. We stood in silence with lowered heads beside these graves so dear to our hearts.

A crowd of people turned out to see us off. The last few minutes of parting. I heard the tune of *Day of Victory*, written by Soviet composer David Tukhmanov. A German girl was singing it, and dozens of voices picked it up as it spread

across the station square, gaining in force. Its lines, full of meaning, resounded festively:

“Scorched and dusty versts they were,

“As we worked for the day of victory...”

The Berlin-Moscow express gathered speed to the tune of the song...

The farther the days of our wartime youth recede into the past, the dearer is each meeting with old army friends. How were they making out? What occupation had they taken up in peacetime? I looked forward to our meeting with eagerness and excitement. And it did finally come about. Veterans of the 3rd Guard Tank Army gathered in Moscow. Silver-haired men (who had been youngsters of 18 and 19 during the war) ran towards each other. Embraces, smiles, and tears of joy—here and there little coteries formed in this huge, seething crowd of people.

Ah, there the tankmen of the 55th Brigade. Hero of the Soviet Union Pyotr Fedorov with his wartime companion Annochka, now a matronly lady. Battalion commander Fedorov embracing the commander of 3rd Battalion, Nikolai Osadchy. And beside them our logistics chief Ivan Leonov. Scouts headed by Andrei Serazhimov crowd around me. Among them Alexander Zabludaev, who had become Hero of Socialist Labour, Djalalov, with three Orders of Glory, who had flown in from Uzbekistan where he is chairman of a collective farm, and Liuda Savelieva, a former scout, who had come from Kursk with her grand-daughter, and at the centre of our little group, Vasia

Ponomarev. He is as handsome and smart as ever, though now grandfather. Popular with the women, he had once made all of us a bit envious. He married during the war, and, though a native of the Urals, settled with his wife somewhere near Kiev. Georgi Gasishvili, once the driver of my tank, had come from Georgia. He was with us at the Victory Parade, and I saw him again later, when serving in the Caucasus.

In ten coaches we went off to Solnechnogorsk, to the Vystrel school. We talked well into the night, recalling our campaigns, the bitterness of defeat and the joy of victory, and remembering our wartime friends. Each of us spoke of his family, of his work, of his children and grandchildren...

In those happy hours we missed Hero of the Soviet Union Leonid Chigin and machine-gunner Avas-Hashim ogly Verdiev of Azerbaijan, both of whom had died for the Motherland. Chief Political Officer Alexander Dmitriev, who had become regional Military Council member after the war, and Ivan Kalenikov, had not lived long enough to come to our reunion. Hero of the Soviet Union Nikolai Novikov, from Pinsk, one of our scouts, and battalion commander Starchenko of Poltava, could not come because they were bedridden due to their many wartime wounds and shell-shock.

Many of our regimental comrades had laid down their lives. We remembered them, and again vowed never to forget them.

I was happy and proud of my fine tankmen, my dear comrades-in-arms, my friends in labour

and in the fight for peace. They had been true heroes in the battlelines, fighting for their country, and were the same now, giving their strength, knowledge and experience to their work for the Motherland.

Trains and planes were taking them home after our reunion—east, west, north and south. I, too, set out that day for Sviatsk, which has always been close to my heart with its pure spring-water wells, its luxuriant birches, and the unforgettable aroma of freshly baked bread.

I have been to dozens of countries on various continents, but for me there is nothing more beautiful than my land. And I visit my native village, the place where I was born, every year. That time, too, with all my family I set out for Sviatsk. The train was approaching Novozybkov, whose people had made me the town's honorary citizen. Dozens of people had come to meet us, smiling and waving flowers. And as on all the other occasions, I stepped on the soil where I was born and where I grew up with a sense of reverence and devotion. The car was driving along a new highway, and up on a mound I again saw Sviatsk. I asked the driver to stop, and got out. There, by the two old birches, I used to have a rest on those Saturdays when I walked home from the Novozybkov school. They had been little birches in those days. And after the rest, I'd jog on to my paternal home.

