

KONSTANTIN SIMONOV

Yugoslavian
NOTEBOOK

From Life at the Front



SAVA PRESS



KONSTANTIN SIMONOV

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FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is the result of my trip to Yugoslavia as a war correspondent for the newspaper *Krasnaya zvezda* (*Red Star*). Nearly all the essays were written about the partisan rear, where I was transferred in October of this year.

The stories included in the book are almost all — with few exceptions — based on real events. Most of the facts described in them actually took place. I simply thought it would be more interesting to present this material in the form of short stories.

The setting of the essays and stories is Serbia. The time period: September to November 1944.

IN SOUTHERN SERBIA

1

Bracing for impact, we clutched the bench railings — but the plane landed unexpectedly softly and came to a stop after a short run.

Parachute straps clattered against the metal floor and a wave of warm black air rushed through the open door of the aircraft.

We were in southern Serbia, on one of the wild mountain airstrips recently reclaimed from the Germans.

Blending into the night horizon, mountains loomed on all sides, and around the plane, partisans were already bustling about, unloading long wooden crates of *amunicija* — that's what they call munitions here.

The pilots were having a smoke, stretching their legs and urging the unloading along. They had to return to base before sunrise.

Now, looking more closely, we could make out the faces of the partisans — some bearded, some very young — and their clothing: coarse British wool uniforms mixed with handwoven, reddish peasant coats just like the ones still worn in our own villages, especially in the North.

Our belongings were loaded along with the ammunition onto ox-drawn carts that loomed in the dark about a hundred steps away. We, along with

Lieutenant General Koča Popović, commander of the partisan forces in Serbia — who had arrived with us on the same plane — got into a Willys jeep that had suddenly rolled up (the only one in the whole army, for now).

The plane was already humming behind us, ready for takeoff, and to our right, along the edge of the landing strip, flickered the signal lights that had guided us down.

Upon closer inspection, each of those “lights” turned out to be nothing more than a massive tin kettle — the kind used by carpenters’ crews on construction sites. The kettles were filled with kerosene, with hemp wicks threaded through their spouts. Clever and practical — true partisan ingenuity.

I will probably never forget my first morning here, in southern Serbia. I got up early, while my comrades from the Soviet mission were still asleep, worn out from the night’s work.

It was already light in the yard. Far to the north, Radan — the famous partisan mountain — rose in a solid mass. Partisans had escaped the Germans through its impassable gorges and thickets dozens of times.

To the west and northwest, mountains loomed as well, fading into gently sloping hills to the south and east, glowing yellow with autumn forests.

The sky was blue, veiled here and there with a light haze. Against the dazzling white house walls, bundles of red peppers — or *paprike*, as they’re called here — hung like holiday decorations, glowing in

crooked clusters. The roofs were covered with reddish curved tiles, looking like flowerpots sawed in half. Two saddled horses were stamping in the yard.

“*Zdravo, družē!*”* I said to the partisan sitting by the house, using up nearly all the Serbian I knew in that simple greeting.

But the partisan stood up, saluted, and — to my surprise — replied in perfect Russian:

“Good morning, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel! You’re up early...”

The partisan I had spoken to was named Ivan. He was a Russian driver who had worked on the Tupa-se-Sochi highway and had been captured by the Germans at the end of 1942. But he didn’t remain a prisoner for long. Sent with a group of POWs to do roadwork in eastern Serbia, he escaped after a few months, slipping away from the guards and making his way through the mountains and forests to the partisans. Now, he was part of the submachine gunner platoon assigned to guard our mission here.

“Who are the horses for?” I asked.

“For the colonel. He planned to head out this morning, but he must’ve gone to bed late. Why, are you thinking of going for a ride?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in that case, go ahead. He won’t be up for at least another hour.”

We mounted the horses and rode out of the yard. Just beyond the village, in the green shade of sprawl-

* Hello, comrade! (Serbian in the original).

ing bushes, lay a small country cemetery. There's a lot of wood here, but even more stone, and unlike our rural graveyards, this one had wooden crosses standing alongside moss-covered, weathered stone ones.

At first, it's hard to make sense of Serbian speech — so close to our own and yet not immediately clear. But when you read, there's no need for a translator to understand the simple inscriptions on the village graves.

“Mihailo Petrović lived twenty-seven years, died as a soldier in 1913.” Clearly, this man was a soldier in the Balkan War. And here's another cross: “Petar Živković lived thirty-one years, died as a soldier in 1914.” That was the last war with the Germans.

At the edge of the cemetery, I saw five identical white stone memorials that must have been placed all on the same day. Behind the glass on each one were small portraits and inscriptions stating that all of these men had died on the same day — June 17, 1942: Bogoslav Konstantinović, Borislav Andrejević, Vele-mir Ivanović, Vladimir Čekić and Aleksandar Čekić.

Later, people in the village told me that the five of them hadn't managed to join the partisans in time, but neither were they willing to live under the rule of the *švabe* — the Germans. They killed several Germans and died themselves. Hanging on the stone crosses were large wreaths — just beginning to wilt, likely placed only the day before — woven from flowers, dark almost-black grape clusters and branches with dried apricots.

Beyond the village, a wide valley ringed by moun-

tains opened up before us — already harvested fields with cut-down cornstalks and strips of reaped wheat. A small herd of cows, softly jingling their bells, moved across the still-green meadow, their heads down. A young shepherd trailed behind, carrying a long whip and wearing a large cap pulled low over his eyes — clearly his father's.

There was a quiet, somewhat melancholy beauty to this peaceful scene — a quiet Russian charm. Only the looming mountains reminded me that this was, though Slavic and familiar, still a distant land.

Ivan rode at a slow pace. Unhurried and thoughtful, as if speaking of something long past but not forgotten, he told me how he and a teacher named Viktor had escaped from the Germans. Viktor, he said, had been a mischievous and cheerful man, who became a partisan and died in his very first battle. He was a large, strong man; he grabbed a light machine gun and, holding it in his arms, led the attack at the front. Just fifty paces from the Germans, a single bullet hit him directly in the heart and killed him instantly. But the attack succeeded. He was buried on the outskirts of the captured village and the girls adorned his grave with wreaths.

“Then the Germans and Chetniks came to the village again,” Ivan continued, “and they dug up the grave and stripped the body. Viktor had been wearing a new British uniform. Then they barely covered him with stones — like a dog. But the villagers came in the night, took his body from the grave and buried him somewhere else.”

We circled around the village and returned.

Down the village road, coming towards us, walked a frail, stooped old man leaning on a stick. Ivan took off his side cap and bowed low, greeting him first:

“*Zdravo!*”

I followed his lead.

“*Zdravo,*” the old man replied gently, lifting his faded blue eyes to us.

A girl in a brightly embroidered skirt approached the old man, kissed his hand and continued on her way.

“People respect the elderly here,” Ivan said. “And if a young person meets one, they’ll always take off their cap first and bow low — or even, like she did, kiss their hand.”

That afternoon, again on horseback, we rode the five kilometres separating us from the village where the main headquarters of Serbia was currently located. There was no barrier at the village entrance, as we would have at our own headquarters, but the guards were clearly alert — three times along the way, sub-machine gunners jumped out from the bushes with warning shouts.

The headquarters was spread across the village. The room occupied by Commander Koča Popović himself was marked by soldierly simplicity: a cot with a coarse black blanket, a large peasant dining table used as a desk, a telephone, a radio receiver, a few benches. On the wall hung portraits of Tito, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, set against the backdrop of

national flags. Also hanging was a large hand-drawn image of the coat of arms of Free Yugoslavia — a wreath of wheat ears, with five vessels at its centre, each with flames rising from it, representing the five federal parts of the new Yugoslavia.

I left my horse at headquarters and switched to a Willys jeep. Koča Popović was heading on an inspection trip to his units stationed near Niš and he agreed to take me along.

A rare thing in partisan territory — here we were lucky to have two things at once: first, a functioning vehicle, and second, a passable road that let us travel through the partisan-held town of Prokuplje almost all the way to Niš.

We reached Prokuplje after several hours. The town had been taken by the partisans quite some time ago, but traces of the German defeat still remained at the station — several burned-out armoured vehicles and tanks, and some blown-up, scorched railway cars. On the charred armour of the tanks — likely on the first day of victory and celebration — someone had boldly written in red paint: “Long live Tito, long live the Red Army, long live the Soviet Union.”

In the town square stood a monument — a common sight in all Serbian towns — to the war of 1914: a bronze Serbian soldier charging forward atop a granite pedestal. I couldn't help but recall Negotin — the first free Yugoslav town I had visited on this trip. There too, in the town centre, stood a monument to the 1914 war — a large bronze eagle on a grey granite pyramid. And next to it, miraculously built in just

one day from roughly hewn grey stones, stood a second monument: to two Russian tankers — Captain Sedelnikov and Senior Sergeant Shor, who died in the liberation of that town. The monuments stood side by side, and the bronze eagle on the older one seemed to be spreading its wings in protection over the grave of these Russian men who had fallen here.

The road we took from Prokuplje couldn't really be called a road in the usual sense. We made our way over hillsides, across dams, through streams and over rocks. It seemed our driver — once a prewar chauffeur, who had since spent three years walking the mountains and riding horses — now trusted his Willys jeep like a rider trusts his horse. He believed it could go anywhere — and it really could.

Along our route, we constantly passed partisan units, either on the move or resting.

“We're in the middle of a big *pokret* now,” Koča explained. (*Pokret* is Serbian for “march” or “campaign.”) “We want to lock the Germans in tight — completely lock them in and not let them out.”

Even a first glance at a marching partisan column made it clear how these people could cover dozens of kilometres in a day and slip through German encirclements without roads or trails. Nothing heavy, nothing bulky to slow them down — no supply trains, no second echelon, so to speak. Machine guns and light mortars were carried by hand. Medium mortars and mountain guns were packed on mules. No kitchens. The large black cooking cauldrons were strapped to saddles, making the horses, from a distance, look like

small one-humped camels.

By midday, we reached the headquarters of the 11th Partisan Brigade. A typical scene: a cottage, a table, some maps. While Koča received reports, I looked around and noticed among the partisan commanders a stout man in civilian clothes. But from the way he moved — the way he answered questions and addressed the general — it was clear he was a military man.

And so it was, in fact. He turned out to be a captain of the old Yugoslav army. For the past three years, he hadn't served the Germans, but he also hadn't joined the partisans — quietly eking out a life in Niš. Two weeks earlier, he had escaped and come over to the partisans. But to put on a partisan uniform, to pin a partisan star on his side cap — that was too great an honour, one he had not yet earned. He was, so to speak, on probation, and judging by what other partisan officers said about him, it seemed he was passing that test with honour.

From the brigade headquarters, we moved on to the headquarters of the partisan division, which was positioned just outside Niš in a small village called Brest, awaiting the upcoming offensive. From the edge of the village, you could see a stretch of the Niš road disappearing into the distance and, half-hidden by the hills, the city of Niš itself — glowing white in a deep valley. This was the main German stronghold in southeastern Serbia.

Major Milija Čulović, commander of the 24th Division, immediately began reporting to the general

on preparations for the forthcoming offensive.

In the meantime, I learned that two Russian volunteers — surgeon Sinodov and nurse Liza Kiryanova — had been with the division for several months, sharing all the hardships and trials with the partisans. I asked one of the partisans to fetch them. Fifteen minutes later, they appeared: Sinodov — a stereotypically Russian doctor in appearance, so much so that it felt strange to see him in a Yugoslav uniform — and the rosy-cheeked nurse, with a sweet, snub-nosed, girlish face.

I asked the usual questions in such situations. They, in turn, began eagerly asking me about Moscow.

“Is it hard here?” I asked.

“No, not hard. It’s good — interesting,” they said, “but the problem is we have no vehicles and the front is scattered. Sometimes the severely wounded travel for a day, two or even three by cart to reach us. Sometimes we have to carry them for whole days through the mountains in our arms.”

“And injuries that could easily be treated,” Sinodov added bitterly, “become life-threatening.” Then, in a more upbeat tone, he added: “But still, we manage to save people in most cases. You’ve seen what kind of people they are. Just recently, we did our first blood transfusion,” he said, with professional enthusiasm.

“Was it successful?”

“Yes — a boy from a neighbouring village. He lost a leg in a bombing.”

“Have you already set up a donor pool?” I asked.

The nurse made some sort of negative hand gesture to the surgeon that I didn’t understand, but Sinodov looked at me and smiled.

“Well, here they are — our first donor pool,” he said. “Liza herself gave the first 400 millilitres to that boy.”

We drove up onto a hillside. Before turning the car around, Koča cast one last glance down into the valley where Niš lay.

“Quiet today,” he said to me. “You must be a little disappointed.” And before I could reply, he added, “It’s all right. You have lulls too, don’t you? We’re preparing. Everything’s in motion. You’ll see — soon we’ll ride straight into Niš together. Just be patient.”

We returned again through Prokuplje. During a short half-hour break at the local military command post — or *komanda mesta*, as it’s called in Serbian — a short, stocky girl entered the room. Koča stood up to greet her and shook her hands for a long time with joy.

“Still in the 1st Proletarian?” he asked.

“Still there. Here are my papers.”

“Well done, well done,” Koča said, still looking at her with the same joy. “Alive?”

“As you see — alive.”

They sat together for about five minutes, reminiscing about their comrades: one killed, another wounded, one still alive, another transferred to a different division. Then the girl stood up and, in parting, gave the general’s hand a firm shake. She was already

out the door when Koča was still looking after her.

“A good *drugarica*,”* he said, turning to me.

“A nurse?”

“Now, yes. But in the first year, when I commanded the Proletarian Division, she was just a fighter — a regular soldier.”

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Her name?” Koča paused and fell silent for a long moment. “I can’t,” he said finally. “I can’t remember. I know who she is, I know how she fought, but I can’t recall her name. But then,” he smiled, “back then, they didn’t call me what they do now either. I was just ‘Pera,’ my underground nickname. And I used to walk around in peasant clothes, with a moustache this big.”

He gestured with both hands to show how enormous his moustache had been. Then he touched a small badge pinned to the left side of his chest — a nearly invisible insignia on his olive-coloured uniform, marked with the number “1941.”

“This,” he said, “will one day be dearer to us than all the medals. This badge is only worn by those who began the struggle from the very start — in 1941. It’s the same for everyone: for the commander, for any soldier — even for that girl. We recognize each other by it.”

We left Prokuplje. The road wound through a deep gorge. Suddenly, behind us, in the direction of Niš, artillery flashes began lighting up the black sky

* Comrade (Serbian in the original).

— one after another. They followed us almost the entire way back to headquarters.

“It’s over there, on the other side — beyond Niš,” said Koča. “On the side where your troops and the Bulgarians are. Don’t be disappointed by today’s quiet. I’m telling you again — mark my words — we’ll soon be in Niš together.”

2

Yesterday, I was fortunate enough to see Marshal Tito and speak with him. Without claiming to offer a full portrait of this remarkable man in such a brief report, I’d simply like to sketch a few impressions that struck me as a writer.

For obvious reasons, I won’t name the exact location where this meeting took place. The surrounding landscape was the familiar one of mountains, with forests beginning to turn yellow, cornfields clinging to patches of cleared land and the dark roofs of low peasant houses nestled among them. In one of these houses, I found the Marshal taking a short break. A low wooden room, a table, a stool and the usual bustle of any headquarters — adjutants coming in with papers and disappearing quietly.

Marshal Tito was seated at an improvised desk. He wore a light, steel-grey tunic with two golden oak leaf branches embroidered on a small red patch at the collar.

The Marshal’s face, animated and often smiling as he spoke, was striking in its calm. He was highly

attentive to his interlocutors, and yet it seemed as if he were always thinking at the same time about something else — something far more important than the subject at hand. His hair, streaked generously with grey, rose like a lion's mane above his high forehead.

His eyes — calm, thoughtful — looked on kindly, even gently. But still, I couldn't shake the feeling that it would be a terrible thing to provoke the anger of a man who had lived such a life of trials.

The atmosphere around the Marshal, I repeat, was utterly simple — just like what I'd seen hundreds of times in our own headquarters during offensives: a table, stools, maps. The only distinguishing feature was the huge German shepherd — the famous "Tigr" — who accompanied the Marshal everywhere. The dog sat beside the table, greeting anyone who entered with an intelligent, alert gaze.

