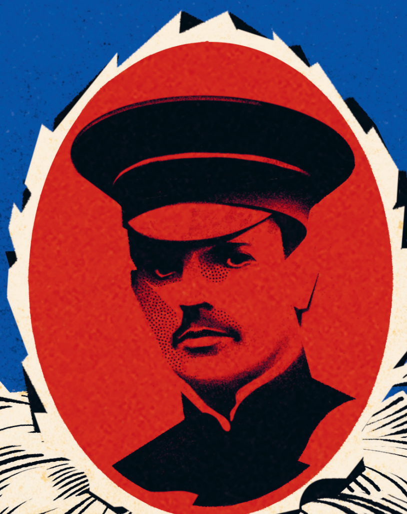
# KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

# THE STORY OF A LIFE



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# THE STORY OF A LIFE

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KONSTANTIN

PAUSTOVSKY

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## BOOKS ONE–THREE

Translated, annotated and with an introduction by

DOUGLAS SMITH

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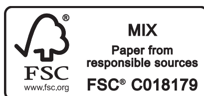


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# Introduction

## *Konstantin Paustovsky: Life and Work of a Forgotten Master*

In June 1964, having just alighted from her plane in Moscow, Marlene Dietrich was mobbed by reporters. The actress had arrived in the Soviet Union for a concert tour, and the press was in a fever over the chance to interview the Hollywood legend. Bombarded by questions, Dietrich replied that there was only one thing she had to say: tell me all you know about Konstantin Paustovsky.

Dietrich had recently read a French translation of Paustovsky's novella *The Telegram* and could not stop thinking about it and its author. For the next hour the reporters told her everything they knew about Paustovsky before Dietrich finally had to end the conversation and leave for her hotel.

On the night of the 13th, Dietrich performed for a gathering of writers, artists and actors at Moscow's Central House of Writers. Before going out on stage, her interpreter came to the dressing room to tell Dietrich that Paustovsky was in the audience. She couldn't believe it. 'That's impossible,' she gasped, seized by an attack of nerves. She was unhappy with her performance that night, for she

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overexerted herself trying to make the best possible impression on the one man in Russia she had most wanted to meet.

After taking her final bow, Dietrich was instructed to wait a moment. Before she realised what was happening, there was Paustovsky slowly mounting the stairs onto the stage. Dietrich recalled later that she was so overcome with emotion she was unable to speak. All she could do to express her admiration for Paustovsky was to fall at his feet and bow her head. Paustovsky gently took her hands in his. The hall erupted in applause. A photographer captured the scene.

Paustovsky started to help Dietrich back up when his doctor ran to the stage. 'Don't even think of lifting her!' he ordered. Paustovsky, now in his early seventies, had come to the concert straight from his hospital bed where he had been recovering from his second heart attack. The gentleman in Paustovsky wrestled with the voice of his doctor telling him to leave Dietrich on her knees and not strain his weak heart. He stood there for a few awkward moments until help arrived and Dietrich was returned to her feet.

The two spent the next several hours together talking about literature and art. 'He is the best Russian writer I know,' she wrote in her memoirs. 'I regret that I did not meet him earlier.' The following year Dietrich told the BBC that if she were cast away on a desert island and could bring only one book with her it would be Paustovsky's *The Story of a Life*.[*]

At the time of her visit, Paustovsky was nearing the height of his fame. Four years later, upon his death at the age of seventy-six, he was not only Russia's most treasured writer of the twentieth century but, according to his obituary in *The Times*, perhaps the most popular and admired living Soviet writer in both Britain and the United States.[†]

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[*] Marlene Dietrich, *My Life*, translated by Salvator Attanasio (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 135–6, 221, 227; interview with Galina Arbuzova, Tarusa, Russia, 8 Sep. 2019; *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 5 Jan. 1965, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009y4dy, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.
[†] 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia', *The Times*, 16 July 1968. On Paustovsky's popularity in the USSR, see Lev Lobov and Kira Vasil'eva, 'On otdal svoë serdtse Rossii', *Kul'tura*, 25:7638 (2008), http://www.peredelkino-land.ru/HTML/press_stroenie_stoyaschee_otdelno.shtml, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

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It is hard to exaggerate Paustovsky's stature in the 1960s. Over his long career, he wrote dozens of short stories, novels, screenplays, dramas, fairytales and children's books. Many of these works were made into films, and his stories served as the inspiration for three operas and a ballet. In 1941, he wrote the script for the film *Lermontov*, with a score by Sergei Prokofiev. The work that brought him the greatest fame, however, was his epic six-part memoir, *The Story of a Life*, published in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1963. His memoir was devoured by generations of Russians, and Paustovsky himself became the object of intense fascination among his devoted fans. In his later years he settled in the town of Tarusa, south of Moscow, where he would write the final volumes of his memoir in a small hut perched on a high bluff. When word of Paustovsky's writing shed got out, crowds began gathering in a nearby field in the hope of observing the master at work. Paustovsky soon found it impossible to concentrate and had to plant a long row of trees to afford him the necessary privacy to write.*

But it wasn't just the writing that so endeared Paustovsky to his fellow Russians. It was his character as well. He was one of the few honest and uncompromised writers of the Soviet period. He managed not to join the Communist Party, to sign his name to any denunciation of another writer, or to sell out his talent to curry favour with Soviet officialdom. Paustovsky somehow found a way not only to survive the bloody horrors of twentieth-century Russia, but to live a life of basic decency and to preserve his inner freedom against the monstrous force of totalitarianism.

Konstantin Georgievich Paustovsky was born in Moscow in 1892. His father, Georgy, a descendant of Petro Konashevych-Sahaidachny, the brilliant seventeenth-century military commander and hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, served as a statistician for the Russian railway. His mother, Maria Grigorievna Vysochanskaya, came from an impoverished noble family. Her father was employed at a sugar factory. Paustovsky's grandfather on his father's side had been a *chumak*, travelling back and forth between central Ukraine and the

* Interview with Galina Arbuzova, Tarusa, Russia, 8 Sep. 2019.

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Black Sea with his oxcart hauling goods to market. One of his grandmothers was a Turk, the other a Pole. Like so many Russians, Paustovsky was a product of empire.

In 1898, the Paustovskys — little Kostik, as he was affectionately called, his older sister Galina (Galya), and his brothers Boris and Vadim — moved to Kiev, where Georgy took a job with the South West Railway. In 1904, Paustovsky was admitted to the prestigious First Kiev Gymnasium. Among his schoolmates was Mikhail Bulgakov. The idyll that had been Paustovsky's childhood came to an end two years later when Georgy left Maria for another woman. Devastated by the betrayal, the family began a downward spiral. In 1909, Maria, no longer able to make ends meet in Kiev, took Galya and Vadim to Moscow and sent Kostik off to live with her brother, Nikolai Vysochansky, and his family in Bryansk. From then on, Paustovsky began what he would call his 'wandering life', forever on the move, never settling down in any one place for long.*

The following year he managed to return to the gymnasium in Kiev by supporting himself as a private tutor. After graduating in 1912, Paustovsky enrolled in the Imperial Kiev University and published his first story, 'On the Water', in the journal *Ogni* ('Lights'). He had been writing for three years by now — poems and short sketches — and was fully consumed by the dream of becoming a writer.

Two years later Paustovsky found himself back in Moscow. He had planned to continue his studies at the university there when the First World War began and his brother Vadim left for the front. Soon after, Boris joined the army as well. Paustovsky quit his studies and got a job as a tram driver to help support his mother and sister. His poor eyesight, plus the fact that he was the youngest of three sons, two of whom were fighting in the tsar's army, saved him from the bloody savagery of the war. Both Vadim and Boris were killed in action in 1915.

By then Paustovsky was serving as an orderly on a hospital train at the front. Wounded by a German shell, he returned to Moscow and

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* Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Neskol'ko otryvochnykh myslei. Vmesto predisloviia,' in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967), 1:5–17.

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found work in an arms factory and began writing his first novel, *The Romantics*, eventually published in 1935. It wasn't long before he was off again — first to Yekaterinoslav, then Yuzovka, then Taganrog, where he laboured in a series of factories, before being taken on as a fisherman in a small village on the Sea of Azov. By 1917, he had returned to Moscow and started working as a newspaper reporter, which would become his main occupation for the next decade. All the while Paustovsky continued to write. That same year he gathered up his courage and sent a few of his poems to Ivan Bunin, his literary idol. Amazingly, Bunin replied: 'I think your future lies in prose, it is here I see your true poetry. If you are able to show enough persistence, I am certain you can achieve something significant.'*

On a dangerous journey to reach his mother and sister, now living in the Ukrainian countryside, Paustovsky found himself trapped in Kiev by the raging violence of the Russian Civil War. Stranded there for a year, he survived off piecework for a few publications before being conscripted first into the army of Ukrainian hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi and then a convict regiment in the Red Army. At the first opportunity, Paustovsky escaped Kiev for Odessa in 1919. He would remain here, making numerous excursions around the Black Sea region and Caucasus, for the next several years, and become part of a lively group of writers which included Isaac Babel and Ilya Ilf.

In 1925, Paustovsky published his first book of stories and short works — *Sea Sketches* — followed by another collection, titled *Oncoming Ships*, two years later. The editors of this second book refused to include one of the stories, however, because they felt it amounted to nothing more than 'a romantic episode, completely devoid of social significance'.† The ideological criticism of his writing was to grow in the coming years.

Paustovsky's 1929 novel *Shining Clouds* was denounced by one critic as having the potential 'to disorganise the class consciousness of the proletarian reader' and was placed on a 'blacklist' of works to

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* Konstantin Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii: povesti, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Dekom, 2002), 1:8.
† Ibid., 1:11; 'Iz dnevnikov', *Mir Paustovskogo*, 15 (2000).

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be removed from all Soviet libraries. The Communist Party's Central Committee debated confiscating every copy of *Shining Clouds* as being, in the words of one speaker, 'very ideologically harmful, particularly for young readers'. In the end, no action was taken, but Paustovsky now understood that he was being watched. 'Apparently, they're going to be keeping an eye on me as a writer. I find this business extremely stupid and typical of the times,' he wrote in a letter that summer.[*] All this was happening as Stalin's 'Revolution from Above' was getting under way. It was a dangerous time for a writer to be suspected of ideological deviance, and as Paustovsky would later remark, it was pure chance that he survived Stalin's terror.[†]

Out of step with the main currents of Soviet literature, Paustovsky next wrote two novels inspired by the crash industrialisation of the First Five-Year Plan. *Kara-Bugaz* (1932) took as its subject the construction of an industrial salt extraction plant along the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, while in *Kolkhida* (1934) Paustovsky recounted the development of a gargantuan chemical facility at Berezniki in the Ural Mountains, one of the largest industrial projects of the time. Although both works received an enthusiastic response, including from Maxim Gorky,[‡] Paustovsky chafed at the prospect of continuing to write works in the Socialist Realist mode (attentive readers noted that at its core *Kara-Bugaz* was in fact an adventure novel) and he was growing disgusted with life in Moscow.

Under Stalin the literary world was becoming increasingly bureaucratised, constrained and smothered by censorship and Party control. What Paustovsky dubbed 'an army of hack writers', together with talentless timeservers and vulgar functionaries, were suffocating the last remaining voices of truth and honesty, and he

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[*] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:11; 'Put' k masterstvu', letter dated 24 Jul. 1929, *Mir Paustovskogo*, 25 (2007).

[†] S. Olivier, 'Paustovskii v nachale XXI veka', in V. A. Pimneva et al. (eds), *Literaturnoe nasledie K. G. Paustovskogo i mirovaia kul'tura* (Moscow: Moskovskii literaturnyi muzei-tsentr K. G. Paustovskogo, 2013), 18.

[‡] Maksim Gorkii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1953), 27:108; Konstantin Paustovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957), 1:644–5. *Kara-Bugaz* appeared in English as *The Black Gulf* (London: Hutchinson, 1946).

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longed to leave the capital for the provinces, to be away from this deadening milieu, off and on his own surrounded by the beauty of the Russian countryside. Finally, in the autumn of 1931, he quit his job with ROSTA, the Soviet press agency, and left Moscow for the village of Solotcha near Ryazan. He wrote at the time that it was 'pointless' to remain in Moscow any longer. He had at last become, in his words, 'a true writer [...] The time has come to speak "at the top of my voice".'[*] When not off travelling, Paustovsky spent most of the next decade in Solotcha writing several books inspired by Russian history and nature, most importantly *The Land of Meshchëra* (1939), works that while cherished by readers placed his oeuvre even further outside the literary mainstream.

With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Paustovsky was sent to report on the fighting near Tiraspol and Odessa. He was embedded with Soviet forces on the front lines and experienced vicious combat and aerial bombardments for six weeks running before being recalled to Moscow, where he continued to write pieces on the war effort for the Soviet press.[†]

In an interview in 1959, Paustovsky said:

> Everything that I have written before [*The Story of a Life*] was a step on the way to this book, on which I continue to work even now. I dream of bringing it up to the current day, but fear I won't manage. Only now do I realise I that started on this project much too late.[‡]

He began writing a still ill-defined autobiographical work in Solotcha in May 1943. Its roots, however, went back much further. While still a gymnasium student in Kiev he wrote a story about his

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[*] Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Neskol'ko grubykh slov', Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Collection 617, Inventory 1, Folder 58; 'Na puti k masterstvu', letters dated 2 Sep. 1929 and 28 Nov. 1931, *Mir Paustovskogo*, 25 (2007).

[†] Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Zhizn'', *Ogonëk*, 26 (1945), 5; A. Muravinskaia and V. Ashcheulov, 'Paustovskii na Altae', *Altai*, 4 (1982), 110–13.

[‡] Konstantin Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni* (Moscow: TERRA, 2017), 1:550.

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experiences of a visit to Polesia that would become the basis for 'The Inn on the Braginka' in *The Faraway Years*. In the early 1920s, he wrote 'The Village of Kobrin', which he later reworked and included in *Restless Youth*. Additional chapters in *The Story of a Life* also started out as parts of other books.

In October 1945, Paustovsky published 'The Faraway Years: A Story of Childhood' in the journal *Novyi mir* ('New World'). This included roughly half of what would grow to become the complete first volume, which was published in book form late the following year. At this point, Paustovsky had no plans for continuing his memoir beyond his early youth and didn't return to the project for several years. The official reaction may have had something to do with this. *The Faraway Years* was met coldly by Soviet critics, and the publisher, Molodaia Gvardiia, even halted production of a second edition of the book just as it was about to go to print after powerful voices raised objections to the fact that 'this book is filled with lots of liberal kindliness and very little revolutionary wrath'.[*]

Readers, however, embraced Paustovsky's story. None more so than Ivan Bunin. Now the leading light of the Russian émigré community in France, Bunin, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1933, stumbled upon 'The Inn on the Braginka' in the journal *Vokrug sveta* ('Around the World'), where it had been published as a stand-alone piece in 1946. Bunin had long forgotten the budding writer who had sent him his early poems thirty years before, but he was so profoundly moved by Paustovsky's story that he sent him a postcard care of his publisher in Moscow to let him know of the 'rare joy' it had given him and that he considered it to be 'among the best stories in all of Russian literature'.[†] If he needed encouragement to carry on with his memoirs, Paustovsky could not have wished for more.

*Restless Youth* appeared in several instalments in *Novyi mir* in 1955. It was only now, a full decade after he began *The Faraway Years*, that Paustovsky came to see his memoir as a much bigger project. He wrote

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[*] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:16.
[†] Bunin's postcard, dated 15 Sep. 1947, is in the collection of the K. G. Paustovsky Museum in Moscow.

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in *Novyi mir* that *Restless Youth* was part of a 'large autobiographical tale, the subject of which is the formation of a man and a writer', and that he intended to write two more books that would bring his life up to the present day.* In late 1955, Sovetskii pisatel', the publishing house of the Soviet Writers' Union, issued volumes one and two together as *The Story of a Life*, the first time this title was used. Paustovsky completed the third volume in Tarusa over the course of 1956.

