

"One for All..."

Loud music can be heard from the loudspeakers in the centre of a coastal town. It is echoing many times through the walls of five-storey blocks of flats and its dissonance is reaching even the outskirts. There, on the gulf coast, is an old wooden house and between the young birch-trees, turning green, there is a laid table. In the middle of it there are bottles of vodka "Stolichnaya" and lemonade. Next to them there is a bowl of Russian salad and a dish of jellied meat. All over the table there are small dishes of sliced suet, garlic cloves, slices of herring sprinkled with oil and scattered with onion rings. At the table there are seven people.

Every year on the 9th of May the smartly dressed men and women get together. Today they are sitting at the table, having a drink, eating and proposing simple toasts. They celebrate the 30th anniversary of Victory, the greatest joy they must have got in their lives. Well, maybe, Gagarin as well... He also deserves a toast. In the house the record-player plays the same song and each of the seven people repeats its words, "We need only one victory, one for all, no matter what it's worth..."

The three men sitting at the table have shiny medals and even an order on the lapels of their blazers. The one with the order is older than the others, half of his face is brown and covered with wrinkles and looks like a big birthmark, and one of his eyes is damaged and can hardly see. He used to be a tank driver. He was caught in a fire

twice in his tank, he fell under the ice, bumped off three "Tigers" and reached as far as Prague during the war.

The second veteran returned from the war as early as 1942 on crutches and without a leg. His plane with landing troops had been put out of action and caught on fire just to the west of Vyazma, the paratroopers had jumped out. But he had happened to descend to a German trench. His only choice was to fire a grenade down...

The third man has also been at war. In the last days of the war, he used to be a sea cadet on a ship in the Gulf of Finland. His chest was covered with badges and of course with a medal for Victory over Germany.

Having drunk vodka and eaten, the men get up at last and leave the table to have a smoke. The women clear the table and prepare everything for tea – they put a samovar on the table, bring crusty egg and cabbage pasties out from the oven. They all know that three pasties contain secret chocolates as usual. They will bring luck to the ones who find them. While standing up, the men drink from shot glasses... and suddenly start beating up the fourth man. As a sinister ritual, they punch him heavily with their fists, trying to hit his face. They are punching him and crying at the same time.

1.

In May of 1941 Vasiliy turned twelve. The school year was coming to its end. Skipping their last lessons, he and his school friend Petka used to run to the bank of the Plyussa. They were always covered in grazes, with shaggy hair, and were wearing ragged trousers and odd-coloured jerseys. They would cast the line and sit in a boat till late at night, fanning away mosquitoes, and staring at hand-made floats sticking over the glass-like water. Then they would climb on a steep sandy bank through the hazel grove to look down at their village,

winding river and dark blue forest. They were looking and dreaming of growing up and flying to the North Pole and then, many years later, coming back to those toy-like houses with grey roofs made of discoloured slats. Usually Petka would search for his house from afar, then Vaska's, and later they would argue where the railway or rail station was...

By the night time the sun was unwillingly falling behind the edge of the woods, the sky on the horizon was looking like fresh rust and in front of the horizon, in the new fir wood, in the light wind there was the gleaming and flickering of the going day which looked like dying fire flames. The boys would go home.

Vaska's parents had died three years before. That spring they were trying to get to the other bank of the river in the flood and both had been pulled out into the fast water. They had been found a month later. Petka had never seen his father and he took offence at his mother for bringing him as a seven year old child to the village to his nan's and leaving him there for ever. She went to live in Leningrad to her new family. Vaska was not alone – he had sisters. Katerina and Alexandra were grown-ups, at the end of the 1930s they got married, settled in Luga and got into accounting college. Zina was only five years older than her brother, she stayed in the village and was like a mother to Vaska. They lived in their parents' house, kept their home and vegetable garden, picked up berries, mushrooms, various herbs, dried them and sold them to a consumers co-operative society.

At school Vaska was considered bright but stubborn and naughty. By the time he was twelve he had grown to one meter and seventy centimetres tall so he looked older than he was. Everybody said he was the dead spit of Zinka. He had the same big and hazel eyes but unlike her warm velvet sight, in his round, nearly black eyes there would always be a mischievous twinkle. Petka was dif-

ferent – blue-eyed and blonde, he was growing as a quiet and well-behaved child, but he was still quite short.

Soon a war began. On the second day servicemen came to their village from the regional centre. They lined up everyone liable for military service near the club and a young commanding officer with crimson button holes and a medal on his chest made a short speech. When he was talking, he waved his fist as if he was threatening the enemies, then he got his black pistol out of the holster for the sake of good order. After him an old man with a beard, the village blacksmith, made a speech, he had fought the Germans in 1915. The serious and gloomy seers off were standing silently nearby. When the men took seats on the benches of the lorry, the women burst out crying at the same time. The village boys stood in the same line as the men during the meeting and after that they ran after the lorry until it disappeared behind the corner.

That very day, after considering everything, Vaska and Petka decided they could not stay at home when their Motherland was in danger. They got a piece of bread, an onion, put some salt in a piece of cloth, put their packets in their bosoms and went off to the front. Two days later militiamen got them on a train and took them back to their village, luckily, the railway station was nearby.

Zina was telling off her brother for a long time then. But a week later the boys ran away again. They were caught. Zina kept telling him off, crying and asking him not to be silly, but to help her and the country there, working in the collective farm. Vasiliy hung his head and looked at his sister frowningly. He knew he was upsetting her but deep down he was glad. Sure! This time they had managed to go much further.

Soon the front-line came nearer. The Germans broke into their village. The new power was enforcing the new system: burgomasters, wardens, police goons, orders, executions... If something wrong happened in the village –

someone came from the woods and stocked up on food or unknown people exploded something, set afire or killed German soldiers – it was followed by cruel punishment immediately. And it was not the Germans who did it. It was mostly local police goons.

The boys were at it again. Since they failed to join the army, they just had to set something afire! For instance, an old club with a Nazi flag on the roof or a board near the well with notices of executions and flogs. They failed to do both of them. The first time they found diesel oil instead of petrol and it wouldn't flame up, they just wasted all their matches. The second time Petka overslept. Thank God! Because the whole village with its people would have been burnt as punishment.

In the winter of 1942 Zina was taken away to Germany for compulsory labour. Petka's nan took Vasya to stay with them. Nothing happened in the next eighteen months after that. There was gossip of the victory outside Moscow and Stalingrad but there were no changes for the villagers. Petka was caught twice and whipped by the police goons for hanging around in the woods without permission. His nan just about pulled him round. Vaska was bright and he didn't get caught. A lot of village men went to serve as police goons. They were given a ration, a wage of thirty marks a month, which was nearly three hundred Soviet roubles. They were also promised a hundred marks for "solid information" of guerillas. But there were no guerillas nearby and no information either.

"Voluntary helpers" of the new power made people work at the station, clear the railway, cut out the bushes along the road, they often got their livestock and took it to the near-by village where the Germans stayed. Petka's grandma had to take a basket full of potatoes, carrots and onions there every week. Actually, people would come out of the village only with the warden's permission. Did she have it?.. Once grandma left the vil-

lage and didn't come back. The boys kept waiting for her, then they looked for her, they even asked the local warden about her. He didn't say anything, he surely knew something but he just gave a wave of his hand. At risk of getting caught, they ran to the village where the Germans stayed, hid behind the bushes, crept along the road hoping to see and learn something about Grandma. All in vain. So they decided the Germans had killed her. They must have asked for the written permission and she didn't have it, so they shot her straight away.