I had arrived during the evening meal. A few officers from the main staff were gathered at the table. The day, like the last several days, had brought good news from the front, and the atmosphere was that lively kind that emerges among people who have endured much and can finally glimpse the doorway to a better future. It was the sort of moment when memories naturally arise.

The conversation turned to Mihailović and the treacherous blows dealt to the partisans by the Chetniks when they were still a formidable force.

"Yes, his following is thinning," said the Marshal, and with a barely noticeable smile, added, "Even his son and daughter are now fighting in the ranks of

the partisans.”

Then, smiling again, he said:

“There was a time, back in ‘41, when some romantically inclined foreign newspapers even called Mihailović a ‘Robin Hood.’”

Everyone laughed, and someone asked:

“Well, what should we call him now?”

“Now?” the Marshal repeated. “Now he should be called... what’s the Russian word? *Bednyazhka*.”*

Everyone laughed again, but the Marshal didn’t even smile. In that oddly placed Russian word, there was no pity, no forgiveness — only a profound, final contempt.

From Mihailović, the conversation shifted to the actions of his Chetniks.

“There are fewer and fewer of them every day,” said the Marshal. “Mihailović tried to impose his influence on the people — with whips.”

I assumed this was a metaphor, but the Marshal immediately clarified:

“Yes, with actual whips. When he entered Montenegro, in order to force people into his army, he had every second Montenegrin flogged. He wanted to make them submissive. That Montenegrin there,” the Marshal nodded towards one of his officers, “ask him how well that went over with proud Montenegrins. Probably no one now hates the Chetniks more than the Montenegrins.”

Soon after — I don’t recall what prompted it —

* Poor thing (Russian in the original).

the discussion turned to the Lublin death camp: Majdanek.

“We have our own — Jasenovac,” said the Marshal. “You’ll see it someday. The Germans were just as precise there as in Majdanek. They set up a little factory where they made large wooden mallets. At Jasenovac, people were killed by a blow to the head with one of those mallets. One group of prisoners would kill another. Then the next group would kill that one.”

Then talk turned to the first, most difficult days of the German occupation. The Marshal recalled how he had come from Zagreb to a half-ruined Belgrade, newly seized by the Germans. The city was gripped by terror. Anyone found outside at night was killed. All doors — to homes, apartments, rooms — were forbidden to be locked, under penalty of death. The Germans had to be able to enter anywhere at any time. For weeks, the Marshal had to sleep fully clothed, a Parabellum pistol tucked under his cheek.

He suddenly paused, then grinned mischievously.

“The only thing that brought me comfort back then was knowing that I was spending the night in the fourth house from the home of the German commandant of Belgrade — Lieutenant General Schröder.” Then, more seriously, he added, “It was a time when you had to either survive or die, thinking only about the country’s future and not for a single moment about your own. I’ve rarely been as happy as I was that day in Belgrade when I was told we had our

first fifteen rifles captured from the Germans. And just a few months later, we took an entire arms factory from them in Užice. There were days when that factory produced 420 rifles a day and 60,000 cartridges. Of course, our supply of gunpowder soon ran out — but we had captured shells. We cracked them open, poured out the powder and used it. The grains were too coarse, but that didn't stop us. Remember," the Marshal nodded to one of his officers, "remember how we ground it down on hand mills? Later, the Germans stormed Užice — but the factory had already done its job. We hauled the machines into the mountains and left ten minutes before the Germans arrived. Yes, I had to flee into the mountains on foot many times in those days. But I never minded — I'm a good walker."

Someone smiled. The Marshal noticed the smile and smiled in return.

"My security battalion thought I was a little too good of a walker," he said. "When I rode a horse while the men walked, I held the horse back to match their pace. But when I got off and walked myself, I'd get lost in thought and not notice how fast I was going. The men could barely keep up. So, naturally, they were always quite happy when I got back on the horse..."

The Marshal stood up, bowed silently to those present and left the room. A hush settled over the room.

"He went to work," one of the officers said. And in his tone, there was deep respect — for every

minute of time belonging to that man who had just walked out.

The next morning, the Marshal received me again and agreed to answer a few questions that interested me as a writer.

First, he told me something about his childhood and youth.

He was born into a poor peasant family in a small Croatian village. Besides him, there were three brothers in the family, two of whom — Stjepan and Alojz — were now fighting in the ranks of the partisans. As a boy, his father sent him to apprentice at a restaurant, but after three months he ran away and became an apprentice metalworker in a machine shop. Later, he moved to Zagreb, where he also worked as a mechanic. In 1913, he was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army.

“By the way,” the Marshal recalled with a smile, “I unexpectedly distinguished myself in the army. I was a good fencer and won second prize in the competition.”

“In your regiment?” I asked.

“No — in all of Austria. Yes, really.”

He smiled again, and I could tell that this old, little-known detail from his biography still brought him a sense of pride, even now — as a man of global renown. That was the soldier in him speaking. When man knows how to handle a weapon well, it always brings him a certain satisfaction.

In 1915, wounded on the battlefield, he was taken prisoner and sent to Russia. After a year in a hos-

pital, he ended up in eastern European Russia, where he worked as a mechanic for an old miller in the village of Kalasevo, near the town of Ardatov.

“Maybe that old man is still alive,” the Marshal said suddenly, lost in thought. “You asked about my youth. It ended there — near Ardatov. That’s where I turned twenty-one.”

At the end of our conversation, I asked him a question that may have sounded a bit naive — about the hardest and the happiest day he remembered in over three years of struggle.

“Well,” he said after thinking for a moment, “they may be the same day. It was during the Germans’ fourth offensive, at the Neretva River. We were pressed up against the mountains — surrounded by Germans on all sides. Ahead of us was the Neretva. The bridges were still in our hands. With us were four thousand severely wounded men and I had to save them. All day and all night, fighting raged for a mountain pass. If the Germans had broken through into the valley where we were, all the wounded would have been lost. I gave the orders, then waited through the night, pacing through a small mill building that served as my headquarters. That night, I probably turned a lot greyer. By morning, I was told the Germans had been held off. Now I had to decide — do we break through the mountains into Bosnia, or cross the river into the Sandžak? I chose the latter — the German forces were weaker there. But to make the plan succeed fully, I resorted to a trick. To the surprise of my troops, I ordered all the bridges across

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the Neretva destroyed and sent part of our divisions towards Bosnia. They moved out, crushed a German division and began breaking through. The Germans rushed all their forces to that area, away from the river. And meanwhile, I built a new bridge and began moving our troops into the Sandžak. If the moment I spent pacing the mill at night was the hardest, then the moment I saw the last of the four thousand wounded cross the Neretva — that was the happiest of all I can remember. So in one day, I lived through both the most difficult and the most joyful moment.”

That was the end of our conversation with the Marshal.

Now, much later, I can only add a few words about the next time I saw Marshal Tito.

November 7. Belgrade. These were entirely different times from those when I first met the Marshal. Serbia had already been liberated from the Germans, as had most of Macedonia, most of Dalmatia — and the northeastern part of Yugoslavia was no longer partisan-controlled territory, but state territory in the full sense of the word, with a government, national authority and an army — both mobilized and mobilizing.

On November 7, Marshal Tito held a reception in the capital of his state in honour of the 27th anniversary of the October Revolution.

At the long table in the hall where Tito himself sat, about forty people had gathered. There were representatives of the Soviet command and military mission in Yugoslavia, along with the British, Amer-

ican and Czechoslovak missions — and Tito's closest comrades: his generals, commanders of armies and corps.

Later in the evening, after all the ceremonial toasts had been given, Tito suddenly began turning to one general after another, asking them to sing.

It was, in essence, the first evening in which people who had spent years in the mountains, on the edge of death day after day — often far apart — were suddenly reunited on free soil, in a warm and comfortable room, under a solid roof.

And Tito's comrades eagerly fulfilled his request. Around the table, songs were sung in nearly all the languages of the new federative Yugoslavia — because among the generals sat representatives of all its peoples: Serbian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Slovenian songs.

I watched the Marshal closely. On his usually serious, reserved face was a clear expression of happiness. There was no doubt — in that moment, he was truly happy. He was happy that his long-held dreams and aspirations — into which he had poured all the strength of his soul — had come true. In those songs, sung at one table by people of many nations, one couldn't help but see a symbol of the new — and, one hopes, eternal — brotherhood that was being born.

And when the last of those songs had been sung, the commander of one of the corps — a tall, mustachioed colonel — began to sing in a strong yet gentle tenour, pronouncing the Russian words with a particularly endearing accent:

*Strana moya, Moskva moya, samaya lyubimaya...
My country, my Moscow, my most beloved...*

When he finished, everyone applauded him for a long time.

Then, in chorus, they began singing an old soldier's song — long forgotten back home:

*Hey, company commander,
Give us machine guns,
Give us batteries,
To make it more fun!*

They sang with gusto, with whistles and swagger — like real soldiers.

Seated beside me at the table was an elderly man, white as snow, about sixty years old. His long silver hair fell nearly to his shoulders, and from beneath thick brows, bright, kind, slightly mischievous eyes looked out. At the end of the evening, he raised a toast to Tito.

Tito stood, walked around the table with his glass in hand, clinked glasses with the old man, embraced him and only then drank his wine. Still holding the old man in an embrace, Tito turned to me and said:

“You know who this is? He's our artist. We've known each other for a very long time.”

As he said this, Tito smiled brightly, as if this acquaintance was tied to a particularly amusing memory. And then he added:

“We met in prison. We spent a long time in the

same cell together. He's a very good artist — and a very stubborn man. You know, he drew the whole time we were imprisoned. Of course, he didn't have any canvas, so he drew on the wall. No brushes, no paints — he drew with charcoal. And the most interesting thing was what he drew. He drew only clouds. Every day — just clouds: cumulus and cirrus, clouds in the rain and in calm weather, clouds in storms and in gales. And do you know why he drew only clouds? Because in our cell, there was a window — and for all those years we sat there, the only thing we could ever see through it were the clouds."

Tito gave the artist another warm, firm hug.

That, perhaps, is all I wanted to tell about that evening.

The next morning, I flew from Belgrade to Moscow.

3

It was evening — unusually warm for that time of year. A light southern breeze lazily stirred the tree branches.

Returning on horseback from another trip, as we approached the house, we noticed that along the village street winding down the hillside, five or six campfires were burning at regular intervals.

"Listen," said the colonel, pulling his horse to a stop, "we'll have plenty of time to sleep. Let's leave the horses and go over to one of the fires — listen to some songs. The whole village will be gathered around

them now.”

The fire burned in a narrow lane between two huts. At the back of the lane stood a barn wall, forming a natural semicircle. People sat and stood along it.

Closest to the fire were the women. Some sat on low stools, others stood, pressed close to one another. The fire cut through the darkness, now and then lighting up faces — faces with a calm Slavic beauty, dark hair neatly tucked under scarves, handwoven colourful skirts and embroidered blouses.

Behind the women stood the men — grey-bearded old men, young lads, villagers from other places on their way to partisan assembly points, stopping for the night, and a few of our guards off duty.

All the women had spindles in their hands. With steady, practised movements, they spun wool and sang softly in chorus, never raising their voices. And it was clear — both the singing and the spinning were infinitely familiar to them, part of a rhythm passed down from great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers.

Each new song was usually started by the women. Sometimes they sang alone from start to finish. Sometimes, by the second verse, the men would join in.

Some songs are beautiful and memorable but don't touch the soul. Others are different — with sad, drawn-out melodies that linger, that you might not be able to hum later, but they leave something heavy and meaningful deep within you.

Old songs alternated with new ones. Here and

there, familiar words flashed through the verses: *Stalin, Russia, Tito, victory, battalions*. And yet the tone of the songs reached far into the past. The centuries-long story of an oppressed yet proud people echoed in them.

I thought of Pushkin and his songs of the Western Slavs, of ancient battles with the Turks, of mountain passes, yataghans, long-barrelled old rifles. And it seemed that if you closed your eyes, even a hundred or two hundred years ago, everything might have looked just the same — women spinning wool by the fire, and men, just as now, preparing to go to war.

From time to time, high above our heads, planes passed overhead. There were many of them — flying one after another with that familiar, strained howl that marked German engines. When the sound of the planes was distant, no one paid attention. But when the hum grew close, one of the women would calmly get up and cover the fire with a round iron bread-baking sheet.

A bit apart from the others, near a wall, sitting on a low bench, not hiding from anyone, sat a couple, holding each other: a very beautiful girl — perhaps the most beautiful among all those gathered — and next to her, a partisan in a green wool tunic, a side cap and dark glasses. They sat in silence, not saying a word. It seemed as though the partisan, behind his dark glasses, was staring intently into the fire.

But that wasn't true — he wasn't looking at the fire. He was blind. He had been captured by the Germans and Chetniks, tortured and had his eyes

burned out. Later, he was freed from captivity and only this morning had he been brought to his home village. The girl was his fiancée.

This evening was their first meeting after three years of separation.

Someone whispered all of this in my ear — nothing more. And because nothing more was said, I thought: this girl, no matter what, will still become his wife.

From time to time, the cries of sentries rang out: “Stop! Who goes there?” Then a minute later, someone else would approach our fire.

Now, the partisans were leading the songs. They sang one after another — songs born of this war, simple, transparent, at times naive. And to us Russians, far from home in that moment, they warmed our hearts — because nearly every song mentioned distant Russia.

Some sang about how Russian heroes had crushed the *švabe* at Stalingrad. Others sang about how the Russians would soon arrive and help the Yugoslavs. Some simply mentioned the names of our commanders in the chorus.

The last song the partisans sang was one I had heard many times: *Mi smo mlada vojska Titova*.*

The first verse and chorus, loosely translated into Russian, went something like this:

Across rivers, through villages and oak groves

* *We are the young army of Tito* (Serbian in the original).

*Partisan battalions march.
Against the švabe, against the bloody vultures,
Millions of free people have risen.
We are Tito's young army.
The whole people are with us.
We fear neither death nor wounds —
As long as our Tito stays healthy.*

Suddenly, with a roar of the horn, a Willys jeep skidded to a stop near the fire. Inside sat General Koča Popović, dressed in field gear.

“There you are,” he said, shaking hands with us. Without getting out of the Willys, he added quickly, “I’ve saved a seat for you in the car.”

“What’s going on?”

“We’ve just received word that our troops and the Bulgarians have cut the southern road and linked up in Leskovac.”

Five minutes later, we set off for the large village of Lebane, where the headquarters of the 47th Partisan Division — operating in the Leskovac direction — was located.

Inside the house, on a clay floor, worn-out fighters lay sleeping, crowded close together. They didn’t wake even when the phone rang out next to their heads or when voices rose in loud conversation.

The reports were confirmed: Leskovac had indeed been taken a few hours earlier — from the west, it had been stormed by one of this division’s brigades, and from the east — by the Bulgarians. The chief of staff tried to persuade Koča to wait and proceed in

the morning, as the road from Lebane to Leskovac was mined. But Koča wouldn't hear of it. He demanded they assign him a guide from headquarters — someone who knew where the minefields were.

However, it turned out that headquarters couldn't provide such a guide. The mines had been laid on that road long ago, several months earlier, by the partisans themselves, who had aimed to prevent German movement westward from Leskovac. But at that time, a different partisan brigade had been stationed here — one that had since moved on towards Niš and left the current occupiers of the area no maps or even rough sketches of the mine barriers.

We seated a partisan on the hood of the Willys — he didn't know where the mines were either, but at least he knew the road — and set out. There were about fourteen kilometres to Leskovac. Along both sides of the single road leading from Leskovac lay scattered villages, farms and occasional houses. Our guide, who hadn't been in the area for a long time but seemed to know everyone and everything here in the past, kept motioning for us to slow the car. He would run up to a house and knock on the door with the butt of his rifle. A sleepy man would appear — usually in his underwear with a peasant coat thrown over his shoulders. The exchange typically went like this:

“Stefan?”

“Yes.”

“Stefan, do you know if there are any mines around here?”

“There are some.”

“Right around here, by your place?”

“Not near me.”

“And not farther up ahead?”

“Up to the bend — no. I took my cart to the fields. All clear.”

“Come on, guide the car.”

The peasant, still in his underclothes, would step onto the road and — without needing to be asked — would jog ahead of the vehicle, lit by its headlights, for a quarter or half a kilometre, as far as he had recently travelled. Then, together with our guide, they’d walk on to the next hut and the same routine would repeat. A bearded old man would come out, point with a stick where it was safe and where it wasn’t, and then, waving us forward, would lead the car for another kilometre — the stretch he knew to be clear.

