



An unusual photograph of Maxim Gorky, taken by the Soviet photographer Moisei Nappelbaum (1928).

# FROM FURMANOV TO SHOLOKHOV

An Anthology of the Classics of  
Socialist Realism

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Ardis, Ann Arbor



Mikhail Sholokhov in the late 1950s.

## Mikhail Sholokhov THE FATE OF A MAN

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Dedicated to Yevgenia Grigorevna  
Levitskaya, Member of the Communist  
Party of the Soviet Union since 1903.

The first spring that came to the upper reaches of the Don after the war was unusually swift and vigorous. In late March a warm wind began to blow off the Sea of Azov and after only two days the sands on the left bank of the Don were completely clear of snow. Out in the steppe the snow-filled ravines and gullies were flooded with water, and as the ice covering them broke up, the streams burst their banks and the roads became almost completely impassable.

It was just at this difficult time of year that I had to travel to the village of Bukanovskaya.<sup>1</sup> The distance was not very great—only about sixty kilometers—but it turned out to be rather hard going. My friend and I had set off before dawn. Though our pair of well-fed horses strained at the traces, they could barely pull the heavy cart along. The wheels kept sinking right up to their axles in the mixture of wet sand and snow beneath them, and after only an hour white flecks of foam had appeared on the horses' cruppers and flanks and under the narrow breech-bands, while the fresh morning air was filled with the strong, heady smell of horse sweat and warm harness that had been thickly smeared with dubbin.

Where the going was particularly hard for the horses, we got off the cart and walked beside it. So all in all it took us about six hours to cover the thirty kilometers as far as the ford across the Yelanka River.<sup>2</sup>

Not far from the small village of Mokhovsky<sup>3</sup> the little river that used to dry up completely in places during the summer had burst its banks and flooded the marshy water-meadows with their alder trees for an entire kilometer around. We were going to have to make the crossing in a flimsy-looking, flat-bottomed boat that could not carry more than three people at a time. We stopped and unharnessed the horses. In a collective farm shed on the other side of the river a battered old jeep that had been standing there for most of the winter was waiting for us. With some trepidation the driver and I got into the dilapidated boat while my friend stayed behind on the bank with our things. No sooner



had we cast off than water came spurting up in little fountains through the rotten planks at the bottom of the boat. We plugged them with anything we could lay hands on and kept bailing all the way across. It took us an hour to reach the other side. Then the driver went to fetch the jeep from the village and brought it back to the boat. Picking up an oar, he said:

"As long as this blasted old tub doesn't fall to bits in the water, I'll be back with your friend in a couple of hours, not before."

The village was quite a long way from the river, and near the water's edge reigned the kind of stillness one finds in deserted places only in very early spring or late autumn. A smell of dampness and the sharp, bitter odor of rotting alders came drifting off the water, while from the distant, mist-shrouded steppes near the Khopyor River<sup>4</sup> a gentle breeze brought the barely perceptible but eternally youthful smell of earth that has only just lost its covering of snow.

Not far away, on the sand at the water's edge, lay a length of broken wattle fencing. I went and sat down on it to have a smoke, but putting my hand in the right pocket of my quilted jacket, discovered to my dismay that my pack of "Belomor"<sup>5</sup> cigarettes was completely soaked. While we were crossing the river, a wave had splashed over the side of the boat and covered me in muddy water up to the waist. At the time I hadn't had a moment to worry about my cigarettes because I'd had to drop my oar and bail as fast as I could to stop the boat from sinking. Now, though, very annoyed at my thoughtlessness, I carefully took the sodden packet out of my pocket and squatting down, began to lay out the moist, brown cigarettes one by one on the fence to dry.

It was midday, and the sun was as hot as in May, so I hoped the cigarettes would soon be ready. In fact, it was so hot that I even began to regret having put on my quilted army trousers and jacket for the journey. It was the first really warm day of the year, and it felt good sitting there alone, abandoning myself to the stillness around me. I took off my old army cap with its earflaps to let the breeze dry my hair after the hard work of rowing, and idly watched the full, white clouds drifting across the pale blue sky.

After a while I noticed a man coming out onto the road from behind the last few houses in the village. He was leading a small boy by the hand, who judging by his height must have been about five or six, that's all. They were trudging along towards the ford, but when they reached the jeep, turned in my direction. The tall, rather hunched man came right up to me and said in a deep, chesty voice:

"Hello, my friend!"

"Hello!" I replied, shaking his big, calloused hand.

Then he bent down to the boy and said:

"Say hello, son!"

Looking me straight in the face with eyes that were as clear as the sky, the boy gave a faint smile and then boldly held out a pink little hand. I shook it gently.

Taking the half-empty knapsack off his back and sitting himself down wearily beside me, the father said:

"This little companion of mine's nothing but a nuisance! He wears me out! If you walk fast he breaks into a trot—and then it's impossible to keep up with him!"

He was silent for a while, then asked:

"And what about you, mate? Waiting for your boss, are you?"

I felt rather awkward about telling him I wasn't a driver, so I answered:

"Yes, looks like I'll have to."

"Is he coming over from the other side?"

"Yes."

"D'you know if the boat'll be here soon?"

"In about two hours, I think."

"That's quite a long time. Well then, let's rest for a bit—I'm not in any hurry . . . Got your cigarettes wet, have you? Well, mate, wet tobacco's like a doctored horse—it's no good at all! Let's have some of my old shag instead."

Putting his hand into the pocket of his thin khaki trousers, he pulled out a worn tobacco pouch made of dark red silk, and as he unrolled it glimpsed the words that were embroidered on one corner of it: "To our dear soldier, from a pupil in the 6th class at Lebedyan<sup>6</sup> Secondary School."

We sat there smoking the strong, home-grown tobacco and for a long time neither of us spoke. I was just about to enquire why he was out at a time when the roads were so bad and where he was going to with the boy, when he asked:

"Driving all through the war, then, were you?"

"Yes, nearly all of it."