Paternal home. It is there, to this day, three of its windows looking out on the square in the centre of the village. It was orphaned during the war, but the villagers look after it now. Two

collective farmers, now on pension, the Markelovs, live in it these days, keeping it clean and orderly.

They received me as they would a brother. A samovar was ready on the table in the big room, which now looks so tiny to me. Oh, the delight of drinking savoury tea from a samovar, and, as once long ago with cherry preserves.

Each visit to my native village is like one more encounter with my youth. And the boys and girls I had gone to school with, who are all now grandfathers and grandmothers, and the house we had lived in, and the wood in the swamp mysteriously called Monastery, where we Komsomols had held our passionate debates—all this reminds me of those distant twenties, the years of my childhood and youth. But in Sviatsk there are reminders of another, a dreadful time, when the nazi plague had visited the village, claiming more than 200 lives. The Usovs, Dragunskys, Sapozhnikovs, Seleznevs, Karasiks, Hermans, and Goreliks—their names are inscribed in golden letters on the marble plaques of the memorial put up by their fellow villagers in the square of Sviatsk.

On every one of my visits, no matter how short, I spend a long time before the eternal flame lit in their memory, and gaze at the granite image of a mourning mother who so resembles my own.

I was leaving Sviatsk on a lovely quiet morning. A new day was coming into its own over the village and the surrounding fields and woods. To making that day, and the next, and all the others, days of peace for little Sviatsk and for our vast Motherland, I have dedicated my whole life.

## AN AFTERWORD

Dear reader, I hope that you have read the story of my life, and that you have reached this afterword. No book can, I think, absorb all the landmarks in a man's biography. I, in any case, have succeeded in recounting only the chief and most substantial occurrences in my life. Now, as my narrative comes to an end, I have decided to share some of my thoughts with you. They are most important to me and, to put it in high-flown words, they make up my ideological creed.

After the Victory Parade in Moscow's Red Square I was going back to rejoin my unit. Out of the carriage window I gazed at my war-ravaged land—the trenches, dugouts, anti-tank pits, and fire-blackened trees. Fascism had spread death and destruction all over Europe. It had robbed humanity of fifty million lives.

And I kept thinking that this should never, never happen again.

Yet soon, in August 1945, when the second world war was already about to end, US atom bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians.



I cannot forget February 1945 either. An armada of American bombers swooped down on the German city of Dresden at night, showering death on its sleeping populace. Two hundred and seventy thousand died under the ruins of houses, factories and power stations—mainly children, women, and old men. Later, some American generals described it as an act of “retribution”.

I am a soldier. And as a soldier who has fought in the past war from its first to its last day, I know that indiscriminate killing of civilians is a barbarity that nothing can justify.

I caught up with my 55th in Austria, in the foothills of the Alps, in the little fortress of Altenburg near the city of Horn.

How beautiful little Austria is, how cosy. But the war did not spare it either, inflicting considerable destruction.

In my free time I wandered about the alpine meadows, angled for fish in the stream, dropped in at village taverns, talked to Austrians about all sorts of things, and told them of faraway Russia.

But the beauty of Austria could not distract my thoughts from home, from the Motherland.

In the autumn, troop trains began to take demobilised soldiers back east. One day, came the turn of our brigade. The parting turned into a thrilling celebration. Soldiers of older age were the first to go. They seemed to grow younger by a dozen years, and began pressing their clothes and polishing their medals and orders.

The next to go home were our young women—surgeons, nurses, radio and telephone operators. They were given a rousing send-off for, after all, their frail shoulders had borne the burdens of war no worse than any man's. They had shared the sour taste of defeat and the sweetness of victory, and at times of crisis had instilled confidence and courage in us men. Many of them had married tankmen of our brigade, with whom they had shared all the hardships of war—the bread and the rusk, bullets and shells, trenches and hospitals.