This happened several times. Twice, we had to detour around mined bridges by fording shallow autumn streams.

At last, we reached an open area with no houses on either side — just dark clumps of trees and the faint outlines of fields stretching into the night. There was no one left to ask.

“How far is it from here?” Koča asked.

“About five kilometres.”

“This is exactly where the mines are supposed to be,” the partisan said. “We won’t meet anyone for the next four kilometres — not until the outskirts of the town.”

The general impatiently drummed his fingers on the seat — he was weighing his decision. But before

he could speak, the partisan said:

“*Družo* General, there’s no one left to ask anyway. I’ll run ahead of the car — thirty paces in front — and you follow me.”

“You’ll run in front of the car?” Koča repeated.

But the partisan apparently misunderstood the tone — not as concern for his safety, but as doubt about his speed.

“I’ll run fast,” the partisan said. “Fast. I won’t slow you down.”

Koča was silent for a few seconds, and for the first time during the entire trip — in which he had been in a hurry, tense and impatient — he spoke calmly and kindly:

“Get on the hood, *družo*, we’ll go together.”

The partisan tried to object, but it didn’t help. He had to climb onto the hood and the jeep set off. At first, we moved slowly, trying to follow in the headlights the last traces of tire tracks on the rain-washed sandy road. But eventually those tracks veered off and disappeared.

“Let’s go,” Koča said firmly, waving his hand — and the Willys lunged forward in third gear with a whistle.

We covered the remaining three kilometres in barely three or four minutes and stopped only when the jeep reached the sloped-roof houses of the outskirts, where a partisan patrol blocked the road.

At the checkpoint, beside the first half-ruined houses, stood the first Bulgarian tank we had seen — a long-barrelled gun pointing east. Sitting on the

turret, with the hatch open, was a Bulgarian tanker without a cap, peering into the darkness and puffing nervously on a cigarette.

After walking about half a kilometre through the city, we reached a surviving three-storey building and climbed up the narrow interior stairs to the third floor, where the headquarters of the 15th Partisan Brigade was located. There we were met by its commander, Captain Stanimir Dančić, and the division's commissar, Sava Kesar.

Without removing his coat or sitting down, Koča asked sharply and possessively what part the brigade had played in taking Leskovac.

"Who entered first — the partisans or the Bulgarians? Maybe they went in first and you followed after?" he asked.

"No — we went in together," the commissar replied. "They came from the east, we from the west — at the same hour."

"Well, how did the Bulgarians fight?"

"*Dobre*,"* the commissar said. After a brief pause, he added again, "*Dobre*. The Soviet troops have already reached Niš from the north. The Bulgarians are trying to keep pace — pushing forward."

Further questions revealed that the Bulgarian side had been represented by the 12th Infantry Division, whose commander was currently in Leskovac. Koča sent his adjutant to summon him. Only then did he finally pull off his outer coat and belt and sit

* Well (Bulgarian in the original).

down at the table. Without the coat, in just his tunic, he looked even thinner — boyishly lean. Smoothing down his hair, he checked his belt and tightened it by another hole. I couldn't help but smile. He caught my look and smiled too.

“No way around it — partisan waistline,” he said.

I went downstairs and out onto the street. Despite the late hour, the street was lit. Trucks drove by constantly, and on the sidewalks, patrols marched in step. There went the Bulgarians in reddish overcoats and forage caps like ours, and crossing their path — a partisan patrol in side caps with red stars.

The partisan patrol stopped at the gate of one house.

“What are you doing here?” one of the sentries asked.

Only then did I notice two old women sitting on a bench nearby.

“Watching,” one of them replied. She stood up, gently touched the partisan's coat with both hands and, with a tear of happiness in her voice, said: “My sweet ones!”

And it sounded just like an old Russian woman's words — something you might hear on the day our forces reached war-torn Vyazma or burned-out Smolensk. The other old woman said sternly, reproachfully, pointing at the ruins stretching down the street:

“Took you long enough, oh how long you took!”

And that exclamation again reminded me of Russia — of the stern words our own mothers sometimes greeted us with after waiting two years behind

enemy lines.

I don't know how that conversation ended. A large covered vehicle pulled up to the gate. I understood that the Bulgarian division commander had arrived and hurried back upstairs to the room where General Koča was. Right behind me entered a stocky, grey-haired Bulgarian colonel, wearing a simple field uniform with field shoulder boards. He and Koča saluted each other, then shook hands and sat down at the table, facing each other. On the table lay a large staff map of the combat zone around Leskovac and Niš. It was the first in many decades — a joint staff map for both countries — on which, with the same red pencil, were marked the positions of the cooperating Bulgarian and Yugoslav units — brothers by blood — and in identical blue circles were marked the *švabe* caught in this shared Slavic trap.

4

Leskovac was now far behind. The fighting was already taking place at the gates of Niš.

At dawn, General Koča set out for Niš to clarify the situation in the sectors where Bulgarian forces were operating. To avoid the mined main road, we had to take a long detour via country lanes. At the crossing over the Morava River, we came upon a scene that must have looked much like what our grandfathers saw during the last Russo-Turkish war of 1877.

Bulgarian mechanized columns had crossed the river during the night, and now the crossing resem-

bled a massive military encampment. Thousands of wagons with round canvas tops were clustered together. Infantry stood in long queues, waiting their turn. Sturdy artillery horses strained through sticky sand, hauling field guns. The air rang with the cries of drivers, the squeaking of wheels, the neighing of horses and the clatter of weapons.

Partisan and Bulgarian infantry moved forward in single file. Everything was full of animated chatter and a particular kind of joy — the joy of a first military success.

The Slavs had risen against the Germans. They were moving forward — together — and it seemed that on this unusually sunny autumn day, everything foretold victory.

In the small town of Vlasotince, a Soviet soldier suddenly ran up to our Willys — short, stocky, clean-shaven, about twenty years old. On the right pocket of his tunic were three faded wound stripes.

“Comrade Lieutenant Colonel,” he said, stepping onto the running board, “who can I join to fight?”

I was surprised to see him, because I knew well that our own troops were advancing on Niš from the north, and that there were no Soviet units in this sector — only Bulgarians and Yugoslavs.

“What do you mean, ‘join’?” I asked.

He told me, in a few simple words, how, after being discharged from the hospital, he had set out to catch up with his unit. He travelled through Bulgaria, learned his unit was somewhere in this region of Yugoslavia and ended up here, where he found parti-

sans and Bulgarians.

“So where’d you get the submachine gun?” I asked.

“There’s a partisan battalion here — stopped for the night before heading into battle. They gave me the gun and said I should fight with them — we’ll meet up with our guys during the battle at Niš.”

I looked over at General Koča. He smiled — that same wide, special smile he always had when someone touched his heart.

“Permission to go with the partisans for now, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel,” the soldier insisted. “We understand each other very well. And once we push forward, I’ll find my way back to my own unit — all right?”

What could I say to that?

“All right,” I said.

The road to Niš looked just like any road after a German retreat. Burned-out vehicles, wrecked armoured cars, unburied German corpses lay scattered. The rumble of battle was getting closer. More and more empty Bulgarian trucks passed by, headed back for ammunition.

When Yugoslav General Koča’s Willys jeep passed by, Bulgarian soldiers riding in the trucks, holding onto the side with one hand, would salute with the other — or, in the tradition of the Popular Front, raise a clenched fist.

The Morava River, which kept snaking through the Niš Valley, blocked our path again twelve kilometres from Niš. It was fairly wide here, but trucks

still managed to cross it straight through the water. On both banks, Bulgarian engineers were building wooden ramps. Their work reminded me of the smooth, fast pace of our own sappers, whom I had seen in August at the Vistula crossings. Working bare-chested, spitting on their hands, they grabbed their axes and, with a hearty shout, drove the wooden posts deep into the ground.

We crossed the river, the tires clicking rhythmically over the tightly fitted logs, and climbed the hillside. Beyond the river lay the familiar setting of battle: hastily dug trenches, earth torn by black shell craters, wounded men wrapped in white bandages walking with comrades' help or lying under the cliff, covered head to toe with brown Bulgarian greatcoats — bodies not yet buried.

The regimental headquarters of General Trendafilov's tank division, operating in this sector, was located on the mountainside, in a small but deep quarry.

After greeting us, the regimental commander — a tall colonel, dressed like many of our own tank commanders, in a loose work jumpsuit over his uniform, a tank helmet tucked into his belt — explained that his tanks had failed to cross the main channel of the Morava about a kilometre away, where the crossing had initially been planned. They were now moving north along the river, searching for a place to ford it and cut off the Germans' retreat to the west of Niš.

The colonel wasn't fazed by the failed first crossing or the fact that the Germans had massed a lot of

artillery and mortars in the area, turning it into a field of craters.

The important thing was that the army had risen, was advancing and already breaking the Germans with its strength. Only someone who has spent three and a half years under the hypnotic spell of daily talk about German technical superiority and the invincibility of the German army can understand how significant and joyful this was.

The colonel assigned us a guide, and we began climbing the hill where artillery and tank observation posts were located. The region around Leskovac and Niš is Yugoslavia's most famous wine country. The steep slope we climbed was covered in one continuous vineyard. The recent rains had washed the soil loose and our feet sank deeply into the rich black earth. We had to follow the tank tracks — crisscrossing the vineyard like long, serpentine strips, they led upward from every direction.

About a hundred metres from the top, nestled in a small ravine on the slope, was the observation post of a heavy artillery battalion. The guns themselves were positioned behind us, on the far side of the mountain, and every minute they barked dully, sending shells flying overhead.

Several soldiers sat at the bottom of the ravine, spooning up the traditional red pepper soup from a large kettle.

The battery commander, a young captain, saluted, introduced himself and handed his binoculars to General Koča, pointing out the targets currently

under fire. Several kilometres away stood a village occupied by the Germans, defending the road to Niš. Fire was being directed at both the village and a small grove behind it. The area had clearly been zeroed in. Shells exploded tightly grouped, one after another, and the Germans fired back less and less frequently.

“We’re slowly forcing them into silence,” the captain said. “An hour ago it was much harder. See there?”

He rose above the edge of the ravine and swept his arm over the slope stretching below us. There wasn’t a patch of untouched ground. Like a chessboard, it was covered with craters from German shells.

Having shown us the targets and left the binoculars, the captain returned to his duties. His voice, young and breaking slightly from emotion, called out orders to his batteries.

General Koča sat at the edge of the ravine for a long time, carefully scanning everything in sight through the binoculars. The right side of the horizon was blocked by the mountain peak, but to the left, the visibility seemed almost endless. Below the hill stretched a wide plain, and in the distance, the Morava River reappeared, cutting across it once more.

Through the binoculars, on the ridge of one distant hill, we could make out lines of soldiers advancing steadily under German fire.

“I think that’s my brigade,” Koča said. He pulled out a map, checked it and repeated: “Yes, it’s mine — approaching Niš from the west, along the road from Prokuplje.”

He turned to the captain:

“Have you observed infantry there?”

“I have.”

“I think it’s partisan infantry. Does that match your data?”

“Yes, those are partisans,” the captain confirmed. “I’ve been watching them for two hours — they’re moving well. Two hours ago, they were still way over there.”

He pointed left, towards a forest three or four kilometres from the hills we were observing.

“Yes, they’re moving well,” Koča said with satisfaction. “That brigade has many veterans from 1941 — battle-hardened people, now practically professionals.”

Half an hour later, we moved from the artillery post to the very top of the mountain and sat behind a half-destroyed white stone chapel, its walls scarred by shells. Set into the wall was a memorial plaque with the names of two heroes who had died here fighting the Germans in autumn 1914.

From this spot, we had a breathtaking view of the right side of the horizon, all the way to Niš, hidden behind folds of hills.

“Right behind that grove and hill — that’s Niš,” Koča pointed out to me. “And to the left — see that white building? — that’s the Niš prison. Over the last three years, many of our people went through those gates, but very few came out.”

The tank observation post was just next to us, inside the commander’s own tank, parked on the

ridge. From there, the observer was constantly radioing down to regimental headquarters. The tank stood right on the crest, an unnecessary display of bravado — a lack of caution. But then again, who doesn't indulge in that during the early days of war?

Just below the hill, in the Morava, a tank — submerged up to its turret — sat stuck midstream, clearly one that had tried to be the first to cross the river.

Further east, across the Morava, smoke from shell bursts kept rising. Even without binoculars, we could see infantry moving — halting and advancing again. About twenty tanks — presumably from the very regiment we were with — were crawling slowly along the swampy left bank of the river, likely searching for a ford.

We could also see the far left of the panorama. There, about thirty kilometres away, beyond the forests, thick plumes of smoke rose into the sky.

“Could that be Prokuplje burning?” Koča said aloud, and then answered himself: “No — it can't be, Prokuplje's farther than that. It must be somewhere on the road between Niš and Prokuplje. But there's no major settlement there. So what's burning?”

Just then, the tanks moving along the Morava suddenly wheeled sharply to the west — one after another — and began quickly moving across the fields and groves towards the direction of the smoke and, in the lulls between nearby shell bursts, we could hear the distant rumble of artillery.

“There must have been a new decision made on the spot,” Koča said. “Maybe the Germans are break-

ing out of Niš towards Prokuplje and the tanks are going to intercept. In any case — let's go. First, we'll find out at headquarters what's going on. Second, we'll move around to the east. By my estimate, the Soviet troops coming from the north will be the first to break into Niš, followed by units from my 13th Corps and the Bulgarians coming from the east. And we need to be there — as early as possible.”

We left the observation post and began descending once again — down the battered, tank-churned vineyard.

Where we had left the regimental command post, there was no one left. The commander had gone forward to the tank battle lines and the headquarters had moved up after him. To find out what was happening, we had no choice but to drive back to the tank division's headquarters. It was located in a small village right beside the road. In the large courtyard of one of the houses stood a brand-new staff bus. A very young Bulgarian colonel — he couldn't have been more than thirty — came out to greet us. He introduced himself as Colonel Surdulov, chief of staff of the tank division, and shook General Koča's hand for a long time and with great warmth.

We asked him about the situation in their sector. He opened the bus door and we all squeezed inside. The interior of the bus looked just as clean and new as the outside.

Surdulov, as I later found out, belonged to that part of the Bulgarian officer corps that had opposed the pro-German policies of recent Bulgarian govern-

ments and had been sidelined or forced into retirement.

Before the September 9 coup, he had been a captain. Now, he was doubly anxious: first, because these were his first days of war, and second, because as a young officer, he was leading the staff of Bulgaria's first tank division. As he spoke with us, he was in that happy state of mind one feels in moments of success — the joy of experiencing victory for the first time.

He quickly showed us on the map the division's original position, its movement towards Niš, and in response to the question of why, an hour earlier, we had seen their tanks turn away from the Morava crossing and head west of Niš, he replied with conviction that their division's tanks would no longer be going to Niš. It was true that the initial order had directed them to the western outskirts of Niš. But in the past few hours, the situation had changed. The main German column, made up of more than 1,000 transport and combat vehicles, had left Niš and was retreating rapidly west towards Prokuplje under rear-guard cover.

“When you were at the front line,” Surdulov said, “you must have seen smoke towards Prokuplje. That was one of our tank regiments reaching the road near Prokuplje just as the German column was passing. It was supported by partisan infantry. Fighting is underway there now, and according to initial reports, several hundred German vehicles have already been captured. An hour ago, the division commander ordered all remaining tanks to head there as well. You

probably saw them just as that order was being carried out. We're tankers — our job is to chase, cut off and destroy. As for Niš — they'll take it without us."

He spoke with great passion, almost heatedly. Then he suddenly paused, smiled shyly and added, turning to me:

"It was very difficult in the environment we had in Bulgaria, but we — I mean the officers like myself and the division commander — we did everything we could to follow how the Russian troops fought. And we're happy that now we have the chance to apply your experience against the Germans. In any case, we're learning to fight like your tank corps did on the Don and in the Ukraine..."

The news that the main German column had left Niš, and that the city's fall was now only a matter of hours, made General Koča even more eager to move quickly. We said goodbye to Colonel Surdulov and immediately set off via a detour, hoping to reach the eastern road from Pirot to Niš before nightfall.

5

After a long detour through the mountains, we reached the Pirot road shortly before dark. In the first village we passed, we learned that Soviet, Yugoslav and Bulgarian forces had entered Niš from different directions — from the east, north and northwest — just a few hours earlier.

