

## MY FIRST GOOSE

S AVITSKY, the Sixth Division commander, rose when he saw me, and I marvelled at the beauty of his gigantic body.<sup>1</sup> He rose and—with the purple of his breeches, with his crimson cap tilted to one side, with the decorations hammered into his chest—cut the hut in half, as a banner cuts the sky. He smelt of perfume and the overwhelmingly sweet coolness of soap. His long legs looked like a pair of girls clad in shiny shoulder-length jackboots.

He smiled at me, slapped his whip against the table and reached for the order that the chief of staff had just dictated. It was an order for Ivan Chesnokov to advance in the direction of Chugunov-Dobryvodka with the regiment entrusted to him and, upon coming into contact with the enemy, to destroy the same...

“...*For said destruction*,” wrote the division commander, filling the whole sheet with his scrawl, “*I hold Chesnokov entirely responsible, under pain of capital punishment, and I’ll shoot him down on the spot, which you, Comrade Chesnokov, have no reason to doubt, as this isn’t our first month working together at the front...*”

The Sixth Division commander signed the order with a flourish, tossed it to his orderlies and turned his face towards me. His grey eyes were dancing with joy.

"Report!" he shouted, and cleaved the air with his whip. Then he read the paper assigning me to the division staff.

"Make it an order!" said the division commander. "Make it an order and issue him a soldier's provisions—but he'll take care of his own privates. Can you read and write?"

"I can," I said, envying the iron and flowers of his youth. "I'm a graduate in law of Petersburg University..."

"You're one of those pansies!" he shouted, laughing. "And with glasses on your nose. What a little louse!... They send you without so much as checking with us—and you get cut to pieces for glasses around here. Think you'll get along, do you?"

"I'll get along," I said, and went off to the village with the quartermaster to find lodging for the night. The quartermaster carried my little trunk on his shoulders. The village street lay before us. The dying sun, yellow and round as a pumpkin, was breathing its last rosy breath into the sky.

We came up to a hut with painted carvings of garlands around the windows. The quartermaster suddenly stopped and said with an apologetic grin:

"We've got trouble with glasses around here, and you can't do a thing about it. A man of the highest distinction—he's a goner for sure. But you ruin a lady, the nicest little lady, and our fighting boys treat you real kind..."

He hesitated a moment with my little trunk on his shoulders, came right up to me, then jumped back in despair and ran into the first courtyard. Cossacks were sitting on hay in there, shaving one another.

"All right, men," said the quartermaster, placing my little trunk on the ground. "According to Comrade Savitsky's orders, you have to take this fellow into your billet, and no nonsense, on account of his having suffered on the fields of learning..."

The quartermaster reddened and walked away without looking back. I raised my hand to my cap and saluted the Cossacks. A young lad with lank, flaxen hair and a handsome Ryazan face walked up to my little trunk and flung it over the gate. Then he turned his backside towards me and, with unusual skill, began emitting shameful sounds.

"Artillery, zero calibre!" an older Cossack shouted and laughed. "Rapid fire..."

The lad exhausted his simple art and walked off. Then, crawling along the ground, I began gathering up the manuscripts and tattered old clothes that had fallen out of my little trunk. I gathered them up and carried them to the far end of the yard. Pork was cooking in a kettle that stood on bricks near the hut. It sent up a column of smoke, like one's family home in the village seen from a distance, mingling inside me a feeling of hunger and unprecedented loneliness. I covered my battered little trunk with hay, made a pillow out of it and lay down on the ground to read Lenin's speech at the Second Congress of the Comintern in *Pravda*. The sun fell on me from behind jagged hillocks, Cossacks stepped on my legs and the lad made fun of me relentlessly; Lenin's beloved lines travelled down a thorny path and couldn't reach me. So I put the paper aside and went over to the landlady, who was spinning yarn on the porch.

"Hostess," I said, "I gotta eat..."

The old woman lifted the flooded whites of her purblind eyes towards me and lowered them again.

"Comrade," she said, after a pause, "this business makes me want to hang myself."

"Mother of fucking Christ," I muttered angrily, and pushed the old woman in the chest with my fist. "I didn't come here to reason with you..."

Turning around, I saw someone else's sabre lying close by. A dour goose was wandering around the yard, calmly preening its feathers. I caught up with him, bent him to the ground. The goose's head cracked under my boot, cracked and bled. The white neck lay stretched out in the dung and the wings folded over the dead bird.

"Mother of fucking Christ!" I said, digging the sabre into the goose. "Roast it up for me, hostess."