'This is a story,' Paustovsky wrote in 1958, 'not history. I am writing my autobiography adhering strictly to the principle of setting down only what I have witnessed myself. And so, in this story it is not possible to include descriptions of everything that happened in the particular place and time described in this book.'†

Paustovsky's choice of title, *Povest' o zhizni* in Russian, is significant — he was not writing a traditional autobiography or memoir, nor was he writing a history; rather, he was writing his *story*. The Russian word *povest'* has conveyed different meanings over time. If, for example, in the twelfth-century *Tale of Bygone Years — Povest' vremennykh let* — it signifies a historical chronicle of Kievan Russia's past, in more recent usage *povest'* implies a level of artistic creativity, licence even, that history, autobiography and memoir generally do not permit. A *povest'* in the modern meaning also refers to a literary work shorter in length than the typical novel. Thus, Tolstoy's novella *Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a *povest'*, as is Gogol's short story *The Overcoat*. In choosing the word *povest'* Paustovsky is signalling where his work is to be placed in the taxonomy of Russian literary genres, in terms both of the length of its constituent parts — *povesti*, in the plural — and of its debt to the deep structures of narrative that give shape to this reconstruction of his past.

'For all its naked autobiographism,' the literary scholar Lev Levitsky noted, 'this is not a documentary work but an artistic one, whose entire plan and every last detail are dictated by its overarching conception.' *The Story of a Life* is not a pedantic accounting of all the things Paustovsky experienced or the people he knew (indeed, his wives and children are not mentioned), rather it is a 'painstaking selection of

* *Novyi mir*, 3 (1955), 3.
† *Oktiabr'*, 3 (1959), 3.

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material and its artistic generalisation'. The work moves forward less by the dictates of chronology and more by the power of memory, which gives it its episodic nature, what Levitsky has called 'a chain of recollections'.[*] The mysterious interworkings of experience, memory, and meaning that shape Paustovsky's *Story of a Life* are beautifully captured by a line from Gabriel García Márquez in his own autobiography, *Living to Tell the Tale*: 'Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.'[†]

The appearance of each new instalment of his magnum opus provided further proof of Paustovsky's ideological heresy. In 1956, Vasily Smirnov, a prominent official in the Soviet Writers' Union, denounced Paustovsky as a 'counterrevolutionary' in a meeting with a group of writers.[‡] Two years later he was publicly attacked on the pages of the literary magazine *Zvezda* ('Star') in an article titled 'Notes on one Master's Party Spirit'. Paustovsky's writing was criticised as overly individualistic, lacking in *partiinost'* — full-throated support of the Communist Party, in other words — and as offering proof that much still needed to be done 'in the battle for ideological purity' in Soviet literature.[§] The criticism was neither unfair nor inaccurate: Paustovsky didn't care in the least about 'party spirit'. He never joined the Communist Party, or any other political party for that matter.

The attacks, however, frightened Alexander Tvardovsky, editor of *Novyi mir*, who refused to publish the fourth volume in 1958 unless Paustovsky made major changes. Tvardovsky wanted more heroic workers, politics and the glories of the early years of the Soviet Union and less 'poetic solitude, nature's beauty and the sea, and art for art's sake'. He detected in Paustovsky's writing an unwarranted 'pride' on the author's part, as though he were 'spitting upon "world history" from on high'. And he was especially upset at the many pages devoted to Babel. There was simply no way Tvardovsky would permit Paustovsky's 'apologetic' defence of Babel, who had been

[*] Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni*, 1:550—52.
[†] Epigraph to *Living to Tell the Tale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).
[‡] Kornei Chukovskii, *Dnevnik, 1901–1969* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1994), 245.
[§] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 8—10.

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arrested and executed as a spy and enemy of the people in 1940, to appear in his journal. When Paustovsky received Tvardovsky's comments he was furious. He wrote to Tvardovsky that his remarks were motivated entirely by political rather than literary concerns and that his objection to the sections on Babel and his tragic death could only be explained by Tvardovsky's anti-Semitism. As this was a 'matter of conscience', Paustovsky refused to make the changes and instructed Tvardovsky to return the manuscript to him immediately.[*]

In the end, Paustovsky published this volume, *A Time of Great Hope*, and the next, *Southern Adventure*, in the journal *Oktiabr'* ('October') in 1959 and 1960, but only after its editors forced him to make considerable changes, albeit not to the extent demanded by Tvardovsky.[†] Nevertheless, he carried on with what had become his life's work, desperate to see it through to the end and unwilling to allow the critics or frightened editors to stop him.

'To be frank, we must admit that among us remain dour writers of memoirs, who look more to the past than to the present and the future,' observed the literary hack and Party loyalist Vsevolod Kochetov at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in October 1961. 'With their twisted outlook and with a zeal worthy of a better cause, they poke around in the refuse of their well-frayed memories to unearth mouldering literary corpses and present them as something that still lives.'[‡] It was obvious to the audience who Kochetov had in mind.

By the late 1950s, Paustovsky's health was in serious decline. He suffered from what was then diagnosed as severe asthma but was possibly chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, brought on by a lifetime of heavy smoking. In August 1960, he suffered the first of a series of heart attacks. He could barely manage more than a few hours of writing a day and worried he would never see his work

[*] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 22–3; Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:19.

[†] Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Collection 1128, Inventory, 645, Folder 1 contains some of the many edits demanded of Paustovsky to volume five by *Oktiabr'* prior to publication.

[‡] John Sendy, 'In Memory of Paustovsky', *Australian Left Review* (April–May 1969), 72.

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through to the end. After the monthly *Znamia* ('Banner') refused to publish *A Book of Journeys*, the sixth and what would be the final volume, Paustovsky swallowed his pride and offered the manuscript to Tvardovsky. *Novyi mir* published it in 1963, but only after removing everything Paustovsky had to say about the barbarism of the Stalin years. Paustovsky's original text was cut in half.*

As a man and a writer who belonged to no camp, Paustovsky found himself attacked not only by the Soviet literary establishment but by dissidents as well. Varlam Shalamov, author of *Kolyma Tales*, who spent seventeen years in the Gulag, maligned *Kara-Bugaz* and *Kolkhida* for their silence about the use of convict labour in the construction of these industrial projects. Paustovsky, he wrote, had been blind to the horrors playing out right before his very eyes.† Setting aside the fact that Shalamov only thought to criticise Paustovsky the year before he died when he was far too ill to respond, there is an element of truth in his criticism. Paustovsky never was a dissident or an active foe of the Soviet state; nor did he ever claim to be. He had never been motivated by politics. As he himself admitted numerous times, he was a dreamer, an observer, a romantic, an individual who insisted on living according to his own terms. In his 1984 commencement speech at Williams College, Joseph Brodsky said: 'The surest defence against Evil is extreme individualism, originality of thinking, whimsicality, even — if you will — eccentricity. That is, something that can't be feigned, faked, imitated.'‡ This was Konstantin Paustovsky.

Paustovsky was not blind to the nature of the Soviet system, however. As early as 1920, he wrote in his diary:

> When the Civil War ended and the period of 'peaceful construction' began, everyone immediately saw that 'the emperor

* Galina Burlaeva, 'Literaturnyi arkhiv K. G. Paustovskogo v Moskovskom muzei-tsentre pisatelia', in Pimneva et al. (eds), *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 488; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 66—7.

† *Mir Paustovskogo*, 21 (2004), 97—100; also Olivier, 'Paustovskii v nachale XXI veka', 14—15.

‡ Joseph Brodsky, 'A Commencement Address', *New York Review of Books*, 16 Aug. 1984.

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> had no clothes' and the only power he had was to destroy and wage war. [...] The entire country has been turned into one of Arakcheev's military colonies. A new era has begun — the tempting of the intelligentsia, the academicians, the artists and the writers ... Lord, let this cup pass me by.*

The lyrical romanticism of Paustovsky's prose blinded critics like Shalamov to just what it was he was saying in *The Story of a Life*, but the clues are unmistakable to the careful reader. Consider Paustovsky's handling of the two revolutions of 1917. The collapse of the Romanov dynasty is depicted as the great national liberation from centuries of autocratic oppression that it truly was. All of Russia came together to celebrate this new beginning and a wave of hope and possibility swept over the land. But, he writes, 'The idyllic generosity of the first days of the revolution faded. Entire worlds crumbled and collapsed into dust.' The Bolshevik seizure of power in October is not treated as the next step on the road to a better tomorrow, but as the brutal and senseless victory of an armed mob. There is nothing heroic in Paustovsky's passages about what he saw in Moscow that autumn. Rather, these pages are filled with accounts of wholesale theft, vandalism, anarchy, brutality and destruction. Paustovsky himself was caught in the violence, captured by Bolshevik forces, and nearly executed as a suspected supporter of the Provisional Government. The politics of the new Soviet government are characterised as 'harsh' and 'pitiless'. An aura of ambivalence hangs over his chapters recounting the first years of the regime. Even this volume's title — *The Dawn of an Uncertain Age*, the adjective being the key signifier here — leaves no doubt as to Paustovsky's attitude to the Bolshevik Revolution. He admits to being disturbed by the Bolsheviks' 'contempt for the culture of the past'. He refused to pick a side during the years of the civil war and not until 1920, with the collapse of the White armies, 'did I realise that there was no other path forward than the one chosen by my people'.

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* *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 7–23.

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This is a shocking, and brave, admission for a Soviet author to make in 1956, especially for one who for years had been criticised for his ideological deviance. Questioning Stalin's cult of personality at the time was one thing; questioning the revolution itself, however, was taboo.

Paustovsky's disgust at the 'brutality, violence and sudden unreason of the twentieth century' reverberates throughout *The Story of a Life*, regardless of the regime, army or political party responsible. Children's skulls bashed in by men wielding rifles; women raped; Jews flayed alive by Ukrainian gangs; a monastery burned to the ground, the monks shot dead for a bit of silver; an orphan crushed by a frenzied crowd of starving refugees; the sugar-white bone of a young soldier's amputated leg. Such were the horrors Paustovsky experienced and described with unflinching honesty. He reminded readers of 'how thin was the veneer of civilisation that separated us from a bottomless sea of dark savagery'.

That savagery touched Paustovsky in the most personal of ways. Among the happiest moments in his life were the days spent with Uncle Nikolai and Aunt Maria at their home in Bryansk and then summers at their dacha in Rëvny. After Georgy Paustovsky left his family, Uncle 'Kolya' became a surrogate father to young Kostik. Paustovsky's love for his uncle flows from the pages of his book. In August 1919, Nikolai took his family to Moscow to escape the advance of General Anton Denikin's army. There he spent the next decade working in the Soviet arms industry until his arrest on 26 March 1929 as a foreign spy. He was executed on 21 October. The death warrant was signed by Genrikh Yagoda, deputy chairman of the OGPU, the Soviet secret police.*

In the Stalin years, 'enemies of the people' became non-persons. They disappeared and ceased to exist. Families burned their executed loved ones' letters and diaries, they removed their pictures from their photo albums, and if they still mentioned their names, then only in a whisper at night in the safety of their room when no

* V. A. Bobkov, 'Zhizn' i deiatel'nost' N. G. Vysochanskogo na Brianskoi zemle', *Vestnik Brianskogo gosuniversiteta*, 2 (2009), 6–11; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 15 (2000), 47–53.

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one else might hear. And yet here is Paustovsky writing an effusive tribute to his beloved uncle, murdered as a traitor to his country, while the Soviet Union was still at war with Nazi Germany. Other victims of Stalin's terror are memorialised in these pages as well — the eccentric bibliophile Mikhail Shchelkunov, who was arrested as a Trotskyite and perished in the Gulag in 1938; the journalist Mikhail Koltsov, executed as an enemy of the state in 1940. One could add more names.

It's one of the remarkable things about Paustovsky that despite the horrors he witnessed, he never became cynical or bitter or defeated; rather he maintained his faith in humanity and his ability to appreciate life's infinite beauty. He referred to this as 'my tendency to see the good in all things', a trait others sometimes saw as a weakness. But Paustovsky couldn't help himself. It was who he was. He writes that while still a youth,

> I began to notice that the worse reality appeared, the more fully I could find all the good that was hidden inside it. I was beginning to realise that in life the good and the bad lie side by side. The good can often shine through a fog of lies, poverty and suffering, just like at the end of some rainy days the fire of the setting sun can pierce the grey clouds with its rays. I tried to find signs of the good everywhere.

He often found these signs in the most unexpected of places and people, like the poor old man in torn overalls he met in Moscow in the hungry year of 1918. The man tended a small kitchen garden that produced just enough to keep him alive, yet he was happy. 'So, you see, my friend,' he said to Paustovsky, 'it just so happens that this too is a way of life. There are all sorts of ways to live. You can fight for freedom, you can try to remake humanity or you can grow tomatoes. Everything has its own price, its own dignity and its own glory.'

Not sure he understood, Paustovsky asked him what exactly it was he was trying to say.

'That we need to be tolerant and understanding. As I see it, that's the only real path to freedom. All of us should devote ourselves to the work we like best, and no one should try to stop us.'

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Tolerance, understanding, respect for the individual. These were dangerous notions in Paustovsky's world.

News of a forthcoming English translation of *The Story of a Life* appeared in 1961 in the *Sunday Times*, which described Paustovsky, then little known outside the USSR, as 'a great storyteller, a stylist of the rarest poetic beauty, and a man of simplicity and truth'.[*] When the first volume appeared three years later the praise was ecstatic. The *Sunday Times* again likened the writing to that of Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov for its 'freshness of response'. The *Times Literary Supplement* dubbed Paustovsky the 'Russian Proust'. The *Observer* called *The Story of a Life* 'one of the supreme examples of autobiography [...] a small masterpiece [...] a classic of childhood'.[†] Reviewers praised the 'sense of the numinous wonder and delight' in Paustovsky's writing, 'its lyricism [and] the immediacy of the portraits of persons, places and events', and its 'limpid style [...] that is simple, unforced and self-effacing'. *The Times* noted how 'Everything he writes is stripped to the bone until nothing is left except what is vivid and necessary'.[‡] (Indeed, Paustovsky laboured over his writing, producing draft after draft by hand, trimming, revising and cutting every unnecessary word, as his supremely illegible manuscripts reveal.[§])

*The Story of a Life* met with a similar reaction in the United States. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Helen Muchnic called the book 'profoundly moving, sometimes humorous, often horrifying' and singled out its 'passages of lyric beauty'.[||] The reviewer for the

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[*] Vera Lindsay, 'Childhood under the Tsars', *Sunday Times*, 29 Jan. 1961.

[†] Raymond Mortimer, '"The greatest living Russian author" in England'; Vera and John Russell, 'A lifetime in revolution', *Sunday Times*, 27 Sep. 1964; 'Russian Proust', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 May 1969; *Observer* quotes from advertisements in the *TLS*, 16 Feb. 1967, 125 and *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1964, 15.

[‡] Jeremy Rundall, 'Draught of the South', *Sunday Times*, 16 Mar. 1969; 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia'; Lesley Branch, 'Jackals among the azaleas', *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1969; 'Paustovsky when young', *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1964; 'Self-portrait of an artist in years of revolution', *The Times*, 4 Nov. 1965; Iverach McDonald, 'Russia going red', *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1967.

[§] The manuscripts are in Moscow's Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.

[||] 'A Russian Soul', *New York Review of Books*, 20 Aug. 1964.