As much as we hurried, in each of the few villages still between us and Niš, we were delayed for several

minutes.

Crowds of villagers blocked the narrow streets, forcing us to stop. Women cried and gave us embroidered towels. Girls placed huge wreaths of wildflowers on the windshield of the Willys, and our emotional driver — though unable to see through them — refused to remove them, driving with his head hanging out the side. Men insisted we have a glass of *slivovitz* with them. They surrounded the vehicle, holding out large woven bottles.

Strong peasant arms hugged me. Strangers I had never seen before — and likely would never see again — kissed me three times on the lips, as if we were brothers.

We entered Niš almost at nightfall. The city had suffered some damage from the fighting but was largely intact. The unity and swiftness of the advancing forces had saved the city — the Germans hadn't had time to destroy it.

I wanted to find the commander of our regiment, which had entered Niš from the north, but it turned out the regiment had passed through the city without stopping and was now ten to fifteen kilometres northwest, pursuing the Germans.

We set off to find the headquarters of the 13th Yugoslav Partisan Corps. It was located in a large semicircular building on the main square — a building that, until the day before, had housed the local *Nedićevci*.*

* Nedić's Serbian State Guard (Serbian in the original).

At about eleven o'clock that night, just as we had finally laid down to get a few hours of sleep in some unknown apartment — some on couches, others on the floor — gunfire erupted in the city. It began with single shots, then came bursts from automatic rifles, then loud bursts from heavy machine guns and anti-tank rifles.

I ran out onto the porch. The sky was streaked with colourful tracer rounds.

“What’s going on?” I asked the man standing beside me, whom I hadn’t noticed in the dark.

He turned towards me, and I saw it was a Yugoslav lieutenant colonel, deputy commander of the very corps that had taken the city.

His name was Živojin Nikolić. But even those who had once known his real name had long forgotten it. Everyone in the corps simply called him Lieutenant Colonel Prka — “The Moustached One” — because of the enormous, bushy moustache that covered half his face. Turning towards me, calm as always and a little amused, he said, struggling with his Russian:

“They’re celebrating the victory. No matter what we do, they’ll shoot in the air for half an hour. A partisan habit — celebrating. We’re working on it,” he added, “but it’s hard to control.”

“And how do you deal with it?” I asked.

“How? Right now we’ve sent out patrols to confiscate weapons from anyone who fires. And tomorrow morning, when they come to reclaim their weapons — we’ll have a talk.”

“Hey!” he suddenly called out into the darkness.
“Come here.”

A boy of about thirteen approached us, dressed in full partisan uniform and hunched under the weight of three submachine guns slung over his shoulders.

“Well, how’d it go?” Prka asked him. “Did you take them?”

Standing at attention, the boy answered confidently.

“Took two.”

“And the third one’s yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There you go,” said Prka with a nod. “A veteran from the Proletarian Division — a disciplined fighter. He’s just confiscated two guns and will now turn them in, as ordered.”

“How old are you?” I asked the boy.

“Fourteen,” he replied, still at attention.

“And how long have you been fighting?”

“A long time,” Prka answered for him. “He’s been at war for three years — from the very beginning.”

Only then did I notice the bronze badge on the boy’s chest with the number “1941.”

In the morning, we went out to walk through the city. Despite the damage — shattered windows, torn-up cobblestones and all the signs of a battle just ended — the city looked festive. There wasn’t a single house without flags fluttering above it — red, blue and white Yugoslav flags with a star, and our red Soviet flags.

At the intersection of two main streets, I saw a

small, poorly dressed old man. He was walking unsteadily, holding a large wicker basket covered with a cloth. I watched as he stopped a Yugoslav soldier coming towards him, quickly set the basket on the ground, pulled out two small glasses and two pieces of bread, poured *rakija* into the glasses, handed one to the soldier and kept the other for himself. Without a word, they clinked glasses and drank. Then the old man quietly put the glasses back in the basket, covered them with the cloth again and went on his way.

I watched him from a distance. A few dozen steps later, he met and stopped a Bulgarian non-commissioned officer. The same scene repeated itself. Once again, the old man set his basket down on the ground and pulled out the little glasses.

He had barely finished when our battered one-and-a-half-ton truck turned the corner — Soviet soldiers with sky-blue collar tabs were sitting in the back. They were likely our ever-restless airfield service personnel, who followed the advancing armies closely. The old man jumped down from the sidewalk into the street, and for a split second, it looked like he was throwing himself under the vehicle. The driver braked with a screech. The old man raised both hands, waving the basket — now clearly three-quarters empty — and shouted something I couldn't hear, but whatever it was, it must have been convincing. The driver and the soldiers got out of the truck, and once again, he pulled out the bread and the little glasses.

He was a poor man — in patched trousers and a

worn-out jacket. And those pieces of bread and that *rakija* in the basket were probably all he had. But he welcomed the liberators with whatever he could.

On the outskirts of the city, where we ended up around noon, we were stopped by a middle-aged, robust and cheerful peasant woman carrying a heavy basket woven from bast. She asked my companion if he knew where the 27th Partisan Brigade was stationed in the city.

“They’re not here,” he said.

“What do you mean, not here? I was told they were.”

“And why are you looking for them?”

She smiled broadly, flashing her teeth.

“My child is with them.”

“Your child?”

“Yes.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty.”

My companion laughed.

“That’s hardly a child.”

“But he was just a boy when he joined the partisans. He wasn’t even seventeen yet.”

“Well, he probably has a moustache now — one like mine,” my companion said, stroking his own. “So why are you looking for him?”

“I brought him something to eat,” she said, pointing to her basket.

“The 27th Brigade isn’t here,” he repeated. “They’ve gone far — towards Belgrade.”

The woman’s face darkened for a moment, then

she suddenly offered us the basket.

“Well, then — take this.”

My companion refused.

“We’ve got everything we need.”

“Then I’ll give it to other soldiers I meet?” she asked.

“If you meet them — give it to them.”

She smiled at us again, said goodbye and, lifting the basket easily with her strong hand, quickly walked off down the street.

At one shop window, we saw a crowd gathered. A large square sheet of paper had been pasted directly onto the glass. On top of it was a photo of a girl — around fourteen — with braids, wearing a traditional Yugoslav costume. Her dark eyes and sweet face smiled cheerfully from the portrait. Underneath, in bold print, was a caption:

“On St. Stephen’s Day, 1942, the Germans shot me at Gubetin as a partisan. Avenge me, comrades, to the very end — I ask you.” Signed: “Comrade Elena.”

The crowd stood in silence before the poster. No one said a word. But I remember thinking that if, at that moment, a group of German prisoners were led down the street — whether it was two or two hundred — they likely would not have made it from one end to the other.

By one in the afternoon, messengers had arrived at headquarters with the latest reports from the battle on the Niš-Prokuplje road. The fighting, which had begun the day before, was nearing a favourable conclusion. General Trendafilov’s tank division had

struck the German column almost simultaneously with the partisan brigades that had broken through from the north.

By the end of the previous day, in addition to destroying and seizing around a thousand German vehicles, a considerable number of prisoners had been taken. The partisans had captured the commander of one of the retreating German regiments along with his entire staff. After abandoning his vehicle, he tried to flee through the mountains, but at the very first pass was cornered in a narrow gorge by the partisans. He was forced to raise his hands — and ordered his men to do the same.

By two in the afternoon, an honour guard of Yugoslav soldiers had assembled in front of corps headquarters.

At exactly two o'clock, the commanding general of the Bulgarian 2nd Army, General Stanchev, his deputy Colonel Bolgarianov, and the commander of Bulgarian partisan forces, General Blagoy Ivanov, arrived. They had come to meet the commander of the Serbian forces. The meeting took place in a small room in a vacated apartment, around a dining table, with a map of military operations spread out before them.

The meeting was warm — like one between soldiers. And that was only natural. Beyond the fact that the generals' meeting was merely a continuation of what their troops had already done on the battlefield, beyond the brotherhood forged in shared blood and future combat, there was something more that

united these men.

Two of the three Bulgarian officers were old comrades of General Koča Popović. He and General Blagoy Ivanov had once fought together in Spain, in the ranks of the International Brigade — one commanding an artillery battalion, the other an infantry battalion.

He had also fought alongside Colonel Bolgarianov before. Back when Bulgaria was still under the fascist Filov government, Bolgarianov — like many Bulgarian patriots — had crossed into Yugoslavia and fought there with Tito's partisan army.

Outside, the sound of voices was growing louder and louder. Within minutes, everyone gathered had to step out onto the second-floor balcony.

In front of headquarters, a spontaneous mass gathering had formed in those short moments. The entire square was full of people — residents of Niš, peasants and peasant women from the surrounding villages who had come into town to celebrate the city's liberation. There were men in peasant clothes with rifles slung over their shoulders, women with several grenades hanging from their embroidered skirts, partisans in green jackets and rakishly tilted forage caps, and dusty Bulgarian soldiers in brown uniforms and steel helmets.

The crowd waited. They wanted to hear words of victory from those who had commanded the forces that had freed Niš.

As always, these most joyful moments allowed for no long speeches. Everyone spoke briefly — with

the passion and strength that only victory can bring.

The partisan corps commander spoke first, followed by General Stanchev, then a representative of the Soviet mission, and finally Colonel Bolgarianov. The square erupted in cheers and applause for their words — for victory, for the newly born brotherhood between the Yugoslav and Bulgarian peoples, for Tito, for Russia, for Stalin.

I stood at the window, deeply moved, watching it all unfold. How sincere and powerful it all felt! It was so clear now — how long and persistently, through all artificial barriers, these brother nations had reached out to one another, how natural the merging of their hearts and efforts had become.

In that moment, scenes from the past month flashed through my mind — all the joyful moments in which I had seen, felt and touched this growing bond between Slavic peoples. I remembered the cathedral in Pleven, above the mass grave of Russian soldiers who died in 1877 for the freedom of the Balkans. I remembered Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia, asking me with emotion about Kiev, where he had once studied: “How are things there in Kiev? Is it true the Germans blew up Kreshchatik?” I remembered the first Soviet soldiers to reach the streets of the little Yugoslav town of Negotin, being carried through the air by an ecstatic crowd. I remembered the black prosthetic glove on the hand of the son of one of the leaders of the Yugoslav resistance — he had lost his arm in the fighting outside Moscow. I remembered the bodies of Bulgarian soldiers covered in overcoats — fallen

for the liberation of Niš. I remembered the green-red-white Bulgarian flags hanging on the streets of freed Leskovac in honour of the Bulgarian troops and the slogans painted on the walls in Bulgarian villages: *Živeo Tito, živeo slobodna Jugoslavija*.*

No matter how sure a person may be that the sun will rise after even the longest night, its first rays still stir the heart. And in that moment — on the streets of Niš, above the heads of this loud and excited crowd — I saw, felt and understood with all my being: these were the first rays of victory, the rays of a long-awaited union, the brotherhood of Slavs being born at last.

Yugoslavia

September — November 1944

* Long live Tito, long live free Yugoslavia! (Serbian in the original).

STORIES

THE ORDER OF LENIN

It was almost dawn, that first night when I had been transferred to the rear, to the Yugoslav partisans. The four of us — Russians — after endless questions about Moscow, finally decided to get some sleep. The colonel, the senior among us, sat down on the hay covered with cargo parachute fabric that served as our communal bed. By doing this, he gave the signal to the others and was the first to start taking off his tunic. In the process, he accidentally turned it inside out, and I was surprised to see that inside, against the breast pocket, an Order of Lenin was pinned — with a large round hole through its centre, clearly pierced by a bullet.

“Not mine,” the colonel said, catching my glance. “Just keeping it safe. Sewed it in so I wouldn’t lose it, God forbid.”

He propped himself up higher against the sacks of coarse hemp we used for pillows, lit a cigarette and told me the first of the many stories I would later hear there. I didn’t write it down at the time, but I remember it well enough and think I can retell it without straying too far from the truth.

Pilot Vladimir Sergeyevich Erikhonov — an old civilian aviation pilot, a millionaire pilot even before the war — was shot down by a German night fighter near Zagreb during his seventy-third flight to

the partisans. The plane was burning, breaking up in mid-air. Erikhonov bailed out last. During landing, he broke his leg, and when, two days later, the partisans found him — the only survivor from the crew — he couldn't walk at all without help. Actually, it wasn't "partisans" who found him, but one partisan — Mirko Nikolić, a thirteen-year-old Croatian boy, different from other boys his age in two ways: First, on his chest was a badge marked "1941," meaning Mirko had been fighting as a partisan for three years. Second, slung over his shoulder on a rope was a German submachine gun — which he had long known how to use with deadly accuracy. These two things had, in turn, shaped two traits in his character: he neither feared nor was surprised by the sight of death, and he got quite irritated any time someone casually referred to his age — especially if they didn't have a "1941" badge of their own.

In all other ways, he was still very much a child — trusting, naive and curious.

When he had gone off in search of berries (as the battalion had gone almost five days with barely anything to eat), and suddenly stumbled upon Erikhonov sitting at the base of a rock with a revolver in his hand, he was so thrilled to see a Russian pilot — for the first time in his life — that he didn't immediately realize this was the result of a disaster.

Seeing the boy with the star on his forage cap, Erikhonov set down the revolver, sighed and swore — all at once — for everything: the downed plane, his broken leg and the two days of fearing capture.

The first Russian words Mirko Nikolić ever heard were, needless to say, not a quote from Turgenev. Luckily, he didn't understand them. He understood only this: that the man was a pilot — from the helmet, that he was Russian — from the uniform, and that he was hurt — from the unnaturally twisted, lifeless leg.

Mirko didn't waste time. He calmly explained he was going to get help — and left. What he should have done next was run for a horse. But the child in him got the better of him. He dropped to his knees next to Erikhonov and stared at something that had caught his eye.

On the Russian pilot's chest was a portrait of Lenin — no doubt about it. Mirko knew that face. But the portrait — it was very small, round, and made of gold and silver.

"Lenin?" Mirko asked.

"Lenin," Erikhonov replied, glancing down at it. He tried to shift into a more comfortable position and grunted in pain.

That reminded Mirko of what he needed to do. He jumped up, laid down his submachine gun next to Erikhonov and ran off. An hour later, the partisans came with a horse and took Erikhonov back with them. It must be said — Erikhonov had arrived at a bad time. For the third week now, a major German *ofanziva* (as the partisans called it) was underway. They had to retreat deeper into the mountains, changing position every night. The battalion, originally left in the rear guard, had long been cut off from

the rest and could rely only on itself.

A medic set Erikhonov's broken leg with crude splints, tied them off with rope — and that was essentially the extent of the medical care.

Mirko, following the medic's instructions, carved the splints himself from a young fir tree. He also helped tie the ropes. Now, as Erikhonov lay in a creaking narrow cart, Mirko walked behind it — sometimes chatting with him, sometimes just mouthing words in silence, lost in his own thoughts for hours at a time.

Three days later, after a short battle, the partisans moved again — deeper into the wilderness. The cart had to be abandoned. Erikhonov was placed on horseback. A wooden board was strapped to the right side of the saddle so he could rest his immobilized leg on it. It allowed him to stay in the saddle — barely.

Mirko now walked beside him — not behind — always on the side of the injured leg. He watched over the leg, broke branches out of the way, and sometimes led the horse by the reins.

More than a week passed this way. Several men were killed. The wounded, barely bandaged, bit their lips and climbed over the rocks with the others. One man, whose legs had been shattered, quietly shot himself — he couldn't go on, and Erikhonov was riding the only horse, previously used by the battalion commander.

By mutual unspoken agreement, the honour of caring for Erikhonov had been given to Mirko. He gave him water from his German canteen, and sev-

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eral times roasted birds for him over a fire, when he could shoot one. When there was absolutely nothing to eat, he would slip away from Erikhonov, hand off care duties to another fighter and return with his forage cap full of scraps — a few crusts of hardtack, a few tiny bits of dried cheese, two or three pods of paprika. These were the last hidden morsels from the bottom of empty pockets and packs, meant for their own “black day,” but now given up for the Russian.

Mirko never had to ask. He simply walked silently from one man to another. They knew he hadn’t managed to find anything for the Russian that day — and, just as silently, with the quiet weariness of the starving and exhausted, they would fumble through their pockets and drop what they had into his cap.

