

Order No.227.
From Stalin With Love

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ISBN: 9781079761283 (paperback)

Imprint: Independently published

For my mother

Note on Russian Names

In Russia, a person is identified by three names: an individual, given first name, a patronymic middle name in honor of one's father, and a family surname—for example, Jakov Antonovich Krivenkov, Grigoriy Dmitrievich Generalov.

It is customary to call a person by both the given name and the patronymic, which implies a mark of respect, to address someone who is your senior or with whom you are on formal terms—Jakov Antonovich, Nikifor Petrovich.

Russian forenames have formal forms—for instance, Nalya; endearing forms—Nalechka, Annushka, and diminutive forms—Andryushka.

In the Soviet Union, the form of addressing each other by “comrade” became commonplace and was a standard form of address in the armed forces, for instance, “Comrade Colonel,” “Comrade Senior Lieutenant,” “Comrade Senior Interrogator.”

October-November 1942.

Jakov Antonovich

The guard at the checkpoint returned to Jakov Antonovich his officer's ID, saluted him smartly, and stepped to the gate to lift the barrier.

Secured by the high barbed fence, in the center of the bare plateau and dominating the entire area, sat a wooden barracks-style building open to all the winds and snow. At a distance from it, a smaller windowed structure, most likely intended for the safeguards, and a shed of the checkpoint he just passed through completed the dull picture. His new place of work.

Jakov Antonovich Krivenkov, the newest senior lieutenant of the prosecutor's office headed to the barrack, returned the salute of two guards at the entrance door, and waited for one of them to open it. The soldier looked at Jakov Antonovich's suitcase and whispered, "You, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, better leave your belongings with us and be on alert about whatever you have in your pockets."

"I'll take care of it," Jakov Antonovich said then stopped mid-stride. "Pfhuuu." He exhaled to ward off the stench of human bodies that hit his nostrils. Before opening a metal door with a small barred window, he put his little suitcase on the concrete floor, smartened his field shirt, then stepped over the threshold. "Good evening!"

A minute-long dead silence met him and then, all hell broke loose. The men jumped from their two-tier bunk beds and set about yelling, and dancing, and singing. It was not like he imagined the meeting with them.

“You, little friend, move aside.” Jakov Antonovich turned to a young man lying on the bed closest to the entrance. The latter grunted something and took a sitting position, making a place for the visitor. *Anikeyev, the deserter*. His father had hidden him from conscription in an abandoned woodcutter’s hut deep in the forest, Jakov Antonovich noted to himself. The only son. The only child in the family.

The cacophony of sounds and the caricature dancing continued for some time. “Goddammit! This one in the striped suit, what nice footwork he has!” Jakov Antonovich nudged his neighbor. “And that one is a real performer!”

As they continued their craziness, Jakov Antonovich peered into their faces, recognizing them from the pictures, bringing back into his mind the particulars from the files of the people with whom he was now locked in this cell.

That one with shifty eyes and small face was a famous Balashov thief, Andryushka Pereverzev. Not that his gains were big, but many local market sellers would find they were rubles short after he made his Saturday raids through their stands.

Khokhlov was an inbred thief. He inherited the calling from both his parents. Yeremeyev and Apanasenko

were in the same league, amateurs though. Smirnov gained laurels as a diamond forger. Ageyev crippled a man in a brawl during his wedding. They all could be active builders of communism, Jakov Antonovich caught himself thinking in terms of the Soviet slogans.

A man lay on his side with his back to all others.

In the older man, who sat on his bunk and watched the scene seemingly unperturbed, Jakov Antonovich recognized Grigoriy Dmitrievich Generalov. With an inherent strength in his face, he reminded Jakov Antonovich of the chief conductor in Saratov Academy Theater of Opera and Ballet. According to his file, Generalov, in his jail time nicknamed *Emperor*, was the former chief accountant of one of the biggest Saratov plants, convicted of squandering public funds. While examining his dossier, Jakov Antonovich could not help but feel Generalov was covering for somebody, somebody influential enough to seal him in jail.

Little by little, the group of wriggling bodies thinned out, and only two of the jailbirds, Kuznetsov and Mikhailov, both accused of self-injuring to avoid being drafted in the army, still pushed their thighs forward and backward, imitating sexual intercourse. At last, they tired out too.

Jakov Antonovich got to his feet, applauding. "Not bad. I wouldn't be sincere if I said you may be certifiable for Bolshoi Theater, but I can see we won't be bored."

Silence fell while thirteen gazes converged on Jakov Antonovich. Faces bearing an air of unconcealed scorn.

“My name is Jakov Antonovich, and for a month or two you have to make an effort to tolerate me.”

The men exchanged looks. The one who lay with his back turned to the others sat up and looked at Jakov Antonovich, his brilliant blue eyes showing recognition.

Krasnogorov! Suddenly, Jakov Antonovich felt joy and another feeling for which he had no name. He, Jakov Antonovich, had saved the young man from a firing squad. An experienced pilot—months of fighting in Spain, two Orders of The Red Banner, numerous medals. How clearly could Jakov Antonovich see the bunch of them laying on his table when he interrogated Krasnogorov. At the sight of the German flying armada, Krasnogorov had gotten cold feet. Refused to go on the operation. That day, he'd received a letter from home. He cried, telling Jakov Antonovich, an officer of lesser ranking than his, about his pregnant wife and feeling sorry not for himself but for her and his unborn child—his cowardice putting them in the category of a traitor's family members.

Jakov Antonovich checked his arm watch. “Your night meal at eight?”

“In the palace main hall, with silverware, served by livery clad waiters,” a voice came—Balanovskiy, the lover of anti-Soviet chastooshkas—ditties, provoking the roar of healthy throats.

“That we'll find out. Form a column!” Jakov Antonovich commanded, studying the men under his charge.

Reluctantly, they moved in an unhurried manner. Jakov Antonovich brought up the rear. Always watch your back was one of the commandments he'd learned during his rushed training for his new job.

The column flew into a windowless room with two rows of plank tables and benches all bolted to the floor. Dubiously protected by a corner and the waist-high plank barrier, a man in a white but already muddied apron was on standby.

While the men formed a line, Emperor proceeded to a table.

The cook produced a shining aluminum bowl and ladled it to the brim with what looked and smelled like boiled pearl barley. "Comrade Senior Lieutenant." He stretched the bowl to Jakov Antonovich.

"Emperors are served first," Jakov Antonovich retorted.

The line shifted. The bowl ended up on the table in front of Generalov. He bent his head majestically and started eating.

Jakov Antonovich waited for all the other men to be served. "On the bottom is the thickest stuff." He stepped to the dispensation stand and after getting a bowl filled with nice smelling gruel, motioned for Ageyev who occupied the end of the bench to slide over. He felt how the man tensed.

There wasn't a sound apart from chomping and smacking. Then, "What about a second helping, Comrade chef?" a voice said.

“Not allowed,” the cook snipped.

Jakov Antonovich got up and approached the cauldron. “Tsk.” He shook his head. “What will you do with the leftovers?”

“But what? I have to feed the guards as well. And I didn’t even have a crumb myself,” he said, annoyed. Facing reality, it seemed true: he was thin as a lath.