"At the front?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had a bellyfull there too, mate, and more besides, I can tell you!"

He laid his big, swarthy hands on his knees and sat with his shoulders hunched up. Glancing sideways at him, I suddenly felt sad . . . Have you ever seen anyone with eyes that look as if they have been

sprinkled with ash and are filled with such unassuaged pain and sadness that it is hard to look into them? Well, that's just what his eyes were like.

He pulled a twisted, dry stick out of the fencing and with it silently traced an intricate pattern on the sand. Then he said:

"Sometimes I just can't sleep at night. I stare into the darkness and think to myself: 'What did life have to go and torment me like this for? Why did it have to punish me so much?' But there's never any answer, either when it's dark or when the sun's shining up there in the sky ... No, there's no answer and there'll never be one either!" Then he suddenly seemed to remember something, and nudging his little son affectionately, said: "Off you go now, laddie, and play down by the water ... There's always something little boys can find to do by a big river. But don't get your feet wet, mind!"

He watched his son go running down to the water's edge and gave a muffled cough. Then he began speaking again, and I listened to him carefully.

"To begin with, I had a very ordinary kind of life, you know. I'm from Voronezh Province<sup>7</sup>—I was born there in 1900. During the Civil War I served in the Red Army, in Kikvidze's division.<sup>8</sup> In the famine of twenty-two I made for the Kuban<sup>9</sup> and worked my guts out for the kulaks,<sup>10</sup> otherwise I wouldn't be here now. But my mother and father and my little sister back home starved to death. So I was left alone, without a single relative in the whole world—no one, not a soul. Well, a year or so later I came back from the Kuban, sold the house and went to live in Voronezh. To begin with I worked in a carpenters' cooperative, then I went into a factory and learned to be a fitter. It wasn't very long before I got married. My wife was an orphan—she'd been brought up in a children's home. Oh, I found myself a fine girl there all right! She was good-tempered, cheerful, always eager to please, and clever too—much cleverer than me. She'd had things hard right from being a kid and perhaps that had made her like she was. To anyone who didn't know her she wasn't all that pretty, I suppose, but I was living with her all the time, so for me there wasn't anyone more beautiful in the whole world, and there never will be either!

Sometimes I'd come home from work feeling tired and bad-tempered as hell. But oh no—she'd never be rude to me in return. Instead she'd be quiet and gentle—couldn't do enough for me—and though we didn't have much, she'd always do her best to make me something nice. I'd look at her and start feeling a bit better, then after a while I'd put my arms round her and say: 'I'm sorry, Irina darling, I was very rude to you—I've had a bad time at work today.' Then everything would be all

right again between us and my mind would be at rest. And d'you know mate, what that does for your work? In the morning I'd get up full of beans and go off to the factory, and anything I laid hands on would go with a swing, just like clockwork! That's what it's like having a clever girl for a wife ...

Well, soon the children started arriving. First we had a little boy then a year or so later two girls ... That's when I stopped going about with my friends and started taking all my pay home—after all, we had a fair-sized family by then and I just couldn't afford to drink any more. Sometimes on my day off, though, I'd have a glass of beer, but that would be that.

In 'twenty-nine I got interested in vehicles, learnt a bit about engines and started driving a truck. Then I got keen on it and didn't want to go back to the factory any more—driving was a lot more fun. So ten years came and went without my even noticing them—it was just like a dream. But what's ten years anyway? Just you ask any middle-aged man if he's noticed the time slipping by, and he'll say he hasn't noticed a damn thing! The past's like that steppe out there. This morning we were crossing it and everything was as clear as a bell all around, but now we've walked about twenty kilometers there's a haze hanging over it and you can't tell forest from grass or ploughland from meadow ...

All those ten years I worked day and night, earning good money and we lived just as well as anyone else. The children were a joy to me too: all three of them used to get top marks at school, and Anatoly, the eldest, turned out to be so good at math that he even had his name mentioned in one of the Moscow papers. Where he got such a gift for the subject from I just don't know, mate, but it made me ever so pleased and I felt very proud of him—terribly proud I was!

During those ten years we saved up a bit of money and just before the war started we built ourselves a little house with two rooms, a small porch and a pantry. Then Irina bought a couple of goats. Well, what more did we need? There was milk for the kids to have with their kasha,<sup>11</sup> we had a roof over our heads, clothes for our backs and shoes for our feet, so everything seemed just fine. The only thing was, though that I'd built the house in a bad place—the plot they'd given me was far from an aircraft factory. If that little house had been somewhere else then my life might have turned out quite differently ...

And then it came—the war. The next day I got my call-up paper from the local office and the day after that it was 'Report to the station please!' The whole family came to see me off—Irina, Anatoly and daughters Nastya and Olya. The kids all took it very well, though the girls couldn't help shedding a tear or two. Anatoly just kept shivering



bit as if he was cold—he was getting on for seventeen by then, you see. But as for Irina . . . well, I'd never seen her in such a state all the years we'd been married. In bed the night before, my shirt had been wet through with her tears, and the next morning it was just the same again . . . When we got to the station I felt so sorry for her I could hardly bear to look at her: her lips were all swollen with crying, her hair was sticking out from under her kerchief, and her eyes had an empty, dull look in them, like someone who's gone crazy. When the officers gave the order to board the train, she flung herself at me and clasped her arms round my neck, shaking all over just like a tree that's being chopped down . . . The kids tried to persuade her to stop and so did I, but it wasn't any good—she just went on and on! The other women were chatting quietly with their husbands and sons, but Irina was clinging to me for all she was worth, shaking all over without saying a word. So I said to her: 'Come on, Irina darling, pull yourself together! You might at least say something to me before I go.' Then she said, sobbing every other word, 'Andrei . . . my darling . . . we'll never . . . see each other . . . again . . . in this world!'