After their failed trip the knocked out boys went to Petka's empty house. They would sit there at the candle light and think of some new plans to find guerillas and any food.

In the autumn of 1943 the cheerful news spread – fascists had been beat badly outside Kursk and were chased everywhere. Petka was shaking his head distrustfully and saying, "I'll tell you what, Vaska, there can't be anything good without any reason! Something will spoil it!" He must have had second sight! The police goons were making up a list of the villagers again. Estonians came to the regional centre and it was clear the people would be taken to Germany for work. Many villagers grabbed what they could with them and disappeared in the woods. They thought it was better to be near a bonfire in the woods in winter than to go to a foreign land.

The inseparable duo, Vaska and Petka, had been to the farm many times and knew it was impossible to survive there in winter, all the sheds there had broken down, the wood had rotten and the bonfire smoke would be recognized for sure – if not by the Germans then by the local police goons. However, it would be silly to stay in the village. So, without waiting to be huddled into a barn, the boys ran away as far away as they could – to the other side of the river. The SS-men decided the guerillas had taken all the villagers with them. So they burned a lot of houses according to their rules.

In early November the yellow leaves had not fallen off the trees yet but the fallen snow was bending young rowans to the ground. It had been fifteen degrees below zero for nearly a week, even the Plyussa froze. In the wind-calm the smoke over the remaining houses' roofs looked stuck to the chimneys and was stretching with white streams towards the black sky with the bright unblinking stars and the giant round moon, which was like a projector illuminating the wood, white with snow, quiet village and the low veil over the hearth and home.

Vasya and Petya had been wandering in the deep snow for a week. Starving and chilled to the bone, in wet felt boots, they at last came to the railway, then walked along it and ran into an unfamiliar village. They knocked on the door of the first house asking for food. That was where their wandering finished. Police goons grabbed the boys and locked them in the local school cellar.

The next day they and all the remaining young people of the village were ordered to the near-by station. Over the crowd of huddling people there were clouds of steam moving heavily. They had been standing in the freezing cold for two hours waiting for something, surrounded by guards with guard dogs. Suddenly they heard a command and they were pushed into two old freight cars without any explanations, the doors were shut, locked and the train began to move. The loud continuous barking of the sheep-dogs gradually faded away and the only thing they could hear was the wheel rattle against the railway joints compressed of the frost. The metal sound was hurting the boys' heads, ticking away at their childhood slipping away.

2.

Inside the carriage it was as cold as it appeared to be outside. In an hour or two it did get a little warmer because of the people breathing, so it did warm them

up a bit. The boys squeezed through into the dark corner. Petka covered Vasiliy who started picking a nail out of the floor board with a rusty piece of iron he had just found. They had been picking it out for five hours taking turns and their hands had been scratched and were bleeding. The huge nail cropped out for about three centimetres. They needed something to pick it up with! Then they would be able to lift the floor board, and another one. After that they could just dive under the floor and that would be it!

At the stops the convoy checked the train, tapped in the wheels and walls with wooden clubs. In the morning two Germans in long overcoats and with guns came into the carriage. They had a skinny bloke in a black coat with a multicoloured bar on his sleeve with them. It was difficult to say whether he was Russian. They looked around searching for someone. They didn't find anyone. They didn't give people any water or food, they just left, locked the doors and the train started moving again. In the next three hours the nail moved back to its place because of the heavy rocking and now it was hardly sticking out. The boys were extremely thirsty and starving.

Behind the window bars they could see trees, electric poles, then grey high-rise buildings, plant chimneys, stations and white signs with foreign letters on them. Trains with cannons and tanks, covered with canvas, were moving at a great speed in the opposite direction. The sky was gradually getting dark, it was the third day twilight. They were far away now, maybe a thousand kilometres from their village. Suddenly there was an explosion. The locomotive hooted drawlingly, the carriage gave a jolt, the buffers clanked. The loud dog barking and abrupt German commands were forced into the open doors with the frosty evening air and harsh smoke of the burning train. Everyone tried to jump out. Before standing up, they grabbed the snow mixed with the

black soil spattered with the explosion and swallowed it quenching their thirst. The guards were standing near each carriage and pushing the stream of people away from the railway. There were black craters, tie bars and ruined railings sticking out every way in front of the train. Someone said it was Poland.

The line of people stretched out for nearly a kilometre. There were all sorts of people: ostarbeiters, like Petka and Vaska, prisoners of war, Estonian guards, German casualties from the train. The latest were being carried by the nurses in white coats away from the main column. Some people decided the Germans were occupied with themselves and started running... They were shot straight away. It looked as though someone invisible and omnipresent was sitting high in a tree, on a house roof or somewhere on a cloud, watching the order and instantly mending all disorders in the precise German "Ordnung" - people streams' allocation.

Covered trucks came, Germans loaded their wounded and left. The crowd of the war and civil prisoners was forced to walk for another two days. Without food or water. They were just swallowing snow. If someone fell, they would kill him with a bayonet. They didn't waste bullets, they must have been saving them. Then they waited for the train and kept everyone near the station in a big old barn with holes in its roof. Everything was filthy and stunk, on the cold floor there lay half-dead wounded Red Army soldiers who couldn't get up, next to the dead, their hands would be lifted up to get a spare ration of bread. They were given hot dirty slip-slop with a small amount of potatoes which was thrown into the huge cauldron from the sacks, not just with their skin, but with the soil as well. That was gulped down from tins, hats or just with cupped hands.

Petka, grown wise by his grandma, would always say something clever, suitable for the occasion. "It's best

not to eat this slip-slop," he would say to his friend, "or we'll get diarrhoea - then we won't survive for sure. Nan used to throw away the cabbage soup which had turned sour. Even the dog didn't eat it. This is it! We'll save bread. Can you hear me, Vaska?"

Vasiliy was looking at the far corner of the barn. The women were crowding there. Some of them would show each other some small paper bags crying tenderly and hide them under their coats or wadded jackets at once. "What have they got?" Vaska thought but he didn't happen to find out then. Another train came and took away another group of prisoners with Vaska and Petka.

The open air platforms with high sidewalls were packed with people. The human mass couldn't even move. Among the alive people there were those who had just died... The boys kept together. They didn't talk, in order to save their strength. They were full of lice. While the train was moving, it was rocking and they couldn't feel the lice but when it stopped in a dead end to let another train pass, the itching would become unbearable.

This went on for two days. On the third morning it was getting freezing cold, everything reeled before Vaska's eyes... There was no Petka, no prisoners, no Germans, no Estonians with their guns on the carriage ends... He could see the young lieutenant who had come to their village to mobilize men. The lieutenant was turning to Vaska with his stretched arm holding a pistol and shouting something trying to prove a point to him. Then he suddenly bent down to Vaska and said slowly and quietly, "Follow me to attack..." The lieutenant waved his arm again, shouted something and his medal banged against his belt buckle...