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*New York Times* said it was one of the finest books by a Russian author he had ever read and highlighted the 'deceptively simple' quality of Paustovsky's prose that 'captures superbly the emotional atmosphere of a situation and an era'. As if that were not enough of an endorsement, the review went on to declare that the greater response to Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* than to Paustovsky's masterpiece could only be characterised as a 'cosmic literary injustice'.*

Similar comments could be heard on the Continent. When Gallimard published the first four volumes in Paris in 1966, *Le Monde* praised its '*lyrisme délicat*' and called Paustovsky '*un génie du coeur*' — a genius of the heart.† The same year Heinrich Böll said that his entire family was reading the German translation and they were all utterly swept away by it. Discovering Paustovsky had been for Böll 'a true revelation'.‡

Paustovsky's name was first raised in connection with the Nobel Prize in Literature in the Swedish press in 1962. The voices in support of Paustovsky inside the Swedish Academy grew, and by 1965 many in the literary world considered him to be the favourite to win. But the Swedes had their concerns. The previous year Anders Österling, permanent secretary of the academy, had been in favour of awarding the prize to Paustovsky when he was instructed by Gunnar Jarring, Sweden's ambassador to the USSR, that this would be viewed as a provocation by the Soviet government, which was still angry at Pasternak's win in 1958. Paustovsky, Jarring warned, was deeply unpopular among the Soviet leadership. As recently as April 1963, at a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev had gone on a tirade against Paustovsky over an article he had written years earlier for *Pravda* arguing against industrial development around Tarusa. The academy heeded Jarring's warning, and the 1964 award went to Jean-Paul Sartre instead.

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* Orville Prescott, 'Books of the Times: A Magnificent Surprise from Russia', *New York Times*, 1 Jul. 1964. See also Harrison E. Salisbury, 'Through the Tumult and the Thaw', *New York Times*. 3 May 1964.

† Piotr Rawicz, 'Une grande chronique de la révolution russe', *Le Monde*, 26 Mar. 1966.

‡ *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 33.

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Paustovsky was put forward again the following year, and once more voices were raised within the academy that giving the prize to him would cause an international scandal that Sweden ought to avoid. At the same time, the Soviet government was working frantically behind the scenes to convince the academy to give the prize to its approved candidate, Mikhail Sholokhov, best known as the author of *The Quiet Don*.

Paustovsky was in Rome in October 1965 as the world awaited the Swedish Academy's decision. The Italian press was busy trying to secure interviews with the man almost everyone assumed would be the winner. Paustovsky, however, harboured no illusions. Politics, not literary merit, would determine the matter. He told a friend that in light of the Pasternak affair the Swedes wouldn't give the award to 'another non-conformist Soviet writer'. Paustovsky was right. Days later Sholokhov was announced as the winner.

One of Paustovsky's biggest supporters in Sweden was the poet and critic Artur Lundkvist. He and his wife had met Paustovsky in the summer of 1962 when he was recovering from a heart attack outside Moscow:

> Marvellously dressed and well mannered, he met us on the veranda of the sanatorium. His sincerity was striking. He was open but at the same time uncommonly tactful, unlike the typical Soviet man. He had the defined, expressive features of someone who had gone through a great deal, although without a trace of cruelty. He had the eyes of a dreamer and a poet, yet clear and perceptive. Despite his heart trouble, he looked strong and youthful for his age, as though he would be more at home walking in the woods or in the thick of things rather than at his writing desk.

Although Paustovsky would be considered a finalist for the prize a total of four times, he never did win.*

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* A. M. Blokh, *Sovetskii Soiuz v inter'ere nobelevskikh premii: fakty, dokumenty, razmyshlenniia, komentarii* (St Petersburg: Gumanistika, 2001), 678–9, 724–8; Kjell Espmark, *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study behind the Criteria of the Choices* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 186; Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:21, 23; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 65; Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 381.

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On his famous visit to the Soviet Union in September 1962, the American poet Robert Frost insisted on meeting Paustovsky. He had quickly tired of the 'Intourist Russia' that was being paraded before him by his official hosts (thrumming factories, bountiful farms, technological marvels and so on) and wanted to sit down with a real writer for an honest, open conversation. From the moment Frost and his American guide, F. D. Reeve, arrived at Paustovsky's Moscow apartment, they were struck by 'an immediate sense of tranquil, cultured excellence'. Frost and Paustovsky recognised in each other kindred souls. When Frost told him about his need for freedom and isolation to write, Paustovsky replied that just like Henry David Thoreau, he had a small house in the woods to which he retreated to commune with nature. They traded stories of their youth when they had wandered about the country from one odd-job to the next. Frost tried to impress Paustovsky by telling him how he had even jumped freight trains and ridden in open boxcars. Paustovsky smiled and went him one better — he, too, he said, had jumped freight trains, although he had often been forced to ride on the tops of the boxcars. Frost laughed. The evening proved to be one of the highlights of his trip.*

By the last decade of his life Paustovsky had become one of the elder statesmen of Russian letters and a champion of artistic and intellectual freedom. Time and again he spoke out to defend writers against censorship and state oppression, from the attacks on Vladimir Dudintsev and his 1956 novel *Not by Bread Alone*, to the campaigns against Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel, and Yury Galanskov and his colleagues in the so-called 'Trial of the Four' in 1968. He called for the passage of strict laws to protect Russia's natural environment, so terribly degraded by the Soviet regime, and when he learned that local officials in Karelia were planning to raze over a hundred ancient Russian Orthodox churches, he wrote a letter to Khrushchev insisting that this barbarism be stopped.†

* F. D. Reeve, *Robert Frost in Russia* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, [1964] 2001), 40, 45, 47–53.

† Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:14, 19–24; Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 333, 502–3; Lobov and Vasil'eva, 'On otdal svoë serdtse Rossii', 46–76; 'Russians ask for review of trial', *The Times*, 16 Feb. 1968; 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia'.

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Just as he had done in the 1930s when he defended the work and reputation of the officially unapproved writer Alexander Grin,[*] Paustovsky helped to publish the writings of Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelshtam, and encouraged the careers of younger writers such as Bulat Okudzhava and Yury Kazakov in two influential and popular anthologies — *Literary Moscow* (1956) and *Pages from Tarusa* (1961) — publications that were denounced by the Writers' Union and Soviet officialdom as ideologically dangerous and quickly suppressed.[†]

Paustovsky was back in hospital in May 1968, for the last time. Nevertheless, he refused to remain silent. When official pressure was being exerted on the experimental Theatre on the Taganka and its brilliant lead director, Yury Lyubimov, Paustovsky telephoned Alexei Kosygin, first deputy premier of the Soviet Union: 'This is the dying writer Paustovsky on the phone,' he said. 'I implore you not to destroy our country's cultural treasures. If you fire Lyubimov, his theatre will collapse, and the great work they're doing there will perish.' Lyubimov kept his job, and the theatre was saved.[‡]

In the last year of his life Paustovsky worked on the seventh volume of *The Story of a Life*. He died in Moscow on 14 July 1968 without managing to complete it. A brief testament was found in his writing desk: 'We lived on this earth. Don't entrust it into the hands of the destroyers, the barbarians and the ignoramuses. We are the heirs of Pushkin, and we will have to answer for that.'[§]

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[*] On Paustovsky and Grin, see K. G. Paustovskii, 'Aleksandr Grin', *God XXII*, 15 (1939); 'Zhizn' Aleksandra Grina', Konstantin Paustovsky website, http://paustovskiy-lit.ru/paustovskiy/public/zhizn-aleksandra-grina.htm, accessed 25 Feb. 2021; 'Uchastie Paustovskogo v izdanii sochinenii A. Grina', Konstantin Paustovsky website, http://paustovskiy-lit.ru/paustovskiy/bio/uchastie-paustovskogo-v-izdanii-grina.htm, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

[†] *Literaturnaia Moskva: literaturno-khudozhestvennvyi sbornik Moskovskikh pisatelei* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1956); *Tarusskie stranitsy: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi illiustrirovannyi sbornik* (Kaluga: Kaluzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1961); Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:18, 20; Blokh, *Sovetskii Soiuz v inter'ere nobelevskikh premii*, 730.

[‡] Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 444.

[§] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:24.

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At the end of *Restless Youth*, Paustovsky wrote of his life in March 1917:

> I didn't know what would come next. But I knew that I would continue to strive with all my strength to become a writer. This would be my way of serving my people, of loving our magical language and our remarkable land. I would work as long as I could hold a pen and my heart, overflowing with the beauty of life, was still beating.

He had kept his word.

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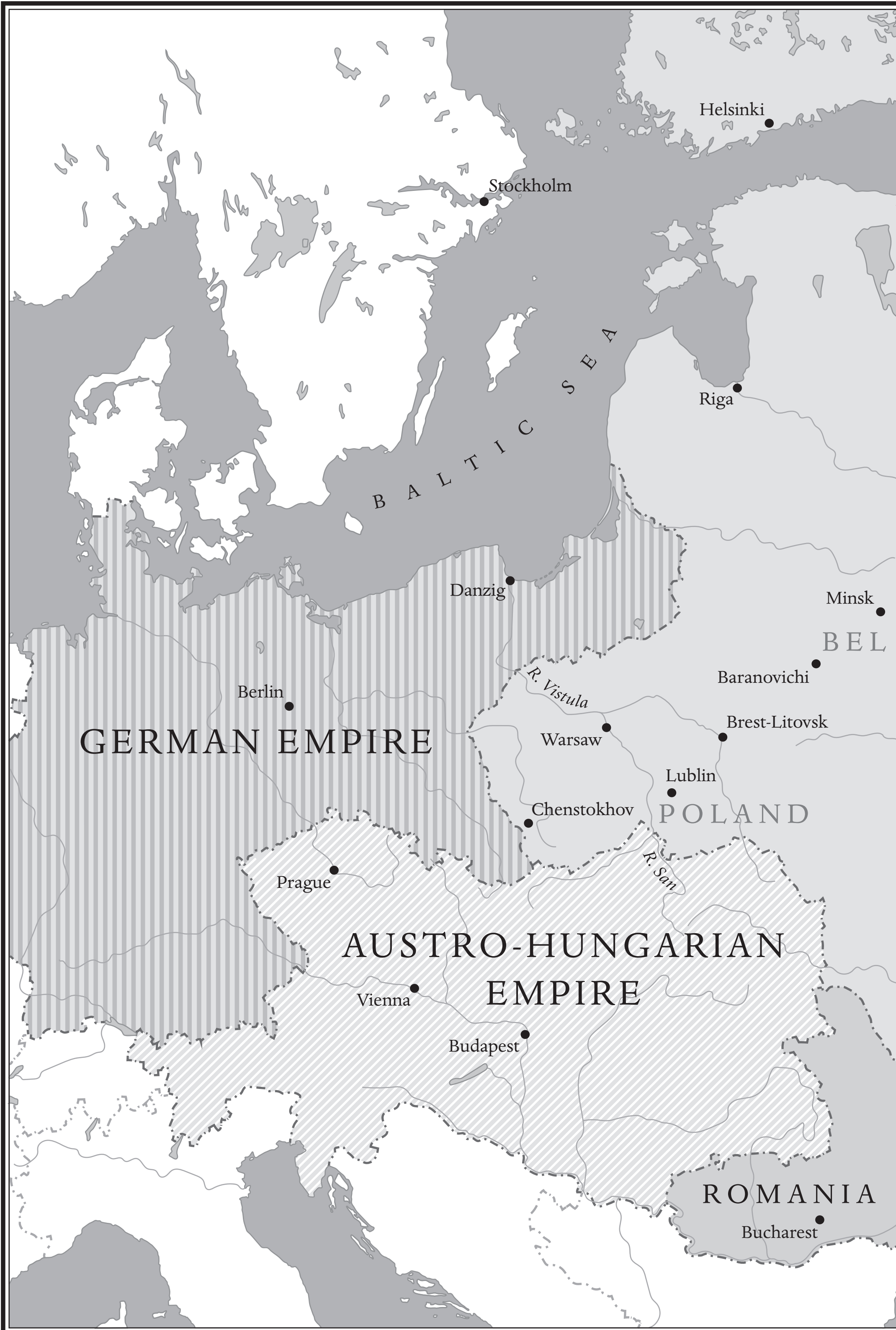


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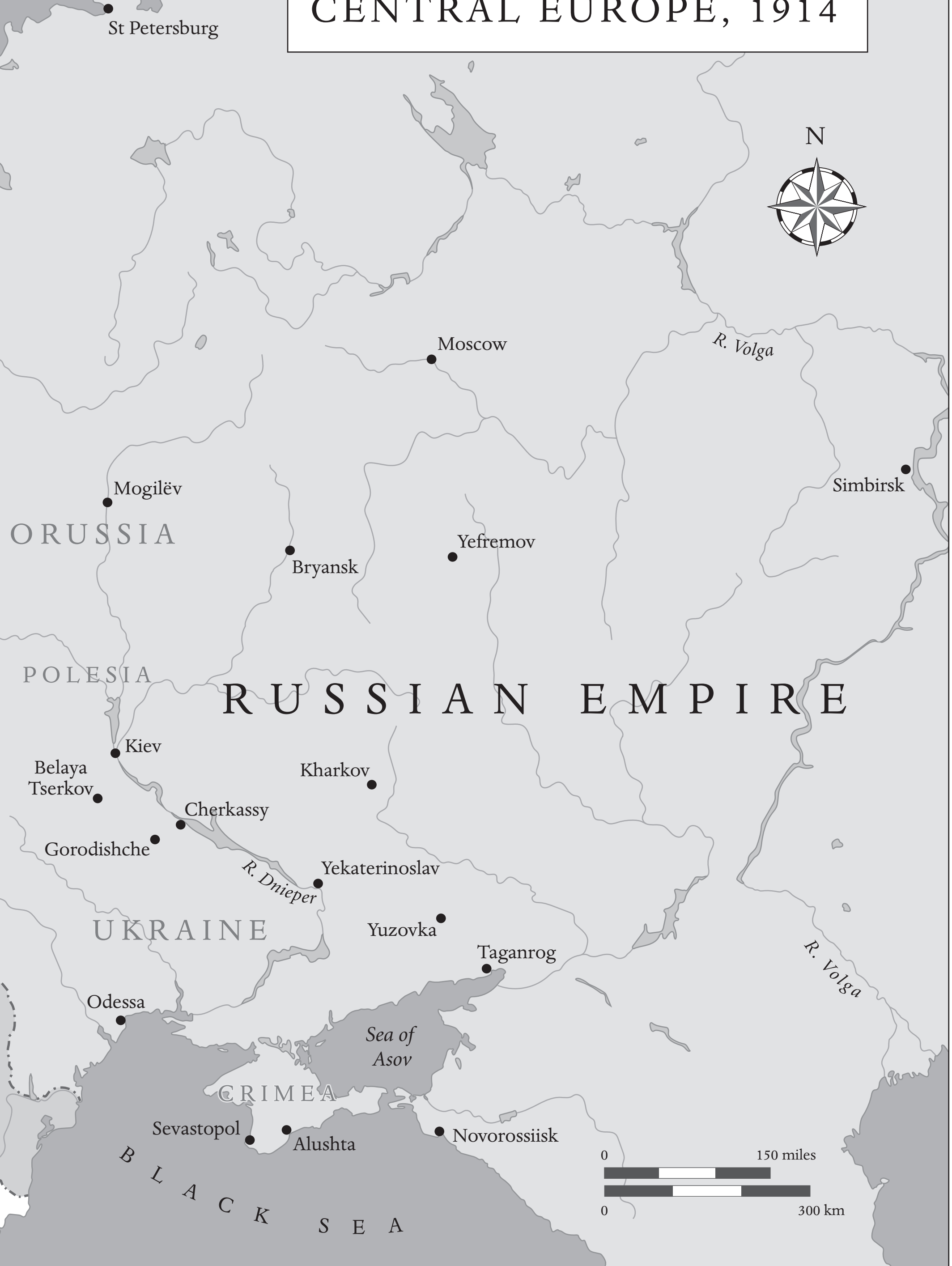


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# BOOK ONE

# THE FARAWAY YEARS

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My life, or did I dream you?
Sergei Yesenin

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# 1
# *The Death of My Father*

I was in my last year of school in Kiev when the telegram came saying that my father was dying on the farm at Gorodishche, near Belaya Tserkov. The next day I arrived at Belaya Tserkov and stopped at the house of my father's good friend Feoktistov, head of the local post office. He was a short-sighted old man with thick glasses and a long beard and wore a shabby old official's jacket with the brass insignia of the postal service, crossed horns and lightning bolts, on his lapels.