There I was with my heart nearly breaking with pity for her and she goes and says a thing like that! She should've realized it wasn't easy for me to say good-bye to them all either. After all, I wasn't exactly going off on a picnic myself! Then I got angry with her, pulled her arms from round my neck and gave her a gentle push. Well, it only seemed gentle to me, but I used to be as strong as an ox in those days. She staggered back but then came towards me again with her arms outstretched, so I shouted at her: 'Is this really the way to say good-bye? D'you want to bury me before my time?!' But then I took her in my arms again because I could see she wasn't herself at all . . ."

He suddenly stopped short, and in the silence that followed I heard a gurgling, choking sound coming from his throat. His emotion communicated itself to me and I shot him a sidelong glance, but I could not see a single tear in those eyes of his that looked as if they were full of dead ash. He sat there just hanging his head, but his big hands were shaking, his chin was quivering and his firm lips were trembling too . . .

"Don't, my friend, you mustn't remember that!" I said softly, but he didn't seem to hear me. Then, making a tremendous effort to master his emotion, he suddenly said in an oddly changed, rather hoarse voice:

"To the end of my life, right to my dying day, I'll never forgive myself for pushing her away like that!"

He fell silent again and this time said nothing for a long while . . . Then he coughed and went on:

"I tore myself away from her, then took her face in my hands and kissed her, but her lips were as cold as ice. Then I said good-bye to the kids, ran to the train, and jumped on the step as it was pulling away. It moved off very slowly, taking me past my family again. I looked out and saw my poor little kids all huddled together, waving at me and trying to smile but not quite managing it somehow. Irina had her hands pressed to her breast, her lips were as white as chalk, and she was whispering something, gazing at me without blinking, her whole body straining forward as if she were walking in a strong wind . . . And that's how I'll remember her for the rest of my days: her hands pressed to her breast, her lips deathly white, and her eyes wide-open and full of tears . . . That's how I usually see her in my dreams too . . . What did I push her away for? Even now when I remember that moment it's like a blunt knife twisting in my heart . . .

We were sent to a unit near Belaya Tserkov<sup>12</sup> in the Ukraine, and I was given a ZIS-5<sup>13</sup> truck to drive. And that's what I went to the front in. Well, there's no point telling you about the war—you saw it for yourself and you know what things were like to start with. I often used to get letters from home but I didn't send many myself. Now and then I'd just write and say everything was okay, that we were doing a bit of fighting, and though we were retreating, I'd say, it wouldn't be long before we got our strength back and then we'd give the Krauts something to think about all right. Well, what else could you say? Those were bad times and you never felt much like writing . . .

I didn't even get a year's fighting done, though. . . I was wounded twice during the first few months but only slightly both times—first in the arm, then in the leg. The first time it was a bullet from a strafing aircraft and the second a shell-splinter. Those Germans punched a lot of holes in the sides and top of my truck as well, mate, but I was lucky to begin with. Yes—and my luck held for quite a long time too, but then I finally came a cropper . . . In May of 'forty-two I got taken prisoner near Lozovenki.<sup>14</sup> We were in an awkward position: the Germans were attacking hard and it so happened that one of our 122-millimeter howitzer batteries had nearly run out of ammunition. So we loaded my truck up with shells right to the very top—I worked so hard on the job myself that my shirt was sticking to my back with sweat! We had to be as quick as we could, too, because the enemy were closing in on us—we could hear tanks blasting away to our left and gunfire to the right and ahead of us, and things were starting to get a little bit too hot . . .

Our company commander said to me: 'Can you get through Sokolov?' But he needn't have asked. Did he think I was going to sit there twiddling my thumbs while my mates were getting killed? 'What

d'you mean, sir?!" I replied. "I've just got to get through, and that's that!" "Well, then," he says, "get moving! And step on it!"

Well, I stepped on it all right—I've never driven so fast in my life! I knew I wasn't carrying a load of potatoes and that I should be careful with what I'd got aboard, but how the hell could I be careful when the lads were out there fighting empty-handed and the whole road was under artillery fire? Anyway, I'd done about six kilometers and nearly reached the turning off onto the dirt road that led to the gully where the battery was, when what do I see? My God! There was our infantry running back across the open fields to the left and right of the road with shells bursting among them as they went. Well, what could I do? After all, I couldn't turn back, could I? So I gave the truck all she'd got! I'd already turned off down the dirt track and there was only about another kilometer to go to the battery, but I never managed to reach our lads, mate ... A long-range gun must have landed a heavy shell near my truck. I never heard the explosion or anything, but instead something seemed to burst inside my head and I can't remember any more. How I came out of it alive I just don't know, and I've no idea how long I lay there about thirty feet from the ditch at the roadside either. When I came to, I couldn't get up at all—my head was jerking from side to side and I was shaking all over as if I'd got a fever. Everything had gone dark before my eyes, there was something grinding and scraping in my left shoulder, and I ached all over as if somebody had been hitting me, say, for two days running with everything he could lay hands on ... Well, I crawled about on my belly for a long time, then somehow or other I managed to stand up. I still couldn't work out where I was or what had happened to me, though—my memory had gone completely. But I was too frightened to lie down again—I was scared that if I did I'd never get up again and then that would be that. So I just stood there, swaying from side to side like a poplar in a high wind.

When I came to properly and had a good look round, my heart felt as if someone was squeezing it with a pair of pliers: the shells I'd been carrying were scattered about all over the place, my truck was lying upside down not far away all smashed to bits, and as for the fighting, well it was going on behind me by that time ... Yes, behind me!

Well, there's no use pretending—when I realized what had happened, my legs gave way and I fell down just as if I'd been pole-axed, because I could see I was cut off behind the enemy lines or to put it another way, I was already a prisoner of the Fascists. But that's how things go in war ...

Well, I lay there and after a while I heard the rumble of tanks. Four medium German ones went racing past me at top speed towards where

I'd come in the truck ... Now what d'you think I felt like when I saw them? Then a few tractors pulling guns came past, followed by a field kitchen and some infantry. There weren't many of them, you know, not more than a single company, I suppose. I had a quick look at them out of the corner of my eye, then pressed my face flat to the ground again and closed my eyes: it made me sick to see them and my heart sank ...