The men snorted.

“With what is left, you can feed a squadron. Leave what’s necessary for the guards and yourself and let the people have a second helping,” Jakov Antonovich said.

His wards watched him with disbelief then approached the now willing cook with their empty bowls.

Back in the cell, Jakov Antonovich, without addressing anybody in particular, said, “It looks like our cook is a good-hearted chap, right, Comrades?” He couldn’t bring himself to call them “citizens” as criminals and convicts were to be addressed and who most of them were—their files told their stories. Fatherless, motherless, abused, neglected, starving during the first years of Soviet power. Life and the insane quirks of fate made them who they became, now lying on their ill-fitted plank beds. Side to side with them lay hard-working laborers and peasants who have not kept their mouths shut, foolishly expecting the Soviet authority to close its ears to their critical opinion—the power could read even their thoughts.

“Now that our stomachs don’t growl, I think we can get to know one another.”

“But you well know all about us,” Emperor said.

“I do,” Jakov Antonovich agreed, “but it’s what is on the paper not what a person is.”

That was his mistake. The men looked at him morosely. Only the youngest of them, a first-year medical student, Kalinin, spoke. “I did not disobey the order as the prosecutor decided. I did not raise up into the attack because I volunteered as a medic to save lives not to destroy them. Nonresistance to evil by force is my—”

“Stop your religious propaganda.” Several voices shushed him.

He, Jakov Antonovich, had been appointed to prepare them to fight for the sake of the nation, and it was a chance for them to atone for their crimes against their motherland and the Soviet people. *And Comrade Stalin*, he added subconsciously. They could not do this barehanded.

“You better tell us, Comrade officer, when we’ll be called to our honorable duty?” Anikeyev sneered.

“As soon as a penal company is formed.”

His answer produced a roar of laughter. “Already we are here for two weeks. In the jails are there not enough willing souls to defend our loving motherland?”

“It seems like not enough,” Jakov Antonovich said calmly. “And I am here to teach you how to fight with honor—”

“There won’t be much time for us to show our honor,” Balanovskiy scoffed.

He is right, Jakov Antonovich thought to himself.

Some of them, depending on their jail term, had to manage almost the unimaginable—to survive for three, or two, or one month. “And preserve yourself,” he finished his sentence.

The men shifted on their bunks.

To break the heavy silence, Jakov Antonovich addressed all of them. “Do you have a place for me to sleep?”

It looked like he stunned them again. At last, Emperor’s voice declared, “Anikeyev, move your crap there.” He gestured with his hand to the second tier. “Make room for Comrade Senior Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Anikeyev,” Jakov Antonovich said to the young man who readily gathered his mattress with all his crappy stuff. “I’ll be back in a minute with a mattress and bed linens.”

Jakov Antonovich listened to the voice on the other side of the line. “Comrade Krivenkov, are you out of your head? You may not live through the night to see the day. Your predecessor begged to be sent to the front only to escape their company!”

“Don’t worry, Comrade Senior Advisor of Justice . . .” he reasoned with his superior. “I’m sure I can handle the situation.”

When he returned, it was dark, but the full moon produced enough light for him to settle on the bed. He lay with his eyes open, staring into nothingness. Like them in this cell, he had no normal home. For years already.

His zealous communist wife. Like it happened when he was not exhausted enough to fall asleep, he couldn't shoo her image away and thought back to how well it had all started. He smiled bitterly at the recollection. They'd met at the Saratov University, both students of the Judicial Faculty, only she was three years ahead. Anastasia was a beauty. He instantly fell in love with her. And how dumbfounded he was to find out she had chosen him among the dozen of her admirers. He courted her by going to communist meetings. Soon, he joined an agitation brigade only to be by her side when she was sent to the local villages to convert the old babushkas into the communist faith. During the long evenings, in her unlit room, they discussed party politics, and he readily agreed with all her arguments.

When had his view of the Stalinist regime begun to change? After the Red Terror descended on the country expelling thousands—maybe millions of hard-working peasants with their families and the ones who tried to raise their indecisive voices against what was happening in the country? They both knew that the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie, stripped of their ranks and nobility, were also shipped to Siberia en masse and subjected to unbearable labor and conditions.

Jakov Antonovich, soon, but not immediately perceived what was going on in their first socialist state in the world. However, Anastasia, his beauty, fervently defended all measures employed by the high-ranking demagogues.

At some point, he was fed up with her sermons justifying the purges the communist party brought down on the country. “They are the enemies of the people, counterrevolutionaries. As Comrade Lenin used to say, ‘Revolution must know how to defend itself.’ How can’t you understand it, Jakov?”

To defend itself while exterminating its own people? No, that he could not justify. But what could he do? He was the son of a worker who fought with Bolsheviks against the Tsar. His mother was a maid in a nobility house, who, if not for the Revolution, was destined to continue toiling for the class of rulers as her children would. Truth be acknowledged, under the Bolsheviks rule, he, her son, went to school, learned to read and write, which was a huge achievement compared to his illiterate mother and father with four years of a church-run school. He then entered the Saratov University and after graduation, according to the laws of that time, was not enlisted in the army but was granted a rather good-paying job at one of the many Saratov plants as a judicial consultant. The country provided him with a one-room apartment when his daughter was born. His little one, Nalya. The spitting image of him.

He still remembered the warm grip of her little hand as he went to see her before departing. Her lovely green-brown eyes that filled with tears as he said he had to go. Her “Papa, come back soon” still sounded in his ears.

Somebody grunted, tearing Jakov Antonovich away from his sweet and sad musings about his Nalechka.

When did he become critical to what was happening in the country? Was it his own conclusion or the bug of doubt stuck in him when his father, a cheerful and happy man, returned from the Ukraine? He did not tell of his role, but the newspapers made it clear. The triumphant reports about the thousands of dispossessed kulaks—prosperous peasants sent to Siberia filled newspapers; sounded from the radio; proclaimed from party podiums, applauded by the workers and poor peasants. Food appeared on the store shelves in the cities. The workers needed to be fed to build the industry, to show to the Capitalist West that . . . What?

A joker and a kind person was how Jakov remembered his father, but he started drinking himself into oblivion and soon died.

Of course, he, the now senior lieutenant Krivenkov, could raise his voice in protest and join one of the anti-government groups to play his role in freeing his country from the cursed Bolsheviks. But he did not. By that time, he had his little daughter and secure, respectful work. To jeopardize it all? That he could not imagine doing.

He was a coward, an opportunist who unwillingly agreed with himself that it was not in his power to fight that behemoth of the repression machine for what by that time the Soviet state had become.

As the war broke, he convinced himself with relief that though he was not willing to defend the communist machine of suppression, he'd fight Fascists who were even worse—your own shit didn't smell was a pearl of

folk wisdom. So, he concealed his education, ignoring his exempt status, and reported himself as a volunteer for the front.

What a fate! It didn't want to put him on the line of fire. In the train headed to the front typhus knocked him down. He came to his senses in a hospital in Smolensk, and as soon as he was able to keep himself standing on his feet, he was sent back home.