It was the end of March. Rain was coming down in a steady drizzle. Naked poplars stood shrouded in fog. Feoktistov told me that the ice on the swiftly flowing river Ros had gone out the night before. The farm where my father was dying was on an island in the middle of this river, twenty versts* from Belaya Tserkov. A stone causeway across the river led to the farm. Flood water was now pouring over the causeway in waves, and no one, of course, would agree to take me to the island, not even the most reckless of coachmen.

Feoktistov thought for a long time, contemplating which coachman in Belaya Tserkov was the most reckless. In the half-light of Feoktistov's drawing room his daughter Zina, a schoolgirl, sat diligently practising the piano. The music caused the leaves on the ficus

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* A verst (*versta*) was equal to 1.06 kilometres or 0.66 miles.

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to tremble. I stared at a pale, dried-out piece of lemon on a small dish and kept silent.

'Well, let's call Bregman, the old rascal,' Feoktistov finally decided. 'Nothing frightens him.'

Soon, into Feoktistov's study, overflowing with volumes of *The Planted Field* in their gold-tooled covers, walked Bregman the driver — 'the biggest rascal' in all of Belaya Tserkov. He was a dwarfish, thick-set Jew with a scraggy beard and the blue eyes of a cat. His weather-beaten cheeks were the red of heavenly apples. He twisted in his hands a small whip and listened, sceptically, to Feoktistov.

'Oy, what a misfortune!' he said at last in a falsetto voice. 'Oy, what bad luck, Pan Feoktistov! My carriage is light, and my horses are weak. Gypsy horses! They won't pull us across the causeway. We'll all drown — the horses, the carriage, the young man and the old driver. And they won't even bother so much as to print a word about it in *Kievan Thought*. Well, that's just unbearable, Pan Feoktistov. Go? Well, of course, we can go. Why not? You yourself know a driver's life is worth no more than three silver roubles — or maybe five, or let's say ten, I won't argue.'

'Thank you, Bregman,' said Feoktistov. 'I knew you'd be willing. You're the bravest man in Belaya Tserkov. For this I'll buy you a subscription to *The Planted Field* for the rest of the year.'

'Well, if I'm really so brave,' Bregman laughed with a squeak, 'then you'd better make it *The Russian Invalid*. At least there I can read all about the young soldiers and the knights of St George. The horses will be at your door in an hour, Pan.' Bregman left.

There had been a strange sentence in the telegram I received in Kiev: 'Bring a priest with you from Belaya Tserkov, either Orthodox or Roman Catholic, it doesn't matter, just so long as he comes.' I knew my father and so the sentence bothered and upset me. My father was an atheist. His jokes about priests of both confessions had led to endless clashes with my grandmother, a Pole and a religious fanatic like so many Polish women.

I guessed that my father's sister, Feodosia Maximovna, or, as everyone called her, Aunt Dozia, had insisted on the priest. She

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rejected all church rites except absolution. She had replaced the Bible with Shevchenko's *Kobzar*,[*] which she kept hidden in an iron-bound trunk and which was just as yellowed and wax-splattered as a Bible. Sometimes at night Aunt Dozia would take it out and read 'Katerina' by candlelight, constantly dabbing her eyes with a dark kerchief. She grieved over Katerina's fate, so similar to her own. In the damp grove behind her cottage was the grave, covered in greenery, of her son, 'the little fellow', who had died many years ago when Aunt Dozia was still quite young. This boy had been, as people used to say, her 'unlawful' son. The man Aunt Dozia loved had betrayed her. He left her, but she remained true to him until death, and she kept waiting for him to return to her. For some reason she was certain he was sick, penniless, ill-fated, and she, after having cursed him out as he deserved, would in the end take him back and treat him with kindness.

None of the Orthodox priests would go to Gorodishche, claiming to be sick or too busy. Only one young Catholic priest was willing to go. He warned me that we'd first have to stop at the church for the Holy Sacrament needed for the dying man's last rites, and that no one was allowed to speak with someone carrying the Holy Sacrament. The priest wore a long, pleated overcoat with a velvet collar and a strange round hat, which was also black. It was gloomy and cold inside the church. Wilted red paper roses hung at the base of the crucifix. Without candles, without the ringing of bells, without the rolling of the organ, the church had the appearance of the wings of a theatre by dull daylight.

At first we rode in silence. There was only the sound of Bregman smacking his lips and hurrying on his gaunt bays. He shouted at them as all drivers do — 'G'on' and 'Ya!' The unkempt gardens echoed with the sound of the rain. The priest held the pyx which had been wrapped in black serge. My grey school overcoat became soaked through and turned black. Out of the mist the famous Alexandria Gardens of Countess Branitskaya appeared to reach all the way up

[*] A book of poems published in 1840 by Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–61).

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to the sky.* These were extensive gardens, equal in size, Feoktistov told me, to those at Versailles. The snow there was melting, wrapping the trees in cold mist. Turning round, Bregman said there were wild deer in the gardens.

'Mickiewicz loved these gardens very much,'† I told the priest, having forgotten he had to keep silent the whole way. I had wanted to say something pleasant as a way of thanking him for agreeing to come on this difficult and dangerous trip. The priest smiled in reply.

Rainwater stood in the sodden fields, reflecting the jackdaws flying overhead. I raised the collar of my coat and thought of my father, about how little I knew him. He had been a statistician and had worked nearly his entire life on various railways — the Moscow—Brest, Petersburg—Warsaw, Kharkov—Sevastopol and South-Western lines. We had moved often from town to town — from Moscow to Pskov, then to Vilnius, and finally to Kiev. Father always had trouble getting along with his superiors. He was touchy and hot-tempered but a kind man. A year earlier my father had left Kiev and taken a job as a statistician at a factory in Bryansk, in Orël province. He had not been there long when he quite unexpectedly quit his job for no good reason and returned to my grandfather's old farm at Gorodishche. His brother, Ilko, a village teacher, lived there, along with Aunt Dozia.

My father's inexplicable act upset all his relatives, my mother most of all. At the time she was living in Moscow with my eldest brother. A month after arriving at Gorodishche my father fell ill, and now he was dying.

The road ran downhill through a ravine. At the road's end could be heard the persistent sound of rushing water. Bregman began to fidget up in his box. 'The causeway!' he said, sombrely. 'Now's the time for my passengers to pray!'

The causeway suddenly came into view around a bend in the road. The priest made to stand up and grabbed Bregman by his faded

* Countess Alexandra Branitskaya (1754—1838), niece of Prince Grigory Potëmkin.
† Adam Mickiewicz (1798—1855), Polish poet and dramatist and national hero.

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red sash. The water was rushing fast between the granite rocks. At this spot the Ros breaks through the Avratinska Hills with a fury. The water was flowing over the causeway in a clear wave, cascading down like thunder and filling the air with a cold spray. Across the river, on the far side of the causeway, the enormous poplars seemed to practically leap into the sky, and one could make out a small white house. I recognised the farm on the island where I had lived as a small boy — its thickets and wattle fences, the tall yokes beside the wells, and the rocks by the riverbanks. They cut the river into separate, powerful streams. Long ago my father and I had fished for whiskered gudgeon from those rocks.

Bregman stopped the horses near the causeway, climbed down, straightened the harness with the handle of his whip, looked at his carriage doubtfully, and shook his head. At that moment the priest finally broke his oath of silence.

'Jesus-Maria!' he uttered in a low voice. 'How are we going to get across?'

'Ahh, how should I know?' Bregman replied. 'Just sit quiet. The horses are already shaking all over.'

The horses threw back their heads, snorted, and then walked into the rushing water. It roared and knocked the light carriage to the unguarded side of the causeway. The carriage shifted at an angle and began to move sideways, its metal wheels screeching. The horses trembled, tried to steady themselves, and nearly lay down in the water to keep from being swept away. Bregman swung his whip over their heads. Halfway across the causeway, where the current was strongest, making a loud ringing sound, the horses came to a stop. The foaming rapids beat against their thin legs. Bregman let out a wail and began to whip the horses mercilessly. They moved backwards, pushing the carriage to the very edge of the causeway. Then I caught sight of Uncle Ilko. He was galloping on a grey horse from the farm to the causeway. He was yelling something and waving a coil of thin rope over his head.

He rode up onto the causeway and tossed Bregman the rope. Bregman hurriedly tied it to something under the carriage box, and then the three horses — two bays and a grey — finally dragged the carriage onto the island. The priest crossed himself with a sweeping

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gesture. Bregman winked at Uncle Ilko and said that folks would long remember such a fine driver as that old Bregman. I asked about my father.

‘Still alive,’ Ilko replied, and kissed me, scratching my face with his beard. ‘He’s waiting for you. But where’s your mother, Maria Grigorievna?’

‘I sent her a telegram in Moscow. She should arrive tomorrow.’

Uncle Ilko looked at the river. ‘It’s still rising,’ he said. ‘That’s bad, my dear Kostik. Well, perhaps that’s the worst of it. Let’s go!’

We were met on the porch by Aunt Dozia, all in black, her eyes dried out from so much crying. The stuffy rooms smelled of mint. At first I did not recognise my father in the yellowed old man with the grey stubble on his cheeks. My father was only fifty years old. I had always remembered him as a slightly stooped but well-built man, elegant, dark-haired with an unusually sad smile and attentive grey eyes.

Now he sat in his chair, breathing heavily, and looking intently at me, a lone tear running down his dry cheek. It stuck on his beard, and Aunt Dozia wiped it away with a clean handkerchief. My father couldn’t speak. He was dying of throat cancer. I sat by my father all night. Everyone else slept. The rain stopped. The stars shone sullenly outside the windows. The river raged ever louder. The water kept rising. Bregman and the priest could not get back and were now trapped on the island. My father stirred in the middle of the night and opened his eyes. I leaned over him. He tried to put his arms around my neck but couldn’t and then said in a raspy whisper: ‘I fear … your lack of character … will be the ruin of you.’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘That won’t happen.’

‘When you see your mama,’ he whispered. ‘I failed her … May she forgive me …’

He grew quiet and weakly squeezed my hand. At the time I did not understand his words, and only much later, after many years, did their bitter meaning become clear to me. I also came to understand much later that my father had never really been a statistician at all, but a poet. He died towards dawn, but at first I didn’t realise this. It seemed to me that he had quietly fallen asleep.

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An old man named Nechipor lived with us on the island. We called him to come and read the psalms over Father. Nechipor frequently broke off his readings to go out into the front hall and smoke his cheap tobacco. There in a whisper he'd tell me the simple stories that stirred his imagination — about a bottle of wine he'd drunk the previous summer at Belaya Tserkov, about how he'd seen Skobelev himself,* so close in fact 'as that hedge right there', at Plevna, about an amazing American threshing machine powered by a lightning rod. Old man Nechipor was, as they said on the island, 'a simple man' — a liar and a gasbag. He read the psalms all day and throughout the following night, picking wax off the sides of the candles with his black fingernails, falling asleep where he stood, snorting himself awake, and then carrying on with his mumbled prayers.

That night someone on the other side of the river began yelling and waving a lantern. I went to the riverbank with Uncle Ilko. The river was raging. The water raced over the causeway in an icy cascade. It was late and dark, not a single star shone over our heads. The wind blew the raw freshness of the flood and thawing earth into our faces. And the whole time someone on the far bank kept shouting and waving a lantern, but not a word could be made out over the noise of the river.

'That must be Mama,' I said to Uncle Ilko, but he did not respond.

'Let's go,' he said, and then was quiet. 'It's cold out here on the banks. You'll catch cold.'

I didn't want to go back to the house. Uncle Ilko was silent for a while and then left, but I stayed and kept watching the lantern in the distance. The wind blew ever stronger, bending the poplars, and carrying the slightly sweet smoke of burning straw from somewhere far off. We buried Father in the morning. Nechipor and Uncle Ilko dug a grave in the grove on the edge of the ravine. From there one could make out the woods beyond the Ros in the distance and the whitish March sky. We carried the coffin from the house on wide, embroidered straps. The priest walked in front. He looked straight ahead with his calm, grey eyes and murmured Latin prayers.

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* Mikhail Skobelev (1843–82), famous Russian general and victor of the Siege of Plevna (1877) against the Ottoman Turks.

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Once we got the coffin out onto the steps, I caught sight on the far side of the river of an old carriage with some untethered horses and a small woman in black — Mama. She was standing motionless on the riverbank. She saw that we were carrying Father from the house. She dropped to her knees and her head fell to the ground. The tall, gaunt driver went up and leaned over her. He said something, but she just lay there, not moving. Then she jumped up and began running along the bank towards the causeway. The driver grabbed her. She sank helplessly to the ground and covered her face with her hands.

We carried Father along the road to the grave. At the bend, I turned to look. Mama was still sitting with her face buried in her hands. We were all silent, but Bregman kept slapping his whip against the side of his boot. By the graveside the priest lifted his eyes to the cold sky and then said clearly and slowly in Latin: '*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis*!' Grant unto him eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

Then the priest fell silent and listened. The river roared and overhead the tomtits called to each other in the branches of the old elms. The priest sighed and began to speak again about man's eternal longing for happiness and the valley of tears. These words were remarkably fitting for my father's life. They made my heart ache. Ever since I have often felt that same pain when confronting this thirst for happiness and the imperfection of human relations. The river kept on roaring, the birds whistled cautiously, and as the coffin was slowly lowered on its straps into the grave it knocked loose clods of damp earth. I was then seventeen.

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# 2
# *My Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich*

I remained at Gorodishche for a few days after my father's funeral. Only the following day, after the water had gone down, could my mother cross the causeway. Mother looked haggard, her face dark, and though she had stopped crying, still she sat for hours at Father's grave. It was too early for fresh flowers, so we'd decorated the grave with paper peonies. Girls from the neighbouring village had made them. They loved to braid these peonies into their hair together with silk ribbons of various colours.

Aunt Dozia tried to comfort and distract me. She dragged a trunk filled with old things out of the store room. The lid made a loud creak. Inside I found a yellowed hetman charter in Latin, a copper seal with a coat of arms, a St George's medal from the Turkish War, a book of dream interpretations, a few smoked-out pipes and some incredibly fine black lace.

The charter and seal had remained in our family since the time of Hetman Sahaidachny, a distant ancestor. My father had laughed about our 'hetman origins' and loved to say that our grandfathers and great-grandfathers had tilled the soil and been the most ordinary and long-suffering of peasants, even though they believed themselves to be the descendants of Zaporozhian Cossacks. When the Zaporozhian Sich* was disbanded by Catherine the Great, some

* The Zaporozhian Sich, a loose, semi-autonomous political structure created by Cossacks on the lower reaches of the river Dnieper, lasted for several hundred years until it was absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1775.

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of the Cossacks settled on the banks of the Ros, near Belaya Tserkov. The Cossacks reluctantly became farmers. Their wild past continued to simmer in their blood for a long time. Even I, born at the end of the nineteenth century, heard the old-timers' tales of the bloody battles with the Poles, campaigns against the Turks, the 'Uman Slaughter' and the Chyhyryn Hetman.

Having filled ourselves with these stories, my brothers and I would fight our own Zaporozhian battles. We'd play in the ravine behind the farm, out by the fence that was densely overgrown with thistles. In the heat their red flowers and prickly leaves gave off a sickly sweet smell. The clouds would hover in the sky over the ravine — lazy and puffy, true Ukrainian clouds. So powerful are childhood impressions that ever since those days every battle against the Poles and Turks is linked in my imagination with that wild field, overgrown with thistles, and its dusty, intoxicating aroma. And the thistle flowers themselves reminded me of clots of Cossack blood.