When I thought they'd all gone past, I looked up again and suddenly saw six submachine gunners walking along about a hundred yards away. As I looked at them they turned off the road and came straight towards me. And none of them said a word. "Well," I thought, "this is it!" I sat up—I didn't want to die lying down, after all—then got to my feet. One of them halted a few paces away and suddenly unslung his gun. It's funny the way a man's made, you know, but at the time didn't feel any panic or fear. I just looked at him and thought: "In a minute he's going to give me a short, sharp burst, but where will he aim? At my chest or my head?" As if it mattered a damn what part of me got riddled with his bullets!

He was a young, well-built sort of fellow with dark hair, but his lips were as thin as a knife blade and he kept screwing up his eyes in an evil kind of way. "A man like that won't think twice about killing me," thought to myself. And then sure enough—up went his gun. I looked him straight in the eye and didn't say a word. But one of his mates, a lance-corporal or something who was a bit older—even middle-aged you might say—shouted something then pushed him to one side and came up to me. Then he muttered something in his own language bent my right arm at the elbow and felt the muscles, you see. When he'd tested them, he said: "O-o-oh!" and pointed down the road westwards, to where the sun was setting. "Off you go, you swine," he says "and work for our Reich!" So it was he who'd turned out to be the boss after all, the son of a bitch!

Well, where didn't they send me in the two years I was a prisoner—I must have seen half of Germany in that time! First I went to Saxony to work in a silicate factory, and then to the Ruhr where I hauled coal down a mine. After that it was to Bavaria where I worked as a laborer and then on to Thuringia. God only knows what German soil I didn't have to tread! The scenery in those parts might all be different, mate but the way they knocked our lads about was just the same everywhere you went. Those goddamn bastards used to beat us like nobody here would ever beat an animal! They'd punch us, kick us, hit us with rubber truncheons or with any bit of iron they happened to have handy, not to mention with rifle butts and things like that.



They'd beat you just because you were Russian, because you were still alive in God's world, or because you were working for them, the swine. They'd beat you for giving them a dirty look, taking a wrong step, or not turning round the way they wanted you to. They'd beat you just so that one day they could finish you off altogether, so you'd choke on the last few drops of your own blood and give up the ghost with it all. I reckon there weren't enough ovens in the whole of Germany for us prisoners to be shoved into!

Everywhere we went they used to give us exactly the same kind of food: a hundred and fifty grams of ersatz bread made half-and-half with sawdust, and some thin pigswill with swedes in it. Sometimes they'd give us hot water to drink, sometimes they wouldn't. But what's the point of talking about it—judge for yourself: before the war started I weighed about a hundred and ninety pounds, but by the autumn of the following year I didn't weigh much more than a hundred. I was nothing but skin and bone, and sometimes I hardly had the strength to move around either. But you had to keep on working without saying a word, and the kind of work they gave you would've been too much even for a cart-horse.

At the beginning of September they transferred a hundred and forty-two of us Soviet prisoners from a camp near Küstrin<sup>15</sup> to Camp B-14, not far from Dresden. By then there were about two thousand Russians in that camp. We were all put to work in a stone quarry, cutting, chiselling and crushing that damn German rock of theirs by hand. The daily norm was four cubic meters per man, and that was for someone, mark you, who could hardly keep body and soul together as it was. Well, that's when things got really bad: after two months, out of the hundred and forty-two men in our section there were only fifty-seven left. So what d'you think of that? Tough going, eh? We'd hardly had time to bury our mates when a rumor started going round the camp that the Germans had already taken Stalingrad and were pushing on into Siberia. It was just one thing on top of another, and they kept us at it so hard you hardly had time to look up from the ground. Anyone would've thought we were asking to be buried in that foreign German earth of theirs! And every day all the camp guards used to get drunk and bawl out their songs, whooping it up for all they were worth . . .

After a while they put about three hundred of us who were the strongest on a scheme to drain some marshes, then we were sent to the Ruhr to work in the mines. And that was where I stayed till 'forty-four. By that time, though, our lads had knocked some of the stuffing out of Germany, and the Fascists didn't look down on us prisoners quite so much any more. Then one day they lined us all up, the whole day-

time shift, and a visiting Oberleutnant said to us through an interpreter: 'Anyone who was a driver before the war or in the army—one pace forward!' Seven of us who'd been drivers stepped forward. Then they gave us some old overalls and sent us under escort to Potsdam. When we got there we were all split up. I was detailed to work in 'Todt'<sup>16</sup>—that was what the Germans called a set-up they had for building roads and defenses.

My job was to drive a German engineer-major about in an Opel Admiral. Oh, now that was a Fascist pig for you! He was a little fellow with a potbelly, as broad as he was tall with a backside on him as big as any woman's. He had three chins hanging down over his collar at the front and three great big rolls of fat on his neck at the back. He must have carried a good hundred pounds of pure fat on him, I reckon.

For about two weeks I drove that major from Potsdam to Berlin and back, and then he was sent to the front to supervise the building of defenses against our troops. By then, though, I just couldn't sleep at night any more—I'd lie awake for hours wondering how I could get back to our lines and home to Russia.

One day we drove to the town of Polotsk,<sup>17</sup> and for the first time in two years I heard the thunder of our artillery. Well, you can just imagine how my heart began to pound, can't you, mate? Even when I'd started taking Irina out it never used to beat like that! The fighting was going on to the east of Polotsk, about eighteen kilometers away. The Germans in the town had got very jumpy and nasty, and my fat major started drinking more and more. During the day we'd drive out of town and he'd give orders about building the defenses, then at night he'd sit there drinking all by himself. After a while his whole body swelled up and there were big bags under his eyes.

'Well,' I thought, 'there's no point waiting any longer, now's my chance! And I'm not going to escape by myself either, because I'm going to take my fat friend along with me—he'll come in very useful over on our side!'