Hardly two months of the military and political study, and he became a senior lieutenant.

Here he was about two hundred kilometers from Saratov, in this protected area. He could be among them would he find the courage to protest what was so appalling to him—and yes, he was among them, only as a suppressor. A jailor.

He did not despise them, perhaps even sympathized with the less fortunate ones and so a question came: Can he do anything for them? And a logical answer: Nothing. Nothing. In one month, they would be thrown against the German fire, their bodies a living shield to such as him, Jakov Antonovich. They would shed their blood so the others, the cowards and opportunists like him, would get that golden chance to live.

How long will these unfortunates survive? A day? Two? But maybe the war would end soon—he mentally embraced those people grinding their teeth in their troubled sleep—and fate would grant them the lucky chance to live. But what kind of life would it be? Laboring in a uranium mine somewhere beyond the Arctic Circle?

“Comrade Senior Lieutenant,” a voice came. “Do you sleep?”

“I don’t. Why don’t you sleep?”

“I think of you,” Kalinin, the medical student whispered.

“Of me? Why?”

“You are different.”

“How is it that I’m different, Kalinin?”

“You are—”

“Shut your mouth,” a voice came from the second tier. Jakov Antonovich recognized Smirnov.

“Yes, Kalinin, let us not disturb others.”

The next day, at four in the morning, under the escort of six armed guards, Jakov Antonovich’s crew mounted a truck. He drove with them in its back.

Their task was to lay the groundwork for a new antitank ditch. They worked well. Nobody complained. By eight, they achieved the defined length, width, and depth of the ditch. “Pass along the line we halt for a snack,” Jakov Antonovich said.

The men under his charge climbed over the breastwork and fell on the burned-out grass, covered with early hoarfrost.

“Thank you for your hard work,” he addressed his crew. Some of his wards acknowledged his words of appreciation with a nod.

Jakov Antonovich motioned the guards to approach with a sack of bread and a canister of what he learned soon was lukewarm tea.

It was not long before a big group of women and teenage kids appeared to catch up with digging. It was time to drive the men away. Any contact with the population—especially women—was prohibited. Deemed dangerous for both parties.

As they returned to the base, Jakov Antonovich led the men straight to the canteen.

“A second breakfast?” As always, Balanovskiy did not care about holding his mouth shut. Chuckling, the men took their places and looked at Jakov Antonovich with interest.

“Did any of you ever hold a weapon in your hands?”

“We are not supposed to,” some said in unison.

“No.” Others shook their heads.

Jakov Antonovich kept quiet, looking at the floor, waiting for Krasnogorov to volunteer.

A militarily clear declaration tore heavy silence. “I did.”

“Good, Krasnogorov, can you tell your comrades about the first rifle you shot?”

“A shotgun. Hunting squirrels.”

“Just that we are going to do soon.” Balanovskiy mocked.

Ignoring his remark, Jakov Antonovich nodded. “Sounds good, Krasnogorov. Tell us about the rifle’s characteristics. Weight, caliber, maximum effective range, capacity.” It was his luck he had Krasnogorov among the men entrusted to him. Himself, Jakov Antonovich,

had inadequate knowledge of arms, and his training was limited to a month of shooting exercises.

Krasnogorov happened to be a great instructor. In the following days, he educated the men in terms of the arms' characteristics. Soon, the theory presented with words and hands seemed to bore the "cadets." In the meantime, Jakov Antonovich scrounged up from a local school a blackboard and obtained from his superiors in Saratov permission for the practical handling of the rifle CBT-38. *Without ammunition and bayonet*, the order directed.

The classes became more animated. One week later, the "cadets" knew how to load the rifle, how to fire, unload, remove the magazine, replace the barrel, fix imaginable jamming, disassemble and assemble, mount the bipod, set sights, change the magazine, upload the magazine. Even the pacifist Kalinin, though reluctantly, took part in the training. Those were the exercises the men liked, opposed to the forced marches along the barbed perimeter of the area, crawling on the frozen earth, negotiating obstacles, throwing bricks as a substitute for hand grenades.

And so the days went on. His men—that was how Jakov Antonovich now called them to himself—worked harder with every day.

"What, have you enchanted them, Senior Lieutenant?" one of the regular guards asked one day. "With Second Lieutenant Cheremukhin, they succumbed to any

possibility of slacking off. Oh, how he cussed them out! Under your command, even Emperor works. I have never seen him with a spade or shovel, forget handling fifty-kilo sacks.”

“It’s good that they work,” Jakov Antonovich said.

When they finished their digging assignment, Jakov Antonovich decided he’d do his best to make the life of his people bearable. Or maybe just a bit better.

One early morning, he went to the director of the Balashov winery that produced spirits for the front and offered help. At first, the director rejoiced but when Jakov Antonovich told him who for a crew he was bringing, the man declined resolutely. “Are you . . . sorry, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, I know what’ll be on their minds. To steal, to drink, and to chase my women workers.” He did not say “chase,” he used a more expressive term.

“Nikifor Petrovich, take my word: not a single drop will my people consume inside the walls of the winery. Not a single woman will complain about them. I promise. Otherwise, you know, I’ll answer before the tribunal.”

It took two hours and two half-liter vodka bottles to break the pig-headed director.

“But I have no means to pay you for your work with rubles. We account every kopeck. You know.” He hiccupped.

“Not a problem, Nikifor Petrovich.” Jakov Antonovich hiccupped as well. “Instead of money, we’ll take the liquid gold.”

“Tomorrow? At eight?” The director stretched his hand.

“Tomorrow at eight.”

Both swaying on their feet, they shook hands, pleased with each other.

Hardly able to keep himself straight, trying not to breathe toward the guard as he marched through the checkpoint, Jakov Antonovich stepped into the cell. All eyes on him, he excused himself and plunked down on his bed.

It must have been late in the evening before he slept off his intoxication. On the floor beside his bed sat a bowl with the long-cooled buckwheat porridge sprinkled with canned stewed meat and a jar of pickle brine. *Where did they get this perfect hangover cure*, he mused?

Under the attentive eyes of his men, he swallowed first the brine then his supper, cleared his throat, and said, “I have to talk to you.”

It seemed everybody forgot to exhale.

“I have secured some work for us at the local winery.”

The roar of pleasure made him smile. “Easy, easy. It comes with conditions.”

Thirteen anxious pairs of eyes watched him in the dense silence.

“Which are?” Emperor raised his eyebrows a fraction.

“Hard work. Plus, no contact with other workers, and I mean it.” While speaking, he made sure his eyes

embraced the semicircle that had formed in front of him. “Not a single drop of spirits.”

“Hah,” several voices protested. “So many temptations and no satisfaction.”

“Stop your blubber and listen to Comrade Senior Lieutenant,” Emperor pronounced with authority.

Jakov Antonovich thanked him with a nod. “They pay us with spirits. We leave some for us to consume in the evenings when no contacts with the guards are expected. What’s left, I’ll exchange for cigarettes—”

A satisfied “Huh” followed.

“And food. I need a confirmation of agreement from each of you.”

In the ensued silence, a buzz of a fly was heard.

“I confirm for everyone here,” Emperor said.