Vaska startled. "Attack," Vasiliy repeated slowly to himself. Why was it now that the words sounded so clear? In June 1941 he didn't pay attention to them. "Why am I not following the lieutenant?" His blurry and muddled thoughts were like a spider web smothering his mind and

sucking it into reality. "Say I have a weapon and am rushing straight in front of the machine-gun fire. Then if I decide to fall and wait... Am I being a coward? Of course I am!" Vaska was telling himself. "I don't think people would do that in battle. It's embarrassing. But here... It's different here. Everything is different here," Vaska tried to convince himself. "You are not a fighter here, you have no weapon, no warm clothes, no food, no help from anyone and... All you think about is getting something to eat and the war to finish... It's not important how... Doesn't matter..." Vaska startled again, "Who said that?" Around him were people standing with their eyes shut and their bodies rocking to the wheels rattling. Their eyebrows, eyelashes, thick bristle on their faces were covered with white frost, there was hardly any steam of their breathing. "Was it me? I must have just thought of that. Or am I saying it aloud now?"

Vasiliy suddenly remembered he had not thought once about his Zinka or other relatives in the last ten days and he didn't even care of anything. He just wanted this endless road to finish.

A miracle turned up in the form of a skinny bloke in a cap, black coat and a coloured bar on his sleeve. At the last stop the remaining alive civilians and prisoners of war who had turned into motionless white dummies with their clothes covered with snow and rain crust were offered food ration and clean clothes by the German command...

3.

On top of the station building behind the platform there was the town name - Lublin. The soldiers would pull civilians out of the solid mass of frozen bodies and take them somewhere. They had already taken half of them and no one had come back. It was Vasiliy's turn now. His legs were frozen, numb and couldn't move. A sudden sharp pain in his groin was giving him no peace

and made him constantly double up. But if he stayed there it would mean going on the train again. No! Whatever would be, would be! He whispered something to his friend and tumbled out of the carriage. Got on all fours. A moment later Petka was near him. Knackered and not able to bend his knees, he was crawling around Vaska until the guard poked his gun in their backs and forced them to stand up.

Three Germans grabbed the boys' arms and pulled them aside. "They are going to finish us off now," flashed in Vaska's head. Suddenly the soldiers stopped and walked away, leaving the boys standing in front of the bloke in a coat and cap. "No, that's not the one who was in the carriage," Petka thought in doubt.

"How old are you?" was the bloke's first question. He was looking at Petka downwards and dabbing his chest with his finger.

"We are sixteen," Vasiliy lied trying to talk before his friend spoke. He drew himself up to his full height and demonstrated his poise: heels in, toes out, arms at side.

Petka nodded. His eyes fixed on the black, good quality drape of the coat of the bloke standing in front of him, he couldn't tear his eyes of the shiny buttons. "They must have been polished with tooth powder," flashed through his mind. Then he looked up, demonstrated resignation and faithfulness, he tilted his head like an idiot and grinned from ear to ear.

"You can choose, guys, whether you want to go to a camp or join the RLA - Russian Liberation Army," the tall man pointed at the bar on his coat sleeve and added hoarsely with a patter, "You've got to decide now if you want to serve the right purpose. If not, you'll walk to a death camp tomorrow. Majdanek is not far away from here," he wound his head towards the high pipes with black smoke on the outside of the town and headed to other prisoners.

Vaska didn't know what a "death camp", but it was clear people were killed there. He also didn't know what the Liberation Army was but he could guess it was not Russian, it must have been the Germans that had thought of that nasty trick. "We can always make it to the camp," Vasiliy thought to himself, "but to find ourselves at the front is just what we need. We'll find a way to escape from there."

"We've got to agree. What do you think, Petka? Shall we fight?" Vaska looked at his friend craftily.

"Yes, agreed! We don't need to die, do we?" Pyotr played along. He was bending over all the time not to look so small and rubbing his numb legs with his hands. "I bet we'll get some food and clobber..."

The man in a coat turned to the boys again, pushed Vasiliy towards a barracks door and shouted abruptly, "Over there!"

The boys, hunched over and limping, went into the barracks. There the stoves were smoking and it was warm. It was warm for the first time in the last seven days. At the long table made out of rough boards, there sat two people in strange uniform - it looked German, but the shoulder loops were without "cables". They were asking questions and writing down everything the boys were saying about themselves: their names, date of birth, where they lived, where their parents were, whether they had relatives who were communists and much more. Then they were given a document to sign - an application of the voluntary joining the RLA.

"Why? At least we'll have a day!" said the prisoners of war having agreed to put on a German uniform. "At least we'll have three cigarettes a day, and a thicker broth." For families of the missing in action to continue getting their food ration, prisoners of war used to register with a strange name and a made-up address.

After the railway explosion all of the prisoners got mixed up and the boys decided to identify themselves

with different names and change their age in order to join the army and be sent to the front.

Everyone in the barracks, about fifty people, were marched to the partition wall. They got undressed behind it, stood up along the wall and were washed with a water jet from a fire hose. The cold water smelt of chlorine and their eyes stung but they definitely washed out the remaining dirt and lice stuck to their bodies. The stomach-ache eased as well. After that they were given clean clothes and boots. Vaska put on underpants, then a jacket with a German spread-eagle on the right side of his chest and a coloured label on his left sleeve. He thought, "It feels foul, that's not how I wanted it... I wouldn't be able to rip it off." Vasiliy touched the label and glanced at Petka who was shifting around, trying to see his new off-size clothes and wondering if there were any more coloured labels and eagles which would need cutting off quickly later.

The next day they were transported in the trucks to the square in front of the town hall. They saw two rows of people in the same uniform as theirs, with the same stripes on their sleeves. They took the oath of fealty to Fuhrer. They pronounced in chorus, "As a devoted son of my Motherland, I am joining voluntarily the soldiers of the fighting forces of the peoples of Russia and in front of my countrymen I swear - for the good of my people I will fight Bolshevism to the death under the command of General Vlasov..." After that each of them would come up to the desk, take an ink pen, dip it in the ink and sign the oath text. "In spite of it being a foreign land, the ink-pot is the same we had at school," Vasiliy thought when he overwrote a doodle on the thin sheet with names and signatures, the same as he had written on the "voluntary agreement". He felt like piercing the sheet with a pen but then he changed his mind.

The boys didn't waste time at their shooting and marching drills. They discussed in detail all possible fur-

ther developments. Where would they be taken? When? How were they going to run away? What would they say at the home unit? As a matter of fact, their plan added up to escaping as soon as they could. What was the German oath for them? Or signing a document? The boys didn't think of that. They were going to violate a German oath, not theirs. And they had put different names... But something kept bothering Vasiliy, he felt squeamish. From time to time he would hear his painful inner voice, "We would have agreed to join that army for the sake of not freezing in that carriage..." He tried to chase away that thought. He did but it would remind him again and again, "Now there's a surprise... Over the top! Follow me!"... You are a coward, Vasya! Whatever you call yourself. Coward, coward, coward..." At time like these Petka would look at his friend differently, as if he could hear his thoughts, as if he had his doubts and asked his mate with his unusual blue eyes - he asked him the main secret question, "Will we work it out?.."

In December the independent Vlasov company was sent to Belorussia where the Red Army was advancing the attack in Vitebsk-Polotzk line. They manned the defences. It took them a long time to dig out the frozen soil, then they, being wet of sweat and invisible in their white camouflage cloaks, sat in the trench and waited for the command to advance. In front of them there was a thin forest, behind it there were Red Army lines. "There are Russians both sides..." Vasiliy thought, then he bent over to Petka and whispered, "Damn, how can we cut the bars off? We can't take the cloak off, can we?"