I looked among some ruined buildings, came across an iron bar that weighed four or five pounds, and wrapped a bit of rag round it so that if I had to hit him with it there wouldn't be any blood. After that I found a length of telephone wire lying on the road, and when I'd carefully got everything ready, I hid it all under the front seat. Then, one evening a couple of days before I finally said good-bye to the Germans, I was on my way back after filling up with petrol when I saw a German NCO staggering along the road drunk as a lord and holding on to the wall as he went. So I stopped the car and led him behind a pile of



rubble, then pulled off his uniform and took his cap. Then I hid the whole lot under the seat with the rest of the stuff and I was ready.

On the morning of the twenty-ninth of June the major told me to drive him out of town in the direction of Troshitsa<sup>18</sup>—he was in charge of building some defenses there. So off we went. He was dozing quietly on the back seat while I sat at the wheel with my heart hammering so hard it was nearly jumping out of my mouth. I drove fast to begin with but once we were outside the town I slowed down, then stopped the car, got out and had a look round. There were just two trucks coming slowly towards us, but they were still a long way off. I got the iron bar out and opened the back door wide. My fat friend was leaning right back in the seat and snoring away just as if he was tucked up in bed with his wife beside him. Well, I gave him one with the bar on the left temple, and his head sagged on to his chest. Then just to make sure, I gave him another one, but I didn't want to kill him—I had to get him over to our side alive because he'd be able to tell our lads a thing or two. I took his pistol from its holster and shoved it in my pocket, then pushed a metal bracket I'd picked up down behind the back seat, put the telephone wire round his neck, and tied it to the bracket with a good knot—that was so he wouldn't fall over on his side when I drove fast. Then I quickly got the German uniform and cap on and drove straight for where the ground was rumbling and all the fighting was.

The German front line lay between two pill-boxes. As I drove towards it, a few machine-gunners jumped out of a dugout and I slowed down on purpose so they'd see I had a major in the car with me. They all started shouting and waving as if to say I mustn't go any further, but I pretended not to understand, put my foot down and tore past them at about fifty miles an hour. Before they realized what was happening and had time to open fire on the car, I was already in no man's land, weaving in and out among the shell-holes just like a hare.

By now the Germans were firing at me from behind and then our lads got a bit cross and sprayed me with machine-gun fire from in front. They put four bullets through my windscreen and riddled the radiator. . . . Then not far away I saw a lake with a little wood near it and some of our lads running towards the car, so I drove in among the trees, opened the door, fell out on to the ground and kissed it. I could hardly breathe for joy . . .

A young fellow with khaki shoulder-straps of a kind I'd never seen before, was the first to come running up, and he said with a grin: 'Aha, you damn Kraut, so you're lost, are you?' Then I tore off the German uniform, flung the cap on the ground and said to him: 'You silly young fool! What kind of a Kraut can I be when I was born and bred in

Voronezh? I've been a prisoner-of-war, don't you see? Now untie that fat pig sitting in the car, get his briefcase and take me to your commanding officer.' I gave him my pistol and then I was passed from one person to another, till by evening I'd got as far as the colonel in command of the division. By that time they'd given me something to eat, taken me to the bathhouse, questioned me and issued me with a new uniform, so when I went into the colonel's dugout I was all clean and tidy and in good shape. The colonel got up from his desk and came towards me, and then in front of all the officers he embraced me and said: 'Thank you, soldier, for the fine present you've brought us from the Germans! Your major and his briefcase have told us more than twenty prisoners could have done. I'm going to recommend you for a decoration!' His words and his kindness moved me deeply, and I couldn't stop my lips from trembling. All I could manage to say was: 'Comrade Colonel, please enlist me in an infantry unit.' But he just laughed, slapped me on the shoulder and said: 'What kind of soldier d'you think you'd make when you can hardly stand on your feet? No, I'm sending you off to hospital right away. They'll see to your scratches and fatten you up a bit, and after that you'll go home to your family for a month's leave. Then when you come back we'll work out where to send you.'

After that the colonel and all the officers who were in the dugout with him shook my hand in a very friendly way, and I came out of there feeling absolutely on top of the world, because in the two years I'd been a prisoner I'd forgotten what it meant to be treated like a human being. Mind you, though, mate, it was still a very long time before I could get out of the habit of pulling my head down whenever I talked to the high-ups, as if I was still scared they might hit me. That was the kind of training they gave you in those Fascist camps . . .

As soon as I got to the hospital I wrote Irina a letter. I told her briefly how I'd been taken prisoner and escaped with the German major. And for the life of me I just don't know why, but I bragged like a child to her! I couldn't even stop myself from telling her the colonel had promised to recommend me for a decoration . . .

For two weeks I did nothing but eat and sleep. They just gave me a bit of food at a time, only at frequent intervals. The doctor said if they'd given me as much as I wanted straightaway, I might have turned up my toes. Anyway, it wasn't long before I got my strength back again. But after two weeks had passed I wasn't interested in food any more because there was still no reply from home, and I must admit, I started feeling a bit miserable. I couldn't even think about food any longer, I wasn't sleeping any more, and all kinds of unpleasant thoughts kept

coming into my head ... Then in the third week I got a letter from Voronezh. It wasn't from Irina, though, but from an old neighbor of ours, Ivan Timofeevich, a joiner. Well, I wouldn't wish a letter like that on anyone! He said that as early as June 'forty-two, the Germans had attacked the aircraft factory and my house had suffered a direct hit from a heavy bomb. Irina and the girls had been there at the time ... Well, he said, there was nothing left of them at all, and where the house had been there was only a deep hole now ... To begin with I couldn't finish reading that letter. Everything went dark before my eyes and my heart felt so full of pain I thought it would never be right again. But I lay on my bed for a while and got a bit of strength back, then finished reading the letter. My neighbor went on to say that Anatoly had been away in Voronezh when the bomb had fallen. That evening he'd visited the place where the house had been, looked at the hole, and then he'd gone back to town the same night. But before leaving he'd told my neighbor he was going to volunteer for the front. And that was all.