The tankmen were going home to all parts of our vast land. They were of different nationalities—Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Jews, Uzbeks, Georgians, Letts, Azerbaijanians, and Armenians.

Pride for what they had accomplished shone on their faces. Each one of us felt like shouting: "We've won peace. The Motherland is saved, racism is destroyed. We have done our best, and are now going home to build a life of peace."

I was also thinking of my own future: What now? Where to go? I'd leave the army, I thought to myself, and go to some quiet corner of Siberia, and in a taiga village school I'd teach children geography or literature. That was settled. I, a professional soldier, have had enough of soldiering. Peace has prevailed. My military profession was no longer needed.

I shared my thoughts with Pavel Rybalko. The conversation took place at his home in Moscow, during a dinner.

"Don't you think you are being fooled by the seeming calm?" he said to me. "It's too early,

much too early, to relax. The situation isn't half as tranquil as we would like."

That Marshal Rybalko was right I was soon to see for myself.

The air had not yet cleared of the smell of gutted towns and villages, the tears of the widows and mothers had not yet dried, the trial of the nazi war criminals in Nuremberg had not yet ended, when from across the ocean, from the small US town of Fulton, there resounded the ominous words of former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. He was pleading for a "crusade" against socialism. What was this? The ravings of a madman, the howls of an insane loner? Were fifty million lives not enough of a price for the quiet that had returned to the world?

In effect, Churchill's Fulton speech had been a public declaration of cold war on the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. The policy of cold war was set in motion by the interests of the extreme reactionary forces in the United States and other Western countries.

It became all too clear that peace on earth was again in jeopardy. It had to be defended, meaning that every sensible person on earth had to join in the struggle for peace. I swore by the memory of the fallen that I would serve the sacred cause until the end of my life. And I stayed in the army in order to safeguard peace.

In the autumn of 1956, the Soviet War Veterans Committee suggested that I should go to France as its representative at the unveiling of a monument

to the unknown martyr. It was a monument to the millions of Jews victimised by the nazis. Representatives of twenty-four countries had come to attend the ceremony. All bowed their heads to the memory of those who were exterminated in anti-tank ditches, in gas chambers, in furnaces, in the hundreds of extermination camps. Thousands of Parisians came to pay homage to the victims of nazi brutality. The French Guard stood at attention in mourning. A boys choir, consisting of the children of the fallen, sang songs of mourning. The melodies of Chopin hung over the square.

The President of France attended the ceremony. Speakers addressed the crowd. The speech of Pierre Tanguy-Prigent, French minister for the affairs of war veterans, took us back to the events of the second world war.

Nahum Goldmann, leader of the international zionist movement, spoke as well. Let me cite a passage from what he said: "Crimes of this sort must not be allowed to recur. It is time to understand that peace and justice go together, and that all nations are obliged to prevent the perpetuation of such methods—"

Baron Rothschild, one of the magnates of capitalist banking, whose money is now being used to conduct Israel's aggressive wars, said in his speech he wished that this monument, which was erected for the dead but to serve the living, would prevent future generations from forgetting and from being complacent.

I would not have mentioned all this, but for a certain incident that I will relate below.

The speeches were over. Pierre Ruais, president of the Municipal Council of Paris, pronounced the closing words: "May all these victims at least awaken the public conscience, so that in no country, under no pretext, whether ideological, strategic or national, such murder should ever occur again—either of single individuals or of a people—"

The shroud fell, and on the frontispiece of the monument I read the words, "Do not forget—"

But what came after that?

On the same day, while zionist chiefs spoke words of peace in Paris, and tribute was being paid to the victims of nazism—on that same day Israel, Britain and France launched their aggression against Egypt.

Bombs were dropped on peaceful citizens, Israeli tanks crashed across the Sinai Peninsula. A new war began against the Arab people.