"Look what I've got," Petka got the overcoat collar from under the camouflage cloak and proudly turned it over. There was a shiny red enamelled flag with a star in the middle and with big yellow letters "CIY - Communist Youth League". "I found it before the war when I went into town with nan.

A green rocket flew up into the sky, the Vlasov “volunteers” reluctantly got out of the trench and slowly moved forward in line. Nearby a machine-gun was peppering the Russians. The boys got delayed for a moment and when everybody had gone into the assault, they shot the machine gunners and followed the others. They just needed to turn left and run another hundred metres. Over there, behind the glade, across the clearing, they could see some fresh black soil in the snow. They were running in zig-zags trying to save themselves from the bullets on either side. There was the forest! Behind them a gun machine was firing again. Petka fell into the snow. Vasiliy fell as well. It was not possible to run with the machine-guns firing. He called Petka but his friend stayed lying face down and didn’t move, then Vasiliy crawled up to **him**, turned Petka over onto his back with great difficulty and clung his head to his friend’s heart. There was silence! He started looking for bullet marks but when he looked at Petka’s glazy eyes, he understood everything. The circumstances didn’t let him waste time. “Shall I drag him or leave him here? Drag or leave?” Vaska hesitated for a moment, then he closed Petka’s eyes – he remembered grown-ups do that – and crawled away from him without remembering about the badge on his collar.

Another minute – and Vasiliy flew over the black soil parapet and found himself among the Red Army soldiers. Around him were the same people as he, in white cloaks, shooting from guns, pulling off the wounded and swearing. His heart was high, his body was filled with comfort and he felt like sleeping. At first they didn’t pay any attention at him but when they beat off Vlasovites’ assault, two of them crawled to him, looked carefully and the elder one smashed his gun-butt on his head. Vasiliy passed out.

His white hood had moved ages ago and under it was a black trapper hat with an eagle instead of the red star.

The secret agents didn't even listen the story about two kids, Vaska and Petka, escaping from the hunger and cold. "You, little shit, are too quick!" the lieutenant concluded. He looked like the officer who had come to their village at the beginning of the war. He was also young, with a medal on his chest, but instead of the bright crimson buttonholes he had bright blue shoulder loops. He was carefully writing down everything into his book and at the same time he was saying what he was writing, as if he was spelling, "... before the other soldiers of RLA he got into the trench occupied by the troop unit No.4527/23 and was captured by arriving Red Army soldiers."

Vasiliy was sent to the back land, into the marching check-filter camp. There were Red Army soldiers in just service shirts, Cossacks in their warm rammed round hats, some blokes in black police overcoats or even SS uniform with ripped off "zips" in the buttonholes... They slept straight in the snow.

"I shot myself in the foot," Vasiliy whispered in a fit of anger. After everything he had seen in the Special Branch and here, in the camp, he suddenly realized that had he been older they would have done him in without thinking. At least they believed he was under fifteen... The boy even thought, "Such bad luck, Petka. It's all for nothing - we are going behind enemy lines again!"

But that was a different home front. In the prison office Vaska was handed a piece of paper, "Sign it!" He saw, "By the decision of the Special Council of the Military Division... according to Articles of Criminal Code of the Russian Federation... imprisonment for 25 years with indefinite deportation..." The piece of tissue paper was shaking in Vasiliy's hands while he was reading the hardly seen printed letters of the verdict. The ink of the typewriter had dried out and the tape had worn out so instead of the letters the thin transparent paper had been punched through with the metal characters. Tears were

showering from his eyes and wouldn't let him see the text. That was the second time in one week that Vasiliy was signing a document. Second time in his life. This time he was signing with his real name. He had been informed!

4.

Before the war Vaska's sister Zina was considered the most beautiful girl in their village. Fellows were storming her house! When the Germans came, she was hiding indoors. They took her among other villagers to work in Germany - she put a dirty scarf on her head. For a week it was really filthy and stinky in the carriage, there was dirty straw everywhere, two buckets of defecation fell and were rolling in a puddle of urine, splashing everyone around. Fresh air was only getting through a small railed window at the top of the wall and there was definitely not enough of it. The first time they allowed the people to come out of the carriage was in Leipzig. The girls were standing along the wall, huddled together, hungry, grubby, in ragged clothes. In short, they looked like slaves. They left the carriage, staring, looking around them. Everything was clean, the houses were colourful, the churches unusual, an orchestra was playing, the chimneys were shining. The column was led from the carriage to a barrack and soldiers in black uniform were selecting the girls for working as maids in rich Germans' houses. Zina was selected - her beauty was impossible to hide.

The next morning after having been disinfected, washed, dressed in clean clothes and with her hair brushed, Zinaida appeared in front of her new family. Now she was an "Ostarbeiter", a prisoner registered at a concentration camp No.153/46 outside Leipzig but placed on detached service in a German family. The head of the family was a building engineer, a mature tonsured man, he had a young wife, a two-year-old boy and a son

from a previous marriage, a student. Everyone was cultured and polite, no one shouted, the house was clean and tidy. Zina had her own room with a bed and a bedside cabinet, a big mirror and two blankets. She was fast to learn orders, surprisingly well remembered long German phrases and could say them without an accent. Among all the dresses and aprons for the maids she would choose the prettiest cuts with a pleasant combination of colours. That was noticed. They started trusting her. She was serving up, doing the shopping for the family and even looking after the child. In short, she was promoted.

The engineer's eldest son, tall, slender and cultured even fell in love with the Russian maid, he would often come into her room to help her with her German and to learn some Russian. Every time he would bring her a flower. Sometimes a twig of mimosa or lilac, sometimes iris or another flower with a complicated name she couldn't remember. When he kissed Zina, she burst into tears and her big brown eyes became even more beautiful.

In her free time Zinaida would sit at a small desk and write letters to her brother and sisters with an ink pen. She wrote to them every week and always added something in German. She would tell them about her life in a foreign land, her work and her host's son. Every time she would put a photo of herself in the envelope – in a new dress, in a coat with a handbag and a hat which didn't hide her hairdo. She had a whole pack of those letters. Zina would tie them up with a ribbon. It was a sort of her diary. There was just one trouble – she was telling them about herself but she didn't know anything about them. How were they? How was Vasya managing in the village? He was so silly, he had surely run away again to fight fascists. There was no one to catch him now.

Time was flying. In the autumn of 1943 the engineer's eldest son, being a fourth-year student of university, was called up to the war. Before he left for the Eastern

front, the father and son had a long conversation. The head of the family was trying to convince his son. But what? Zina couldn't understand. She just understood separate phrases. "Hitler and fascists began the war... Death of Germany..." Then something about the family, duty, motherland... Having lived in Germany for a year, Zinaida was aware that those words were enough for the talkers to find themselves in a camp.

Three months later they got a notice saying the engineer's son had gone missing. When the father was reading the letter, his wife was sitting in an armchair, weeping and holding a white handkerchief near her eyes. Zina was standing next to her and crying. The little boy was frightened, he tried to hold her knees with his little hands.

Before New Year 1945, for Christmas, the family gave Zinaida a new woollen coat, a short calabar coat, a fur-trimmed hat and brown leather high-heeled boots. Neither more nor less, a German girl! She was fluent at speaking and reading and could even write in German. Her talent was brought to light! For three years in the family she had nearly become German.