With the years the Zaporozhians' hot-bloodedness cooled. During my childhood it was only evident in the ruinous lawsuits that went on for years against Countess Branitskaya over every little piece of land, in the persistent poaching, and in the Cossack folk songs. Our grandfather Maxim Grigorievich would tell them to us, his grandchildren.

Small, grey-haired, with kind dull eyes, he lived every summer with his beehives out beyond the meadow to avoid the wrathful nature of my Turkish grandmother. Long ago my grandfather had been an oxcart driver. He had gone as far as Perekop and Armyansk for salt and dried fish. It was from him I first heard that somewhere beyond the light blue and golden steppes around Yekaterinoslav and Kherson lay the heavenly land of Crimea. Before becoming a driver he had served in Nicholas's army, fought in the Turkish War, been captured and then returned from the town of Kazanlak in Thrace with a wife — a beautiful Turkish woman. Her name was Fatma. Upon marrying my grandfather, she adopted Christianity and a new name: Honorata.

We feared our Turkish grandmother no less than our grandfather did, and we tried to stay out of her sight. Sitting among

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the yellow pumpkin blossoms near his hut, Grandfather would sing in his trembling tenor the old Cossack songs and the ballads of the oxcart drivers or tell us all sorts of stories. I loved the drivers' songs for their plaintive spirit. You could sing such songs for hours on end to the squeaking wheels, lying on your cart, staring at the heavens. The Cossack songs always evoked a strange sadness. To me they sounded either like the cry of captives in Turkish chains or valiant battle hymns to be sung to the sound of horses' hooves.

Our favourite of Grandfather's stories was the tale of Ostap the lyrist. I don't know whether you've ever seen a Ukrainian lyre. Now you can probably only find them in museums, but in those days you would see blind lyre players not only at small-town markets but even in Kiev itself. They'd walk with their hand on the shoulder of their guide, a barefoot boy in a sackcloth shirt. On their backs they'd carry a canvas sack with bread, onions and salt in a clean rag, and a lyre hung across their chests. It looked like a violin, but had a handle attached to it and a wooden rod with a small wheel. The lyre player would turn the handle round and round, the wheel would spin, rubbing against the strings that would vibrate in different keys, as if he were being accompanied by a swarm of friendly bumblebees buzzing around him.

The lyrists almost never sang. Rather, they performed their folk songs, ballads and psalms in a sing-song recitative. Then they stopped and would listen to the buzzing sound of the lyre as it slowly died away, after which, looking about with their unseeing eyes, they begged for alms. They didn't beg like most paupers. I recall one lyre player in Cherkassy. 'Toss us, a poor blind man and his little boy, a half-kopeck,' he'd say, 'for without him the blind man will lose his way and won't find the path to God's Kingdom when the time comes.'

I can't recall a single market without a lyre player. He'd sit leaning up against a dusty poplar. Compassionate women would crowd around and sigh as they dropped their greenish copper coins in his wooden bowl. The image of the lyre players has remained forever linked for me with the memory of the Ukrainian markets — markets held early in the morning, when the dew still glistens on the

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grass, cold shadows lie across the dusty roads, and bluish smoke wafts over the earth, already lit by the sun.

Misty stoneware jugs of ice-cold milk, wet marigolds in pails of water, pots of buckwheat honey, hot cheesecakes with raisins, sieves with cherries, the smell of sea roach, the languid ringing of church bells, the impetuous haggling of the market women, the lacy parasols of the young provincial ladies of fashion, and the sudden bang of a copper kettle carried on the shoulders of some Romanian with wild eyes — every old man considered it his duty to knock on the kettle with the handle of his whip to see whether Romanian copper really was any good.

I know the story of Ostap the lyrist practically by heart. 'It happened in the village of Zamoshye near the town of Vasilkov,' Grandfather told us. 'Ostap was the village blacksmith. His smithy was at the edge of the village under some dark, brooding willows overhanging the river. Ostap could make anything — horseshoes, nails, axles for oxcarts. One summer evening Ostap was stoking the coals in his smithy when a thunderstorm broke, scattering leaves into the puddles and blowing down an old willow. Ostap stoked the coals and suddenly he heard the heavy pounding of horses' hooves coming to a stop by his forge. A voice — young and female — called the blacksmith.

'Ostap went out and froze — at the very doors of the smithy pranced a black steed, and on it sat a woman of heavenly beauty, in a black velvet dress, with a switch, and a veil over her face. Her eyes were laughing behind the veil. Her teeth were laughing too. The velvet of her dress was soft and dark, and upon it sparkled raindrops that had fallen onto the woman from the dark willows after the rain. And next to her on another steed sat a young officer. At the time a regiment of uhlans was quartered at Vasilkov.

'"My dear blacksmith," said the woman, "shoe my horse, he's lost a shoe. The road is terribly slippery after the storm."

'The woman got down from the saddle and sat on a log, and Ostap began to shoe the horse. As he worked, he couldn't stop stealing glances at the woman, and then suddenly she became agitated, threw off her veil and returned Ostap's glances.

'"I've never met you before," Ostap said to her. "Maybe you're not from around here?"

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'"I am from St Petersburg," answered the woman. "You're very good at your work."

'"Shoeing a horse is nothing!" Ostap said to her softly. "I can forge something out of iron for you finer than anything any empress has."

'"What sort of thing?" the woman asked.

'"Whatever you want. Well, for example, I can make you the most delicate rose with leaves and thorns."

'"Wonderful!" replied the woman just as softly. "Thank you, blacksmith. I shall come for it in a week."

'Ostap helped her back up into the saddle. She gave him a gloved hand to steady herself, and Ostap was overcome by emotion. He clung to her hand fervently. Before she could pull her hand away, the officer struck Ostap across the face with his switch and yelled: "Know your place, peasant!"

'The horses reared and galloped off. Ostap grabbed his hammer to throw at the officer but had to put it down. So much blood was running down his face that he couldn't see a thing. The officer had injured one of his eyes. But Ostap didn't let this stop him, and he worked on the rose for six days. Various people came to see it and they all agreed that even in the land of Italy you couldn't find such craftsmanship. On the night of the seventh day, someone quietly rode up to the smithy, dismounted and tied their horse to the fence. Ostap was afraid to go out or to even show his face — he covered his eyes with his hands and waited. He heard light footsteps and breathing, and someone's warm arms embraced him, and a single warm tear fell on his shoulders.

'"I know, I know everything," the woman said. "My heart has been aching these past days. Forgive me, Ostap. I am the cause of your great misfortune. I've driven my fiancé away and am now leaving for St Petersburg."

'"But why?" Ostap asked.

'"My dear, my love," said the woman, "no matter what, people will never let us live in peace."

'"As you wish," Ostap replied. "I'm a simple man, a blacksmith. Just thinking of you brings me joy."

'The woman took the rose, kissed Ostap and slowly rode off. Ostap went to his door, watched her go and listened. Twice the woman

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stopped her horse. Twice she wanted to turn round and go back. But she did not. The stars in the sky danced over the valleys and fell upon the steppe, as if the night sky itself were weeping over their love. So it was, my boy!'

Grandfather always fell silent at this point in the story. I sat afraid to move. Then I'd ask in a whisper: 'And they never saw each other again?'

'No,' Grandfather would answer. 'That's right, never again. Ostap began to lose his sight. He thought about going all the way to St Petersburg to see this woman before going blind. And he did walk all the way to the tsar's capital, only to learn that she had died — possibly because she couldn't bear their separation. Ostap found her tombstone of white marble in a graveyard there. He looked and then his heart broke — on the marble lay his iron rose. The woman had instructed that it be placed on her grave. Ostap took up the lyre and most likely died out on the high road or perhaps under his cart in some market town. Amen!'

Listening to Grandfather's story, Ryabchik, a shaggy dog with burrs stuck to his muzzle, yawned loudly. I gave him an angry nudge in the side, but far from taking offence, Ryabchik nuzzled up looking to be patted and licking me with his hot tongue. Ryabchik had only a few broken teeth left in his mouth. Last autumn, as we were leaving Gorodishche, he bit down on one of the wheels — he wanted to stop our carriage — and broke all his teeth.

Oh, Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich! I owe some of my excessive impressionability and romanticism to him. They turned my youth into a series of collisions with reality. This caused me suffering, but still I knew my grandfather was right, and that a life based on soberness and common sense might be good for others, but for me would be burdensome and fruitless. 'One man's meat is another man's poison,' Grandfather liked to say. Maybe that's why my grandfather could not get along with my grandmother or, more accurately, hid from her. Her Turkish blood did not give her one attractive trait, except for her beautiful yet formidable physical appearance.

My grandmother was a tyrant and a nag. She smoked at least a pound of the strongest tobacco a day in her small, scorching-hot pipes. She ran the household, and her black eyes noticed the

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slightest disorder in the house. On holidays she'd put on a satin dress fringed with black lace, go out and sit on the small earthen mound by the house, smoke her pipe, and watch the rapid waters of the Ros. Now and then, deep in thought, she'd let out a loud laugh, but no one ever dared to ask what she was laughing at.

The only thing we liked about her was a hard, pink bar that looked like soap. She kept it hidden in her chest of drawers. Once in a while she'd proudly take it out and let us smell it. The bar gave off the faintest smell of roses. My father told me that a valley near Kazanlak, Grandmother's hometown, was called the 'Valley of Roses', and that this miraculous bar was impregnated with attar of roses from there. A Valley of Roses! The words alone stirred my imagination. I could not understand how such poetic places could produce a soul as stern as my grandmother.

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# 3
# *Carp*

Stuck in Gorodishche after the death of my father, I recalled my early childhood, those times when we, happy and carefree, would come to stay for the summer from Kiev. Mother and Father were young then, and Grandfather and his Turkish wife were still alive. I was still just a little boy and loved to make up all kinds of fanciful tales.

The train from Kiev arrived in Belaya Tserkov in the evening. Father hurried out into the station square to hire one of the garrulous drivers. We reached Gorodishche in the middle of the night. Half asleep I heard the tiresome jangling of the springs, then the noise of the water near the mill, and the barking of dogs. The horses snorted. The wattle fences creaked softly. The endless stars shone in the sky, and out of the damp darkness came the smell of weeds. Aunt Dozia carried me, half asleep, into the warm cottage with its coloured rugs spread out over the floor. The cottage smelled of warm milk. I opened my eyes for a moment and saw in front of me the rich embroidery on Aunt Dozia's snow-white sleeves.

The hot sun beating against the white walls woke me in the morning. Red and yellow hollyhocks swayed outside the open window. A nasturtium peeped inside the room; a furry bee had crawled into the flower and become stuck. I froze and watched as it angrily struggled to back its way out and fly off. Soft, bright waves of light reflected from the river rippled endlessly across the ceiling. The river rushed noisily nearby. Then I heard funny Uncle Ilko's voice: 'Well,

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as usual, the sun's barely up, but the parade's already begun! Dozia, put the cakes and the cherry brandy on the table!'

I jumped out of bed and ran barefoot to the window. A line of old men in large straw hats, tapping the ground with their knotty sticks, the medals on their brown tunics clanking and glistening in the sun, was slowly making its way over the causeway from the other side of the river. These venerable elders from the neighbouring village of Pilipchi had come to welcome us upon our successful arrival. Leading the way with the copper badge of his office hanging from his neck was the pock-marked Mayor Trofim.

The cottage sprang to life. Aunt Dozia tossed a cloth over the table, sending a rush of air through the room. Mama hurriedly piled cakes on the plates and sliced sausage. Father pulled the corks from the bottles of homemade cherry brandy, while Uncle Ilko set out the sturdy glass tumblers. Then Aunt Dozia and Mama ran off to change and Father and Uncle Ilko went out onto the porch to meet the elders who were approaching, as solemnly and inevitably as fate itself.

At last the elders arrived, and, after silently exchanging kisses with my father and uncle, they sat down on the low stone ledge amid a chorus of heavy sighs. Then Mayor Trofim, once he had cleared his throat, uttered his traditional greeting: 'I have the distinct honour of welcoming you, Georgy Maximovich, most respectfully to our quiet corner of the country.'

'Thank you!' said my father.

'Yes-s-s!' the elders replied immediately, sighing with relief. 'Yes, of course, as it should be.'

'Yes-s-s!' repeated Trofim, peering through the window at the sparkling bottles on the table.

'That's the way it is,' added an old soldier from the era of Tsar Nicholas I with a crooked nose.

'Quite naturally,' chimed in a small, curious old man by the name of Nedolya. He was the father of twelve daughters, but in his old age he had forgotten most of their names and could only remember five of them by counting on his fingers: *Hannah, Parasya, Gorpyna, Olesya, Frosya …* And then here the old man would get confused and have to start all over again.

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'Yes, indeed!' the elders said and then fell silent for a time.

At this point Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich came out of the cottage. The elders got up and bowed down low. Grandfather bowed in return. After yet another round of loud sighs, the old men sat back down, grunted and stared silently at the ground. Finally, Uncle Ilko, having read some mysterious signs imperceptible to the rest of us that the meal was now ready, said: 'Well, my good men, thank you for this conversation. And now let us partake of what God has provided us.'

Mama, in a fine summer dress, greeted the men inside. Each of them kissed her hand, and, as was the custom, she kissed theirs, wrinkled and brown, in return. Beautiful Aunt Dozia, rosy-cheeked and prematurely grey, wearing a blue dress and a shawl embroidered with crimson flowers, bowed at the waist.

After the first glass of the syrupy cherry brandy, Nedolya, tortured with curiosity, began asking his questions. He was bewildered by the things we had brought with us from Kiev and, pointing at each one, asked: 'What's this here? What's it for? What do you say it's called?'

Father then explained to him — this here is a brass steam iron, and this is an ice cream maker, and over there on the commode, that's a folding mirror.

Nedolya shook his head with amazement: 'There's a tool for everything!'

'Yes, of course, so there is!' the elders agreed as they drank up.

Summer came into its own at Gorodishche — hot summers with terrifying thunderstorms, rustling trees, currents of cool river water, fishing outings, blackberry picking, and the sweet sensation of carefree days filled with surprises.

The island on which Grandfather had built his cottage was, of course, the most mysterious place in the world. There were two large, deep ponds behind the house. Their dark waters and the surrounding old willows gave the place a gloomy feel. On the hill beyond the ponds stood an impenetrable tangle of nut trees. Beyond the trees stretched several meadows filled with flowers up to your waist whose fragrance on a sultry day was enough to give you a headache. Past the meadows a thin trail of smoke rose from

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Grandfather's crude hut by the beehives. And beyond the hut lay unexplored lands — rocky hills of red granite covered in creeping vines and wild strawberries. There were small pools of rainwater amid the rocky hollows. Little wagtails, shaking their bright feathers, drank the warm water in these pools. Cheeky bumblebees, having clumsily splashed down into the water, spun around and buzzed, vainly calling for help.

The rocks ended in a steep cliff above the Ros. We were forbidden from going this far, but once in a while we crawled out to the edge of the cliff and looked down. The sight of the torrent of clear water rushing down the Ros made our heads spin. Just below the surface of the water, skinny fish, struggling against the current, slowly made their way upstream.

Spread out along a slope on the far side of the river was the forest preserve of Countess Branitskaya. The green forest was so thick the sun could not penetrate it. It was rare when a ray of sunlight managed to break through the trees to reveal the amazing forest depths. Little birds darted into the beam like twinkling dust motes. They chirped as they chased each other and then dived into the leaves as if into green water.

But the ponds were my favourite place to visit.

Father went there to fish every morning, and he took me with him. We went out very early, moving slowly through the heavy, wet grass. Catching the first light of day, the willow branches shone like tranquil slivers of gold amid the dark, as yet nocturnal foliage. The carp splashed, disturbing the quiet water. Clumps of water lilies, knotweed and arrowhead hung as though suspended somehow above a black abyss.