The first reward for their diligent work materialized in the form of a twenty-liter canister.

With fiery eyes, his men watched Jakov Antonovich unscrewing the cap. He took a crystal cut glass, placed it on a stool, and, supporting the canister from the bottom, splashed a translucent liquid in. “Does it make one hundred grams?” He looked around into the intense faces.

“Nee, eighty,” Khokhlov said.

Jakov Antonovich added more spirits into the glass.

Khokhlov squatted and squinted at the level of the liquid. “Ninety-five. Give me.” He took the canister from Jakov Antonovich’s hands and added some more drops.

“Add more,” Yeremeyev whispered.

The men leaned forward, holding their breath.

“The first tasting goes to . . .” Jakov Antonovich swept his eyes over the eager faces.

“To you, Comrade Senior Lieutenant,” Emperor said.

Jakov Antonovich downed the burning liquid and wiped his lips. “First class.”

Panting, with their hands shaking, first, the most eager ones received their 100 grams. Others followed suit. One after another, they swallowed spirits and breathed out with a little moan.

Ageyev who almost killed a man in a brawl declined his portion. “I swore not to drink a long time ago,” he said sharply.

“A second helping, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?” Balanovskiy sneered.

Emperor glowered at him viciously.

“A joke.” The lover of chastooshkas crawled into his bed.

To ease the tension, Jakov Antonovich placed the canister under his bed. “I have a proposal but won’t accept any objection. A joke.” He burst out laughing. “Tomorrow, I’ll get to the city and exchange it to . . . make wishes.”

“Cigarettes!” “Sugar!” “White bread!” “Lemonade!”

“Women!” Well, of course, it was Balanovskiy.

“Anchovy in the tomato sauce!” “Marmalade, the strawberry one!” “Canned crab meat!” “Candy!” “Butter!”

“Wait! Let me write it down.” In a quieter atmosphere, Jakov Antonovich noted all the wishes on a piece of paper.

A sentry on duty stepped into the room. “Comrade Senior Lieutenant, you are called to the phone.”

Jakov Antonovich threw his greatcoat on his shoulders and hurried to the checkpoint.

“Senior Lieutenant Krivenkov, listening!” he barked in the receiver.

“Prepare your scums for transferring to the front,” a voice, without even introducing himself, instructed. “You’ll accompany them to Saratov. From there, you’ll get your next assignment.” Whoever was on the other end hung up.

Jakov Antonovich exited into the fresh air. Early November granted them with the first- night frosts. Very uncertain ones. Still, he shivered. So, the day he feared had come. But why did he react this way? What did he expect when he took those men under his command? That they wouldn’t be sent to the front? That the war would stop? Foolish. The Germans were under Stalingrad. That’s where his men would be transferred to participate in the fight.

But now, he had to pull himself together and deliver the news.

Jakov Antonovich stopped at the threshold. All eyes were on him. Strained. Wary. He sensed they knew what he was about to say. “Yes,” he said.

“When?” A few beds away a voice spoke. Unrecognizable.

“Tomorrow. Five o’clock rise. Breakfast. Departure.” The air was sucked out of his lungs the moment he pronounced it. “If anyone wants to pull back, now is the time.”

His men responded with worried looks and clearing throats, but not a word.

Jakov Antonovich could not sleep. He knew nobody did. There were no usual night sounds: no grunts, no deep exhale, no other least pleasant manifestations of the bodies. Only creaking of the bed planks.

At dawn, he dozed off. A light whisper penetrated his subconsciousness. He opened his eyes and first, he thought he was dreaming. His men stood in a file in front of his bed. “What? Time already? Did I oversleep?”

“No, Comrade Senior Lieutenant,” Emperor said. “There is still time for you. But excuse us, we needed to talk to you before the guards come.”

“Let’s talk.” He jerked himself into a seated position.

“Jakov Antonovich,” several voices said in unison.

They had never called him by his name, the perplexing thought rushed through his mind. And suddenly, an unexpected and shameful thankfulness overwhelmed him. *In their hearts, they called me by my name.*

“We’d like to ask you for a favor,” Emperor continued.

What favor? What could he do for them? How could he save them from the inevitable? Horrible. Horrible. A

terrifying realization defied his understanding and ability to think clearly. “What?”

“Come with us to the front. We’ll safeguard you. We’ll make you into a Hero of the Soviet Union,” Emperor said, and others nodded in agreement.

Jakov Antonovich felt his throat compress his vocal cords. He squeezed out some guttural sounds, and as he was in underwear, rushed from the room. He stormed into the checkpoint. “Sentry! Immediately, connect me to the command. Faster. Faster. I have no time.” He caught himself shouting.

The sentry busied with the phone for some unbearably long time then held out the receiver.

“Comrade Samoylov, Senior Lieutenant Krivenkov. Allow to report.”

The officer on the other side said, “Report.”

“The penal unit is ready to depart for Saratov.”

“I was told you got all the orders yesterday,” Samoylov said somewhat annoyed.

“Comrade Major, may I ask you for a favor?” And afraid to anger his superior even more, he blurted out, “May I go with my unit to the front?”

There was a brief silence on the other end, and then, “A commanding officer is already appointed. You accompany the unit to Saratov, to the train station. Lieutenant Petrashov will take it under his command.” He hung up.

How was it that he didn’t notice before how long the way to the barracks was? However, he was now standing in

the doorway, unable to step over the threshold. Thirteen pairs of eyes searched him. Some pleadingly, others tragically as if contemplating their demise, their eyes already dead. Kuznetsov and Mikhailov with accusation as though they did not trust he felt like going with them to save them from the inevitable. From . . . unavoidable death.

“Jakov Antonovich, this is from us.” Smirnov handed him an elongated plexiglass thing.

“What is it?” Jakov Antonovich asked, and looking at the small, sharp-pointed knife in his hand, answered his own question. “Very handy. Thank you.”

They gaped at him in awe then silently exited the room, giving him a chance to gather what little belongings he had, to wash and shave.

He didn't hear the noise of the truck, but when he stepped into the chilly outdoor, they, his men, were already in the back of the vehicle. “I will drive with you.”

Reaching hands helped him up.

Two hundred kilometers to Saratov. Nobody talked. They huddled against each other trying to preserve what little warmth their bodies produced.

Shivering in the cold wind, Jakov Antonovich hugged himself with his arms and listened to his feelings. He feared the moment of parting, feared he would break under the pressure of anguish that seized him. The last thing he needed was to burst into tears. He pushed up the collar of his greatcoat and lowered his head into its protection.

Then, there was the sight of the train station square encircled with armed soldiers. Their truck drove inside the secured area, and his men jumped from the truck, lining up.

“Senior Lieutenant Krivenkov?” A smart salute. Spic and span uniform, peaked cap, and shining high boots. “Lieutenant Petrashov. I’ll take over. Here, please sign.”

With his signature, they became shtrafniks—penalized persons. Their new commander counted his men. From that minute they were not his men anymore. *I just signed their death warrants.* Jakov Antonovich shuddered at the thought.

Meanwhile, Petrashov signed another paper and handed it to him.

“Lieutenant Petrashov, let’s step aside.” His voice cracked.