Then Mirko would come to Erikhonov, hand him the cap — and suddenly become unusually talkative. He could sense the pilot’s suspicious glance and would do everything possible to keep him from asking where the food came from. In those moments, he bombarded Erikhonov with questions — about Moscow, the Russian army, his flights. And Erikhonov, who could barely understand Croatian, would get drawn in, struggling to find simple Russian words the boy might grasp.

On the third or fourth occasion, when Erikhonov took the cap from Mirko, he clenched it in the hand not holding the reins, didn’t touch the food, and asked Mirko to take the horse and lead him to the battalion commander — Nikola Petrić.

Petrić was a tall, grim Belgrade metalworker. He

was quiet even in normal times, and these past days hadn't said a word beyond the most necessary orders.

"Where is this food coming from?" Erikhonov asked dryly as he rode up. "I don't want to eat while others are starving."

Petrić looked into the forage cap, then at Erikhonov. He realized there was no point in lying.

"You didn't drop us guns, machines and ammo back in Russia because you had too much of it," Petrić said quickly.

"Even so, if this continues, I'm going to start throwing the food on the ground," Erikhonov stubbornly replied.

"As you like," Petrić said. Then, pointing first at Mirko, then at the cap, he added, "he'll still bring it to you every day — unless we find something else to eat. Up to you."

They stared each other down for a moment. Then Petrić turned and walked away.

"Hey, Petrić!" Erikhonov shouted after him.

But Petrić didn't even turn around. He walked along the path back to his usual place at the head of the detachment and thought to himself that this Russian pilot was a good, stubborn man, and he, Petrić, could easily imagine himself arguing the same way if he were in his shoes.

And yet, to refuse that food was wrong and unfair — coming from a man who had flown seventy-two missions (he knew that from Mirko), flying by night, over mountains, above the heads of the Germans, and who had probably armed not just one

or two partisan brigades, and who had then crashed, broken his leg and was now riding on his own horse.

Petrić, like most of the people around him, rarely and reluctantly spoke aloud about his feelings towards the Russians. Deep in his soul lived a sense of love and gratitude towards them. For him, and for the others, it was such an obvious truth that, really, there was nothing to talk about.

It was understood without saying that the last piece ofhardtack in the battalion would go to this Russian — and just as clearly, if the end came, everything possible would be done to save him. And if he had to die, he should die last.

But to speak about this meant to assume that it somehow deserved special thanks, and Nikola Petrić, annoyed by the conversation that had just taken place, walked on thinking about how he would scold Mirko — for failing to spare him, Petrić, from having to say what never should have been said aloud.

As for Erikhonov — he didn't touch the food. He stuffed the forage cap into the saddlebag, and who knows how things would have ended if the next day Mirko hadn't shot, with his submachine gun, some large — though barely edible — bird. It was enough to last them two whole days. But on the third day, the remnants of the battalion were driven by the Germans into a deep gorge with almost no exit routes. Their only hope was to unexpectedly climb over an impassable mountain peak and, maybe, reach their own lines. But there were no paths directly across the mountain; a horse couldn't get through. To carry

Erikhonov on a stretcher would have been hopeless — the carriers would've fallen into the ravine along with him. There was one trail that skirted the mountain, but it led out onto a plain where nearly every village had a German garrison.

The detachment couldn't go that way — but two or three men might. They might manage to hide or vanish.

Petrić summoned two submachine gunners and Mirko.

"You'll go with the Russian," he told the submachine gunners. "You'll take the trail around the mountain."

He explained how the trail turned — first left, then at a fork, right:

"You'll reach the nearest village and hide him there until he recovers."

"They'll probably meet us on the trail," one of the gunners said, shaking his head.

"I think they know we won't go that way. Anyway, once you leave, we'll start a battle here. I think all the nearby Germans will come for us."

"How will you start a battle..." the gunner began again reasonably, knowing that the battalion's best hope lay in immediately starting the climb up the bare peak — now, at dusk and under cover of night.

Petrić winced. He knew it himself.

"You must save the pilot. He's Russian, and he's a pilot," he said instead of answering. And once more he repeated: "A pilot."

Then he pulled Mirko aside:

“You found the pilot, you must get him through.” There was no condescension in his voice towards Mirko’s age. “Well, go.”

Petrić patted him on the shoulder, turned and walked away.

Ten minutes later, the two gunners, Mirko and Erikhonov set out along the barely visible trail that wound along the mountain, past the Germans.

When Mirko told Erikhonov about the journey ahead — leaving out the fact that Petrić would simultaneously be leading a diversionary battle — Erikhonov nodded and said only two words: “All right, Nikolić,” and, drawing his pistol from the holster that had slipped behind his back, tucked it inside his coat.

Mirko called Erikhonov the same way all partisans addressed one another — by first name and “*ti*” (you). He called him Volodya.

As for Erikhonov, he always called Mirko by his last name — Nikolić. He was used to addressing comrades by surname during duty hours in his air unit.

Mirko had long since gotten used to it. But now, those familiar words — “All right, Nikolić!” — sounded unexpectedly sad, as if they were saying goodbye. Mirko flinched and thought of the dangers ahead.

Half an hour later, as darkness set in, they heard gunfire behind them. At first just short bursts from submachine guns, then mortar fire — more and more frequent, as in a real battle.

Erikhonov stopped the horse and listened. In the

half-light, Mirko saw his surprised, sorrowful face.

“Volodya, let’s go,” he said.

“Wait!”

Erikhonov listened for a long time, then silently turned the horse around and began riding back. He understood everything.

Mirko ran ahead and sharply grabbed the horse by the reins.

“Volodya!” he repeated pleadingly, looking into Erikhonov’s eyes.

The two gunners also stepped in front of the horse and blocked its way.

“Move!” Erikhonov shouted in a desperate voice that wasn’t his own, jerking the reins.

But Mirko and the two gunners remained motionless, blocking the path.

The gunfire intensified. Erikhonov understood it was now too late to change anything. For those people now fighting back there to save his life, his return would be the most terrible and senseless thing imaginable. And yet, knowing that didn’t make it any easier. Shame and helpless despair consumed him.

“Damn you! You won’t even let a man die with everyone else like a human being!” he said bitterly, looking at Mirko — and suddenly burst into tears, for the first time in three years of war.

After that, he became indifferent to everything. Mirko turned the horse around and led it by the reins. Erikhonov rode in silence, head down, gloomy, and didn’t say another word the entire night.

During the night, they made two turns — just as

Petrić had instructed them. The second time, Mirko hesitated for a long while — the path veering left seemed more like a dried-up streambed than a trail, but after consulting with the others, they decided it was the fork, and they turned right.

At dawn, as they climbed a steep slope and suddenly emerged from behind a large rock, they ran into the Germans. Apparently, just as Petrić had anticipated, the Germans had gone to where the fighting was — but they had left a patrol of four men on the trail.

It was four against four. But since Erikhonov was on horseback, the Germans saw them first — and opened fire first.

One of the partisans fell silently on the spot. The other dropped behind a pile of rocks and, shouting hoarsely, “Mirko, get the pilot out!” fired the first burst.

Mirko struck the horse hard across the haunches. It turned and bolted back, but Erikhonov yanked the reins and pulled it to a stop behind a massive boulder by the road. Swinging his good leg over, he awkwardly tried to dismount.

“Volodya!” Mirko cried out, nearly in tears.

But Erikhonov didn’t listen. He pulled his revolver from under his coat and tried to free his trapped leg to get off the horse.

In desperation, Mirko grabbed the horse by the reins and tried to drag it downhill along with Erikhonov.

A burst of gunfire rattled against the stone, and

Mirko sensed — more than saw — that Erikhonov had gone limp against the horse's body.

“Get the pilot out of here!” the partisan called hoarsely again, between bursts of gunfire.

Mirko leapt onto the horse's back, grabbed the reins with one hand, wrapped the other arm — with strength beyond his years — around Erikhonov, and yanked the horse away from the rock and back onto the trail.

The trail sloped downward. The horse, stumbling, desperately scrambled from rock to rock, faster and faster, then slid down a rocky slope, hooves scraping, and finally galloped on its own, no longer obeying its rider, racing through the narrow, stony riverbed, under the crashing, interlaced branches overhead.

They rode like that for another five minutes. Then the horse suddenly began to collapse sideways and Mirko barely managed to jump down in time to catch the helpless Erikhonov as he fell along with the horse.

They were surrounded by thick underbrush. Mirko pulled Erikhonov away from the twitching, bleeding horse. Seeing the bloodied hindquarters, Mirko shut his eyes and fired point-blank into its head.

Erikhonov lay motionless. Mirko unbuckled his belt and pulled up his tunic. The entire left side of Erikhonov's chest was covered in blood and Mirko assumed he was dead.

Had Mirko been just a little older and a little more patient, he might have shaken Erikhonov, lis-

tened for a heartbeat and realized he was still alive — that two grazing bullets had torn up his chest terribly but hadn't touched bone.

But Erikhonov was in a deep faint and Mirko didn't know that, in such a state, breathing is barely noticeable. Shouting "Volodya!" three times, desperately and without a response, Mirko decided the pilot was dead and dropped to his knees before him.

His lips pale, he whispered words even he couldn't hear, and with despair remembered what Petrić had told him before they parted — and that they had probably taken the wrong trail during the night.

Gunfire rang out behind him. Mirko jumped to his feet, reflexively touched his submachine gun — which he had completely forgotten about in the last few minutes — and suddenly, with unexpected calm, remembered everything he now had to do.

Kneeling again, he reached for Erikhonov's blood-soaked tunic and began unscrewing the Order of Lenin. He didn't touch the other medals — only this one, the one Erikhonov had said was the most important.

After removing the medal, Mirko pulled off his homespun brown peasant coat and was left in his green partisan shirt.

Feeling around on the ground, he found a stick with a sharp branch, used it to pierce a hole in his shirt, and fastened the medal to his chest — in the same spot Erikhonov had worn it.

Then he stood up. He knew that honour was

due to the dead. But as he reached towards his cap to salute, he realized he was about to cry. So instead, he turned around, and while walking, slung the submachine gun from his shoulder around his neck for easier carrying and quickly made his way down the riverbed.

He now understood — more clearly than at any other time in his young life — everything he had to do.

Within fifteen minutes, he reached the place where they had run into the Germans. He climbed up about thirty steps above the trail. From there, he could see the bodies of the four who had been killed, lying motionless, and two Germans still alive. One leaned against a tree, smoking. The other, sitting on his haunches with his helmet off, was wearily wiping his face and bald head with a handkerchief.

Mirko took a few more steps. Small pebbles scattered from under his feet. The German standing by the tree reacted first. In a swift motion, he reached for his submachine gun. But Mirko had already pulled the trigger. With the crackle of a long burst, his body jerking along with the gun pressed to his stomach, he saw the German throw up his arms, lurch to the side and start to fall.

Mirko's numb finger kept pressing the trigger, even as the German fell, even as he lay on the ground. The second German fired his rifle. Mirko raised his weapon again and pulled the trigger — only then did he realize that he had emptied the entire magazine in the first burst.

Then, without thinking, still clutching the sub-machine gun, he ran downhill — straight at the German.

The German fired again. At first, Mirko didn't realize he'd been hit — it just felt like he had stumbled. Dropping the gun, he tumbled down the slope. Grimacing from the pain, he turned over and sat up. He had been shot in the stomach; his legs went numb instantly and he was surprised to find he couldn't stand.

He sat there, leaning against a rock, staring ahead in bewilderment, still trying to understand why he couldn't get up. The German came close — but Mirko just kept staring past him — nothing interested him anymore. As he lost consciousness, he was still trying to make sense of why he couldn't stand.

And that's how he died — with that puzzled expression on his face and the Order of Lenin pinned to his chest. When the German got within five steps, he noticed something shiny on the boy's chest — a badge or a medal, he couldn't tell what. Acting on a sudden, instinctive, cruel urge, he raised his rifle, squinted one eye like he was at a shooting gallery, took careful aim — and fired.

“That's the whole story,” said the colonel. “Later the partisans found the body — and the Russian order was given back to us, to the Russians. Though, truth be told, if I'd been there then, I would have buried the boy with that medal still on his chest.”

“And what happened to Erikhonov?” I asked.

“Nothing. Still flying... He came to, crawled

for five days before someone found him. They cut, stitched, patched him up... Better let the doctor tell you about that,” the colonel said, nodding towards the surgeon dozing beside us.

He paused, then added:

“It’s been a month now — he’s flying again. Mostly to Slovenia and Montenegro. I already let him know through others. He promised to stop by for the medal when he flies back here.”

From the open window came the drone of a plane descending.

“Didn’t think anyone else would fly in today. The weather’s awful,” the colonel muttered.

“What if it’s Erikhonov?” I asked.

“Could be. I’ve heard he’s passed a hundred flights by now. When no one else flies, he does. Says that for the people who once brought him back from the dead, he wouldn’t mind dying a second time. But who knows — doesn’t matter. If he lands, he’ll send a rider from the strip. Let’s get some sleep. It’s late.”

CAFÉ “STALINGRAD”

That night, we stayed in the small town of Vlasovica on the road from Leskovac to Pirot. The town had only been taken from the Germans the day before yesterday, but the little tavern where we lingered long past midnight over dinner was already called *Café Stalingrad*.

This grandiose name, painted in red directly onto the cracked and patched-up glass of the tavern's only window, looked naive and touching — it brought an involuntary smile.

There were about fifteen of us, and the owner had pushed together all three of the rough wooden tables in the café.

Dinner — which was also our breakfast and lunch, since we hadn't eaten anything since the day before — stretched out for a good two hours.

After we'd finished with the meat and red pepper — the only two components of the available menu, offered in various combinations — we lingered around the large hearth, warming ourselves and happily washing down our pepper-scorched throats with the local sour white wine.

Suddenly, the brigade commander, Major Simić, took a pitcher of wine from the table, raised it, and with a smooth, practised motion — tilting and turning it just so — caught the stream pouring from it straight into his mouth.

Then he began moving the pitcher farther and farther from his face, yet the stream still hit its mark

perfectly.

When he finally set the pitcher back on the table, the usually silent Russian captain — who had come to the town to set up an airfield and had not spoken a word all evening — unexpectedly turned to Simić.

“Been to Spain, haven’t you?” he asked.

“I have,” Simić replied.

“That’s how everyone drinks wine there,” said the captain. Then he lit a cigarette and sank back into his usual silence.

Simić stared at the flames dancing in the hearth for a long time. Finally, he spoke again, thoughtfully, addressing me:

“There are always pictures in a fire. Right?”

“Pictures?”

“Yes. You look at the fire and you remember things. Flames always look like something. Right now it’s all tongues — like the mountains near Santander — and the twigs are cracking like gunfire.”

As he said this, his face turned pensive and sad.

“Were you there during the last days of Santander?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” he said, not answering directly, “sometimes in the fire you see the face of someone who’s no longer here. And that’s obviously just your imagination, because fire doesn’t really look like a person’s face. But still — you see it. Yes, I was there in the last days of Santander. Just now I remembered someone who was there with me, in the international brigade.”

Simić wasn’t normally talkative, but I had no-

ticed that once he began speaking about something, he usually laid out everything that was on his mind.

So I stayed quiet, waiting for him to continue.

“I commanded a battery there, and he was the gun commander in my battery,” Simić said after a long pause. “He was Bulgarian — Popov. Though he had a different name at the time, but that doesn’t matter. I knew his real one.

“On the last day, we had only two guns left out of four. All the horses had been killed in bombing raids. We were moving the guns by hand, though even that was barely possible. The Spanish winter — rain and mud...”

“Yeah, the mud there in winter is brutal,” the Russian captain suddenly chimed in again, then, just as suddenly, fell silent and turned away, as if someone else had spoken for him.

“Exactly,” said Simić, “the mud was awful. Soon another gun was destroyed and its crew killed. I went to Popov — the last gun was his.

“And just then the German tanks and the Moroccans started coming. We began firing at them. Popov had just one man left — and me. We were carrying shells and loading, and Popov was firing. He was a better shot than I was. Then his crewman was killed too. Only Popov and I were left. The rain didn’t stop the whole time. When I got to him, Popov wasn’t even wearing his leather jacket anymore. Then he pulled off his shirt too, right in front of me — stripped to the waist. He said he was hot.

“Soon we knocked out one tank and maybe an-

other — but we had only three shells left.

“Then Popov suddenly stepped away from the gun, bent down and dug up a half-buried jug of beer.

“‘Hot, eh, Pablo?’ he said to me. That’s what they called me there — Pablo.