When the pain in my heart had eased a little, I remembered how desperately Irina had clung to me when we'd parted at the station. So in that woman's heart of hers she'd known all along we'd never see each other again. But at the time I'd just pushed her away ... Once I'd had a family and a home of my own—it had all taken years to get together—but everything had been destroyed in a flash, and now I was alone. 'But isn't this ruined life of mine just a dream?' I wondered. And you know, when I'd been a prisoner I used to talk to Irina and the kids nearly every night—to myself, of course, under my breath—trying to cheer them up, saying I'd be home again soon and telling them not to feel sorry for me. I'm strong, I used to say, I'll get through, and one day we'll all be together again ... But as it turned out, for two whole years I'd been talking to the dead!"

The man fell silent for a moment, then said in a faltering, soft voice: "Let's have a smoke, mate—I feel as if I'm choking."

We lit our cigarettes. Somewhere in the flooded water-meadows a woodpecker was tapping away with a clear, ringing sound. The warm breeze was still stirring the dry leaves on the alders just as gently as before; the clouds were still drifting by high in the blue sky like taut, white sails; but in those moments of sorrowful silence the boundless world preparing for the great fulfillment of spring—that everlasting affirmation of life—seemed altogether different to me.

It was too painful to remain silent for very long, so I asked:

"And what happened then?"

"What happened then?" he echoed reluctantly, "Well, the colonel gave me a month's leave, and a week later I was back in Voronezh. I

walked to the place where I'd once lived with my family. But there was just a deep hole full of rust-colored water with weeds all round it as high as your waist ... Everything was as deserted and still as a graveyard. Oh, it was so painful for me, mate! I stood there for a while, my heart full of sorrow, then I went back to the station. I couldn't even bear to stay another hour there, so I set off for my unit again the same day.

But about three months later a flash of joy burst into my life, like a ray of sunlight breaking through the clouds: I got news of Anatoly at long last. He sent me a letter from another front, or so it seemed—he'd got my address from our old neighbor, Ivan Timofeevich. It turned out he'd been to artillery school to begin with—his gift for math had stood him in good stead there. A year later he'd passed with distinction and gone to the front, and now he said he'd been promoted to the rank of captain, was in command of a battery of 'forty-fives,' and had been awarded six orders and medals. In other words, he'd left his old man far behind! And so once again I felt terribly proud of him! Say what you like, but my own son was a captain and in command of a battery. That was no mean feat! And he'd got all those decorations too! No matter that his old man was carting shells and stuff around in a Studebaker truck! His dad's days were gone, but he, already a captain, still had his whole life ahead of him ...

That winter we went on advancing without a break and so we didn't have time to write to each other very often, but one morning towards the end of the war, when we were close to Berlin, I sent Anatoly a note and got a reply the very next day. Then I realized my son and I had come up to the German capital from different directions and were quite close to each other now. I was so excited I could hardly wait for the moment when we'd meet. Well, we met sure enough ... Right on the morning of Victory Day, May the ninth, Anatoly was killed by a German sniper ...

That afternoon the company commander sent for me. When I went into the room I noticed an artillery lieutenant-colonel whom I'd never seen before sitting with him. He stood up as if in the presence of a senior officer. My company commander said to me: 'It's you he's come to see, Sokolov,' then he turned away to the window. An electric shock suddenly seemed to go through me because I sensed something was wrong. Then the lieutenant-colonel came up to me and said quietly: 'Bear up, father! Your son, Captain Sokolov, was killed at his battery this morning. Come with me.'

I swayed but managed to stay on my feet. Even now it still seems like a dream when I remember how the officer and I drove in that big car through those streets strewn with rubble. I can only dimly recall the



soldiers drawn up in a line and the coffin draped with red velvet. But I can still see Anatoly just as clearly as I can see you now, mate. I went up to the coffin. It looked like my son lying there and yet it didn't too. I remembered him as just a young lad, always happy and smiling, with narrow shoulders and a sharp little Adam's apple that jutted out on his thin neck. But this was a broad-shouldered, handsome young fellow, lying with his eyes half-closed as if he was gazing past me and away into the distance. Only the corners of his mouth still showed a hint of the smile my son always used to have on his face—the little Anatoly I once knew . . . I kissed him and stepped aside. The lieutenant-colonel made a speech. Anatoly's comrades were all weeping, but I couldn't cry—the tears seemed to have dried up in my heart. Perhaps that's why it still hurts so much . . .

So it was that I buried my last hope and joy in that alien German soil. The battery fired a volley over my son, bidding their commander farewell as he set out on his long journey, and deep inside me something seemed to snap . . . When I got back to my unit I was like a different man. Soon after that I was demobilized. But where was I to go? Back to Voronezh? Not on your life! Then I remembered I had a friend living in Uriupinsk<sup>19</sup> who'd been invalided out of the army back in the winter—he'd once invited me to go and stay with him—so off I went to Uriupinsk.

My friend and his wife had no children and lived in a little house of their own on the outskirts of town. Though he'd been invalided out of the army, my friend worked as a driver at a truck depot, and I managed to get a job there too. I moved in with him and his wife, and they gave me a home. We used to take all kinds of loads to various parts of the town, and in the autumn we switched over to carrying grain. It was then that I got to know my new son, the one that's playing down there on the sand.

After a long run in the truck you'd come back into town, and the first thing you'd do, of course, would be to call at the café for a bite of something and a drop of vodka to help take away your tiredness. Drink's a bad habit, I know, but I must admit it had got a fair old grip on me by that time . . . Then one day I noticed a little boy near the café, and the day after I saw him again. What a ragamuffin he was! He was absolutely filthy—all smeared with melon juice and covered with dust, and his hair all untidy, but his little eyes were shining like stars do at night after it's been raining! After a while I got so fond of him that funnily enough, I started missing him and I'd hurry to finish my trip so as to see him near the café. That's where he used to get his food, you see—he just ate whatever people happened to give him.