News of this undisguised imperialist collusion reached me as I was walking off the square. I was shocked. I could only think, "What perfidy! We turned out to honour the memory of the fallen, and became unconscious witnesses of double-faced mockery."

A few hours later, Paris heard the firm protest of the Soviet people. At meetings and conferences in workers' quarters we, as Communists, openly and honestly exposed the imperialists' designs in the Middle East.

At one of the receptions I was approached by the Israeli minister of national education, Mr. Shneur Zalman Shazar, who headed the Israeli

delegation to the opening of the monument. With off-hand impertinence, he said to me:

“Mr. General, why does the Soviet Union oppose our lawful rights? We need land. We are crowded —”

There, before me, stood one of the leaders of international zionism. What could I have expected from him? All I could say was:

“Mr. Minister, what you have just said echoes the old nazi claims to *Lebensraum*. Have you forgotten the price of Hitler’s adventure? Fifty million people died in the second world war.”

That was the first time I had come face to face with zionism. I could not help recalling my childhood and youth. The Jews in Sviatsk, Novozybkov and Klinttsy, in the towns and villages, living side by side with people of other nationalities, had not the slightest idea of national hostility. For all labour and concord had been the pillar of pillars. Generations of hard-working people had befriended each other, had rejoiced together, and had jointly lamented failures.

During the war, in the trenches, in tanks, in dug-outs, Soviet people of all nationalities had one sacred goal—to defend the Motherland, to safeguard the land in which we were born. And when the war was over we all joined hands, all the nations of the Soviet Union, to restore the war-ravaged economy in the name of happiness and peace on earth.

My own life, from my village childhood to this day, was never clouded by even the slightest male-

volent reference to my national origin. I have not met all the 117 Heroes of the Soviet Union, 60 Heroes of Socialist Labour, the hundreds of holders of the Lenin Prize and State Prize, the thousands of workers, engineers, farmers, scientists and writers of Jewish origin. But I am deeply convinced that, like me, they have the feeling of belonging to the family of Soviet nations, and that for them, too, the Soviet Union and no other country is the Promised Land for whose prosperity and power none of us will spare strength and energy.

There, in Paris, coming face to face with zionists, I saw that they want to spread the lie that none but the zionists represent the interests of World Jewry, of all Jews wherever they may live, whatever they may be doing, and whatever is the source of their livelihood.

It is a long since acknowledged fact, however, that there is no such thing as World Jewry. In the capitalist world, Jews, like people of other nationalities, are divided into opposed classes of oppressors and oppressed, and in the socialist world they are organically part of society along with people of other nationalities and rightly consider themselves patriots of the country in which they and their ancestors were born and raised.

From the day of its birth, zionism set itself the goal of establishing a "great and powerful Jewish homeland" by seizing the territory of other nations. For the sake of these goals, Israel started several aggressive bloody wars against the Arab states, and as a result the Israeli extremists over-ran four

times as much land as that allotted to Israel by the decision of the United Nations.

In so doing, the zionist leaders adopted fascist methods of exterminating people. Menachem Begin's thugs have been killing old men and children, plundering and raping. And one cannot but agree with Ben-Gurion, the zionist leader who wrote in 1963: "Begin is a racist who is ready to destroy all Arabs..., to use any means to attain his cherished goal — absolute power."

The present-day chiefs of the zionists have learned nothing from the second world war and the abominations committed by the nazis. They continue to cultivate racism in all shapes and forms.

That is why I felt obliged to raise my voice in protest. My conscience, like that of all progressive people in the world, cannot reconcile itself to this state of affairs.

I wrote to the *Pravda*. My article, "The Criminal Hand of the Zionists", which appeared on 27 February 1970, caused a violent reaction. A hue-and-cry was raised simultaneously in the zionist camp in Israel, the United States, and other Western capitalist countries. Threats resounded in the bourgeois press, backed up by the Voice of America and the Voice of Jerusalem, and by Radio Free Europe and by other "voices" hostile to peace.