One day in spring the engineer called Zina to his study and started an unusual conversation, unusual for the host and maid. He offered Zina to go to the west with them, to Lotharingia, which was his motherland. He even explained why. "Because the war will end soon, Nazism will be defeated at last, but it's better to live as far away from the Russian Army with its political officers as possible... I know what I am talking about. I worked in Russia in 1935..." The head of the family would put Russian words into his German trying to make her trust him. Zina had already got used to not understand everything spoken in the family. There was nothing to understand really - everything was clear without words. But this time she had to be persuaded. The Russian words in the German's speech didn't add

any points. On the contrary, they just made things worse and pushed Zinaida away, reminded her of her village, brother and sisters... They made her remember another thing – the feeling implanted from her childhood, “It is a crime to leave your country or even think about it, it is as dreadful as espionage or sabotage..”

Zinaida stayed on her own in the big empty house.

The first day when the Russians appeared in town she was thought to be a German, they tried to find out where her family was, where the men were, they were looking for military uniform in the wardrobe. When she started speaking Russian, the instinct worked, “You slut can speak Russian! Spy!” First they beat Zina up, then they pulled her onto a bed. Her tears, shouts, Russian language, all the swear words she knew – nothing stopped them. It was not just lust that drove them, it was revenge. She tried to seem Russian to them but the soldiers’ verdict, “We don’t have Russians like her!”

In the Soviet military commandant’s office they started check-ups and endless questioning. Everyone had to go through that purgatory: survived concentration camp prisoners, Ostarbeiters, interned persons, former Vlasov volunteers, refugees from the Baltics and Western Ukraine. They didn’t have enough interpreters and Zina came in handy. She was enrolled on the military administration staff. She would sit at questionings, translate, write down questions and answers. She had seen a lot of fates in the three after-war years. Some people were the same as her. Most of them were sent to a filtration camp. They were let out only if someone could confirm that while working for Germans the person had been fighting against fascism together with the German underground and Communists... So it would have taken at least two years to get to the bottom. At the same place, in Leipzig, in 1947 Zinaida was admitted to Komsomol as an award for her work in the commandant’s office.

In those days many people had doubts about whether to return to Motherland or not. It was not clear what would happen to them. If they had worked for the enemy, they were public enemies themselves. Even if Germans lived in your house during invasion you were their ally! But these thoughts were torturing mostly people who had found themselves with the Americans or English. People who had been in the Russian zone didn't really think of that. Zina would be anxious now and again. When she found herself in the middle of Germany at the very beginning of the war, the very phrase "It's full of Germans in town" seemed terrifying. Then she got used to it. Now she had all home faces around her - it looked she was already at home! For her there was no doubt - she had to go back! To her own village.

Having worked in the commandant's office for three years, Zinaida got a reference letter from the MSS saying although she was interned, she was "good". She went to Leningrad. Her German clothes - she didn't have any others - made her look uncommon and alarmed most people. She would be walking in town, so beautiful that other people turned around, as if those in Leipzig who said, "We don't have Russians like her", were right.

Her sisters Katya and Shura returned from the evacuation in 1944, straight after the siege of Leningrad was lifted, and in 1947 they as accounting college graduates were forwarded to work in the Regional Financial Department of Primorsk, former Finnish town of Koivisto. Their husbands Dmitry and Gleb went with them. Gleb was a former tank man and worked as a gas welder in the only secret plant in town. Every morning he left for work at 7 and every night he came home at 7, knackered. Just the journey took him 2 hours every day. He would bring home a bucket or a hand brace made at work. Later on stainless steel appeared. Workers would make stools,

pails for pickling, door handles, knives for themselves. All the tombs in the local cemetery were shining with that metal. On Sundays Gleb would have a drink at dinner time and with a sad heart recall the pre-war years when he had been an honoured tractor driver rewarded with the certificate of honour of the USSR Supreme Soviet...

Katya's husband was invalided from military service at the end of 1942 and he returned to his wife after he had found her in the evacuation. He didn't work, he stayed at home and drank vodka. Once when he was in a health resort about fifteen years after the war, a doctor told him he should drink dry wine instead of vodka. How could he have said that! Now Gleb was swallowing dry wine one bottle after another. He didn't wish any of his youth fun, memories of daring fights after disco in the village club. In 1964 the family moved into the first five-storey brick block of flats in town - with central heating and gas, and he didn't leave his flat for weeks.

Zina got a room in a wooden house on the skirts of Primorsk. Around it there were sheds of unpainted faded planks and a few rickety barracks remained after the Finnish. She started teaching German in a local school. She was young and beautiful, it was impossible not to take notice of her. A handsome guy with long whiskers and a forelock sticking out of the naval cap who was an executive officer on a fishing seiner and was called Nickolay, had been wooing her for a month. He was known to everyone in town. Men like him wouldn't miss any woman. Zina tried to avoid him, she liked the deputy head teacher who was teaching Maths. He was considerable and got on in years. The executive officer, on the contrary, was fond of the bottle and was about five years younger than Zina.

However, once after a party on the occasion of the first open water, Nickolay stumbled into Zinaida's room, pushed her on the bed and raped her. Zina got

pregnant and had to solemnize a marriage to Nickolay. She was terrified of publicity – she was different from everyone anyway.

The executive officer was hardly ever at home. When he did come back he would draw himself into drinking. Then the couple would argue with or without any reason. He would see her German photo where she was wearing a hat and smiling – and start shouting at her, rip the photo into pieces, jealous of her past life. He would often lay hands on her.

When it was time to give birth, Zina found out the baby was stillborn and she would never be able to have children.

5.

Prisoners in the Siberian camp found out the war had been over only a month later. The news had been withheld from them. They probably didn't want to share the joy with the prisoners. To announce it in front of the line of prisoners was the same as after the battle in front of the Reichstag. They couldn't afford to hug and kiss them all. What was more, all the prisoners were different – German prisoners of war, volunteers of Bandera and Vlasov having offended in the war or during invasion, police goons... There were also servicemen and engineers, scientists and priests, accountants and students who had already served ten years... Those were called "politics" and sent from one camp to another so that they couldn't get used to each other. A spicy mixture of "spies", "diversionists" and "followers of Trotsky and Zinoviev" could have exploded! There were also robbers and real gangsters – it was not possible to handle everything! Each person was so complicated!

Everyone accepted the news of victory differently. Some people didn't react at all. Victory meant they had to

serve for a long time! The difference now was to get rid of the unnecessary illusions during the check-up, when they had to pronounce louder and more confidently, "Prisoner so and so, article so and so, serving a term of imprisonment of so and so years." Someone might have had a quiver inside, under his jacket, near his heart, but only a little bit, as if the victory was somewhere else, in Korea or China, and had nothing to do with their time, area or soul. Other prisoners were sincerely happy, some waited for an amnesty. Police goons and Vlasov volunteers, those who had been chasteners, were angry – they had backed Germans and miscalculated. Those didn't miss a chance to take a revenge to the "Krauts" – Bandera's followers and Balts.

Every time Vasiliy was moved to another prison – in Komi, beyond the Urals or Kolima – he peered into faces trying to find someone like him, an unreal Vlasovets, offended by the power for the wrong accusation. Vasiliy tried not to think of his childhood. His agonizing thoughts came to no good – just despair. When the twilight made all the colours fade away, he had nowhere to run from his nightmares. Fear made him live with his memories and added an incredible heroic nature to them. All his life went through his conscience and sometimes he felt offended he was serving time for nothing, like he was an invalid and he couldn't even call himself a Vlasovets with pride and dare, like the others did.