“He drank from the jug Spanish-style, catching the stream in his mouth like I just did. Gulped it down greedily and kept saying: ‘Hot, Pablo, hot.’ But the rain was running in streams down his bare body.

“I drank too and then we fired the last three shells. Popov was hit in the chest and collapsed. I pulled the breech block from the gun, threw it as far as I could and hoisted Popov onto my back.

“He told me what many do in such moments: ‘Listen, Pablo, leave me. Leave me, Pablo.’ And he cursed in all three languages he knew.

“But I carried him to a ravine and made it down. The Republicans picked us both up there, because I was wounded too.

“He was evacuated from Santander with the last group of wounded that got out. I stayed — my wound wasn’t that serious.

“‘Thanks, Pablo. Farewell,’ he said when they were taking him away.

“‘Why farewell? We’ll meet again,’ I told him — though I didn’t really believe we would.”

Simić fell silent and began furiously poking the coals in the hearth with the poker. Then, almost angrily, he said:

“How was I supposed to know we’d meet again? I was one of those who drank the whole bitter cup in

Spain. Back then, Europe didn't want to understand what fascism was. I crossed the French border, spent two years in a French internment camp, escaped, got captured again and spent more time in a German camp, then escaped again. How could I have known we'd meet again? No one could have known."

He savagely smashed the embers into smaller bits with the poker.

After reducing them all to fine glowing coals, he added, now calmly:

"Well, that's that — we can close the flue now. Six months ago I was sent to command a brigade in northern Macedonia. Things were bad there at the time and they were sending many of us in.

"I walked through the mountains for eleven days straight and arrived at the brigade on the evening of the twelfth day — exhausted and even more irritable than usual.

"The chief of staff reported on the situation, which hadn't been great over the last month. And then, saving the worst for last, he said that of the three battalion commanders, two were no longer in action — one had been killed, the other seriously wounded just yesterday."

"Where is he?"

"Buried."

"No, the wounded one?"

"Here, in the house next door."

I said I wanted to be taken to the wounded man. The village had already been visited twice by the Germans — all that remained were ruins. The house I

entered had neither doors nor window frames; from the remnants of the roof, rain streamed directly onto the clay floor. The wounded man lay in a corner on a heap of wet straw, covered from head to toe with two greatcoats, breathing hoarsely and with a wheeze so loud it echoed through the house.

“Lung shot through?” I asked quietly.

“Yes,” said the chief of staff.

The wounded man groaned and started muttering rapidly. I leaned over, trying to understand.

“He’s delirious,” said the chief of staff. “You won’t make sense of it. He speaks Serbian well, but when he’s delirious — it’s in his own tongue. He’s Bulgarian.”

“How long has he been with the brigade?” I asked.

“A year,” the chief of staff replied. “He crossed the border and came to us. Started as a soldier. A brave man.”

Just then the wounded man shifted on the straw, opened his eyes and as I looked into his exhausted face, soaked in cold sweat, I recognized him.

“Popov!” I called.

“Ah, Pablo,” he said calmly. And by the fact that he wasn’t the least bit surprised, I understood — he was dying.

“Sit down,” he said. “Sit with me!” Then added, “Put a coat under you, it’s wet here.”

I sat beside him, squeezed his feverish, burning hand, and said that I had been appointed commander of their brigade, and that now he would once again

serve under my command.

He didn't reply. It didn't interest him. He knew far too well that he would serve under no one again.

So we sat in silence for a few minutes. Then he propped himself up a little on the straw, leaned his head against the wall and said:

"Again in the chest. Like that time. And you know — again it was a tank."

"A heavy tank," the chief of staff added. "He manned the gun himself and set it on fire. He'll tell you."

"Go on, tell the commander," he said to Popov.

But Popov said nothing. It was clear that all of this already felt distant to him and no longer mattered much.

After a pause, he touched my hand and said softly:

"You didn't expect to find me here, did you, Pablo?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I said.

"You didn't, you didn't," he insisted stubbornly. "I'm Bulgarian."

"You're an anti-fascist," I replied.

"Yes, yes," he whispered fervently, and from the sudden force with which he squeezed my hand, I understood that now he was speaking of the one thing that still truly mattered to him.

"Yes, yes," he repeated. "And don't believe what they say about our people, just because that damned Bulgarian expeditionary corps is stationed here in Macedonia."

“No one says anything about the people,” I said.

“They do, they do,” he whispered. “Bulgarians, Bulgarians... Even about me they used to say that — back when I was alive.”

He had clearly become so accustomed to the inevitability of death that he unconsciously spoke of himself in the past tense.

“A good man, though Bulgarian. Brave, though Bulgarian... That’s not right! Dimitrov is a Bulgarian too. And those ones now in Sofia — the fascists — we’ll shoot them. Do you remember how we executed those fifth columnists in Cordoba?” he asked. “Remember?”

“I remember,” I said.

He sat up a little higher on the straw and, looking straight into my eyes with his feverishly shining gaze, waited out a fit of painful coughing and said loudly:

“Our people — they’re sick right now, but they’ll recover. Do you believe that?”

I wanted to say that I fully believed him, but he interrupted again, and I understood he didn’t want to hear anything. On the edge of death, he only wanted to speak.

“They’ll recover!” he repeated. “But I’ll die.”

The thought of death must have reminded him of yesterday, and with a tired smile, he said:

“And the tank — it was just like that time. And it rained. Only this time there was no beer — remember? From the jug.”

He slumped back onto the straw and, closing his eyes, asked:

“Listen, sing *Bandera Roja*.”

I stayed silent.

“Sing.”

It felt strange, suddenly, to sing that old Spanish Republican song here in a shattered Macedonian hut. But I couldn't deny him, and in an unsure voice, I sang one verse.

“More,” he said.

“I don't remember the rest.”

“I remember: *Bandera Roja*...” he started singing — then broke off, coughing violently. “No, I can't sing. But still, Pablo — not for this,” he said quietly, after a long silence. “Not for this did we fire the same gun together — you and I — not for this, so that now that cursed expeditionary corps sits here. Not for this,” he repeated with open pain and bitterness. “It can't go on like this. It can't be this way!”

Those were the last words I heard from him. He made a small movement, as if, finished with the conversation, he wanted to turn towards the wall. Then he went quiet, breathing heavily and wheezing through his wounded lung.

I don't know if he didn't want to speak anymore, or if he simply couldn't — but an hour later, he died without saying another word.

“That's who I remembered when I was looking into the fire, when you asked if I'd been in Spain,” said Simić, turning to the Russian captain. “You were there too, of course?”

“How can I put it,” the captain smiled for the first time that evening. “Well, let's just say I've been

told a lot about Spain. And *Bandera Roja* — it's a good song. I wouldn't mind hearing it again before I die. Reminds me of my youth."

"Something's smoky, stings the eyes," said Simić. "Probably closed the flue too soon. Let's step outside."

We opened the door and stepped out. It was a clear moonlit night. Along the Niš highway, which passed through the town on its way to the front, troops were moving in a constant stream — Yugoslav infantry, blunt-nosed Renault trucks with short Bulgarian field guns hitched behind them. Bulgarian and Yugoslav soldiers marched side by side, speaking quietly to one another, their weapons clinking; here and there, red dots from cigarette tips flickered in the darkness.

"Popov was right," I said to Simić. "This was inevitable."

"Yes," Simić replied simply. "Back then it seemed like it was still very far off — but even then, I believed it would come in the end, no matter what."

THE VISITOR BOOK

The tall hill covered in pine forest, where the Unknown Soldier is buried, can be seen from almost every street in Belgrade. If you have binoculars, despite the fifteen-kilometer distance, you'll notice a square structure at the very top of the hill. That is the grave of the Unknown Soldier.

If you drive east out of Belgrade along the Požarevac road and then turn off to the left, you'll soon reach the foot of the hill via a narrow paved highway. Winding your way up between two dense rows of ancient pine trees, whose trunks are tangled with wolfberry bushes, ferns and yellowing wild strawberry runners, you begin your ascent.

The road leads to a smooth asphalt platform. You can drive no further. Directly ahead of you rises a broad staircase built from roughly hewn grey granite. You'll walk a long way up, passing grey parapets adorned with bronze torches, until you finally reach the summit.

There, you'll find a large granite square bordered by a heavy parapet, and in its centre — the tomb itself. A heavy arch clad in grey marble, its roof supported not by columns but by eight stooped figures of mourning women, sculpted from massive blocks of the same grey marble.

Inside the arch, you'll be struck by the austere simplicity of the grave. In the stone floor, worn smooth by countless feet, lies a large bronze plaque, set flush into the ground.

Engraved on it are just a few of the simplest words imaginable:

“Here lies the Unknown Soldier”

And the dates:

“1912 — 1918”

On the marble walls to the left and right, you’ll see faded wreaths with discoloured ribbons, laid over time — sincerely and insincerely — by ambassadors from forty nations.

That’s all. Now, step outside and look from the tomb’s threshold to all four directions. Perhaps you’ll feel, once again in your life (as happens many times), that you’ve never seen anything more beautiful or more solemn.

Before you stretches a view you’ll long remember. For fifty kilometers in every direction, the land lies open before your eyes.

To the east: endless forests and groves, with winding woodland paths.

To the south: the soft, yellow-green contours of Serbia’s autumn hills, green patches of pasture, yellow stubble fields, red-tiled roofs of village houses, and countless black dots of livestock moving across the hills.

To the west: bombed and battered but still beautiful Belgrade, glowing white amid the faded green of gardens and parks.

To the north: the mighty grey ribbon of the turbulent autumn Danube, and beyond it, the fertile pastures and black fields of Vojvodina and Banat — Yugoslavia’s granary, which before the last war was

held by the Austrians, and in this war the Germans handed over to the Hungarians, right up to the Danube.

Only when you cast your eyes across all four directions from here will you truly understand why the Unknown Soldier is buried in this very place. He is buried here because from this spot, with the naked eye, you can see all the beautiful Serbian land — everything he loved and died for.

This is what the grave of the Unknown Soldier looks like and I describe it because it is the setting of my story.

Though on the day in question, both sides in the battle were concerned with anything but the historical significance of the hill.

For the three German artillerymen left there as forward observers, the grave of the Unknown Soldier was merely the best vantage point in the area — though they had already twice requested radio permission to retreat, since the Russians and Yugoslavs were drawing dangerously close.

The Russians, too, viewed the hill and its structure at the top as a perfect observation point — but since it was held by the enemy, it had to be shelled.

“What kind of strange building is that? I’ve never seen anything like it,” said battery commander Captain Nikolaenko, peering through binoculars for the fifth time at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

“And the Germans are holed up there, that’s for sure. Is the data prepared for firing?”

“Ready, sir!” reported Lieutenant Prudnikov, the

young platoon commander standing nearby.

“Begin ranging fire.”

They found the range quickly — with three shells. Two struck the slope right beneath the parapet, sending fountains of earth into the air. The third hit the parapet itself. Through the binoculars, they could see stone fragments flying.

“Look at that spray!” said Nikolaenko. “Switch to fire for effect.”

But Lieutenant Prudnikov, who had been staring intently through the binoculars, as though recalling something, suddenly dug into his field bag, pulled out a captured German map of Belgrade, laid it over his 1:50,000 Soviet map and began tracing with his finger.

“What’s the hold-up?” said Nikolaenko sternly. “No need to double-check — everything’s already clear.”

“Just a minute, Comrade Captain,” murmured Prudnikov, eyes fixed on the map.

He glanced repeatedly from map to hill and back, until finally he jabbed his finger at a spot he had evidently been searching for and looked up at Nikolaenko.

“Do you know what that is, Comrade Captain?”

“What?”

“That whole hill and the building on top?”

“Well?”

“It’s the grave of the Unknown Soldier. I kept thinking I recognized it... saw it once in a book, in a photo. Yep, here it is on the map — the Tomb of the

Unknown Soldier.”

For Prudnikov — who before the war had studied in the history department of Moscow State University — this discovery was deeply significant. But to his surprise, Nikolaenko didn't show any reaction. He answered calmly, even a bit suspiciously:

“What Unknown Soldier? Fire the guns.”

“Comrade Captain, permission to speak!” said Prudnikov, rising and looking Nikolaenko straight in the eyes.

“Well, what is it now?”

“You may not know... It's not just a grave. It is, how to say... a national monument. A symbol. One soldier, unidentified, was buried there in the name of all those who died for the Fatherland. It's a tribute, a sacred memory for the entire country.”

“Hold on, stop babbling,” said Nikolaenko. He frowned and thought for a whole minute.

He was a man of great heart, despite his roughness, beloved by the whole battery and a skilled artilleryman. But having begun the war as a private, working his way up to captain through blood and bravery, he had never had time to learn much of what an officer perhaps ought to know. His understanding of history was minimal unless it directly involved his personal fight with the Germans, and geography meant little unless it pointed to a town that needed taking. As for the grave of the Unknown Soldier — he was hearing about it for the first time.

Yet, even if he didn't grasp everything Prudnikov had said, his soldier's heart felt that the young man

wasn't worked up for nothing — that this must be something genuinely worthy of respect.

"Wait," he repeated, smoothing his brow. "Just tell me clearly — whose soldier is it? Who did he fight against? That's what I need to know."

"A Serbian soldier, generally Yugoslav," said Prudnikov. "Fought the Germans in the last war — the war of 1914."

"Well, now it's clear."

Nikolaenko felt pleased. Now it really made sense and he could make the right decision.

"All clear," he repeated. "We know who and what now. Not all that 'unknown this, unknown that' nonsense. What kind of 'unknown' is he, when he's Serbian and fought the Germans in that war? Cease fire! Send for Fedotov — bring two men with him."

Five minutes later, Sergeant Fedotov appeared before Nikolaenko. A laconic man from Kostroma with bear-like habits and a broad, pockmarked, impenetrably calm face under any circumstance. Two scouts came with him, fully armed and ready.

Nikolaenko briefly explained Fedotov's task — to climb the hill and quietly eliminate the German spotters. Then, eyeing the grenades hanging from Fedotov's belt with some regret, he added:

"That building on the hill, it's a historical site, so don't go throwing grenades around in it — there's already enough damage. If you have to take out a German, use your submachine gun, and that's it. Got your orders?"

"Got it," said Fedotov, and started up the hill

with his two scouts.

* * *

The old Serbian man — the caretaker of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier — hadn't found peace all day.

For the first two days, when the Germans arrived at the tomb, dragging with them a stereoscope, a radio and a machine gun, the old man had gone about his routine at the top, under the arch — sweeping the stone slabs and dusting the wreaths with a feather bundle tied to a stick.

He was very old and the Germans were very busy, so they paid him no mind. Only in the evening of the second day, one of them stumbled across him, looked at him in surprise, turned him around by the shoulders, and with a sharp "Get out," gave him a kick in the backside.

The old man stumbled a few steps to regain balance, walked down the stairs and never returned to the tomb.

He was very old — and in the last war, had lost all four of his sons. That, in fact, was why he had been given the caretaker's job — and also why he had a special, deeply hidden personal connection to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Somewhere in the depths of his heart, he believed that one of his four sons was buried there.

At first, this thought only crossed his mind occasionally. But after so many years spent constantly

at the tomb, the thought became almost a certainty. He never told anyone — knowing they'd mock him — but in his heart, he quietly accepted it, and when alone, he'd ask himself only one thing: Which of the four?

After being driven off the hill by the Germans, he slept poorly that night and had been restless since dawn, wandering around below the parapet.

When the first artillery shots rang out, he calmly sat down with his back to the parapet and waited — something was bound to change.

Despite his age and remote life, he knew the Russians were advancing on Belgrade — and so, eventually, they'd come here. After several explosions, things went quiet for two whole hours. The Germans upstairs shouted and argued loudly, moving about noisily.

Then, suddenly, they opened machine-gun fire downhill. Someone below fired back. Then, close — right beneath the parapet — there was a loud explosion. Silence followed. A moment later, a German jumped down from the parapet just ten paces away from the old man, fell, scrambled up and ran towards the woods.

This time, the old man didn't hear a shot — he only saw the German leap into the air and fall face-down, a few steps short of the trees.

The old man paid him no further attention. He listened. Footsteps echoed above, at the tomb. The old man stood and began walking around the parapet towards the stairs. At that moment, Sergeant Fe-

dotov — the footsteps had been his — was standing at the tomb, making sure that, apart from the three dead Germans, there were no others. He was waiting for his two scouts, both lightly wounded in the skirmish and still climbing.