But I was moved to the bottom of my heart when hundreds of letters poured in from decent men and women who approved of my legitimate anger. They came from Russians and Georgians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians. They came from



Jews in Moscow, Odessa, Kishinev, Kiev, Leningrad, Rostov, and Vinnitsa.

I was especially touched by the letters I received from the United States and Belgium, from Paris and Rome. Letters from progressive Jews in Israel expressed agreement with me. And members of the Palestinian nation, too, responded to my statements.

One American personality said very aptly that Jews waving baseball bats and bicycle chains, and lining up like stormtroopers in front of synagogues present no less of a disgusting spectacle than the men in the white cloaks and hooded caps of the Ku-Klux-Klan. The facts of recent years show that the comparison was right. Zionism is a highly dangerous movement. Lenin described it as an entirely false and in essence reactionary ideology of the big Jewish bourgeoisie.

In February 1971 I visited Brussels on a delegation of the Soviet-Belgian Friendship Society. On the way from the airport to the Belgian capital, the driver switched on the radio. The announcer mentioned the number of sorties flown by Israeli planes and how many bombs were dropped on Arab targets. And, as in the cinema, furnishing a visual background to the announcer's story, we saw a poster in the street with a fascist swastika. Beside it, someone was pasting up a star of David.

A paradox? Maybe at first glance. But if you look deeper, the accident of the two posters neighbouring each other is much more sinister and, I would add, highly symbolical.

The rulers of Israel have raised terrorism to the rank of state policy, though this did not prevent them from holding a conference in Jerusalem on the subject of "combatting terrorism". The conference was attended by people from certain imperialist countries. These "champions of human rights and democratic freedoms" were not in the least troubled by the fact that the Israeli authorities are committing atrocities in the occupied Arab territories, that they are committing armed provocations against the long-suffering people of Lebanon.

Zionism is the same everywhere—cruel, perfidious, sticking at nothing to act out the will of the master and to misinform the public.

Time and again I have myself been the butt of the methods practised by zionists. Lies, slanders and falsifications are their stock in trade. In 1970, for example, they spread the lie that I had been leader of a zionist youth organisation in Gomel during the first world war, though when that war started I was only four years old. In 1971, the French *Le Figaro* reported that Marshal Grechko had discharged me from the Soviet Army because I was Jewish, although at that very time the Soviet Defence Minister was congratulating me on my promotion to Colonel-General of Armoured Forces.

At the end of June 1972, the British *Observer*, the French *L'Aurore*, and later the Israeli newspapers, reported that Soviet General David Dragunsky, a zealous supporter of what they called Soviet policy on the Jewish question, was having second

thoughts and wanted to go to Israel. Some of the newspapers put the headline in the affirmative, while others supplied it with a question mark, but all referred to a "source" that only they could know.

I saw no valid reason for replying to that foul insinuation. We have all grown accustomed to the fact that our ideological adversaries stick at nothing, not even the foulest of lies, to slander our country, our Communist Party, and individual Soviet citizens.

It pains me to see the fate that a handful of adventurers, obscurantists and preachers of racism have visited on the working people of Israel.

Some time ago I had occasion to look into an Israeli encyclopaedia published in Jerusalem in Russian. In its second volume I came upon an item explaining the word "marriage". I would never have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes. How much medievalism, racialism and hatred of people of other faiths is crowded into it. Indeed, I was struck by its close resemblance to Hitler's racial theories.

The following fact, too, has gone on record. When Israeli Justice Minister Ya'acov Shimshan Shapiro was drawing up his bill on "who is a Jew", and when Golda Meir called for people to back him, those who read the racist document could not help recalling the compasses that the nazis used in their concentration camps to measure people's foreheads, noses and occipita to see "who is an Aryan". That is a disgrace that the

claimants to "Jewish exclusiveness" have incurred by their extremism.