Then the morning would come, grey, joyless and vague. The future would seem a dreadful kaleidoscope of a wrench, broken dreams and expectations of the unknown.

"How I would love to run away! I would pick mushrooms, go fishing, make a bonfire, build a hut," Vasiliy was dreaming childishly. "Why not? I could... But what for?! Again he had just one thought – how to escape! To run away into the woods, a thick forest where they wouldn't be able to find him. Maybe, to the North... He

was lying on the bare plank bed shining of the muddy, sweaty and bloody prison uniform of thousands of prisoners. Over the camp there were flying rain clouds threatening to burst any minute. They were like fate, putting pressure on everyone settling down there, calling either a full apathy or readiness to act. The first of them was killing any hope and the second one was killing apathy. Every person had to make a choice.

"I've got to wait for the summer," Vasilij decided.

In the summer of 1947 everyone came to life. The sun was giving back strength fast. One day in July the governor chose about ten people and sent them and the guards to a new site in the woods, twenty kilometres away. There was a shed or an old half-demolished cottage which they fenced off straight away. That was where the prisoners had to stay: political prisoners, criminals, ex-soldiers of RLA and a German prisoner of war. The guards lived in a tent next to them. There were two spotlights connected to a slider with light oil. For some reason in a thick forest they had to dig out two hundred holes, two by two metres each and two metres deep. The heat was unbearable. There was no escape from it and from ubiquitous ginger mosquitoes. At least it was not a prison! As Petka used to say, "Something will spoil it!" Evil bloodsuckers lived just to take the sun energy from mice and men immediately. Blisters from their bites covered the prisoners' faces, necks and ears. They were scratched to blood with dirty hands and all the body got abscessed. Drunk from the blood, mosquitoes were falling on the ground or into the bowls with thin broth. Some prisoners would squeamishly move them aside with a spoon. Others just ignored and gulped down hot water with an overcooked onion and thin cabbage leaves mixed with thick ginger mush.

In the night shift the guards allowed them to leave unfinished holes and start new ones so that at midday in the full blaze of the sun they could climb down the

unfinished holes and dig the ground in the shade of their walls. The ground was unbearably hard. Now and again the prisoners would sit on the bottom of the hole and dig it with a hack, trying to see, "What's there under it, when will the ground be normal?" It was mostly limestone, which was impossible to dig with a shovel. At four o'clock in the afternoon they would beat the rail and the guards led everyone to the river to water. People got into the river in their clothes and drank water like horses. Under the hot water it would become warm and didn't quench their thirst. While the guards were not watching, some people managed to fling themselves into the water, get close to the bottom and swallow the cool water there. If the guards saw that, they started firing a rifle in the water, as it was considered an attempt to escape.

They dug two hundred holes, grouted in and on the top of each of them built frameworks the same size for the coming pillars, between them they put planks at a height of two metres, which was a path for wheelbarrows. The tough guys made the cement, the political prisoners were standing near the holes and throwing stones into the mixture poured out of the wheelbarrows, the rest of them were pushing the wheelbarrows along the laid planks. They were not nailed up, just laid one on another, and under the weight of the prisoner with a wheelbarrow long planks were sagging and separating and the people were falling on the stones scattered about. From outside, through the two-metre pillars, it was impossible to see whether a prisoner had fallen or was still pulling his heavy wooden wheelbarrow along the serpentine board road. Everyone fell many times, but the planks could not be fixed - nails were on strict allowance. Vasilii's face and body were covered in bruises; the palms of his hands were tied with rags - his hand muscles were so stretched he couldn't hold a spoon. In front of his eyes there was dreadful red limestone, as if

covered with blood, and grey slush of the cement rolling in a wheelbarrow.

Vasiliy's heart was high only at the end of the shift when everyone else started snoring on the hay. Through their snoring he could hear subtle shivering of the leaves in the aspen grove. That was when he liked to get up, come to the giant hole in the wall and enjoy the sight of the leaves change their colour in the beams of the powerful spotlights. In only one second they would turn from invisible to white, with shiny silver. It looked to him that the outside world was shining and invitingly flickering in the night.

"This is where I've got to try and run away," Vasiliy decided, "there are only five guards, it's easy to hide, it's high time..."

Today there was a skinny German with a wheelbarrow in front of Vasiliy all the time. Suddenly he disappeared. "Goodness me!" Vasiliy nearly shouted with disappointment. He had been getting ready, calculated everything but the German left him behind! The tall, skinny guy was lying on the ground among stones, doubled up unnaturally, his wheelbarrow was lying on his legs and the lips on his bloody face were whispering something. Vasiliy heard, "Help". He had been planning to fall off the board road, hide behind the hills of stones and then escape into the woods running between the holes and pillars. The German spoilt everything. Two people would have been too much, the guards would notice. Vasiliy stopped his wheelbarrow, jumped on the ground and pulled the long guy to the barrel with water for cement which was near the shed. A guard came up to him and Vasiliy gave a wave of his hand - it was a common thing. He ripped a piece of the German's clean shirt and bandaged his head. The injury looked serious, he might have had concussion, but there was not much blood. The German remained lying

near the barrel but the rest of the prisoners were led to the river in the evening to unload the barge of cement with shovels. They returned only in the morning. They were covered in white and had breathed in a lungful of cement, enough for the rest of their lives. Vasiliy was coughing non-stop, he was scared to have something stuck or glued inside, like the pillars in the framework. He was tired but couldn't sleep of overpressure.

The German had already regained consciousness, he stumbled along to his saviour and started thanking him. He spoke quite good Russian. He secretly pulled some green grass from behind a board in the wall, then something else wrapped in a cloth and gave them to Vasiliy. "These are horse-radish and honey. Put it in a leaf and chew, It's to not get ill. Vitamins..."

"Where did you get them from?" Vasiliy was stunned.

"I found the horse-radish on the bank," the German said proudly, "I dug it out with my hands and planted it behind the shed, in autumn you can eat its roots. If we live that long... But we've got to water it."

"What about this?" Vasiliy bit off a piece from the sticky dark brown mass. It tasted tart and sour and its incredible linden flavour savoured smoke. The wonderful product soothed Vasiliy's unceasing cough.

"The honey is right there, in a hollow. I'll show you," Jerry suddenly changed his face and added very seriously, as if it was the most important thing in life, "There's more there but we shouldn't take everything, the bees need some for the winter."

There were two hours left until getting up. The German didn't stop talking about himself. He was a botanist student but hadn't graduated, he had been called up in 1943 and sent to the Eastern front. He had been in a supply troop, then their base had been surrounded, many had been killed and he had surrendered with a white flag.

“It’s much better in a camp with prisoners of war than to shoot civilians,” the student said. He had seen SS-men that made soldiers do that. “Nazis are a great trouble for Germany,” Vasiliy could see the German was happy to have found someone who had helped, listened to him and maybe even understood him.