On the fourth day I came straight back from the state farm with a load of grain and pulled up at the café. There was my little boy sitting on the steps swinging his legs, and judging by the look of him he was absolutely famished. I put my head out of the window and shouted: 'Hey, Vanya! Get in quick, and I'll give you a ride to the elevator, then we'll come back here and have some dinner!' He gave a start, then ran down the steps, scrambled up on the running board and said softly: 'How d'you know I'm called Vanya, uncle?' And he opened his little eyes wide, waiting for me to answer. Well, I just told him I'd seen a lot of things in my time and knew everything.

He came round to the right-hand side of the truck and I opened the door for him. Then I sat him on the seat beside me and off we went. He was a lively little fellow, but for some reason he suddenly went quiet and thoughtful, and kept looking up at me from under those long, curly eyelashes of his and heaving a sigh. Only a little fellow he was, and yet he already knew how to sigh! Now was that the right kind of thing for a kid of his age to be doing? 'Where's your father, then, Vanya?' I asked. 'He was killed at the front,' he whispered. 'And what about your mummy?' 'She was killed by a bomb when we were on the train.' 'Where were you coming from on the train?' 'I don't know, I can't remember . . . 'And haven't you got any family round here at all, then?' 'No, nobody.' 'But where d'you sleep at night?' 'Anywhere I can find.'

I felt hot tears welling up in me and I made up my mind there and then. 'Why should we both suffer separately like this?' I thought, 'I'll take him in as my own son.' And straightaway my heart felt easier and lighter somehow. Then I leaned over towards him and said softly: 'Vanya, d'you know who I am?' And he answered with a sigh, just breathing the word out: 'Who?' And I said to him just as softly as before: 'I'm your father.'

My God, what do you think happened then? He flung his arms round my neck, kissed me on the cheeks, forehead and lips, and started chirping merrily away like a little bird in such a shrill voice that the noise in the cab was deafening: 'Daddy dear! I knew it! I knew you'd find me! I just knew you would, whatever happened! I've been waiting so long for you to find me!' He nestled up against me, his whole body quivering like a blade of grass in the wind. Well, my eyes had gone all misty, I was trembling all over, and my hands were shaking . . . How on earth I managed to keep hold of the wheel, I just don't know! But all the same I quickly pulled over to the side of the road and switched off the engine. While my eyes were like that I was afraid to drive any further, just in case I happened to knock someone down. Well, we sat

there for about five minutes with him still pressing up against me for all he was worth, trembling from head to foot but not saying a word. Then I put my right arm round him and with my left hand turned the truck round and set off back to where I lived. When all was said and done, what did I need the elevator for after that? How on earth could I think of going there after what had happened?

I stopped the truck at the gate, picked up my new son and carried him up the path. He'd got his little arms right round my neck and just wouldn't let go, pressing his cheek up against my bristly chin as if he was stuck to me with glue. And that's how I carried him into the house. My friend and his wife were both there at the time. In I went and winked at them, first with one eye then with the other and said cheerfully: 'Well, I've found my little Vanya at last! So here we are, good people!' My friends guessed what was up straightaway and started bustling about doing things, but the boy just wouldn't let go of me. In the end, though, I managed somehow to put him down. Then I washed his hands with soap and water and sat him at the table. My friend's wife poured him a bowl of cabbage soup and when she saw how he gulped it down she burst into tears. She just stood there by the stove, crying into her apron. My little Vanya saw she was crying and ran up to her, tugged at her skirt and said: 'What are you crying for, auntie? Daddy found me near the café and so everyone should be glad, but you're crying!' But she—God bless her soul!—only cried all the more, the tears just streaming down her face!

After dinner I took him to the barber's to get his hair cut, and when we got home again I gave him a bath in the washtub and wrapped him in a clean sheet. Then he put his arms round me and fell asleep just like that, with me holding him. So I laid him carefully in bed, drove off to the elevator and unloaded the grain, then took the truck back to the depot. After that I hurried off to do a bit of shopping. I bought him a pair of flannel trousers, a little shirt, some sandals and a straw cap. When I got home again I lay down beside him and for the first time for weeks fell fast asleep. I woke three or four times during the night, though, to find him nestling in the crook of my arm like a little sparrow under the eaves, snoring away softly, and my heart was filled with such joy that words just can't express it! I tried not to move for fear of waking him, but all the same I couldn't resist it, and after a while I got up very quietly, struck a match, and just stood there, feasting my eyes on him . . .

I woke just before dawn and couldn't make out why it felt so stuffy in the room. But it was my little son: he'd slipped out of his sheet and was lying stretched right across my chest with his foot on my neck. He's a bit of a fidget when you're sleeping beside him, but I've got used

to him now and I miss him if he's not there. At night I can stroke him while he's asleep or smell the little curls on his forehead, and it takes some of the pain out of my heart—makes it feel a bit softer, you know, because it's turned to stone with sorrow . . .

To begin with he used to ride about with me in the truck but then I realized that wouldn't do. After all, what do I need when I'm on my own? A thick slice of bread and an onion with a pinch of salt will last a soldier all day long. But with him it's different. First you've got to give him some milk, then boil him an egg, and he can't manage for very long at all without hot food. But I had my work to do and it wouldn't wait. So one day I plucked up my courage and left him in the care of my friend's wife. Well, he just cried his eyes out all day long, and in the evening he ran off to the elevator to meet me. I didn't get back till late at night but he was still there waiting for me.

I had a hard time with him to begin with. One day I felt worn out so we went to bed while it was still light. Usually he'd be chirping away like a little sparrow, but this time for some reason he was very quiet. 'What are you thinking about, son?' I asked, but he just stared up at the ceiling. Then he said: 'Dad, what did you do with your leather coat?' Now I'd never had a leather coat in my life! But I had to wriggle out of it somehow. 'I left it behind in Voronezh,' I told him. 'But why were you looking for me for so long?' he asked. So I said: 'Son, I looked for you in Germany, Poland and all over White Russia, and then you finally turned up in Uriupinsk.' 'Is Uriupinsk nearer than Germany?' he asked. 'And is it far from our house to Poland?' And on we went, chatting like that till we fell asleep.