This mysterious world of water and weeds opened itself before me. I was so enchanted by this world that I could have sat on the banks from sunrise to sunset.

Father would silently cast his line and light a cigarette. The smoke drifted over the water and wound through the rushes. I gathered a pail of water from the pond, threw in a handful of weeds, and waited. Red floats rested motionless on the surface of the water. Then one of them would begin to tilt, creating slight ripples, before either diving to the bottom or shooting to one side. Father hooked

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a fish, the line tightened, the wooden rod bowed into an arc and then a thrashing, splashing row erupted in the haze over the pond. The ripples rocked the lilies and sent the pond skaters scuttling in all directions, and then, finally, out of the mysterious depths there appeared a quivering streak of gold. It was impossible to know just what it was until Father landed the heavy carp on the trampled grass. It lay on its side gasping for air and moving its fins. The carp's scales smelled of a wondrous, underwater realm.

I dropped the fish in the pail. It thrashed about among the weeds, smacking its tail all of a sudden and splashing me with water. I licked the water from my lips and felt a deep urge to drink from the pail, but Father wouldn't let me.

It seemed to me that the water in the pail with the carp and the weeds tasted as delicious and refreshing as rainwater. We little boys loved to drink rainwater and we believed it could make you live to the age of one hundred and twenty. At least that's what Nechipor always said.

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# 4
# *Pleurisy*

Thunderstorms at Gorodishche were common. They began on the peasant festival of Ivan Kupala and lasted all July. They besieged the island with enormous multi-coloured clouds, which flashed and crashed, shaking the house and frightening Aunt Dozia half to death.

These storms are connected with the memory of my first childhood love affair. I was nine years old at the time. On the festival of Ivan Kupala the girls from Pilipchi arrived on the island in their finest dresses like a brightly feathered flock of birds to float wreaths down the river. They wove the wreaths out of wild flowers. In the centre of each wreath, they affixed a wooden crosspiece which held a wax candle-end. The girls lit the candles at dusk and then released the wreaths into the river. The candles told the girls' fortunes — the one whose candle was the last to go out would know the most happiness. But the most fortunate of all were the girls whose wreaths drifted into the whirlpool and slowly spun around and around in the eddy just before the rapids. The air here was still and the flame would burn with unusual intensity such that you could even hear the wick crackle from the banks.

Everyone — children and grown-ups — loved these wreaths on Ivan Kupala Day. Nechipor alone grunted dismissively and liked to say: 'Bunch of nonsense! Those wreaths are pointless!'

Hannah, a distant cousin, came with the girls. She was sixteen. She braided orange and black ribbons in her thick reddish plaits.

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Around her neck hung a necklace of dull coral. Hannah had sparkling, greenish eyes. Every time Hannah smiled, she lowered her eyes and then raised them slowly as if they were too heavy to lift. Her cheeks were always burning red. I used to hear Mama and Aunt Dozia speaking of Hannah with pity. I wanted to know why, but they always fell silent as soon as I approached.

One Ivan Kupala Day I went down to the river with Hannah to see the girls. On the way she asked: 'Kostik, what are you going to be when you grow up?'

'A sailor,' I answered.

'Oh no, don't do that!' said Hannah. 'Sailors drown out at sea. Someone will then cry their eyes out over you.'

I didn't pay any attention to what Hannah said. I held her hot, suntanned hand in mine and told her about my first trip to the sea.

Early that spring my father had taken me with him to Novorossiisk on a three-day business trip. The sea appeared to be far off, like a blue wall. For a long time I couldn't tell what it was. Then I caught sight of the green bay and the lighthouse and heard the sound of the breakers, and the sea filled me like the memory of a confused but magnificent dream. Two black battleships with yellow funnels sat anchored in the harbour: the *Twelve Apostles* and the *Three Bishops*. My father and I visited the ships. I was amazed by the sunburned officers, with their white uniforms and gold-hilted daggers, and by the oily warmth of the engine room. But I was most amazed by my father. I had never seen him like this before. He laughed, he joked and he carried on lively conversations with the officers. We even visited one of the ship's engineers in his cabin. The two men drank cognac together and smoked pink Turkish cigarettes with gold Arabic lettering on them.

Hannah listened with her head lowered. For some reason I felt bad for her, and I said that when I became a sailor, I would immediately take her with me aboard my ship.

'As what?' Hannah asked. 'The ship's cook or the laundress?'

'No!' I answered, fired by my schoolboy enthusiasm. 'You'll be my wife.'

Hannah stopped and looked me square in the eyes. 'Promise!' she whispered. 'Swear on it in your mother's name!'

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'I swear!' I answered, not even thinking what I was saying.

Hannah smiled, her eyes turned as green as seawater, and she gave me a big kiss on the forehead. Her lips were hot. Neither of us said a word the rest of the way to the river.

Hannah's candle was the first to go out. A massive dark storm cloud had appeared over Countess Branitskaya's forest, but, distracted by the wreaths, we did not notice it until the wind struck, thrashing the reeds and bending them to the ground, and the first flash of lightning lit the sky in a blinding explosion of thunder. The girls ran screaming into the woods. Hannah tore the shawl from her shoulders, wrapped it around me, grabbed my hand, and off we ran. She dragged me behind her, but the downpour was catching up with us and I knew there was no way we'd ever make it home in time.

The downpour hit us near Grandfather's hut. We were soaked through by the time we got there. Grandfather wasn't there. We sat in the hut, clinging to each other. Hannah dried my hands. She smelled of damp calico. She kept asking in a frightened voice: 'Are you cold? Oh, what will I do if you get sick?'

I was shivering. I truly was cold. The look in Hannah's eyes went from fear, to despair, to love. She clutched her throat and began coughing. I saw a vein on her neck bulge beneath her smooth, clear skin. I flung my arms around Hannah and buried my head in her wet shoulder. All of a sudden, I wished that my mother were as young and kind as Hannah.

'What's wrong?' she asked, confused and still coughing as she stroked my head. 'What is it? Don't be frightened … The thunder can't hurt us. I'm right here. Don't be frightened.'

Then she gently pushed me away and pressed her mouth to her sleeve, which was embroidered with red oak leaves. When she took her mouth away, I saw a small patch of blood, similar in shape to those leaves, splattered on her sleeve.

'I don't need your oath!' she whispered, looking up at me with a guilty smile. 'I was only kidding.'

The thunder had moved off. The downpour had passed. There was nothing now but the sound of rain dripping from the trees. That night, I caught a fever. The next day young Dr Napelbaum rode out on his bicycle from Belaya Tserkov. He examined me and said

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I had pleurisy. Napelbaum left us to see Hannah in Pilipchi. When he returned, I overheard him talking in a low voice to my mother in the next room: 'Maria Grigorievna, the girl has galloping consumption. She'll be dead by spring.'

I burst into tears and shouted for Mama. I threw my arms around her, and at that moment I noticed she had the same sweet vein as Hannah. Then I cried even harder and for a long time couldn't stop. Mama stroked my head and said: 'What is it? I'm right here. Don't be frightened.'

I got better, but Hannah died that winter, in February.

Mama and I went to visit her grave the following summer. I placed a bunch of daisies tied with a black ribbon on the small grassy mound. Hannah used to tuck daisies into her plaits. For some reason I felt uncomfortable standing there next to Mama with her red parasol. I should have come alone.

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5

# *A Trip to Chenstokhov*

My other grandmother, Vikentia Ivanovna, a tall, old Polish woman, lived in Cherkassy on the river Dnieper. She had many daughters, my aunts. One of these aunts, Yevfrosinia Grigorievna, was the headmistress of a girls' school in Cherkassy. My grandmother lived with this aunt in a large wooden house. Vikentia Ivanovna always went around in mourning and a headdress. She first began to wear mourning clothes after the suppression of the Polish Rebellion of 1863 and from that day on never took them off. We were convinced that during the rebellion Grandmother's fiancé had been killed. He must have been a proud Polish revolutionary, not at all like Grandmother's morose husband, our grandfather, a retired notary public in Cherkassy.

I remember my grandfather poorly. He lived on a small mezzanine and rarely came downstairs. Grandmother sent him off to live there away from all the others given his intolerable smoking habit. Once in a while we'd go and visit him in his room, smelly and dense with smoke. On the table were great piles of tobacco that had spilled out of various pouches. Our grandfather, seated in his chair, would roll cigarette after cigarette with his shaking, gnarled hands. He didn't talk to us but would ruffle the hair on the back of our heads and give us the shiny purple paper off his tobacco pouches.

We often came to visit Vikentia Ivanovna from Kiev. She had one strict habit. Every spring during Lent she undertook a pilgrimage to Catholic holy sites either in Warsaw, Vilnius or Chenstokhov.

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Sometimes she took it into her head to visit Orthodox shrines and would go to the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergius or to Pochaev. Her sons and daughters all laughed at her and said that if she kept this up, Vikentia Ivanovna would start paying visits to Jewish *tsaddiks* and end her days with a pilgrimage to Mohammed's tomb in Mecca.

The biggest argument my father ever had with my grandmother was when she used the occasion of his travelling to Vienna for a convention of statisticians to take me with her on one of these religious journeys. I was happy to go and did not understand my father's indignation. I was eight at the time. I remember the bright spring air in Vilnius and the chapel at the 'Gate of Dawn' where grandmother went to Mass. The whole town glistened with the pale green and goldish brilliance of the new leaves. At noon a cannon from the Napoleonic era fired a salute from atop Castle Hill.

Grandmother was an extremely well-read woman, and she was forever explaining things to me. She had a remarkable way of combining her religiosity with progressive ideas. She was infatuated with Herzen and at the same time with Henryk Sienkiewicz.* In her bedroom portraits of Pushkin and Mickiewicz hung side-by-side with an icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov. During the pogroms of the revolution of 1905, she hid revolutionary students and Jews in her home.

From Vilnius we left for Warsaw. I only recall the Copernicus monument and the cafés where grandmother treated me to 'upside-down-coffee' — more milk than coffee. She also treated me to meringues, which melted in my mouth with creamy cool sweetness. We were served by fidgety waitresses in pleated aprons. From Warsaw we travelled on to Chenstokhov and the famous Catholic monastery of Jasna Góra with its 'miracle-working' Black Madonna icon. This was my first encounter with religious fanaticism. It shocked and frightened me. Ever since I have been filled with fear and revulsion for fanaticism. For a long time, I could not lose the fear I felt that day.

Our train arrived in Chenstokhov early in the morning. It was far from the station to the monastery, which stood on a large green

* Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846—1916), Polish novelist and journalist, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1905).

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hill. The pilgrims — Polish peasants, men and women — exited the train, along with some city dwellers, all in sooty bowler hats. A portly old priest and some young deacons in lacy garments were waiting for the pilgrims at the station. The procession of pilgrims gathered on the dusty road in front of the station. The priest blessed them and muttered a prayer. The crowd dropped to its knees and began to crawl towards the monastery, chanting psalms as they went.

The throng crawled all the way to the cathedral. Taking the lead was a grey-haired woman with a white, ecstatic face. In her hand she held a black wooden crucifix. Ahead of them all the priest walked slowly and indifferently. It was hot and dusty, sweat was running down their faces. They panted and wheezed and shot reproachful glances at the pilgrims who were falling behind. I grabbed my grandmother by the hand.

'Why are they doing this?' I whispered.

'Don't be afraid,' Grandmother answered in Polish. 'They're penitents seeking forgiveness for their sins from Our Lord God.'

'Let's leave,' I said to my grandmother, but she pretended not to hear me.

The monastery at Chenstokhov was a medieval castle. Rusty Swedish cannonballs were embedded in its walls, and mucky green water filled the moats. Large, thick trees rustled on the ramparts. The drawbridges had been lowered on their metal chains. We drove across one of them in a droshky into a tangle of courtyards, back streets and alleyways. A lay brother, a cord around his waist, led us to the monastery hotel. We were shown to a cold room with a vaulted ceiling. The inevitable crucifix hung on the wall. Someone had affixed a garland of paper flowers to the nails on Christ's brass feet. The monk asked my grandmother whether she didn't happen to be suffering from any illnesses requiring a cure. Grandmother had always been quite anxious about her health, and she immediately complained to him of heart pains. From the pocket of his brown habit the monk took out a handful of small silver hearts, arms, heads and even tiny babies and poured them in a heap on the table.

'We have hearts', he said, 'for five, ten and twenty roubles. They have already been blessed. All you have to do is say a prayer and hang them on the icon of Our Lady.'

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Grandmother bought a small plump heart for ten roubles. She told me that we were going to go to Solemn Mass that night at the monastery church, treated me to tea and stale buns from Warsaw, and then lay down to rest. She quickly fell asleep. I looked out of the small window. A monk in a magnificent but faded habit walked past. Then two Polish peasants sat down in the shadow of the wall, took some plain bread and garlic out of their bundles, and began to eat. They had blue eyes and big, strong teeth.

I got bored, so I quietly went out into the street. My grandmother had instructed me not to speak Russian inside the monastery. This scared me since I only knew a few words of Polish. I got lost and ended up in a narrow passage between two walls. The ground was covered with cracked tiles, out of which grew a single plantain. There were cast-iron lanterns along the walls that had not been lit in a long time — I spied a bird's nest in one of them. A narrow gate in one of the walls stood half open. I looked inside. An apple orchard, bathed in pools of sunlight, stretched out across the slope of a hill. I hesitated and then went inside. The orchard was shedding its blossoms. Yellowed petals were falling. A faint but melodic ringing came from the church belfry.

A young Polish peasant sat nursing her infant under an old apple tree. The baby wrinkled his face and wheezed. Next to the woman stood a pale, puffy peasant youth in a new felt hat. A blue satin ribbon had been sewn to the hat and a peacock feather stuck into it. The young lad stared down at his feet with big round eyes and did not move. A short, bald-headed monk with gardening shears in his hand sat down on a tree stump across from the woman. He fixed his eyes on me and said, 'Praised be Our Lord Jesus Christ!'

'For ever and ever!' I replied, just as my grandmother had taught me. My heart stopped from fright.

The monk turned around and began listening to the woman. Strands of her blond hair kept falling in her face, and she was brushing them back gently and complaining: 'When our son was four months old, Michaś shot a stork and brought it into our little house. I cried and said: "What've you done, you fool? Don't you know that for every stork that's killed, God takes a baby? Why'd you shoot it, Michaś?"'

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The youth in the felt hat went on staring at the ground.

'And since that day,' she continued, 'our dear son has gone blue in the face and has trouble breathing. Will Our Lady help him?'

The monk looked away awkwardly and said nothing.

'Oh, what misery!' said the woman and began clawing at her throat, 'Oh, what misery!' she wailed, pressing the baby to her breast.

The baby wheezed and its eyes bulged. I remembered the toy silver babies that the lay brother had shown Grandmother back at the hotel. I felt sorry for the woman. I wanted to tell her to buy one of those babies for twenty roubles and hang it on the icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov, but I didn't know enough Polish to give her this complicated piece of advice. What's more, I was afraid of the monk, and so I left the orchard. When I got back, Grandmother was still sleeping. I lay down on the hard bed without taking off my clothes and fell fast asleep. Grandmother woke me in the middle of the night. I washed with cold water in a large faience hand-basin. The shock of the water made me shiver. Outside our windows hand-held lanterns floated by, feet shuffled and the bells called.

'The cardinal is holding Mass tonight,' Grandmother said. 'He's the papal nuncio.'

It was difficult to find our way in the dark, but eventually we reached the church. 'Hold onto me,' said Grandmother in the unlit vestibule. We groped our way into the church. I couldn't see a thing. There wasn't a single candle, not the faintest glint of light amid the close gloom entombed within the high church walls. In this utter darkness I could hear the breathing of hundreds of people; there was the slightly sweet smell of flowers. I felt the worn iron floor underfoot, took a step, and immediately bumped into something.