Vasiliy was listening to him in silence and chewing the mixture of horse-radish and honey. He was waiting to hear the usual phrase from the German prisoners of war, “Hitler kaput!” but he didn’t. He couldn’t talk about his own misfortunes and he didn’t want either. “No one believes me and this Jerry won’t,” Vasiliy decided. The German suddenly held Vasiliy’s hand, looked in his eyes and started talking calmly and confidently, “What called you to the war? You wanted to go to the front yourself, didn’t you?” Vasiliy nodded. “You wanted to and you did. It doesn’t matter that you did only through this uniform,” the German dabbed with his finger the place on Vasiliy’s chest where there was a mark from the cut off emblem of an eagle. “With me it was different... Neither of us wanted this war and now we are sitting together in this shed... You treated me like a human being. I didn’t think you were like this, you had always looked at me with hatred. But you turned out...”

“Russians can’t be angry for a long time.”

“Yes. My father used to say this. He knows Russians and he’s always been against this war.” The German stopped talking, squeezed his lips and shook his head as if he had thought of something dreadful. “What has happened to him? If it had not been for my father I wouldn’t have probably surrendered. There was so much propagan-da... What a nightmare! You shouldn’t have believed those either!” The student pointed at the dark mark on the faded RLA uniform. “When I was leaving, my father recited the words of the Ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius, “This terror, then, this darkness of the mind, not sunrise with

its flaring spokes of light, not glittering arrows of morning can disperse, but only Nature's aspect and her law..."

Vasiliy didn't understand those words but something stirred in his soul. It was strange, the German had either heard about the unsociable Vlasovets or was really discerning, but Vasiliy was surprised to hear his words and he appreciated and trusted the guy and, like a sponge, he absorbed everything he was saying. It was that night that a new strange feeling was born in Vasiliy's heart. It was not self-confidence but it was incomprehensible peace. It felt like he entered a quiet harbour, which was an amazing shelter for his tortured soul, and everything in the woods was satisfying his eye and that feeling seemed to never end. It felt like it did when he had been with Petka on the high bank of the Plyussa... "I can't believe that!" Vasiliy thought, "A little bit of quiet water and a beam of the sunset are such common things, but also the dearest things and they have equalized everyone..."

"Don't even think of trying to escape," the German interrupted Vasiliy's thoughts, "you won't be able to get out of taiga on your own, especially in your shoes with holes. Give them to me tomorrow night, I will mend them." After a moment he added, "You like saying, 'Freedom, freedom...' The main thing is to feel free, the rest is nonsense. As you say, all the trouble will pass away."

"To feel free behind the wired fence..." Vasiliy said aloud. "How is it?" He understood it not straight away, but very soon, maybe the next morning.

After the morning check-up the prisoners were led to the holes to work. Their clothes, hardened of sweat and cement, were rubbing their bodies and didn't let them nap on the move. Among the uneven column of the prisoners in their clothes covered in cement, the German stood out with his dark green coat. He was walking and without looking under his feet he was enjoying the nature, lifting his head and watching the clear sky. He didn't look like someone

who had fallen on the stones the day before, he didn't look like a prisoner in a camp. Everything cheered him up that morning: the trees were rustling free and easy, the dew was shining in the grass, it smelt of the morning freshness and everywhere the air was so fresh it made Vasiliy feel drunk! There was a vegetable bed behind the shed. The plants had become a little dry in the morning sun. The student looked enchanted when he took a mug out of his pocket and walked confidently to the water barrel...

A gun shot. The German stopped, turned his head towards the guard and looked at him, surprised. A moment later he fell on his back, as if someone had hit his long legs from his back with a stick. The prisoners came out of trance and stopped, three of them tried to come up to the chap lying at the verge, waved their arms and started swearing at the guards. After all, there were only ten of them, not a hundred. They had been working together for a month and had become close. It didn't matter that he was Jerry. At first many of them used to hit or push him creepily.

Vasiliy was the first to rush to him but he heard the icy sound of the gun shutter and froze. The German was lying the same way as the day before, with his arms spread and his long legs bent unnaturally. The bloody bandage on his forehead had moved onto his blonde hair and his eyes were wide open and staring upwards. The morning blue sky was reflecting in them and his genuine surprise hadn't ended the shining joy. Next to the plants with wide and slightly faded green leaves there lay his aluminium mug.

6.

A year later, in 1948, all German prisoners of war were sent to their motherland. And nineteen-year-old Vasiliy had twenty one years of prison ahead of him. Only now he felt better, he knew he would overcome everything

and survive. He had got an inner core, which kept him alive in the difficult hours, days, months and long years.

"Maybe, everything is made this way," the young guy with an old man's experience would think to himself, "if you don't go through hell or don't get broken once, you can't believe in yourself." Now Vasiliy treated everything differently. A lot of things were clear to him now, and the main thing was he could understand and feel himself, his life-giving union with nature. He would tenderly watch the steam over the clots of the new soil, warmed by the uprising sun and dug along the barbed wire, - where there was freedom, or more precisely, his native land... Now he understood what the crying women had been hiding on the way to Poland - their native soil.

In 1953 Stalin died and a lot of committees came to the Siberian camp. Every day they would interview forty to fifty prisoners. The interview didn't last longer than five minutes and always ended with, "You have committed a crime but the Soviet Government grants you with amnesty and releases you." The word "rehabilitation" was not known to the amnestied.

After the amnesty Vasiliy stayed in the Magadan region. No one had annulled the perpetual exile! He worked in all sorts of places, studied in third-rate trade school, where they accepted people with just primary education, and later he finished an evening secondary school. In 1957 his exile was cancelled.

"That's it! I am free! I can go wherever I want and can do whatever I want! Now I can start looking for my relatives."

It was now, when all the problems had been left behind and he seemed to be able to calm down, that something was bothering him and he had new disturbing questions, "Who am I now? How can I live with my relatives? What am I going to do?"

In his memory there arose his sister Zina's image, very grown-up and serious. Like a teacher. Then there was Petka with his tricky ideas... He couldn't forget his blue eyes! Their dreadful stillness was still hurting Vasiliy. "If he had got to the trench, what would he have done? Petka would have never agreed to be found guilty. I know him! Mind you, what would the difference be? It's only important what the other people think of you! Who are those other people?"

Vasiliy's memory returned him to the Siberian camp again, into the year of 1947 and his conversation with the German who had given him a green leaf of horse-radish, wild honey and revelation in his last night. "Everything happening to you just makes you stronger," the student had told him confidently. "That was said by one of our philosophers, not me. Just believe it!" The German looked at Vasiliy and said apologetically, "Don't resent your motherland! It's in a very difficult position at the moment. Both yours and mine. It can't look in every person's heart." He said that and grinned when he thought, "Will this boy understand that?" He personally was only a couple of years older. "I will tell you that - It doesn't matter what good things you've done but it does matter that you wanted to and aimed to do it genuinely. Even if no one ever knows about it. And they will think you are an enemy. You might not be able to prove anything to anyone at all..."

In that night of revelation with the German prisoner Vasiliy recollected for the first time in four years himself and Petka standing on the high bank of the river, being happy and free, enjoying the sunset, the river and their village and dreaming.

Then he remembered the dust after the truck going to the front. He could even feel the dust on his teeth... The carriage with the rusty nail, his palms in blood... and the damned eagle on his chest.

Today, ten years later, these thoughts were not enough for Vasiliy. He was dreaming of being useful to other people, he needed someone kind to warm him up. "Who is my dearest and nearest? Zinaida, of course! I need to tell her everything and then go to the village, see the steep bank of the Plyussa..."