Fedotov circled the tomb and, stepping inside, began inspecting the wreaths on the walls.

They were funeral wreaths. That's how Fedotov realized it was a grave. He looked over the marble walls and statues, wondering whose grave it could be to warrant such grandeur.

That's when the old man entered from the opposite side of the arch.

Fedotov immediately guessed he was the tomb's caretaker. Taking three steps towards him, he patted the old man on the shoulder with his free hand and said the reassuring phrase he always used in such moments:

“It's all right, father. Everything'll be fine.”

The old man didn't understand the words “everything'll be fine,” but the wide, rough, freckled Russian face lit up with such a kind smile that the old man smiled in return, involuntarily.

“Yeah, we banged it up a bit,” Fedotov continued, not caring whether the old man understood him or not. “But this wasn't a 152 — it's just a seventy-six. Easy fix. And the grenade — that's nothing. I couldn't take them without one,” he explained, as if he were talking not to an old caretaker, but to Captain Nikolaenko himself. “That's how it is, see?”

The old man nodded — he hardly understood a

word of what Fedotov had said, but he felt the meaning was just as comforting as the Russian's warm, honest smile. And now, he wanted to say something good and meaningful in return.

"My son is buried here," he said suddenly and solemnly, surprising even himself. "My son," the old man pointed first to his own chest, then to the bronze plaque.

He said it — and looked at the Russian with a silent fear, afraid he wouldn't believe him and would laugh.

But Fedotov wasn't surprised. He was a Soviet man — and it didn't seem strange to him that the son of this poorly dressed old man might be buried in such a grave.

"So that's what it is, then," Fedotov thought. "His son. Must've been an important man. Maybe a general." He remembered the funeral of General Vatutin in Kiev, which he had attended — where the general's parents, dressed simply like peasants, had walked behind the coffin, surrounded by tens of thousands of mourners.

"I see," he said, looking at the old man with sympathy. "I see. A rich grave..."

And the old man understood that the Russian not only believed him, but wasn't at all surprised by the unusual nature of his words — and a wave of gratitude towards this Russian soldier filled his heart.

Hurriedly, he fumbled in his pocket for a key and, opening a small cabinet door built into the tomb wall, took out a leather-bound Book of Honorary

Visitors and a fountain pen.

“Write,” he said to Fedotov, handing him the pen.

Propping his submachine gun against the wall, Fedotov took the pen in one hand and flipped through the book with the other.

It was filled with elaborate signatures and ornate flourishes from royal dignitaries, ministers, ambassadors and generals he didn’t know. Its smooth, glossy pages gleamed like satin, and the edges of the joined sheets formed one shining golden trim.

Fedotov calmly turned past the last filled page. Just as he hadn’t been surprised earlier to learn that the old man’s son was buried here, he wasn’t surprised now that he was being asked to sign a book with golden edges. Opening to a blank page, and with his unshakable sense of self-respect, he carefully printed — in the large, steady handwriting of a man unaccustomed to writing much — one word across the whole page: “Fedotov.” Then he closed the book and returned the pen to the old man.

“Fedotov!” came a voice from outside — one of the scouts who had finally climbed the hill.

“Here I am!” said Fedotov, and stepped out from beneath the arch into the open air.

For fifty kilometers in every direction, the land lay open to his gaze.

To the east, endless forests stretched across the horizon.

To the south, the autumn hills of Serbia glowed golden-yellow.

To the north, the turbulent Danube snaked in a grey ribbon.

And to the west, among the fading green of parks and trees, lay Belgrade, still not fully liberated — white in the distance, with the smoke of early shelling rising above it.

And on the oak lectern beneath the arch of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier lay the Book of Honorary Visitors, where the last entry — written in a firm, unshaking hand — was the name of a Soviet soldier: Fedotov, born in Kostroma, who had retreated all the way to the Volga, and now stood here, looking down at Belgrade, the city for which he had travelled three thousand versts to help set free.

SERGEANT ERESHCHENKO

It happened right here in Belgrade. On the fourth day. Already getting close to the end. Our 18th company was stationed in the ruined building of the National Theatre. Because of heavy gunfire, it was impossible to move along the streets — we had to slip through courtyards, climb rooftops via fire escapes, then back down again.

That morning, I went with a soldier to fetch breakfast. We had just returned when we received orders to advance into another district. So, we launched an assault.

Two heavy machine guns were firing down the street. Abdulayev and I sprinted across. Both of us were hit in the legs — him badly, me lightly — and I got a bit of a scrape on the head too.

We made it across. The gate into the courtyard was locked. We got in through a basement window. Jumped down. It was pitch black. I turned on a flashlight. It was eight in the morning.

Abdulayev couldn't go any further. His leg was shattered. I dragged him down into the basement myself. He was wounded above the knee. I took off both our trouser belts — mine and his — and tied up his thigh. I told him, "Don't shout. Quiet. The Germans are here. They'll kill us." Then I went upstairs.

I saw a bit of light ahead — a door leading into the courtyard. I had a machine gun, aimed directly at the gate that had been locked. I saw two Germans and ducked down.

At that moment, I had one thought — if I didn't kill them, they'd kill me. I pulled out my pistol and shot them both from about five metres. Then I went back to the basement.

Abdulayev was begging for water.

"Where am I going to get it?" I said. "Hang in there. I'll find a way into the house and get you some."

I went searching. It turned out to be a factory. A narrow-gauge track led down into the basement and stairs went up. It was clean and empty. The corridor turned right, and to the left were two rooms. I stepped inside.

I heard someone coming down the corridor. I hid behind a pile of something, holding my submachine gun. A woman approached and said:

"There are no Germans here."

An old woman — a cleaner.

"Where are they?"

"I'll show you."

She led me down the corridor to a window. Outside, just below it, surrounded by stones, lay three Germans. The old woman pointed and walked away quickly, not wanting any trouble.

I threw a grenade out the window — blew up the machine gun and killed two of them. The third either crawled off or the others dragged him away — I don't know.

I turned to leave the room. Just then, a German on the second floor threw a grenade down the stairwell into the corridor. It didn't hit me. I was behind a projection in the wall. The grenade rolled past me

and exploded lower down. Smoke filled the hallway.

I dashed across the corridor and unbolted the gate. When I opened it, I saw our men across the street. Out front — Senior Lieutenant Kiselev.

I shouted to them:

“Send reinforcements! I’m alone, surrounded by Germans!”

A second gunner and a rifleman ran over, but one of them was wounded. He reached me and lay down. We picked him up and carried him into the first floor.

Those two made it across — but no one else could. The gunfire was too intense. We moved down the corridor towards the rooms facing the building from which the Germans were shooting across the whole street. From our position, we could see that on the third floor, a metal curtain had been lifted and a light machine gun was firing.

We fired two short bursts at them — and they went quiet. But then a grenade was thrown into another window from the street below. In the room we were in, there were bunks with mattresses. The grenade exploded on them — but the machine gunner was still wounded in the shoulder.

I quickly bandaged him, over his shirt. Then I went back down to Abdulayev. I called out:

“Abdulayev!”

He asked:

“Water... give me water!”

“I’ll carry you upstairs. Grab my shoulders.”

He grabbed my shoulders, hugged me from behind — but couldn’t hold on and fell.

“I... I’m dying,” he said.

I ran upstairs and said to the machine gunner:

“There’s a man dying. Let’s go.”

He said:

“I’m wounded too.”

I said:

“That doesn’t matter. We’re all wounded here. Come on!”

We grabbed a mattress and went back downstairs for Abdulayev. We carried him up on the mattress.

Told him:

“We’ll bring you water now.”

And we went to search the rooms.

It was quiet everywhere. We reached the last window — and were fired at from a machine gun in the building opposite. We ducked behind the wall. I pulled the pin — threw a grenade. But it didn’t make it — exploded under the house. I threw a second one — that one flew straight through the window. After that, we didn’t hear anything from them.

Now we could pass safely by the window — into the kitchen. There, beans were cooking, tea was warming and a bucket of water stood.

I said to my comrade:

“Keep watch while I drink and fill the canteen.”

We returned to Abdulayev and finally gave him water.

It was getting dark. From the street came the sound of an engine — either a tank or a truck.

We saw a German self-propelled gun (SPG) move up and stop right across from our window, and

we didn't have any anti-tank grenades.

I said to the machine gunner:

"I'm going to run for grenades."

But the SPG had already started firing down the street.

I got back to the gate. The machine gun was sweeping the street, the SPG was firing too. No way to cross. I shouted across the street to our guys:

"Give me a grenade!"

But they couldn't hear me over the noise.

Then, between two volleys, I shouted again:

"Throw me a grenade!"

"All right," they yelled back. "But first — here's the fuse."

They wrapped it in paper and tossed the fuse — it landed four meters short.

I crawled over on my belly, grabbed it and crawled back. Then they threw the grenade itself — already without the fuse — straight through the gate.

I caught it, rushed back through the corridor to the room facing the German SPG, inserted the fuse, pulled the pin and threw it at the front track. Then I dropped flat under the window.

Three seconds later — an explosion. I jumped up. Two Germans jumped off the gun. I fired, killed one; the other ducked behind the vehicle. The SPG stopped. I set the machine gunner to keep watch and went back downstairs to give water to the two wounded. Then I ran through the yard to the gate. The machine gun was still firing down the street, but now it was dark. It fired a burst, then paused — it was

a little easier now.

Our guys were across the street, in a building entrance, but they couldn't get to me. And I had three wounded — the machine gunner was now flat on his back too, having lost too much blood from his shoulder.

So I carried out three mattresses from the room with the bunks into the yard by the gate. I brought Abdulayev and the other wounded man down and laid them on the mattresses. The machine gunner managed to walk over himself and lay down.

I took some rope from the kitchen — there was a lot there — and a heavy iron ladle.

The machine gunner asked:

“What are you doing?”

But I didn't say anything — no time to explain.

I took a knife, poked two holes in the mattress Abdulayev was on, ran a rope through them, tied two solid knots. Then I tied the other end to the ladle and threw it across the street to our guys in the doorway.

At first, they thought it was a grenade and ducked, but then they figured it out, grabbed the ladle and the end of the rope.

I shouted:

“Now pull, fast!”

I said to Abdulayev:

“Grab the mattress with your teeth if your arms won't hold. If you fall off, you'll die in the middle of the street.”

They pulled the rope tight and, in a second, dragged the mattress across the street — fast, like on

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a sled.

Then they untied the rope and tossed it back with the ladle.

That's how I got all three wounded across and stayed behind — alone in the house, like the owner. Once it was completely dark, reinforcements made it across to me — and we moved on to take another building...

Dragging wounded across the street like that with rope — that wasn't the first time I'd done it. We'd used the same method before — to send over ammunition and food in thermoses...

* * *

At this point, Sergeant Yereshchenko's story ends.

I'd like to say a few words about how and where I met Yereshchenko himself.

It was early morning. Overnight, our units and the Yugoslavs had cleared the train station area and finally crossed the Sava River. Fighting was now taking place in Zemun — the last remaining German stronghold in Belgrade.

Despite the early hour, the shattered, blackened streets of Belgrade — some of them still smoking — were full of people.

Civilians walked along the sidewalks and roads, crunching broken glass underfoot, stepping over torn-down wires hanging to the ground.

And still, the city looked festive — countless red-

white-blue Yugoslav and red Soviet flags hung from rooftops, windows and balconies.

Suddenly, something caught my attention — a scene so strange in its mix of sorrow and absurdity that I couldn't look away.

Right next to the sidewalk, a cart was slowly moving down the road. It was piled high with assorted household goods, all covered in dust and white plaster residue.

On the front of the cart, awkwardly hunched, sat a grey-haired general — dressed in the faded uniform of the old Yugoslav army, wearing a high, round, French-style general's cap.

Everything about him was as faded and dusty as the belongings stacked behind him — the worn cap, the uniform with creases like it had just been pulled out of mothballs, the frayed gold braid on his trousers.

Where he was going, why he was riding with his belongings on a cart — no one, including me, knew. One thing was clear: this man had likely sat quietly in his corner all these years, indifferent to everything.

And now, he rode just as indifferently through liberated Belgrade with his things, on his own mysterious errand.

Everyone passing by treated him with the same indifference — some with disdain, some with a mocking sympathy, most with nothing more than a glance — and walked on.

He didn't exist for them. Only one partisan, who happened to walk directly into the cart's path, sud-

denly saluted him. The general awkwardly and hastily returned the salute, then hunched up even more, as if from the cold, raising his collar around his neck.

At that very moment, I saw a sergeant walking along the sidewalk. He was limping heavily on an injured leg. He wore a sun-bleached *gymnastyorka* with two medals, worn-out boots and a grimy field cap. Bandages showed white underneath.

Two partisans walked alongside him, looking at him with admiration.

Passersby took off their hats, patted him on the back, said joyful things in their own way, and held his hand for a long time, shaking it with warmth.

The sergeant had a handsome, still very young face. He walked, both embarrassed and proud of the attention, smiling humbly at the people around him. Soon, he caught up to the cart carrying the general — and, without even looking back, passed it with his wide, limping stride.

THE CANDLE

The story I want to tell happened on September 19th, 1944.

Strictly speaking, by that time Belgrade had already been taken; the Germans still held only the bridge across the Sava River and a small patch of land before it on this bank.

At dawn on the 19th, five Red Army soldiers decided to try and quietly make their way to the bridge. Their path lay through a small square, littered with the burnt-out hulls of tanks and armoured cars — both ours and the enemy's. Not a single tree stood whole; only shattered trunks remained, snapped at the height of a man, as if broken by some rough hand.

In the middle of the square, the soldiers were caught in a half-hour mortar barrage from the opposite bank. For thirty minutes they lay under fire. Finally, when the shelling eased, two lightly wounded men crawled back, dragging two of their severely wounded comrades. The fifth — dead — was left lying in the square.

I know nothing about him, except that his name, according to the company lists, was Chekulaev — and that he died on the morning of the 19th in Belgrade, on the bank of the Sava River.

Apparently, the Germans were alarmed by the attempt to approach the bridge undetected, because for the rest of the day they continued to shell the square and adjacent streets with mortars, almost without pause.

The company commander, who had anyway been ordered to repeat the attempt before dawn the next day, said there was no need to retrieve Chekulaev's body yet — they would bury him later, once the bridge was taken.

But the Germans kept shelling — all day, at sunset and into the twilight.

Near the square, slightly apart from the rest of the houses, stood the stone ruins of a building — so broken that it was hard to tell what it had once been. No one would have guessed that anyone still lived there.

And yet, in the basement beneath the ruins — accessible through a black, half-blocked hole — lived an old woman, Marija Đokić. She used to have a room on the second floor, left to her by her late husband, a bridge guard. When the second floor was destroyed, she moved to the first. Everyone else left the building. When the first floor was also destroyed, she moved into the basement.

By the 19th, it was the fourth day she had spent down there. That morning, she had clearly seen five Russian soldiers crawl into the square, separated from her only by a mangled iron fence. She saw the Germans begin to fire at them. She saw the mortar explosions all around. She even managed to crawl halfway out of her basement — just about to shout to the Russians to crawl to her. She was sure it was safer near her ruins. But just then, a mortar shell exploded nearby, knocking her down. She hit her head against the wall and lost consciousness.

When she came to and looked out again, she saw that only one of the five Russians remained in the square. He lay on his side, one arm thrown out, the other tucked under his head — as if he were just trying to sleep more comfortably. She called out to him several times, but he didn't respond. And she understood that he was dead.

The Germans were still firing. Mortar shells continued to explode in the square, throwing up fountains of black dirt and slicing off the last few branches from the trees. The dead Russian lay there, alone, his lifeless arm tucked under his head, in the bare, desolate square surrounded only by twisted metal and dead trees.

Old Marija Đokić looked at the dead soldier for a long time and thought. If there had been even one living soul nearby, she might have shared her thoughts aloud. But there was no one. Even the cat who had lived with her for the past four days had been killed by flying bricks during the last explosion. She thought for a long time. Then, rummaging through her only bundle of belongings, she pulled out something hidden under her black widow's shawl — and slowly climbed out of the basement.

She didn't know how to crawl or run. She simply walked — with her slow, elderly shuffle — into the square. When she came to a section of the fence that was still intact, she didn't climb over — she was too old for that. She walked around it and entered the square.

The Germans continued to shell the area, but no

mortar landed close to her.