The young officer—*could he be even twenty?*—looked at him with hesitation before following Jakov Antonovich some steps away.

“They are honorable guys.” And then, choking down the unwanted, shameful tears, he grabbed Petrashov’s hand and whispered, “Sonny, don’t squander their lives,” not comprehending how ridiculous his calling the young officer “Sonny” sounded. He, himself, was thirty-three years old.

“I promise.” A strong look. A strong handshake. It relieved Jakov Antonovich. Somehow, he trusted this newly made officer.

Jakov Antonovich looked at the men as though hugging them with his eyes and felt they returned his feelings.

“Company, forward march!”

They moved away and soon were swallowed by hundreds of other men marching to the railway platform.

Jakov Antonovich returned to the truck and climbed into the cabin. “To the staff,” he said. Only now, he sensed that his hands were ice cold. He reached deep into his pockets. His right hand felt something like a piece of paper. He pulled it out and unfolded it. *We’ll fight fascists for you.* Thirteen names scribbled on the gray-brownish packing paper in which he brought sugar cubes for them.

November 1942. Matryona

Matryona sat at the window and looked at the endless field that now was buried under a thick layer of snow. In winter, there was not much to do. In any case, the kolkhoz management evacuated among the first, taking all the equipment with them in trucks. They left only a rusty, broken-down tractor. First, the local kids climbed it in a thrill, then little by little, the villagers moved away from the rapidly approaching front. Matryona had nowhere to go.

The sky was overcast. Perhaps that was why no airplanes were to be seen and no deafening noise was heard. Today, she had carried enough of the water from the well. Back in summer, she logged plenty of firewood for the entire winter. In uneven stacks, it was propped against the barn wall. Potatoes were stored in a sandbox in the cellar. She prepared herself for a usually long and harsh winter.

Logs crackled in the oven. Her caldron, pushed into its hearth, kept water hot. There was nothing for her to do. She could now relive her life. She liked to remember.

What kind of life did she have? Not a bad one. Not much different from the lives of other women in her village. That is Kolkhoz since 1920, with a beautiful name: *The Dawn of Communism*. Yes, it dawned every morning. With communism they had to wait a bit, the local

propagandists kept saying. They, that is collective farmers, had to work harder to achieve the privilege.

She worked hard. But that was the norm—under the Tsar—under the Bolsheviks. What difference?

Matryona went to school in 1909. She learned to read a little and write her name, but only in block letters, then had to drop from school: her mother delivered twins. She needed her daughter in the house to help. Thank God, one of Matryona's siblings died of diphtheria at the age of ten months. What a relief for the family it was! But hardly had her mother's tears dried before she gave birth to another of Matryona's brothers.

In 1918, Ivan, the neighbor's son returned from the Great War. He'd lost one eye fighting Germans. He stuttered and limped slightly. But there was no end of interest from eligible girls. His family owned a cow. The only one in the village.

Ivan pointed to Matryona.

The wedding was humble. Guests—all sixty-six village inhabitants—brought whatever they had for the table. There had been no shortage of moonshine though. By the night, a brawl broke out. The limbs and fists were weakened, shaky. There was no blood.

In the night, Ivan tried. He raged that nothing came of it. He hit her. She spat out two teeth on the pillow. There was blood. Since then she stopped smiling in public.

Now she could. Anyway, nobody would see her.

Matryona retreated into her mind, finding relief in her memories.

It took years till Ivan recovered. They had a boy, a tiny creature, Vanechka—her love, her world. He was three when he got under the wheels of the car, which drove a big city boss. An important man he was. He came to congratulate the collective farmers on their success—they had such a good harvest that year. The plan was exceeded. From his hands, Matryona received a Certificate of Merit, Stalin's face looking lovingly at her from the colorful, thick piece of paper.

She glanced at it. Framed, it was still there, on the wall. She moved her eyes to Stalin's portrait in the corner where the icon of the Savior hung earlier. That was before the Bolsheviks proclaimed there was no God.

Matryona was an agreeable one, but that she did not accept. For her, God existed, and he would save her if it came to that. *That* could be Germans. Not that they were here—*ours hit them bad*. At least, that was what they'd heard on the radio in the kolkhoz council when it still was there. Whether or not it was true, she didn't question it. Who would dare to doubt the authority?

Stalin's portrait was the most expensive of all her possessions. First, the new power convinced people to have Lenin's portrait in every house. But then she had only a newspaper clipping of the savior of all the Russia's working people. After he died in 1924, a mobile shop came from the city bringing all different stuff. At the memory of it, Matryona put her hand to her mouth, forgetting no one would see her toothless smile. She'd fought Agrafena for Stalin's portrait and emerged

victorious from the tussle. The portrait was hers! She looked again at *Him* who replaced the icon of the Savior in the corner of veneration, and for a fleeting moment it seemed to her he smiled back from under his walrus mustache.

Suddenly—she even could not explain to herself what possessed her—she got up, took two steps to reach up to the portrait, and unhinged it from the wall, then removed the Certificate of Merit as well.

Behind her Russian stove, she had a hiding place, which harbored her treasures: the icon of the Savior and Lenin's newspaper clipping portrait. Matryona pulled up two short loose floorboards, took out the icon wrapped in canvas, and boxed the Certificate of Merit and Stalin's portrait inside. She pushed the planks to their place and for whatever reason, stomped them with her feet repeatedly.

With much reverence, she hung the icon in the corner of veneration where it belonged, said a quick prayer, and made the sign of the cross, peering into the Savior's face whose eyes stared at her with love, and yet there was also a deep sorrow in them.

She exhaled a long sigh of contentment as though she accomplished something important and returned to her observation post at the window. Gray clouds covered the sky. Up in the black trees crows were cawing.

She listened closely. It looked like the fighting was drawing nearer.

The day passed by in idle.

At sundawn, the sky became red from dozens of distant fires, and a gray screen of smoke hung all along the horizon.

The sound of the door crashing down threw Matryona from her peaceful sleep and from the stove's sleeping bench. Thank God she slept in all her gear, even her woolen shawl pulled low down on her face. *It's shameful to make people wait.*

She hastened to the inner door to unlatch it. On the step of the anteroom, a young man in a belted white, half-length sheepskin coat stood, his nose red from the frost, almost as red as the belt with a star on its buckle. Behind his back, a group of men huddled, also in uniform. Only they looked somewhat strange, Matryona noted to herself. There was nothing of a military air in them.

The men gazed at her, flabbergasted. "We thought nobody was left in the village," the one in the sheepskin coat said, somewhat hesitantly. "*Babooshka*—Granny, may we quarter in your house?"

She sighed, a bit offended that he called her "Granny." But the feeling was fleeting. "How many people are you?"

"Fourteen," the youth said, shifting from foot to foot. So did the men behind his back.

"What a stupid woman I am!" Matryona flung her arms up. "Come in, come in." She stepped aside, letting them in.

“Two rooms I have and this anteroom. Somehow we’ll accommodate.”

The men barged inside and right to her big Russian stove, stretching their hands to its white-washed walls now barely warm.

“Not kindled yet,” Matryona said apologetically. “Let me bring some firewood.”