A year later Vasiliy found his family. Zinaida sent him an invitation and he went to see her. The town was not ordinary, it had an important plant, which was a restricted area, but the local authority allocated him a room in a half-ruined cottage with a stove in a working village and he got registered there. He mended what he could, chopped some firewood. Because of his files he couldn't work at the plant, of course. So he got a job as a stoker in a boarding school for disabled children. His shift was twenty four hours followed by three days off. At first he lived with Zina and Nickolay. When he moved to his own room, he would often go into the woods, get across the river to the isles and wander there for a long time looking for hollows with wild bees. When he found them he made some hives, put them up in the woods in a glade. Two years later Vasiliy started selling honey to a consumer co-operation and getting decent money to live on. Then he bought variety of materials - leather, rubber, felt, strong thread - and established shoe repair. He did it for his acquaintances. Everyone in the village knew Vasiliy-the-shoemaker could cure any illnesses with honey, was always willing to help and support, he was a local sage and voodoo, the right person in town. He was only thirty at the time.

Vasiliy lived as a loner, didn't go anywhere, only to the grocery's or to the shop to buy some clothes. He would come to a shop, dab a loaf of bread with his finger, pay for it, get the bread and leave. Like a foreigner. He never settled down. But when he was in the bee-garden, he transformed. He would wander around the hives, pull something out of them, then put it back

and be talking all the time. He would talk to the bees – praise some of them and tell others off but affectionately... Vasiliy was also good at listening to other people. When someone popped in to get some honey or to share an issue, they would leave enlightened, confident and feeling lucky all of a sudden.

The second year after Vasiliy came to Primorsk, his relatives got together for the first time to celebrate Victory Day. At the end of the tableful the men got off the table and went to the very gulf coast. Nickolay hustled, smiled unnaturally, got a small bottle of vodka out of his side pocket, then three wet little shots with tobacco crumbs stuck to them. "Let's drink to ours!" His brothers-in-law turned to each other, and Vasiliy stayed aside. Gleb and Dmitriy looked at Vasiliy and lowered their eyes, embarrassed, but a second later they looked at their relative again. Now there were contradictory feelings in their faces. Was it their anger? Or were they tears in their eyes which were quenching their feelings?

Before he finished his shot, Nickolay suddenly hit the pit of Vasiliy's stomach and jumped away, fearing a fight-back. He waved his arms and shouted, "To ours!" The instinct worked fast. The other brothers-in-law dropped the unfinished vodka shots and started hitting Vasiliy with their fists, legs and crutches.

Vasiliy seemed to have been waiting for that, he wasn't surprised. He knew why they were beating him, although it wasn't just their hatred to Vlasov volunteers, there was a personal after-war thing... He understood why Gleb and Dmitriy had tears in their eyes. He also knew why their tears were different. He knew Nickolay would be the first to beat him next time as well, trying to hit him as painfully as possible. Because he himself had not been at the front. Because his Zinka had a thing for her brother. Because Vasiliy-the-shoemaker was known and respected in town.

The brothers-in-law were his relatives but nothing in the past had related them together. Nothing apart from the war...

A week later Vasiliy and Zina decided to visit their home village. It seemed to be nearby but they had to travel by train for a whole day, then by bus and a hitch. They got there only in the evening. There were no remaining houses left but in the rowan-tree thicket they found their preserved bath-house and stayed there overnight. In the morning, before walking to the station through the woods, they stood near the burnt framework of their house, visited their parents' grave, then they went up the high cliff and stood there watching what had been left from their village...

The riverbed was overflowed by the fast spring water. It was running down and nothing seemed to be able to stop it. The smooth surface of the water could reflect the still sun and the white clouds moving slowly. A fish must have come up to the surface, gulped some air and gone back to the bottom. Near that place the slight waves ran in different directions and the sun reflection could be seen shaken. Having passed the reed and stone, the waves got quieter near the bank and surrounded birch-tree trunks and alder bushes with the last season catkins on their bare branches.

"You know, their life hasn't worked out, they are not fine now," Zina started talking. "It's terrible they are like that. They haven't experienced what we have... But the war affected everyone, I feel sorry for them..."

Vasiliy didn't realize at first his sister was talking about the relatives but when he did, he forced himself to smile. He wanted to comfort her, then he cuddled her and said quietly, "As if you and I don't have problems in life!"

"I know, but you and I are strong... everyone respects you..."

"Especially your hero. He tried to be the first to hit me, it must be revenge for something," Vasiliy interrupted her. "How can you live with him?"

"I don't. It's only appearance." Zina was silent for a minute, then she suddenly said, "You know, I've never loved him. He raped me... The same as our soldiers in spring of 1945."

"Why did you have to marry him?"

"The baby... But it was stillborn... Anyway..."

"The same thing with me - anyway!" Vasiliy stopped, he didn't know how to say it. You know, Petka used to say that good things never happen on their own. Something will always spoil them."

"What do you mean?"

"I am all on my own," then he added quietly, "I am thirty but I have never been with a woman and never will be now..."

Zinaida became serious, touched Vasiliy's hand, comforting him, "Don't be silly, Vasiliy! The only thing blokes can't get through is alcoholism. The rest is nonsense, things will end up alright."

She turned her beautiful face to her brother. Her big brown eyes were shining in a special way, as if they were looking at the fireworks.

"I've only loved one person..." she said and felt calm after revealing her biggest secret. "I used to live in his father's house in Leipzig then."

"Who was he? A German?"

"Yes. Why? Does it sound strange? It might do. Even frightful for some. But for me those were the happiest days. Yes, in Germany."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"How could I abandon my parents' house, sisters and you, silly?"

"So what! If you loved him..."

"He left. And..."

"Did he die?"

"He went to the war and disappeared."

"He might be alive. He could be well-fixed somewhere in FRG now," Vasilij said.

"In Lotharingia..."

Zina went quiet again.

"Petka and I used to climb up here so often," Vasilij said quietly trying to change the subject. "This was his place. I wish I could bury him here... His death was so silly. He only had a hundred steps to make. Mind you, it was probably for the best..."

"No one had a clever death!"

"Some did! In full view of everyone, spreading their arms, closing a loophole with their body or killed with a bullet and falling beautifully on a birch-tree!"

"Vasya, you are not offended by them, are you?" Zina asked suddenly.

"Tell me, are they jealous? Or greedy?" Vasilij said in answer. "We won... but they don't want to share the victory..."

"They want this day to be for them only!"

"You can't share the victory," Vasilij said with conviction. "We have one victory for all... Do you understand? For all! Not only for those who were wounded or died beautifully, not only for "ours" but for people like Petka, you or me... The war took everything from us."

"Everyone paid their price," Zina finished knowingly. "The whole generation has rolled somewhere and we are still paying for that. You were a naive boy, Vasya, you ran to the front after a truck... I remember... You loved Motherland... You were right. You thought they would believe you at the front line, didn't you? We as a family did." Zina put her hand on her brother's shoulder. "The main thing is we are together. You'll find a wife and you'll have children... They will live a long life..."

“I also knew one German lad,” Vasiliy suddenly remembered. “He was young and he had surrendered. We were in prison together. He helped me a lot. We talked just one night, but I gathered knowledge for ten years. He was a student. He liked grasses,” Vasiliy looked into a distance dreamily and added sadly, “He taught me to collect wild honey...”

“That was him! I know it was! Was his name Gunther?” Zina shouted.

Vasiliy didn't know the name of the German.