She walked across the square to where the dead Russian soldier lay. With difficulty, she turned him face-up and saw that he had a young, very pale face. She smoothed his hair, folded his stiff hands across his chest and sat down beside him on the ground.

The Germans were still firing, but the shells continued to fall far from her.

She sat next to him — for perhaps an hour, maybe two — and said nothing.

It was cold and quiet — very quiet — except for the moments when mortars exploded.

At last, the old woman stood up and, stepping away from the dead man, took a few steps across the square. Soon, she found what she had been looking for: a large crater from a heavy shell, made several days earlier and now beginning to fill with water.

Kneeling at the edge of the crater, she began to scoop out the accumulated water with her hands. Several times she had to rest, but each time she resumed her work. When no water remained in the crater, the old woman returned to the fallen Russian soldier. She took him by the armpits and began to drag him.

She only had to drag him about ten steps, but she was very old, and three times she had to stop and sit down to rest. At last, she managed to pull him to the crater and gently laid him inside. After doing this, she felt completely exhausted and sat for a long time — probably an hour — to recover.

The Germans kept firing, but the shells still did not fall near her.

After resting, she knelt, made the sign of the cross over the fallen Russian, and kissed him on the lips and forehead.

Then she began slowly covering him with earth from the edge of the crater. There was plenty of dirt. Before long, she had buried him completely, so nothing could be seen above ground. But that wasn't enough for her. She wanted to make a proper grave. Resting again, she began to heap more earth on the spot with her hands. And over the next few hours, handful by handful, she built a small mound above the dead soldier.

The Germans kept firing — but their shells, just as before, continued to fall far from her.

After building the little mound, she took from beneath her black widow's shawl the thing she had brought from the basement. It was a large wax candle — one of the two wedding candles she had kept for forty-five years since the day of her marriage.

Rummaging through the pocket of her dress, she pulled out a box of matches, stuck the candle into the head of the grave and lit it. The candle caught easily. The night was still and the flame rose straight upward, not bending to either side. She lit the candle and continued to sit beside the grave, in the same motionless posture, her hands folded beneath her shawl on her knees.

When the mortar shells exploded far away, the candle's flame only flickered. But several times, when the explosions came closer, the candle blew out — and once even toppled over. Each time, old Đokić

silently took out her matches and patiently lit the candle again.

It was nearing dawn. The candle had burned down to half. The old woman, groping on the ground around her, found a burned and rusted piece of tin. With difficulty, she bent it with her old hands and stuck it into the ground next to the candle, shielding the flame on three sides from the wind. Having done this, she rose and, with the same slow, elderly steps by which she had come, she crossed the little square again, walked around the intact section of fence, and returned to her basement.

Before sunrise, the company to which the fallen soldier Chekulaev had belonged moved under heavy mortar fire through the square and captured the bridge.

An hour or two later it was fully light. After the infantry, our tanks began crossing the river to the far bank. The battle was now on the other side and no one was firing mortars at the square anymore.

The company commander, remembering the fallen Chekulaev, gave the order to find his body and bury it in a common grave along with those who had died that morning.

They searched for Chekulaev's body for a long time — in vain. Then one of the soldiers stopped at the edge of the square. Surprised, he called to the others. A few men came over to him.

“Look,” the Red Army soldier said.

And everyone looked where he was pointing.

Near the ruined fence of the square, over a

mound of earth filling an old shell crater, a small grave mound rose. At the head of it, a rusted tin semicircle had been stuck in the ground, and inside it, a candle was quietly burning. It had almost burned down — wax pooled around the stub — but the small flame still trembled steadily in the air.

All who had approached the grave almost simultaneously removed their hats. They stood silently in a circle, staring at the dying candle flame, gripped by a deep emotion that made it hard to speak.

At that very moment — unnoticed by them until now — a tall old woman in a black widow's shawl appeared in the square. Quietly, with aged, deliberate steps, she walked past the Red Army soldiers, knelt silently at the grave and took out from under her shawl another wax candle, exactly like the one whose stub still burned on the grave. Lifting the stub, she lit the new candle from its flame and placed it into the earth in the same spot. Then she began to rise from her knees. It was not easy, and one of the soldiers — the one standing nearest to her — gently took her by the elbow and helped her up.

Even now, she said nothing. She looked at the soldiers standing bareheaded before her, gave them a silent bow and — firmly adjusting the edges of her black shawl — turned and walked away without glancing back at the candle or at them.

The Red Army men watched her go. Then, speaking softly among themselves, as if afraid to disturb the silence, they turned in the opposite direction — towards the bridge across the Sava River, where the

battle was still raging — to rejoin their company.

And on the grave mound, among the powder-blackened soil, the twisted wreckage and the dead trees, burned the last possession of a widow — a wedding candle, placed by a Yugoslav mother on the grave of a Russian son.

And its flame did not go out. And it seemed eternal — like a mother's tears and a son's courage.

NIGHT OVER BELGRADE

Before the war, Dusya Zhelyabova worked as a lighting technician at a film studio. She operated the arc lamp — its blinding white light cast, at the operator's command, now across the studio floor, now onto the set, now onto actors in full makeup.

Dusya had worked at the studio for about eight years. Under the light of her 500-watt lamp, Lyubov Orlova ran after a train, clutching a Black child to her chest; Cherkasov, raising his sword, led Russian troops against the Livonians; and Shchukin — so much like Lenin in make-up that people would flinch when they encountered him in the hallway — gave a speech to the Second Congress of Soviets from a mock-up of a tribune in the studio.

Dusya knew every film actor by name, patronymic and face, and at home she kept countless reels of film frames from all the movies where her 500-watt lamp had lit the scenes.

Then the war began. The studio was evacuated. Dusya travelled with the studio's bulky lighting equipment for days in a railcar, deeper and deeper into the Soviet rear — to Central Asia. There, in a large city, the train finally stopped and went no further.

The studio was temporarily set up on one of the old city's narrow streets, in small, inconvenient rooms not meant for filming.

Times were hard. From the front, only bleak news came. Electricity was only available for a few

hours at night, and even then not every day — power was needed for the war factories relocated there.

No big films were being made. Only combat newsreels were produced — each a series of short documentaries.

No one yet really knew how to film a war, but everyone wanted to, and every short featured plenty of shooting, running and dying.

There was nothing for filming in the city: no tanks — they were all at the front; no planes — they had flown off long ago; no German helmets, uniforms or weapons — very few German prisoners had yet been taken. Not even desert firewood (saxaul) to heat the studio — and so actors not in the current scene would crowd around Dusya's 500-watt lamp to warm their freezing hands.

Almost all the male lighting technicians had gone to the front. Dusya would return each morning to the barrack that served as their dormitory, lie down on her cot still dressed in her padded coat, trousers and boots — just as she was in the studio — close her eyes and think in torment.

More and more often — especially on days when the war reports were grim — it seemed to her that everything she and the others were doing here was useless, meaningless, and that the real work was only there, at the front, where most of her colleagues had already gone.

One day in the spring of 1942, she went to the military commissariat and volunteered for the front.

When she came to say goodbye at the studio, the

director of the film she was working on — a fat, loud, often grumbling man — looked at her with sad eyes and quietly said:

“Pity. It’s a pity.”

But he didn’t argue. Then he looked at her again and said:

“I asked to go to the front too, but they wouldn’t let me. Said I was more useful here — doing this.”

He nodded towards a corner of the studio where a fake apartment entrance with a foreign-language sign hung.

They were filming a movie about underground resistance against the nazis in occupied Western Europe.

To Dusya, in her current mood, the filming of this picture seemed particularly pointless.

“What Western Europe?” she thought. “They’ve just taken Kharkov.”

Regretfully giving the director one last look, she quietly offered her hand, stiff with callouses and weather.

Over Belgrade hung a quiet, dark night. That morning, the last Germans holed up in attics had been killed. They had retreated across the Danube and Sava, and a stunned, war-torn city now lay in an extraordinary silence.

The general commanding the rifle division that had taken the southern part of the city had a passion for music — an all-consuming love. As a boy, he had sung for several years in the church choir. Perhaps his love of singing and music had its roots there. In

any case, anyone in the division who had a voice and could sing was someone special to him — he knew them by full name, held them in high regard, even tried to protect them as much as possible, though this was just a rifle division — not an army headquarters or front staff.

By hook or by crook — despite no formal positions in the division for such a thing — the general had created a small ensemble. On paper, its members were all listed as medics. In quiet times they stayed in the divisional rear. In battle — there was no help for it — they truly carried wounded men from under fire, just as their assignments required.

Belgrade had been taken. By morning, the infantry was to move on across the Danube, heading north.

But the general wanted to mark the occasion somehow. Remembering his little ensemble, he decided to hold a concert that night — in the National Theatre, the largest intact theatre left in Belgrade.

As always happens in such cases, word of the concert spread quickly, and by nightfall more guests arrived than expected.

Many Yugoslav officers and partisans came. So did a member of the army's military council, someone from the front's political department, two generals from the tank corps, several correspondents and even a quartermaster colonel from the main war trophy department — with whom the general had had such a heated exchange that morning that it had seemed they'd never speak again.

The night was pitch-black and deathly still. That made the bustle outside the theatre all the more noticeable.

One after another, cars and Willys jeeps pulled up to the brightly lit building. Drivers called to one another. Car doors slammed. Soldiers with flashlights swept white circles of light across the pavement, pacing back and forth with automatic rifles.

Dusya Zhelyabova, along with the rest of the ensemble, was moving around the stage behind the closed curtain — figuring out where each person would stand, where to place stools for the accordianists, how to move the piano back so it wouldn't get in the way of the Russian folk dance.

Everyone was anxious — not only from fatigue after several sleepless nights of battle, but also because this was a foreign city. And most of all, because yesterday, in the last battle, their best dancer, Sergeant Larikov, had been wounded — and Olya Solomina, who had sung lyrical songs in their ensemble, had been killed.

Dusya had joined the ensemble just three months ago, and purely by chance. One evening, while serving as a medic in her battalion, she had sung some old Samara laments. The general happened to be visiting. He heard her, made her sing again and two days later gave the order for her to be transferred into the ensemble.

She usually sang laments — from the Volga and other folk ditties — to the accordian. But tonight, after Olya's death, Dusya would have to sing not only

for herself — but for Olya too.

She felt sad — grieving for Olya, anxious for herself: how would she sing? Unable to resist the sounds of the hall filling with people behind the curtain, she stepped closer and peeked through a gap.

There were many familiar faces in the audience — and even more unfamiliar ones. Three-quarters of the hall was a sea of green Yugoslav partisan jackets. In the very front row sat several Yugoslav priests in black cloaks and tall hats, large crosses hanging on their chests.

Her comrades — Red Army soldiers — sat quietly, patiently waiting for the show to begin. Their faces were worn out from seven days of fighting, but they waited, enduring.

Finally, the curtain parted. First, two accordions played *The Moon is Shining* and a Liszt prelude. Then came a dance featuring almost the entire ensemble. At the end of the first part of the concert, it was Dusya's turn — first to sing her humorous folk ditties, then to perform the lyrical songs that had once belonged to Olya Solomina.

Dusya watched and listened as the audience received her fellow performers. The crowd clapped warmly and, as if not wanting to offend anyone, held each act on stage for a long time.

As she walked out, Dusya was calm. She knew it would go well. First, she sang laments accompanied by the accordion, then sang some cheerful ditties — *If the Volga Floods, Mother Volga River...* She sang them with trained cheerfulness and even saw out of

the corner of her eye how the priests in the front row were smiling after each one and clapping loudly, raising their long black sleeves high into the air.

And yet, as her performance drew closer to the song she was to sing in Olya Solomina's place, Dusya's heart grew heavier, sadder, more anxious.

And then — the moment came. She had to sing the song that began:

What are you longing for, comrade sailor?...

Your accordion moans and weeps...

It was a song that Olya had sung with particular soul.

Suddenly, Dusya felt she couldn't sing it. She looked helplessly at the hall and, for the first time — only now — she fully realized that she was in a foreign country, abroad, that this was Belgrade, and that three-quarters of the audience were Yugoslavs, speaking a language that sounded similar, but was still unfamiliar.

And perhaps because of that sudden awareness of being abroad, she remembered the cold film pavilion in the Central Asian city... and the face of the director saying: "They said I'm more needed for this," and the fake apartment doorway with a foreign sign above it, and a song from that film — a song that had been sung by everyone at the studio that month.

And then — unexpectedly, for herself, for her comrades, for the entire audience — Dusya took a step forward, closed her eyes and quietly began singing the song that had suddenly returned to her memory:

*The night over Belgrade is quiet,
It has replaced the day.
Remember how brightly flared
The furious thunder of fire.
Remember the hour of terror —
The flight of black machines —
Clench your heart — listen:
The night is singing a song.
The flame of anger burns in our chests.
Flame of anger, lead us on the march!
Prepare the hour of reckoning!
Death for death! Blood for blood!
To battle, Slavs! The dawn is ahead!*

She sang the first and second verses with her eyes closed, not thinking about the words, not fully aware of them.

In her mind, a reel of memories passed: cold winter days in the first year of the war, the distant Central Asian city, the pages of newspapers ending with: “After fierce battles, our troops withdrew from...”, the unheated film pavilions, and how — God, how long ago it seemed! — it was precisely at that time, while those terrible headlines were in the papers, that they were filming a movie about this distant city where she now stood singing this song.

“Could anyone have imagined, or known back then, that in three years we would actually be in this very city? Could anyone have guessed, foreseen this?” Dusya asked herself silently. And then silently an-

swered:

“Yes. As strange as it sounds — yes. Someone did know, someone guessed, someone foresaw it. Surely — because otherwise nothing that happened over these years would have been possible.”

She finished the song and opened her eyes. The hall was silent — entranced.

Then something happened that Dusya had never seen before. People began to clap. Louder and louder. Then they started shouting things, standing from their seats, clapping and clapping — now standing — the entire hall.

And in that moment she understood: she wouldn't be allowed to leave unless she sang the song again.

She raised her hands helplessly, child-like, in front of the thunderous crowd.

And the audience, just as suddenly and obediently as it had risen, fell silent.

In the stillness, Dusya suddenly felt the urge — before singing again — to say something about what she had just felt herself.

“This song,” she said, stepping forward, “is from a film about your Belgrade. We shot it three years ago, very far from here, in evacuation — in Central Asia. It was very cold there at the time, and hard. The Germans had taken Kharkov. They were near Moscow. But still, we made that film. I worked at the film studio back then too.”

And remembering herself in those days, she blushed. Stepping back a little, flustered, she said

awkwardly:

“Well... I’ll sing it again.”

And she began.

On the grand stage of the National Theatre in Belgrade stood a plain-looking girl in a soldier’s field blouse and worn-out army boots, singing with a trembling, unsteady voice the song *Night Over Belgrade*.

And the people in the hall cried. They cried — these people who had spent three and a half years as partisans, staring death in the face every day.

And now, when I remember it, I too think — maybe she didn’t sing all that well. But people cried.

That, really, is all.

Only this: when we send our films to Yugoslavia, let them definitely send the wartime film collection that includes this short film — *Night Over Belgrade*. Maybe it’s not that well made. But it holds the power of hope and the gift of foresight.

And those things touch the human heart — like the greatest art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Konstantin Mikhailovich Simonov (1915-1979) was a prominent Russian writer, poet, playwright and journalist, best known for his works created during and about the Second World War. Born in Petrograd, he grew up in a military family and later moved to Moscow, where he trained as a mechanic before entering the Literary Institute. He began his career as a poet in the 1930s and soon became a war correspondent, reporting from the front lines of the Khalkhin Gol conflict and the Great Patriotic War.

Simonov gained wide recognition for his war-time poetry, marked by emotional sincerity and a deep sense of personal responsibility. His famous poem *Wait for Me* (1941) became one of the most iconic lyrical works of the war. He also wrote influential prose, including the novella *Days and Nights* (1943-1944) and the trilogy *The Living and the Dead* (1955-1971), which explored the human and moral dimensions of war and was later adapted for film.

Alongside his literary career, Simonov served as editor-in-chief of major Soviet journals and held leadership roles in the Union of Soviet Writers. He wrote plays, screenplays and numerous poetry collections, and was an important cultural figure of his time. He also supported the publication of other writers' works, notably helping to bring Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* to print.

Simonov received many state honours, including three Orders of Lenin and two Stalin Prizes. He

died in 1979 after surgery, and according to his will, his ashes were scattered at Buinichskoye Field near Mogilev, a location of personal wartime significance.