'Be still!' Grandmother whispered. 'There are people lying on the floor. You'll step on them.' She began to say a prayer, and I stood waiting, holding onto her elbow. I was terrified. The people on the floor lay with their arms stretched out in the shape of the cross and were breathing softly. The air was filled with a doleful rustling.

Suddenly, the organ thundered to life, piercing the heavy darkness and shaking the walls. At that very moment hundreds of candles burst into flame. I screamed, blinded and frightened. The large gold curtain covering the icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov slowly

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began to part. Six old priests in lacy vestments knelt before the icon with their backs to the crowd, their arms raised up to the heavens. Only the bony cardinal, in his purple cassock with its wide violet sash drawn up about his thin waist, was standing upright, also with his back to the praying crowd, as if listening to the dying storm of the organ and the sobs of the throng. I have never since witnessed such a theatrical or incomprehensible spectacle.

After the service Grandmother and I left and entered a long vaulted passageway. It began to grow light. People knelt in prayer along the walls. Grandmother also knelt and made me kneel too. I was afraid to ask her what these wild-eyed people were waiting for. Then the cardinal appeared at the end of the corridor. He walked swiftly with light steps in our direction. His cassock billowed as he went, brushing the faces of those kneeling in prayer. They grabbed at the edges of his cassock, kissing it with passion and humility.

'Kiss his cassock,' my grandmother hurriedly whispered. But I refused. I blanched and begrudgingly stared the cardinal in the face. There must have been tears in my eyes, for he stopped, touched me briefly on the head with a small, dry hand, and said in Polish: 'A child's tears are the best prayer to the Lord.'

I looked at him. Brown skin was stretched tightly over his pointy face, which appeared to be lit by a dim glow. His black eyes narrowed and focused on me expectantly. I remained stubbornly silent. The cardinal turned round sharply and swept on as lightly as before, stirring the air as he went. Grandmother grabbed me by the arm with such force I nearly cried in pain and led me out of the corridor.

'Just like your father!' she said once we had reached the courtyard. 'Just like your father! Oh, dear Mother of God! Whatever is to become of you?'

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# 6
## *Pink Oleanders*

My grandmother always kept oleanders in green tubs on the verandah of her home in Cherkassy. They had pink petals. I liked their greyish leaves and pale flowers very much. For some reason I associated them with the sea — a distant, warm sea bathing the shores of a land that blossomed with oleanders. Grandmother had a way with flowers. Her bedroom in the winter months was always overflowing with fuchsias. In the summer the garden exploded with flowers, taking on the appearance of a giant bouquet, and burdock crowded the fences. The scent of all those flowers made its way inside to Grandfather's room on the mezzanine and drove out the tobacco fug. Grandfather would angrily slam the windows shut. He liked to say that the flowers aggravated his chronic asthma.

At the time I imagined the flowers to be living beings. Mignonette was a poor girl in a darned, grey dress, but her remarkable scent gave away her fairytale lineage. The yellow tea-roses were young beauties who had lost their rosy cheeks from drinking too much tea. The bed with pansies looked like a masked ball. These were not flowers, but happy and playful Gypsies in black velvet masks, florid dancers — now blue, now purple, now yellow. I didn't like the daisies. With their faded pink dresses, they reminded me of the little daughters of the schoolmaster Zimmer, my grandmother's neighbour. The girls were tow-headed and had no eyebrows. Every time you met them, they would curtsy, their fingers daintily touching the edge of their skirts. The most interesting flower was, of course,

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the purslane — a creeper covered with the purest colours. Instead of leaves the purslane had soft, juicy needles. If you gave them a slight squeeze, they'd spray green juice in your face.

Grandmother's garden and all the flowers in it acted on my imagination with uncommon force. My passion for travel must have been born in that garden as well. In my childhood I used to imagine a faraway country that I was certain to visit. It was a hilly plain covered as far as the horizon with grass and flowers and hidden in among them were villages and towns. When express trains crossed the plain, thick pollen would cover the sides of the carriages. I would tell this to my brothers, sister and Mama, but no one cared to understand me. Rather, when he first heard this, my elder brother called me a 'dreamer', a contemptuous nickname that stuck.

Perhaps the only person who understood me was my Aunt Nadya, the youngest of my grandmother's daughters. She was twenty-three at the time and studying singing at the Moscow Conservatory. She had a beautiful contralto voice. She would come to Grandmother's in Cherkassy for Easter and the summer. The quiet, spacious house became noisy and crowded as soon as she arrived. Slender and graceful, with tousled fair hair and fresh lips parted ever so slightly, she played with us and rushed headlong up and down the polished floors, laughing as she went. Flecks of gold sparkled in her grey eyes. These eyes responded to everything with a laugh: to any joke, joyful word, even to Anton the tomcat, who looked upon our games disapprovingly with a most critical expression.

'It's all fun and games for Aunt Nadya!' Mama liked to say, with mild criticism. Her happy-go-lucky nature was proverbial in our family, and she was always losing things — her gloves, her powder, her money — but she never let anything upset her. We opened up the piano the day she arrived, and it remained open until Aunt Nadya left for her cheerful, hospitable Moscow. Piles of sheet music littered the chairs. The candles smoked. The piano rumbled, and sometimes at night I awoke to the sound of her deep yet delicate voice singing a barcarolle: 'Sail, my gondola, lit by the moon. Ring out, barcarolle, over the slumberous waves.'

And in the morning, I was awakened by an ingratiating voice, almost a whisper, by my ear, and Aunt Nadya's hair tickling my

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cheeks as she sang: 'It's time to get up, it's no time to slumber, your eyes closed, having abandoned yourself to your reveries. The robins have been calling for some time, and for you the roses have opened up!'

I opened my eyes, she kissed me, and then suddenly disappeared, yet a moment later I could hear how she and her brother, Uncle Kolya, a cadet, were twirling through the hall in a rushing waltz. He too sometimes came to visit my grandmother from St Petersburg for Easter. Then I would hop out of bed, sensing that the day was going to be wild, cheerful and full of surprises. When Aunt Nadya sang, even Grandfather up on the mezzanine opened his door to the stairs and would later say to my grandmother: 'Where on earth did Nadya get her Gypsy blood?'

My grandmother would assure him that Nadya's blood wasn't Gypsy, but Polish. Citing examples from literature and the early history of Poland, she showed him that Polish women were often uncontrollably cheerful, whimsical and carefree.

'Exactly!' my grandfather answered caustically and then slammed the door shut. 'Exactly!' he repeated loudly behind the closed door, sitting down to roll a cigarette.

I recall one year when Easter came late and the gardens in Cherkassy were already in bloom. We arrived by steamboat from Kiev, followed by Aunt Nadya from Moscow. I loved Easter but not the days leading up to it because I was forced to grind almonds and beat egg whites with a spoon. I found this exhausting and would quietly cry to myself. Also, Grandmother's house was thrown into disorder before Easter. Women with their skirts tucked up were busy washing the ficus plants, rhododendrons, the windows and floors, they beat the rugs and the furniture, they polished all the brass handles and fittings on the doors and windows. And they forever chased us from one room to another.

After the cleaning came the solemn rite — Grandmother made the dough for the Easter cakes or, as our family called them, 'satin cakes'. A quilt was laid over the tub filled with bubbling yellow dough, and until the dough had risen, no one was allowed to run around, slam the doors or even speak in a raised voice. A cab driving by the house filled my grandmother with horror: the slightest

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shaking could cause the dough to 'sink', and then goodbye to the tall, spongy cakes smelling of saffron and covered with sugary icing.

Along with the cakes, my grandmother also baked a number of different biscuits with raisins and almonds that we called 'mazurkas'. When the baking tins with the hot mazurkas came out of the oven, such delicious smells wafted through the house that even Grandfather in his mezzanine would get all worked up. He would open the door and peer down into the drawing room at the long marble table already covered with heavy tablecloths. With Holy Sunday, a cool cleanliness and calm finally reigned in the house. In the morning we were given a cup of weak tea with sugar and rusks, and we did not eat another thing until after matins the following day. We liked this short-lived hunger. The day seemed very long, we felt a faint ringing in our ears, and Grandmother's insistence that we stop talking so much put us in a solemn mood. At midnight we left for matins. They dressed me in long sailor's trousers and a jacket with brass buttons and brushed my hair so hard it hurt. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw a terribly excited and flushed little boy and was very pleased.

Aunt Yevfrosinia Grigorievna came out of her rooms. She was the only one who did not take part in the Easter preparations. She was always ill, spoke very little, and did nothing but gently smile at our cheerful banter. She wore a drab blue dress with a gold watch chain around her neck and a pretty bow on her shoulder. Mama explained to me that the bow was called a 'cipher' and had been awarded to Aunt Yevfrosinia Grigorievna for graduating with high honours from the institute she had once attended.

Mama wore her special grey dress, and Father his black suit and white waistcoat. Then Grandmother would make her grand appearance — beautiful and all in black silk with an artificial heliotrope pinned to her corsage. Her smooth dress rustled as she walked along so lightly — Grandmother became younger on those nights. She lit the lamps before the icons and then pulled on her black lace gloves and Father held out her mantle with its black ribbon ties.

'You're not coming to Mass, I take it?' Grandmother asked him with chilly politeness.

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'No, Vikentia Ivanovna,' Father replied with a smile. 'I think I'll lie down for a while. They'll wake me when you're back from church.'

'Oh,' said my grandmother and shook her shoulders, adjusting her mantle. 'My only hope is that God has had enough of your jokes and has given up on you as a lost cause.'

'I'm also counting on that very much,' Father answered politely.

Grandmother went upstairs for a moment to say goodbye to Grandfather. When she came back down, Aunt Nadya, who was always late, appeared in the hall. She didn't so much walk as fly, just like a petite, shimmering bird, in her white silk dress with a train and puffed sleeves. She was breathing heavily, and the yellow rose on her breast fluttered. It seemed as if all the light and joy of the world were shining in her eyes. Grandmother stopped on the stairs to put her handkerchief to her eyes. She could not hold back the tears at the sight of her youngest daughter's beauty. It was clear she thought about Aunt Nadya's fate, about what would become of her in this harsh world, and these thoughts could not keep my grandmother from crying. When we returned from church this time, Father was not asleep. He had opened the windows of the drawing room that looked out onto the garden. It was very warm.

We sat down at the table to break the fast. The night hovered all around us. The stars shone straight into our eyes. From the garden came the twittering of a bird. We spoke little and everyone listened to the rising and falling sound of the bells in the darkness. Aunt Nadya sat pale and tired. I had seen that my father had handed her a blue telegram in the entrance hall while helping her off with her cloak. She had blushed and crushed the telegram in her hand. After we had eaten, I was sent straight to bed. I awoke late to the clinking of cups in the dining room where the adults were already drinking coffee. At dinner Aunt Nadya said that she had received a telegram from her friend Liza Yavorskaya in the neighbouring town of Smela. Liza had invited Aunt Nadya to come and spend the day with her at her home near Smela.

'I want to go tomorrow,' said Aunt Nadya, looking at Grandmother, and then added: 'And take Kostik with me.' I blushed with joy.

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'All right,' Grandmother replied, 'go, but take care you don't both catch cold.'

'They're sending horses for us,' said Aunt Nadya.

It was an hour's ride on the train from Cherkassy to Smela. Liza Yavorskaya, a plump and cheerful young lady, met us at the station in Smela. In a carriage and pair we drove through the clean and pretty little town. The river Tyasmin had overflowed its banks at the foot of some steep green hills, its slow current swirling with quiet eddies that appeared silver in the light. It was hot. Dragonflies flew over the river. We drove through a lonely park outside town and Liza Yavorskaya said that Pushkin had loved to go for walks here. I couldn't believe that Pushkin had visited these places and that I was now where he had been. At that time Pushkin seemed to me to be a purely legendary being. There was no way his spectacular life could have had any connection to this Ukrainian backwater.

'The Raevskys' old estate, Kamenka, is nearby,' said Liza Yavorskaya. 'He stayed with them for a long time and wrote a marvellous poem there.'

'Which one?' asked Aunt Nadya.

'Play, know no sorrow, Adele, / For you've been crowned by the Charites and Lel, / 'Twas they who rocked your cradle so well . . .'

I did not understand what 'the Charites' or 'Lel' meant,* but the music and power of these verses, the expansive park, the ancient lime trees, and the sky with its drifting clouds — all combined to put me in a magical mood. The whole day remained in my memory as a quiet and lonely celebration of spring. Liza Yavorskaya got the carriage to stop in a broad allée. We got out and went up to a house on a path lined on either side with dog-rose. Suddenly, at a turn in the path, out popped a well-tanned, bearded man without a hat. He had a double-barrelled shotgun over his shoulder, and in his hand he carried two dead ducks. His jacket was undone, exposing his strong, brown neck. Aunt Nadya stopped, and I saw that she had gone very pale.

The tanned man broke off a large branch of dog-rose covered in small thorns, bloodying his hands, and handed it to Aunt Nadya.

* 'Lel' refers to mythical Slavic pagan goddesses of love or marriage.

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She carefully took the spiky rose and extended her hand to the old man, and he kissed it.

'Your hair reeks of gunpowder,' said Aunt Nadya. 'And your hands are all cut up. You must have the thorns removed.'

'It's nothing!' he said and smiled. He had nice, straight teeth. Now, close up, I noticed he was not an old man at all. We made our way to the house. The bearded man talked most strangely, about everything all at once — about how he had arrived from Moscow two days ago, how wonderful this place was, how the day after tomorrow he had to take his paintings to an exhibition in Venice, how he'd been bewitched by a Gypsy — a model of the artist Vrubel* — and how he was a lost soul who could be saved only by the voice of Aunt Nadya. Aunt Nadya was smiling. I watched him. I liked him very much. I guessed he was an artist. He really did smell of gunpowder. His hands were covered in pine sap. Now and then bright blood dripped from the ducks' black bills onto the path. The artist had cobwebs stuck in his thick hair, along with some pine needles and even a dry twig. Aunt Nadya took him by the arm, made him stop and pulled out the twig.

'You're hopeless!' she said. 'Just a little boy,' she added, smiling sadly.

'Try to understand,' he mumbled in a begging voice, 'it was wonderful! I forced my way through a young pine forest, and yes, I got all torn up, but what smells, what dry white pinks, what red pine needles, and what a spider's web! Such delights!'

'And that's why I love you,' Aunt Nadya said softly.

Suddenly, the artist took the gun from his shoulder and fired both barrels into the air. Bluish smoke swirled from the end of the gun. Dogs began barking and running towards us. A frightened hen could be heard squawking.

'A salute to life!' said the artist. 'It's a hell of a marvellous thing to be alive!'

We made our way to the house with the excited dogs barking around us. The house was white with columns and striped curtains

* Mikhail Vrubel (1856—1910), painter and sculptor particularly remembered for his series of 'Demon' paintings.

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covering the windows. A little old lady — Liza Yavorskaya's mother — came out to greet us in a pale mauve dress and holding a lorgnette, her hair a pile of grey curls. She screwed up her eyes and, clasping her hands, extolled Aunt Nadya's beauty at length. A breeze blew through the cool rooms, tugging at the curtains and sweeping copies of *The Russian Word* and *Kievan Thought* off the table. The dogs wandered about, sniffing here and there. All of a sudden, they heard some suspicious noises coming from the park and raced outside, yelping loudly and falling all over each other as they went.

Patches of sunlight, chased from room to room by the breeze, picked out things along the way — vases, the brass castors on the piano legs, gilt picture frames, the straw hat Aunt Nadya had tossed onto the windowsill. We drank strong coffee in the dining room. The artist told me about how he had caught a fish in the centre of Paris on the embankment across from Notre-Dame. Aunt Nadya watched him, a gentle, amused smile on her face, and Liza's mother kept repeating: 'Oh, Sasha! When will you finally grow up? It's high time already!'