The people of Israel are enduring ever greater hardships. Corruption is rife in the country, and the cost of living has never been higher. Many are leaving the "promised land". It is, indeed, more appropriate to speak of emigration from rather than immigration to Israel.

That segment of Soviet Jews who fell for the blandishments of zionist propaganda and went to Israel, have experienced all the horrors of that "life of milk and honey". They have lost their true motherland, have lost the opportunity for free labour in the chosen trade or profession, and are bereft of the support and assistance of the Soviet work collective, which is always ready to give a person a helping hand.

These days, the zionist leaders need Jewish immigrants most of all to further their strategic aims. This was made clear by Menachem Begin: turning north, he said, we see the fertile valleys of Syria and Lebanon; in the east lie the rich valleys of the Euphrates, and in the west the land of the Egyptians; we will have no chance for development until we settle our territorial problems from a position of strength, reducing the Arabs to complete obedience.

During a long tour of the United States on a delegation of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, I was asked again and again why some Soviet Jews go to Israel. Let me cite my reply: because the war had split many Jewish families.

We managed to save more than a million Jews living in the west of our country from the nazis. They were evacuated to the interior. But not all escaped the nazis. Many were killed, while some fled to the West across fascist-occupied countries and then by devious routes finally reached Palestine. Fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters were separated. Now it has become possible to reunite, and people are availing themselves of the opportunity.

True, among the Soviet Jews who have moved to Israel there is a certain percentage of people contaminated with nationalist prejudices, and those who fell for zionist propaganda. But when they come to Israel, like those who go there to reunite with their kin, they see that the blandishments of zionist propaganda are worlds removed from the stern bourgeois realities. Many of those who left the Soviet Union feel that they have been deceived, stripped of the rights and privileges they were accustomed to, deprived of the advantages of the socialist way of life. Life in Israel cannot satisfy them either politically or ethically, and also materially. The disappointment they suffer brings on an acute mental conflict, and often culminates in tragedy, in suicide or moral degradation.

I have before me a copy of *The White Book: Evidence, Facts, Documents*, put out in Moscow in 1979. It contains documentary evidence of the oppression and humiliation suffered in capitalist countries by persons who had left the Soviet Union. For them the spurious Western freedom

of the individual took the shape of unemployment, social inequality, humiliation, and family tragedy. The book confirms that imperialist secret services, including that of Israel, use the freedom of travel for ideological subversion and espionage against the USSR, and for false propaganda to lure people to the "promised land".

Let me cite a few passages from *The White Book*. "In Israel," writes Jakov Shukhman,<sup>1</sup> "I saw a strange way of exploiting people. Strange, too, was the hostility of man to man. Each one lives for himself. The lot of other people is of no concern for anyone.... Meeting people from Lithuania and other parts of the Soviet Union... we remembered what we had had in our Motherland. ...I met all kinds of people who had come from the Soviet Union. Most of them are dragging out a miserable existence" (pp. 46 and 47 of *The White Book*).

Professors, engineers, doctors and people of other professions who had emigrated to the United States cannot find jobs in their field and are compelled to wash windows or dishes, collect garbage, or sweep streets.

"I have decided to plead on my knees to let me come back," wrote F. Vishinsky in his letters to friends in the USSR.

These are not complaints of loners who had

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<sup>1</sup>Jakov Shukhman, born 1950, secondary education. Left for Israel in 1970, fled from there to Vienna, and returned to the Soviet Union in 1974. Resident in Vilnius, employed as mechanic.

failed. Here is the story of Ilya Fuzailov,<sup>1</sup> who has had a taste of the "promised land":

"After three years of correspondence and telephone conversations with my father-in-law, our family decided to go to Israel. On 1 September 1973 we crossed the border and soon came to Vienna. At the railway station we were met by two police vans and a large coach. The policemen were armed with submachine-guns. They accompanied the coach to Schönau castle.