The old woman, her blindness and glasses glinting, picked up the bird, wrapped it in her apron and carried it off to the kitchen.

"Comrade," she said, after a pause, "I want to hang myself," and shut the door behind her.

In the yard the Cossacks were already sitting around their kettle. They were motionless, straight-backed as priests. They hadn't looked at the goose.

"Our kind of lad," one of them said, winked, and scooped up some cabbage soup with his spoon.

The Cossacks commenced their dinner with the restrained elegance of peasants who hold one another in respect. I

wiped the sabre down with sand, went out of the gate and came back in again, languishing. The moon hung over the yard like a cheap earring.

“Little brother,” the eldest of the Cossacks, Surovko, suddenly said to me, “come and have a bite with us till your goose is ready...”

He drew a spare spoon from his boot and handed it to me. We supped up the home-made cabbage soup and ate the pork.

“What’re they writing in the newspaper?” asked the lad with the flaxen hair, making room for me.

“In the newspaper Lenin writes...” I said, pulling out *Pravda*. “Lenin writes we have a shortage in everything.”

And loudly, like a deaf man triumphant, I read Lenin’s speech to the Cossacks.

Evening enveloped me in the bracing dampness of its twilight sheets—evening laid its motherly palms on my blazing forehead. I read and rejoiced, and caught, rejoicing, the mysterious curve of Lenin’s straight line.

“Truth tickles every nostril,” Surovko said when I’d finished. “Question is, how do you pull it out of the pile? But Lenin hits it straight away, like a hen pecking at a grain.”

That’s what Surovko, platoon commander of the staff squadron, said about Lenin, and then we went to sleep in the hayloft. There were six of us, huddling together for warmth, our legs tangled, under a roof full of holes that let in the stars. I had dreams—dreamt of women—and only my heart, crimson with murder, creaked and bled.

PAN APOLEK

- 1 *zrazy*: stuffed meat cutlets, eaten throughout Eastern Europe.
- 2 *Oj, ten człowiek!*: “Oh, that man!” (Polish).
- 3 *Co wy mówicie?*: “What are you saying?” (Polish).
- 4 *Tak, tak... Panie*: “Yes, yes... yes, yes, sir...” (Polish).

THE ITALIAN SUN

- 1 Nestor Ivanovych Makhno, called “Old Man” (1888–1934), was a Ukrainian anarcho-communist who commanded his own independent Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine during the Civil War. Volin—or Voline, as he himself spelt it—was the *nom de guerre* of Vsevolod Mikhaylovich Eikhenbaum (1882–1945), a prominent Russian Jewish anarchist who collaborated with Makhno, helped organize his army and wrote many of his manifestos. Both Makhno and Volin were driven into exile in 1921.
- 2 “*Tsek*” is Sidorov’s corruption of the abbreviation TsK (pronounced “tse-ka”)—which stands for Central Committee, the chief administrative body of the Communist Party. “*Tsekist*” is a member of the Central Committee. Later in the letter, Sidorov uses the correct form of the abbreviation (*Tseka*), and also refers to the *Cheka*, the secret police, itself an acronym (ChK) for Emergency Commission.

MY FIRST GOOSE

- 1 The character of Savitsky is based on Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko (1895–1970), the son of a Ukrainian peasant from what is now the Odessa region, who was drafted into the Imperial

Army in 1914 and joined the Red Army in 1918. He commanded the Sixth Division from November 1919 to August 1920; he was wounded five times during the Civil War and the Polish conflict. He had participated in the defence of Tsaritsyn (see note on Voroshilov on p. 213), where he befriended Semyon Budyonny and Joseph Stalin. Timoshenko rose to become a People's Commissar for Defence and a Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1940. His daughter married Stalin's son in 1944. After commanding troops on various fronts during the Second World War, Timoshenko became Inspector-General of the Defence Ministry.

#### THE REBBE

- 1 Hershel of Ostropol is a trickster figure in Yiddish folklore.
- 2 *tsaddik*: a term of respect in the Jewish tradition, bestowed upon the most righteous figures.

#### THE TACHANKA DOCTRINE

- 1 *tachanka*: a machine-gun cart.
- 2 *britchka*: a long horse-drawn carriage.

#### THE SECOND BRIGADE COMMANDER

- 1 *koleso*: wheel (Russian).
- 2 *sazhen*: an obsolete Russian unit of measure, equivalent to seven feet, or approximately two metres.
- 3 Vasily Ivanovich Kniga (1883–1961) was a Soviet military commander, who would become a major general in 1940. He began