After our coffee the artist took Aunt Nadya and me by the hand and led us to his room. Brushes and squeezed paint tubes lay all about. An air of total disorder reigned in the room. He quickly gathered up some dirty shirts, boots and bits of canvas, shoved them under the sofa, then filled his pipe with oily tobacco from a blue tin, lit it, and ordered Aunt Nadya and me to sit down on the windowsill. We sat down as ordered. The sun was very warm on our backs. The artist went up to a picture on the wall covered by a cloth and removed it. There it is,' he mumbled in an embarrassed voice. 'I've managed to botch every last bit of it.'

It was a portrait of Aunt Nadya. Back then I didn't know a thing about painting. I had overheard my father and Uncle Kolya arguing about Vereshchagin* and Vrubel, but I'd never seen a good picture in my life. The ones at my grandmother's house were gloomy landscapes with dull trees and stags beside a stream or still-lifes of dead ducks hanging upside down. When the artist revealed the portrait I

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* Vasily Vereshchagin (1842—1904), realist painter well known for his depictions of war.

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couldn't help laughing from sheer delight — the portrait captured the essence of Aunt Nadya's springtime beauty, and also the golden cascade of sunshine that poured down into the old park, the breeze wafting through the rooms and the greenish reflection of the leaves. Aunt Nadya looked at the portrait for a long time, then she playfully ruffled the artist's hair and hastened out of the room without saying a word.

'Well, thank God!' the artist sighed. 'That means I can take the work to the exhibition in Venice.'

That afternoon we went for a boat ride on the Tyasmin. A green crenellated wall, the shadow cast by the trees in the park, lay on the water. In the depths the round leaves of young water lilies could be seen straining to reach the surface. In the evening, before we left, Aunt Nadya sang in the cosy music room, accompanied by the artist, whose fingers, still smeared with pine sap, kept sticking to the piano keys: *First meetings, last meetings, the dear sound of a beloved's voice …*

Then we drove back to Smela in a carriage and pair, along with the artist and Liza. The horses' hooves clanged on the hard road. From the river came a damp breeze and the croaking of frogs. High overhead, a single star burned in the sky. At the station Liza took me to the buffet to get ice cream while the artist and Aunt Nadya sat down on a bench in the little garden out front. The buffet didn't have any ice cream, of course, and when we returned, Aunt Nadya and the artist were still sitting on the bench, lost in thought.

Soon after this Aunt Nadya left for Moscow, and I never saw her again. At Shrovetide the following year, she sang in an open troika while riding to Petrovsky Park and caught a chill that soon developed into pneumonia. She died just before Easter. My grandmother, mother and even my father went to her funeral. I missed her terribly, and to this day I cannot forget Aunt Nadya. She has always remained for me the embodiment of feminine youth, warmth and happiness.

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# 7
## *Elderwood Balls*

Small, soft white balls rolled around inside a box. I would drop one into a bowl of water. The ball would begin to swell, and then open up and transform itself into either a black elephant with red eyes or an orange dragon or a rose with green leaves. These magical Chinese balls made of elderwood had been a gift from my godfather and uncle, Iosif Grigorievich, or, simply, Uncle Yuzia, who'd brought them from Peking.

'An adventurer, pure and simple!' Father would say of him, although not with disapproval, but in fact a touch of envy. He envied Uncle Yuzia because he had travelled all over Africa, Asia and Europe, and not as some well-behaved tourist, but as a crusader, noisy, rowdy, insolently daring, and with an unquenchable thirst for every improbable kind of affair in any corner of the globe: from Shanghai to Addis Ababa, from Harbin to Mashhad. All these affairs had ended in failure.

'I should stake a claim in the Klondike,' Uncle Yuzia liked to say. 'I'd show those Americans a thing or two.'

Just what it was exactly he was going to show those inveterate gold prospectors in the Klondike remained unclear. But it was perfectly obvious that he would have shown them something so stupendous that his fame would resound all across the Yukon and Alaska. Perhaps he had been born to be a famous explorer or discoverer like Nikolai Przhevalsky* or Livingstone. But life in Russia

* Nikolai Przhevalsky (1839—88), famous geographer and explorer of central and eastern Asia.

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back then in those days — what my father called 'untimely' — had ruined Uncle Yuzia. His noble passion for travel became in the end a haphazard and fruitless wandering. All the same, I am indebted to Uncle Yuzia, for his stories made the world a desperately interesting subject for me, and I have kept this feeling my whole life. Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna regarded Uncle Yuzia as a form of 'divine retribution' and the black sheep of the family. When she was angry at me for some prank or being naughty, she'd say: 'Mind yourself or you'll turn out to be a second Uncle Yuzia!'

My poor grandmother! She had no idea that my uncle's life seemed to me utterly splendid. My sole dream was to become 'a second Uncle Yuzia'. Uncle Yuzia always turned up unexpectedly at our home in Kiev or at our grandmother's in Cherkassy only to disappear just as unexpectedly, and then reappear in a year or eighteen months with his deafening ring at our door and fill the flat with his hoarse voice, his coughing, swearing and infectious laughter. And every time right behind Uncle Yuzia would be the cab driver dragging heavy trunks across the floor filled with all sorts of treasures.

Uncle Yuzia was a tall, bearded man with a broken nose, hands of steel — he could bend silver roubles — and suspiciously calm eyes, in whose depths always lurked a glint of cunning. As my father would say, 'He has no fear of God, Satan or death,' although he'd go all to pieces at the sight of a woman's tears or when confronted by a capricious child. The first time I ever saw him was after the Boer War. Uncle Yuzia had joined the Boers as a volunteer. This heroic and unselfish act had greatly raised his stock among all the relatives.

All of us children were shocked by this war. We felt sorry for the Boers fighting for their independence and hated the English. We knew the details of every battle fought on the other side of the earth — the siege of Ladysmith, the clash at Bloemfontein, the assault on Diamond Hill. Our heroes were the Boer generals De Wet, Joubert and Botha. We despised the haughty Lord Kitchener and laughed at the English soldiers in their red coats. We were intoxicated by a book called *Pieter Maritz, a Young Boer from the Transvaal*. But it wasn't just us — the entire civilised world followed with a sinking heart

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the tragedy being played out on the plains between the Vaal and the Orange River, appalled at the unequal fight of a small nation against a great world power. Even the organ grinder in Kiev, who until then had only played 'The Parting', began to play a new song: 'Transvaal, Transvaal, you burn in flames'. For this we gave him the five-kopeck pieces we'd saved up for ice cream.

For young boys like me the Boer War ruined the exotic dreams of childhood. Africa, it turned out, was not at all as we had imagined it to be based on the novels published in *Around the World* or from engineer Gorodetsky's house on Bankovaya Street in Kiev. The walls of his grey house, which looked like a castle, were decorated with sculptures of rhinoceroses, giraffes, lions, crocodiles, antelopes and other African beasts. Instead of drainpipes, elephant trunks made of concrete hung down over the pavement. Water dripped from the jaws of rhinoceroses. Grey stone boa constrictors reared their heads from the façade's dark recesses.

The owner of the house, engineer Gorodetsky, was a fanatical hunter. He had even travelled to Africa to hunt. It was in memory of these hunting expeditions that he decorated his house with these stone figures of wild beasts. Grown-ups said Gorodetsky was a bit mad, but we little boys loved his strange house, and it had done much to shape our fantasies about Africa. But now, even though we were still little, we understood that a huge struggle for human rights was being waged on the so-called Dark Continent, where until then we had thought only of the trumpeting of wise elephants, the miasmas of the tropical jungles, and the hippopotamuses quietly snorting in the slimy ooze of great uncharted rivers. Until then, Africa existed as the land of explorers, of various Stanleys and Livingstones.

I, just like the other boys, was sorry to lose that Africa where we had wandered in our dreams, to say goodbye to lion hunts, dawns over the sands of the Sahara, rafts on the Niger, whistling arrows, the furious shrieks of monkeys, the dark gloom of impenetrable forests. Danger awaited us there at every turn. In our imagination we had already died many times of fever or wounds behind the log walls of a fort listening to the whizz of a lone bullet, breathing the poisonous vapours of the swamps, gazing with inflamed eyes into the black velvety sky at the dying glimmer of the Southern Cross.

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How often had I died regretting my short, young life and my never having crossed mysterious Africa from Algiers to the Cape of Good Hope, from the Congo to Zanzibar!

Nevertheless, it was impossible to erase this image of Africa from my mind completely. It had a life of its own. Hence, the shock, the wordless amazement I felt at the appearance in our prosaic Kiev flat of a bearded man, burnt by the African sun, sporting a wide-brimmed Boer hat and an open-necked shirt with a cartridge clip on his belt — Uncle Yuzia. I followed his every step, I gazed into his eyes. I couldn't believe that these eyes before me had seen the Orange River, Zulu kraals, British cavalrymen and storms on the Pacific. This happened just as the president of the Transvaal, the corpulent old Kruger,* had come to Russia to request help for the Boers. Uncle Yuzia had travelled with him. He stayed in Kiev just one day and then departed for St Petersburg right behind Kruger. Uncle Yuzia was convinced Russia would help the Boers. But from Petersburg he wrote to Father: 'Overriding considerations of State have forced the Russian Government to make an ignominious decision: we will not be helping the Boers. This means everything is lost, and I'm heading back now once more to the Far East.'

My grandfather — on my mother's side — had not been a wealthy man. He would not have been able to educate his many children — five daughters and three sons — had he not sent all his sons to the Kiev Cadet Academy, where education was free. Uncle Yuzia had studied there together with his brothers. All went well for four years, but then in his fifth year Uncle Yuzia was transferred from Kiev to the penal 'convict' academy in the town of Volsk on the Volga. Cadets were sent to Volsk only for 'serious crimes'. Uncle Yuzia had committed just such a crime.

The kitchen of the Kiev Cadet Academy was in the cellar. Before one of the holidays a large number of buns had been baked and left to cool on a long kitchen table. Uncle Yuzia got hold of a pole, fixed a nail to it, and used it to fish out through an open window a few

* Paul Kruger (1825—1904), president of the South African Republic 1883—1900.

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dozen brown buns, after which he laid on a magnificent feast for his classmates. Uncle Yuzia spent only two years in Volsk. In his third year he was expelled from the Cadet Academy and demoted to the rank of private for striking an officer — the officer had stopped him in the street and reprimanded him harshly for some trifling fault in his uniform.

Uncle Yuzia was given a soldier's greatcoat and a rifle and sent off from Volsk on foot to join an artillery unit in the town of Kutno near Warsaw. He crossed the country from east to west in winter, reporting to the various garrison commanders along the way, begging for his food in the villages, sleeping where he could at night. He left Volsk a hot-headed boy and arrived in Kutno an embittered soldier. In Kutno he advanced to ensign, the lowest of the officers' ranks.

Uncle Yuzia was plagued by the worst possible luck in his military career. He was transferred from the artillery to the infantry. His regiment was sent to Moscow to do guard duty during the coronation of Nicholas II. Uncle Yuzia's company was ordered to guard the river embankment alongside the Kremlin. Early on the morning of the coronation, my uncle saw his soldiers race down to the river's edge where a violent melee had broken out. Gripping his sabre, he ran to join the soldiers. There in the mud on the riverbank he encountered a terrifying creature with a bronze head entangled in tubing. The soldiers had knocked the creature down and piled on top of it, and it was awkwardly trying to kick them off with its enormous lead boots. One of the soldiers wrapped a thick rubber hose around the creature's copper head and it let out a hoarse rattle and soon stopped resisting. My uncle then realised that the creature was in fact a diver, screamed at the soldiers and began to quickly unscrew the copper helmet, but by then the diver was already dead. Neither my uncle nor the soldiers had been informed that divers would be searching the bottom of the Moscow River that morning for devilish devices.

After this incident Uncle Yuzia was discharged from the army. He left for central Asia, where he served for a while as the chief of camel caravans travelling from Uralsk to Khiva and Bukhara. At the time central Asia had yet to be linked to Russia by the railway, and so all goods had to be unloaded from the trains at Uralsk and

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transferred onto camels and transported thence by caravan. During one of these caravan trips my uncle made friends with the Grum-Grzhimailo brothers,* explorers of central Asia, and hunted tigers with them. He sent Grandmother a gift of one of his tiger skins that had such a ferocious expression on its dead face she immediately hid it in the cellar, after first sprinkling it with mothballs.

Uncle Yuzia loved to tell how he could kill jackals on the spot just by sneezing at them. Out in the desert at night he'd lie down with his head on the knapsack containing his food and pretend to fall asleep. The jackals would creep up with their tails between their legs. Once the most brazen of them began to carefully pull the knapsack with his teeth out from under our uncle's head, he'd let out a deafening sneeze and the cowardly jackal would drop dead of heart failure right there without letting out so much as a yelp. We believed him because we knew how loudly Uncle Yuzia sneezed in the morning as he prepared for the day. Those sneezes caused the glass in the windows to rattle and the terrified cat to race about the room trying to escape. Uncle Yuzia's tales were more interesting to us than the adventures of Baron von Munchhausen. We had to conjure up Munchhausen in our imaginations, whereas Uncle Yuzia was right there — alive, enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke, shaking the sofa with his laughter.

After this, a sketchy period in Uncle Yuzia's life began. He roamed about Europe; he played, so some say, the roulette tables in Monte Carlo; and then he turned up in Abyssinia from where he returned with an enormous gold medal conferred upon him by the Negus Menelik.† The medal looked like the sort of badges worn here by janitors.

Uncle Yuzia had trouble finding his place in life until his gaze turned toward the mists of the Far East, to Manchuria and the land of the river Ussuri. It was as if this country existed solely for people

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* Grigory Grum-Grzhimailo (1860–1936), entomologist and lepidopterist, made numerous voyages to collect in central Asia and the Russian Far East; Vladimir (1864–1928), his younger brother, a noted metallurgist.

† Menelik II (1884–1913), negus of Shewa 1866–89, emperor of Ethiopia 1889–1913.

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like Uncle Yuzia. There one could live freely, expansively, to the full extent of one's unbridled nature and ambition without having to submit to any 'asinine laws'. This was the Russian Alaska — untamed, rich and dangerous. No better place on earth for Uncle Yuzia could have been invented. The Amur, the taiga, gold, the Pacific Ocean, Korea, and then beyond — Kamchatka, Japan, Polynesia. A vast, unknown world thundered like the surf on the shores of the Far East, exciting the imagination of such men.

Uncle Yuzia went off to the Far East, but only after having taken for himself a wife, a young religious ascetic, or so Mama insisted since in her opinion only some sort of ascetic could stand being married to such an awful man as my uncle. There he took part in the defence of Harbin during the Boxer Rebellion, in fights with the *honghuzi* and in the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway, interrupting these undertakings only to go to the Transvaal. After the Boer War he returned to the Far East, although not to Manchuria, but to Port Arthur, where he worked as an agent of the Russian Volunteer Fleet. Uncle Yuzia wrote to us that he'd fallen in love with ships and the sea and regretted not having become a sailor in his youth.

About this time his wife died, and Uncle Yuzia was left with two little daughters on his hands. An affectionate though somewhat bungling father, he raised them with the help of his old Chinese servant, whom my uncle called 'Fetch Me-tea'.* Uncle Yuzia loved this devoted man nearly as much as his own daughters. He loved the Chinese in general and liked to say that this splendid, kind and wise people had but one shortcoming — a fear of rain.

During the Russo-Japanese War Uncle Yuzia was called up into the army as a former officer. He sent his daughters and 'Fetch Me-tea' off to live in Harbin. After the war he visited us in Kiev. This was the last time I saw him. By then he was already grey and staid, but those rambunctious and merry sparkles still flickered from time to

* Paustovsky's uncle called his servant 'Sam Pyu-chai', which can be translated literally as 'Drink tea myself', an expression of a then rather common — and clearly xenophobic — punning on what were for Russians strange-sounding Chinese names and words.

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