"The castle resembles a military camp. It is a transit base where Jews are kept for two or three days. At night we were put in a Boeing-707, and three and a half hours later landed in Lod airport outside Tel Aviv. Here, too, we were met by policemen with submachine-guns. We went up to the second floor. The hall was crowded with people waiting for their fate. You come to the first desk and are given a little book recording your debts. All entries are in Hebrew. You have no idea what is written in it; all you see are figures, and you sign.

"At the next desk you are given a summons: in five and a half months you are expected to turn up at a conscription point. They lose no time to integrate us in the militarist activity of the State of Israel. Here it begins to dawn on you who they need in Israel and for what purpose. Not old people and believers, but you—young, healthy, strong, a man who can bear arms and defend their interests.

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<sup>1</sup>Ilya Fuzailov, born 1934, university-level education. Left for Israel in 1973, escaped to Italy. Returned to the USSR in 1975. Resident in Tashkent, employed as graduate engineer.

“Everybody was saying, ‘Congratulations on coming home to the Holy Land’. But the next minute they let you know why they are so intent on luring Jews from the Soviet Union: the confrontation with the hundred million Arabs will go on for years.

“Then begins the fight for housing, and for the place they will post you to. My father-in-law advised me to choose Ramat Gan, but we were offered Beersheba. That is on the border with the Arab countries, on land captured in 1967. The houses for immigrants are mainly barracks, with no running water and lacking elementary amenities. It was clear to me that we were wanted there to form a buffer, so that in the event of a clash with the Arabs Soviet Jews would absorb the first assault” (pp. 28, 29, *The White Book...*)

And one more tale of woe. Asya Volpeh, with the academic degree of candidate of medical science, had been deputy chief of a polyclinic in Leningrad. In 1975 she left for the United States. There, a doctor with thirty years of medical practice found nothing better than temporary employment in the homes of old and sick people prosperous enough to have a personal servant. She swept floors, cooked meals, fed her employers, washed dishes, cleaned rugs and carpets, and looked after the house.

Asya Volpeh called at some thirty agencies, wrote more than 200 letters, responded to dozens of want ads in search of permanent employment. In June 1978, she committed suicide.



These people paid a high price for the zionist lies they had fallen for. Even the social and political aspects aside, people coming to the hot climate of the Middle East from the moderate climate of Europe, elderly people deprived of the medical care they are accustomed to, children leaving their school and compelled to learn things anew, women who were found to be "unlawful" wives, and atheists forced to take part in religious rites — people like that find it very difficult to adjust. Oh, how many tragedies have the zionist lies brought about.

Recently, I happened to turn to the proceedings of the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal and read the speeches of the prosecutors and defenders, and the last words of the convicted criminals, along with the testimony of over 120 witnesses. Before my eyes rose the concentration camps the nazis had in Oświęcim (Poland) and Dachau (Germany), the Minsk and Warsaw ghettos, and Babi Yar in Kiev, where tens of thousands were exterminated.

Yes, the nazis guilty of horrid crimes against the world and humanity were strictly and justly punished. The international trial in Nuremberg is of historic significance, for it qualified aggression as a capital international crime.

Do those who shoot at Arab children west of the Jordan, those who send planes to bomb and strafe civilian targets, think they will evade responsibility? Do they think the world will not keep track of their misdeeds?

It is a breach of international law for US-made

Fantoms piloted by Israeli flyers to violate Saudi Arabia's neutrality or to invade Iraqi air space. Yet they do it.

Near Baghdad, Israeli pilots bombed a French-built atomic reactor designed for peaceful uses of atomic energy. If that is not piracy then what is? If that is not a crime against humanity then what is?

It is now common knowledge that zionist elements had co-operated with Hitler and Mussolini, and had dreamed of having the same kind of leaders as these fascist chiefs. None other than the present leader of Israel, Menachem Begin, once said: "We're looking for a Jewish Mussolini. Help us find him."