“You stay put, Granny. Where do we find it?”

“Right there, placed against the back of the barn.” She watched the men and again was surprised how un-military they appeared. Some were young, one or two must have been in their forties.

“Ageyev, Smirnov, bring the stuff,” the red-nosed said. She perceived he was the commander.

Others wandered through the rooms, each finding a place to collapse, leaning against a wall or back into a corner. Thank God she didn’t have much furniture. And for what would she need it? All she had were her two patched up jackets and her only skirt, also mended. Some underwear she had for so long she couldn’t remember; a couple of sheets, still from her wedding, which she’d saved, she didn’t know what for? All her other apparel found a place hanging from nails at the entrance door.

Two soldiers brought a hefty armload of firewood and soon blissful warmth filled the room.

Matryona boiled her huge cast-iron pot of potatoes she received from the Kolkhoz for her work days.

“What, Granny, would you dine with us?” The

commander didn't bother to wait for her reaction and pulled on the knot of his backpack. From its inside, he took a chunk of gray bread, two cans, a spoon. "Comrade fighters," he yelled, "snack time."

The men started stretching their limbs then getting up from the floor. They sniffed the smell of boiled potatoes and a hint of a smile ran through some faces. "Like at home," one said. Two or three of them sighed.

After the meal, which they shared with her, they slumped on the rag beds she'd arranged for them on the floor and peacefully slept through the night. Only every two hours two of them would shift guards outside.

The next day, when she opened her eyes, they were gone. On the table, they left a chunk of bread and canned meat.

After the breakfast of a piece of dark soldier's bread and a small potato, she took her position at the window. In the distance, something rattled and thundered and then merged into one long thunderous rumbling now coming closer, now drifting away. Ours were showing the Germans what was what she thought.

She patiently waited for her soldiers to return.

"Let me in!" a voice full of panic shouted. Somebody tried to open the door the wrong way.

She yanked the door open, almost knocking a man down. One of the soldiers who had stayed at her hut a day before, he was shaking with his whole body, his uniform shredded and bloodied.

“Hide me.” He threw himself under her feet, begging, kissing her valenki—felt boots.

That embarrassed Matryona. It was not right for a man to fall at a woman’s feet. To help him get up, she took his hand. “Where are your others?”

“All . . . I . . .” Pale and whimpering, he almost crushed her hand.

“Come with me. I have a cellar. You’ll be safe there.”

She pushed the table aside from the wall together with the straw mat and pulled up a hidden trapdoor. “Climb down.” She knew he’d be pleased with the kind of nest she had constructed for herself in case she was ever in danger. But what case? Her people would not harm her. The Germans? She was curious about what those beasts were like. Like she heard them being described on the radio? However, why would they harm her, an old woman?

She saw the soldier disappear into the semi-darkness of the dank smelling cellar and returned to the window.

But what use was it sitting in the darkness and listening to the fight raging somewhere close, most likely at the neighboring village, that is if something was left of it—she saw fires shooting up over the treetops.

Deep in the night, she thought she heard loud wailing from the cellar. The soldier—*poor soul*—wept like a woman. Matryona lighted a candle, tottered to the hole, and looked into its darkness. The soldier lay on the bedding covered floor in the fetal position, his howls

heart-rending. She climbed down the rickety step ladder and lowered herself beside him.

“There, there now, dear.” She pushed him to her chest and stroked his head like she did when she had her son, the man’s head burning hot to the touch.

He quieted down.

In his sleep, he pressed himself into her bosom. “Annushka, Annushka,” he mumbled. “How I missed you, Annushka.”

To the sound of his loving murmuring, she dozed and woke up to somebody’s hands freeing her from her heavy jacket, touching her breasts. “What are you doing?” She wanted to say, “sonny,” but stopped. How could he be her son? It was only two months since she turned thirty-nine.

He fiercely continued ripping off the layers of her clothing, moaning, calling for Annushka.

What would people say, an embarrassing thought came, instantly replaced by the other: *What was to happen could be for the last time in his life.* She would let him do it.

He seemed inexperienced and besides, did she know what experience was? She only felt now that she had never lived through such sensations before. When he finished, he reverently removed her hand from his face and kissed it.

Ah, that was how it meant to be? She choked at the unfamiliar emotions, something flooding her, and she wanted to die right then, forasmuch as how dared she think *this* would happen to her again?

She woke up to a bright light coming down through the open trapdoor. *Spring?* In her still dazed state, she forgot that winter raged outside. She felt a warm glow flow through her as though she was just born for another life. She remembered the soldier, but he was not by her side.

She climbed from the cellar. The hut was empty and the exit door open. Over the threshold, the wind carried a pile of snow. *He left.* But maybe it was for the better, she sighed.

Matryona settled herself by the window and breathed on it attempting to thaw an opening. For better observation, she rubbed the glass in a circular motion to make the opening bigger. Through it, she saw uniformed men with their weapons at the ready moving from one house to the other. That is, what was left of them. She smiled. They wouldn't be finding anybody. She was the only one who stayed in the village.

Gray-green uniforms, steel helmets. Although she had never seen them, she knew they were Germans.

Without waiting for them to smash her door, she leaped up and hastened to meet them. As though she was a ghost, two soldiers gaped at her, aiming their rifles at her chest. She felt no fear. Life had not spoiled her, and lately, she'd learned something unexplainable, something blissful, and was now ready to die. She was Russian. Living under Germans? No way!

Another group of soldiers—*God! They looked so*

young!—joined the other two and chatted among themselves in their barking language. It looked like they were in good spirits that they did not encounter Russians around.

“Partisans? Commissars?” one said.

She shook her head and rejoiced at how easy it was to understand what he asked. Maybe their language was not so different from hers?

One of the older Germans shoved her away and stomped inside. A youth threw an angry look at the soldier who barged into her hut and pressed his right hand to his chest. Surprised, she perceived that he apologized for his comrade and could not tear her gaze from him. Her Vanechka had blue eyes just like this German lad had. The memory chipped at her heart. She shooed the feeling away. Hadn't she forbidden herself years ago to remember her sonny? What use was it in tearing her soul apart?

With a move of her arms, she expressed her invitation for the unwanted guests to come in.

Again, there was a play of gestures: the soldiers waited till she entered first.

The noise of her few utensils thrown on the floor hit her ears. So, it was not a lie. They were beasts. But what about the others? They did not look like that older soldier. In her mind, a conviction formed: there still were beasts among them.

The blue-eyed youth pulled a thin rectangle wrapped in beige paper from his backpack and stretched to her.

She spread her arms, asking what was it? He unwrapped what looked like a dark brown piece of . . . Involuntarily, she thought of the outhouse and giggled.

He stared at her seemingly uncomprehending then broke off a little piece. “Jetzt mach deinen Mund auf.” He opened his mouth, showing her what he wanted her to do.

Staring at his white, straight teeth as if transfixed, she opened her mouth and suddenly, something oily, tasting bittersweet, melted in her mouth. It reminded her of the sensation the day when her husband brought her sonny from the street and placed his little lifeless body on the table, his head deformed by what she would learn later was the big boss’ car. The taste reminded her of the henbane she’d attempted to take her own life with that night ten years ago. Did this young German want to poison her?