But d'you think, mate, he'd asked about that leather coat just out of the blue? No—there was a reason for it all. It meant at some time or other his real father used to wear a coat like that, and the boy had suddenly remembered it. A kid's memory's like summer lightning, you know: it suddenly flashes out and lights everything up for a moment, then dies away again. And that was how his memory worked, in quick flashes, just like summer lightning.

We might've gone on living together in Uriupinsk for another year or so, but that November I had an accident. I was driving along a muddy road through a village when my truck suddenly went into a skid. There just happened to be a cow in the way and I knocked it down. Well, you know how it is—all the women came out and started making a hell of a fuss, a crowd gathered round, and a few minutes later a traffic policeman showed up. I pleaded with him to go easy on me, but he took my license away just the same. Then the cow got up, stuck its tail in the air and went galloping off down the street. But I still lost my license! So I



spent the winter working as a joiner and then got in touch with an old friend who'd been in the army too—he works as a driver in your part of the world, near Kashary<sup>20</sup>—and he invited me to come and stay with him. 'You'll be able to work as a joiner for six months or so,' he said, 'and then you can get a new license in our area.' So now my son and I are making our way to Kashary.

But to tell you the truth, you know, even if I hadn't had that accident with the cow, I'd still have left Uriupinsk because my sadness won't let me stay in one place for very long. When my little Vanya grows up a bit, though, and has to start school, then I'll probably give in and settle down somewhere. But for the time being we're tramping Russia together."

"It must be hard for him to walk," I said.

"Well, he doesn't walk much on his own feet at all, you know, because most of the time he rides on my back. I put him on my shoulders and carry him, and when he feels like stretching his legs, he gets down and runs along at the side of the road, jumping and kicking like a little goat. It's not that, though, mate—we'd manage somehow or other—the trouble is my heart's got a knock in it somewhere, needs a new piston . . . Sometimes it goes and gives me such a stab I nearly black out. I'm worried I'll die in my sleep one night and frighten the little lad out of his wits. And that's not the only problem either: nearly every night I dream of the dear ones I've lost. Most of the time it's as if I'm behind barbed wire and they're on the other side, free . . . I talk to them, Irina and the kids, but as soon as I try to pull the barbed wire apart, they disappear and seem to melt away before my very eyes . . . And there's another amazing thing too: during the daytime I always manage to keep a good grip on myself and you'll never get a complaint or even so much as a sigh out of me, but at night I sometimes wake up and my pillow's wet through with tears . . ."

Suddenly, through the trees, came the sound of my friend's voice and the splash of oars.

Then the stranger who seemed such a close friend of mine now, got up and held out his big hand that was as strong and firm as a block of wood.

"Good-bye, mate, and all the best!" he said.

"All the best to you too, and have a good journey to Kashary!"

"Thanks. Hey, son! Let's go down to the boat!"

The boy ran to his father's side, and taking hold of the right-hand edge of his quilted jacket, set off with little steps, doing his best to keep up with the big man who was striding down towards the river.

Two orphaned human beings, two grains of sand flung into unfamiliar places by the unprecedented hurricane of war . . . What did the future hold for them? I wanted to believe that this Russian, this man of indomitable will, would endure whatever befell him, and that the boy would grow at his side into a man capable of surmounting any obstacle in his path, capable of enduring anything if his native land called upon him to do so.

It was with great pain and sadness that I watched them go . . . And perhaps everything would have turned out all right as we parted had it not been for Vanya. After he had taken a few steps, stumbling along on his short, little legs, he turned and waved to me with his tiny pink hand. All of a sudden a gentle but sharp-clawed paw seemed to grip my heart and I turned quickly away. No, those elderly men whose hair turned gray during the years of war do not only weep in their sleep, for they weep during their waking hours too. What matters is to be able to turn away in time. But the most important thing of all is not to wound a child's heart by letting him see the reluctant tear that burns your cheek—the cheek of a man . . .

1956

## Notes

1. Situated on the Khopyor River near its confluence with the Don, in western Volgograd province, northwest of Volgograd.
2. (Yelan') small tributary of the Don, in northern Volgograd province.
3. Hamlet on the Yelan' River.
4. Tributary of the Don which it joins at Ust'-Khopyorskaya in western Volgograd province.
5. Popular brand of Russian cigarettes (*Belomor* is an abbreviation for *Belomorsko-Baltiskii kanal*, the canal in north European Russia which links Lake Onega with the White Sea).
6. Town in Lipetsk province, north of Voronezh.
7. Some 275 miles southeast of Moscow.
8. Named after Vasily Isidorovich Kikvidze (1895–1919), a military hero of the Civil War, Red Army Commander in 1917–1918, then a Divisional Commander in the campaign against the White Cossacks on the Don. He was killed in action.
9. Region in northwest Caucasus.
10. Literally "fist." Pejorative term for wealthy peasant.
11. Dish of cooked grain or groats.
12. Town in Kiev province, south of Kiev.

13. Stands for *Zavod imeni Stalina* (Stalin Factory), where motor vehicles were made.

14. Location obscure. Sholokhov may mean Lozovenka, a village south of Kharkov and west of Izium in the Ukraine.

15. (Kostrzyn) town east of Berlin and north of Frankfurt an der Oder.

16. The "Organisation Todt" was named after Fritz Todt (1891–1942), whom Hitler appointed General-Inspektor für das deutsche Strassenwesen in 1933. He was in charge of the building of the Reichsautobahnen and in 1938 organized the German fortifications in the west (Westwall). The Organisation Todt was formed that year.

17. Town north of Minsk in Belorussia.

18. Village east of Polotsk and west of Vitebsk, in Belorussia.

19. Town on Khopyor River in northwest Volgograd province.

20. Village in northern Rostov province, northeast of Voroshilovgrad.