I have visited many countries on delegations of the Soviet War Veterans Committee, of the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, and as vice-president of the USSR-Uruguay and USSR-Peru friendship societies.

Most of the people I talked to are determined to fight for world peace. They are for detente and social progress, and are working actively against militarism and aggressions inspired by the policy of the US imperialists. I have also met those who dream of escaping from the Israeli "paradise". And I have talked to a few champions and preachers of zionism, and even saw their "policy" in action.

I happened to be in the building of the Soviet mission to the United Nations in New York when a zionist fired four shots through its windows,

luckily missing the children of a Soviet diplomat. The plane we were to have boarded for Kansas City was replaced, for word had been received that the zionists had planted a bomb in it. I saw ferocious thugs throwing stones, whooping and shouting obscenities outside the buildings in which Soviet delegations were meeting people in the United States, Uruguay and Belgium.

During those incidents, I observed, the police kept a very low profile.

But let me recount a memorable encounter. It occurred a few years ago in the United States. After a long and interesting discussion with members of the public I was approached by a young Jewish woman of about twenty.

"I was born after the war," she said, "but my father fought in Europe and met Soviet soldiers on the Elbe. My parents left us very little after their death, for we had always had to work hard to make our living. Practically all my father had to bequeath to me was a watch he had inherited from his father. This watch is about seventy years old, and it is our most cherished family possession."

She had the bulbous pocket watch hanging from a ribbon round her neck, and she handed it to me, saying: "I must admit that I had hesitated to come to this meeting with visitors from Russia. We have read and heard a great many contradictory things about your country, and especially about the life of Jews in Russia. But as I listened to you I remembered what my father told me about these things when I was a little girl, and I realised how many lies are being circulated about

the great people of your country. If my father were alive, I am sure he would come out against those who are slandering the Soviet Union. Please take this watch of an old American soldier to the country that has done so much to defeat racism."

I will never forget that young woman who sensed the truth behind the contentious goings-on in the present-day world and swept aside the lies that are being told about the Soviet Union, about its peaceful people, and its nationalities policy.

The watch? It keeps good time. And most of all, it shows that the time in which the zionists can still succeed in duping gullible people is running out.

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My narrative has come to an end.

Last year, in a newspaper interview I was asked:

"Who are you indebted to for your present position and everything you have achieved?"

I replied:

"The October Revolution, the Soviet system, and the Leninist Communist Party of which I have been a member for nearly half a century. Tell me, where else could a lad from the large family of a Jewish village tailor have finished two academies, become a general, and received the highest awards?"

Solnechnogorsk, February 1982

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. P. Argyunov". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.



"F  
own to thousands of people in the  
n," writes his friend, the prominent  
: Samuel Ziv, of the author of  
*Memoirs*. "But readers abroad are  
about to meet a man they have not met before,  
and I want them to know that he is a heroic  
personality whose life has in many ways been  
out of the ordinary, though in many other  
ways it has been typical of his time and country."

General David Dragunsky ranks among the  
heroes of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945  
against Hitler Germany. He was one of the men  
who had fought as tankmen against the panzer  
corps of Guderian. His bravery in battle, and his  
keen generalship earned him the highest  
decorations of the Soviet Union and of a number  
of foreign states.

He relates in his memoirs of his life as a little  
boy, son of a large Jewish village tailor's family, of  
the hard years of the war, and of his postwar  
encounters with public leaders and statesmen,  
friends and foes of peaceful coexistence and  
detente. He calls his memoirs "pages from the  
story of my life".

His writing is winningly sincere, the facts he  
presents are truthful. His view of himself is wryly  
humorous, with a touch of world-wise irony. He is  
outspoken about his philosophy of life, and most  
scrupulous not to injure the truth in his  
descriptions of friends, comrades-in-arms, and  
various generals. As he says himself, he wanted  
them "to be the same in the book as they were in  
life".