She did not die.

For a week, there was no noise of fighting as though the war was over. Her heart sang with delight—there wouldn’t be more deaths on her soil.

The Germans still settled in her hut. Every morning, they got up before the sun showed its existence, washed, did some exercises, cleaned their uniforms and weapons, chopped wood for her. They fixed the entrance door and patched the roof over the anteroom where snow tended to drift inside. Their three-time meals, always at the same time, mesmerized her by the strange tastes and at

the fact they willingly shared their food with her. In the evening, one of them played mouth harmonica. She set the samovar to boil. They poured some brown powder into the hot water and treated her with that bitter concoction that tasted like “chocolate.” She rejoiced that she could pronounce the word. For the whole week, she felt like she had a family.

“Russians!” A shout jerked Matryona from her sleep.

The boys grabbed their weapons and rushed outside. It was not long before she heard shooting, cannonade, and thunder that continued for hours. The sounds of a fight came in waves, getting closer then abating then becoming so close she thought the next moment her hut would be obliterated.

She was not afraid to die and prayed for those young men who fiercely killed each other just a couple of kilometers away. Peering through the frozen window, she waited for them to come back—she would boil her samovar for them—and sing their songs and eat their meals from the tin cans. And sleep peacefully on her floor carpeted with the comforters the Soviet soldiers who had billeted in her hut just a few days ago brought from the abandoned houses in her village—those few that were still relatively intact.

She did not think of them as Russians or Germans. In her mind, they were just boys. The waiting made her tired, and she dozed off.

The sound of the door opening shook her from her

daze. Here they were, beaten and bloodied, the German boys. Only a few of them now. She threw herself to help them lower themselves on the covers and started freeing them from their torn greatcoats, tunics, trousers, cleaning blood clots away, pressing on the blood oozing wounds. By midnight, she'd dressed their wounds and cleaned them from dirt and blood.

The youth with Vanechka's eyes gave her the most trouble. He was shaking, mumbling something under his breath, waving his hands at her as if seeing a ghost or looking at nothingness when he quieted down. She thanked God that bullets did not kill him, that he was not even wounded. The blood on his chest turned out to belong to somebody else. Only now she had to find some clothing to dress him—it would take hours for his soiled pants and the coat to dry.

She boiled water, went out to collect snow into the trough she used to wash her Vanechka in when she still had him.

Matryona used the hot water to melt the snow and began cleaning the boy. He whimpered, closed and opened his eyes, which continued looking at her with no signs of recognition. With no objection, he let her remove the dried feces from his lower body. Under her caring strokes, he quieted, following her every little push to have access to his most intimate parts. She didn't notice when she started humming the tunes her sonny loved so much.

When he was cleaned and garbed into her deceased husband's white Russian shirt with the collar fastened

on one side and white underwear, the only ones left after she dressed him for burial, she covered the young German with a blanket and lowered beside him on the floor. “Vanechka,” she muttered into his ear, “Sleep, my joy.”

He shifted, bringing Matryona back from her slumber. The room cooled, and she pulled him to her, wrapping her left arm around him, and all of a sudden remembered the song she sang to her sonny. So as not to disturb others, she pressed her lips closer to his ear. Since she did not recall the first verse, she started with the second one:

Tili tili bom.

The silent night hides everything

He sneaks behind you

And he is going to get you.

Feeling warmth spreading through her body, she nodded off, her own voice repeating itself in her semi-consciousness. “*And a Russian is going to get you.*”

She opened her eyes to a crash coming from outside, then it was right in her hut, stomping, cursing. In the dark, the sound of some hassle, screaming. Somebody turned on a flashlight.

“Germans!” “Russen!” Shooting broke out.

Matryona pushed herself up, spread her arms. “Stop! They are wounded!”

“Ah you, old bitch, German minion!” A rifle butt crushed into her chest.

Her blue-eyed Vanechka jerked to his feet and threw himself toward the offender who aimed his machine gun at him.

“Nye-eet!—No-oo!” She hurled herself forward, covering him with her falling body. A hot wave pierced her back. “Vanech—”

1946. Saratov. The Military Prosecutors Office

Jakov Antonovich pulled a high stack of files closer to him and lowered his head on them. *To close my eyes at least for ten minutes*, he thought. Almost a year had passed since the war was over but they, military interrogators, worked up to twelve hours a day and still the stacks of files on their desks did not wane. The mechanism of terror and repression continued to function.

He inhaled the mixed smell of newly printed or already rotting paper and hardly had he a moment to drift off before a knock jerked him from his seat.

An officer poked his head inside. “May I, Comrade Senior Interrogator?”

“Come in.” Jakov Antonovich pushed the stack of files aside and stood up to shake hands with a colonel whose uniform jacket displayed the Golden Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. “What can I do for you, Comrade Colonel?” Inwardly, he frowned. *You most likely came to ask me for somebody*. Those high-ranking applicants used their position in society to save friends or a family member from just punishment. *Did he, Jakov Antonovich, have to put his own head on the scaffold for them?*

“My name is Petrashov. Do you remember me?”

Try to think, Jakov Antonovich gave himself a mental push. “I beg your pardon, Comrade Colonel.”

“Generalov, Anikeyev, Khokhlov, Smirnov, Ageyev, Pereversev, Krasnogorov, Kalinin.”

“Petrashov? Comrade Petrashov!” Jakov Antonovich got a spasmodic, painful constriction in his throat. He threw himself to the colonel, hitting the desk and sending the files to the floor. “How—” He knew he wouldn’t be able to verbalize the question that had tortured him all these years since he bid goodbye to his men on that day at the Saratov train station.

“I’ll tell you. Let’s sit down.” Petrashov took Jakov Antonovich’s elbow and headed to the black leather covered couch.

They sat down and remained silent for a long time.

At last, Petrashov placed his hand on his chest, covering the order. “Your men . . . I owe them that—” He closed his eyes for a moment as though welcoming the images of the past to his mind.

“We detrained at a small station about twenty kilometers from Stalingrad. We spent a rather comfortable night in an old woman’s peasant’s hut, the only one left intact in that otherwise depopulated village. I still remember the woman’s name, Matryona.

“The next day, we arrived at the front and were instantly thrown into combat. The command was to take a strategically important height and hold it by any means until the arrival of the main forces. Germans were holed up, protected by concrete bunkers with armored towers, three lines of trenches, and barbed wire fences. To our luck, in the sector of our attack, they didn’t lay minefields. This fortified area stalled the advance of our army.

“A colonel—I don’t remember his name—promised that if the mission was accomplished, all shtrafniks who proved to be fearless soldiers regardless of shedding blood or not, would be discharged from further service in the penal company. They handed out to the shtrafniks the PPSH submachine guns and grenades, and at dawn, off we went.

“Your men attacked, yelling, ‘For Jakov!’ I wondered why would they do it for Stalin’s son? By that time, we knew Germans captured him. It was only later I understood your name was on their lips.

“We attacked several times, unsuccessfully. The Germans put up a stubborn resistance. Half of our company had found their death on the outskirts of that hill, but despite serious losses, our morale was high, and vigor was great, perhaps strengthened by a shot of vodka.” Petrashov gave a bitter smile.

“The command insistently ordered we throw the Germans out from their position and hold ground or die trying. At sundawn, I took the men into the next attack. Khokhlov and Yeremeyev were the first who reached the firing post and annihilated the machine gunners. Building on their success, your men finished the Germans off in a hand-to-hand fight. It was tough, harsh, and brutal. Smirnov and Mikhailov were wounded but declined to move to a dressing station.

“We still had to hold the retaken position. All my pleas to the command through the radio communication to send reinforcement were futile.”

Petrashov fished for a pack from his pocket, lit a cigarette, and smoked for a while.

“In the night, Germans did not bother us. Only shot up illumination flares in the air, most likely to prevent more of our forces moving into position.

“At dawn, they attacked again . . .

“I was wounded. Shot in both my legs and arms. Kalinin tried to pull me away from the line of fire but was killed on the spot. Krasnogorov lead people into the next attack. That I have seen with my own eyes. Later, somebody told me, he went over to the offensive with the remaining two dozen shtrafniks.

“I regained consciousness in a medical battalion to moans, screaming, groaning, loud Russian curses. Stretcher-bearers scurried around. On the table next to me lay Generalov. He seemed so peaceful. I rejoiced he survived.

“A nurse approached me saying, ‘A-aa, you came to. Thank him, he spared your life.’ She motioned to Generalov, and only then did I notice his chest was ruptured by shrapnel. They took me to the surgery room. I haven’t seen him again.”

Petrashov fell silent.

“And what about the others?” Jakov Antonovich’s voice broke with huskiness.

“When I returned to my regiment from the hospital, I learned . . .” He waved his hand hopelessly. “You know how it is.

“For that operation, I was awarded the Star of Hero of the Soviet Union. I learned that all your men were rewarded too.” Petrashov took from the pocket of his

jacket something wrapped in a piece of fabric. It took some time before he unwrapped it. On the sofa between them, he placed the awards. “This Star of Hero of the Soviet Union is for Krasnogorov. The Order of the Red Star is Generalov’s.” Then, he carefully arranged ten Medals for Bravery. “All posthumously.”

“But why do you have them? Not the families?”

“It took me months to get a response to my requests about their whereabouts.”

“And?” Jakov Antonovich tensed at a sticky feeling of shame among other emotions. Either he was too busy—and truth be said, he was—or he was afraid to raise suspicion by an unappropriated interest in the fate of the former convicts, or maybe the war deprived him of simple human compassion, but the thought of finding his men never came to his mind.

“Khokhlov, Yeremeyev, and Pereversev were orphans. Anikeyev’s and Mikhailov’s families perished in the city bombings here in Saratov. Generalov’s family was sent somewhere to Siberia and got lost there. Krasnogorov’s parents, his wife, and the son he didn’t live to see starved to death in Leningrad. I got lucky, or better to say unlucky, to meet Kalinin’s parents. Baptists they are. They refused to accept his medal. Said he took arms into his hands. They disowned him, dead or alive.” He sighed deeply. “I was unsuccessful in finding any relatives of Smirnov, Kuznetsov, Mikhailov, Balanovskiy, and Apanasenko. Thus, I thought you are the closest family to them, your men.” He gathered the awards,

carefully wrapped them in the cloth, and placed them on Jakov Antonovich's desk.

"Our men, Petrashov. Ours." Jakov Antonovich hugged him. "But what about Ageyev, the one who crippled somebody at his own wedding? You didn't mention him. And there are only ten medals."

"Ageyev . . . Yes, Ageyev . . . During the last attack, he disappeared. Either deserted or was killed . . . I don't know. He was reported missing."

They sat silently on the sofa for some time, each in his own thoughts.

In parting, they hugged again.

Jakov Antonovich returned to his table and slumped in his chair like an old man. His mind burning with the memory, he stared at the bundle then loosened it and, with much care, spread the awards on the desk. First, the Star, then the Order, then the medals. He covered them with his hands and, seeing the faces of his men in his mental eye, thought they did not bend to power. They did only what their hearts told them to do. *You were better than I. Coward. Opportunist. An adapter.*

He sighed, gathered the files, and pushed them into the safe. From the bottom of it, he took the small, sharp-pointed plexiglass knife and slipped it into the pocket of his britches.

The next day, Jakov Antonovich wrote a letter of resignation.

From the Author

The first year of the Great Patriotic War. The Soviets suffer heavy losses, mass retreat, and desertion. Nazi Germany penetrates deep into the territory of the Soviet Union. The Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic republics, huge territories of the European part of the Soviet Union are lost to the German invasion. Over 70 million Soviet people are under the yoke of the oppressor. Combat goes on at the gates of the Northern Caucasus and Kuban with its oil and grain. The Germans advance toward Stalingrad. The Soviet people start losing faith in the Red Army. The Soviet Union is upon the brink of destruction. Such is the situation in the summer of 1942. On July 28, 1942, Stalin releases Order No. 227, the so-called, “Not a step back.”

Based on the Order, penal battalions and penal companies had to be formed from the officers and soldiers guilty of a breach of discipline due to cowardice and bewilderment and, in some cases, even convicts sentenced to short prison terms were sent to penal companies as well. Their bravery in the battles on the most difficult sectors of the front gave them an opportunity to redeem by blood their crimes against the Motherland. You can read the full text of Order No.227 here: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Order_No._227_by_the_People%27s_Commissar_of_Defence_of_the_USSR

Was the Order No.227 cruel? It was. And yet, Stalin could not do otherwise. Thus, the title, *From Stalin With Love* is in no way a mockery. Only harsh measures could save the country from total disaster. The Soviet Union was fighting for its life.

Were the measures justified? As time and history has shown, they were. Was it fair to all who found themselves in the punishment battalions and companies? Most likely not. With the enemy seizing more and more territories, destroying more and more cities and villages, violating, plundering, and killing the Soviet population, the Soviet authority had no time and not enough human resources to pay needed attention to every case of the guilty ones.

The story is based on my grandfather's history and one of the events of the Great Patriotic War as it was and is called on the post-Soviet space. The main facts are accurate, but they are presented through fictional characters except for my grandfather. I took the liberty to give names to thirteen of the Soviet people who among 427,910 men shed their blood in defending their motherland in punitive military units. In *Matryona*, I hope I have conveyed a collective image of a Russian woman who, despite her difficult fate and the life full of hardship, retained her humanity and tenderness.

My mother, Nalina Jakovlevna Krivenkova, told me the story of her father, first, when I was not a writer, then when I started writing but still was not interested

in the subject of WWII, and the last time, when I visited her in Moscow, in February 2019. I understood that I had to lose no time so she could hold in her hands this tiny book—my tribute to the memory of her father and my grandfather. This feeling of urgency became a driving source for me to tell the story of Jakov Antonovich Krivenkov, one of the millions of Soviet citizens with the “These are things I cannot change” attitude. We would have to have lived at that time of fear to understand. Yet he did what little he could in the climate of total suppression of any opposition to the then existing regime.