Chapter 1

OVERTURE TO WAR

"Mummy! Time to go to the beach! *Muummy*! Can you hear me? Bother. Hey, dogface – what's the big mystery? Our parents have been talking in there for ages."

"Listen, plinkety-plonker, call me that again and I'll whack you so hard, even Mother won't recognise you!"

"All right, dogface, put that book down and let's go for a swim."

A heavy volume violently struck the back of my head, pre-empting my retaliation. The red mist descended and yet again, my older brother and I were rolling around on the floor in a tight clinch, destroying everything in our path. I managed to sink my teeth into his hand, and he screamed. Hearing the kerfuffle, our father threw open the door and rushed into the room. He picked us up off the floor, separated us by the scruff of our necks, and shook us.

"What are you fighting about this time? Shame on you both! You don't give the neighbours downstairs a moment's peace, with your constant squabbling."

"Semyon, your nerves," my mother intervened. "Let me deal with these two."

"S'not my fault!" yelled Yosif. "Look! He bit me and drew blood!"

"That's because he bashed me so hard on the head with *Robinson Crusoe* he nearly killed me!" I whimpered, relying on my parents' customary soft spot for the younger child. As usual, it paid off.

"Yosif, you're eleven years old," Mother said sternly to my elder brother. "It's about time you behaved like it."

Father tried to even things out. "And you, Misha darling, must have more respect for your brother – he's two years older than you."

"He's *not* two years older than me," I protested. "Only a year and nine months!"

"In any case," Mother added categorically, "You must stop your silly squabbling from now on, because something dreadful happened this morning – not just for our family, but for the entire Soviet nation."

Her voice faltered. She turned away and went to the bedroom, where three-year-old Roman was now awake. My brother and I stood bewildered, open-mouthed. Father sat on the edge of the chair, pulled us towards him and sighed heavily, his head low.

"I realise that you children are too young to understand what war is about..."

"I know," the eldest interrupted. "It's when Red Indians fight white people, or pirates rob the rich!"

Father shook his head. "Unfortunately, lads, this is a totally different kind of war. There's nothing in the least romantic about it. I'm sure you've heard at school that there's been a world war in Europe these past two years…"

"Oh, yes," Yosif volunteered. "Our teacher told us that Germany won't go to war with us now that Hitler and Stalin have signed the peace treaty."

How come he knew all that? Although annoyed, I held my tongue. Only one class ahead of me, and just look at him showing off like a know-all. I'll make him pay for that...

"By the way, Daddy, why does Germany have to go to war with us? What's in it for them?"

"Stupid!" Yosif shouted. "They'll capture us all and make us slaves."

"Stupid yourself!" I snarled back. "You just think you're above everyone else because you've read all those fantasy adventure stories."

I had overheard Mother tell him off about this in the kitchen, and memorised the criticism in case it would come in useful. He opened his mouth, ready to nail me, but a gesture from father put a stop to our squabbling.

"Boys, as of this morning, we are at war. The Nazis have attacked us. Everyone in the country is urgently being mobilised by the Red Army to fight for our nation's freedom. The announcement is being broadcast on every radio station. I'll also be leaving for the front in a few days, to protect our beloved Odessa from the enemy."

I felt a sudden lump in my throat. I could hear Mother crying in the bedroom, where little Roman was desperately offering her his toys in an attempt to comfort her. Yosif, stunned, stared at father. After a long pause, he took a deep breath, and continued.

"This is the first time in this family we've talked man-to-man, and I hope you'll take it seriously. War is not about rolling around on the floor, biting each other like puppies (I felt my cheeks flush). Soldiers fight to the death, to defend themselves, our country and our freedom. You, too, will have trials to face. Unless we stop the advance of the enemy immediately, you and Mummy will have to leave Odessa for a while and go inland. After our victory, I'll come and find you, wherever you are, and we'll all come back together to our wonderful city. I give you my word, as your father. However, you must promise me to obey your mother without question, to help her in every way, to protect each other from any trouble or mishaps, and to stick together at all times."

"Semyon, don't frighten the children," urged Mother anxiously as she walked up behind him. She grabbed our heads, and pressed them against her, almost convulsively. "They're too young to know about war and death..."

"Annushka, please! Stop being hysterical. From now on, they're no longer children. They're young fighters who will protect our family. No more baby talk. They must let go of your apron strings to be ready to face the troubles ahead. I have faith in our sons' future. They will survive the hard times ahead, I'm sure."

Father spoke in the same portentous tone as the radio presenter announcing the outbreak of war. With a heavy step, he went to the bedroom to entertain whimpering little Roman. We both stood there, unable to speak, feeling confused and bereft. Our heads were bathed with Mother's tears as she held us close, as if to protect us from the disaster to come.

From 22nd June 1941, during the first month of the war, life in Odessa was hard, as it was in the rest of the country. Despite the hot summer, the beaches were deserted. Long queues formed in the shops, and the streets were animated by a kind of muted bustle, like a silent movie. Many relatives from all walks of life came to our house. During the day, women would come to ask Mother's advice on how best to keep their children safe, and shared food and medicine. In the evening, after work or military training, came the men who were not yet at the front, to discuss when and how to evacuate their families, or the safety or otherwise of those of Jewish origin, as opposed to those of the faith, in the occupied territories. Our father categorically insisted on the evacuation of all our relatives, but some of his brothers and sisters were reluctant to part with their possessions, and hoped for commercial cooperation with the Nazis. In the end, they paid for their greed with the lives of their entire families, which was especially heart-breaking because of the children.

In mid-July 1941, my father was dispatched to the front line of Odessa's defences. Before leaving, he warned Mother about the evacuation due to take place a week later. Frantic preparations were made for our departure. We had never seen Mother so serious or so implacably organised. None of us knew when or where we were going, or how long we would be away. On the night of the 21st–22nd of June, our city suffered its first bombing raid. There were sirens, explosions, and mills and factories ablaze. In the morning, we were picked up by a large cart drawn by two horses. Mother helped the driver to load our bundles and suitcases, perching all three children on top. She replied calmly to the questions of astonished neighbours, and promised to be back in a month, after the victory. Who could have guessed that victory would take another four years? For us children, the horse-drawn journey seemed an exotic start to the school holidays. Mother sat next to the driver, and we set off on a trip that was to prove longer and more dramatic than we had anticipated in Odessa. Something inside me said farewell to my childhood.

At the military checkpoint at the city gates, our very own commander-in-chief showed the officer her documents, and they let us go with a warning that, sooner or later, our horses would be requisitioned for the war effort. The driver opted to take small country roads. In every village, we were greeted with curiosity and kindness; we were the first war refugees in that district, as it turned out. Kind-hearted women gave us generous amounts of fruit, milk and other food. Although the harvest had been exceptionally plentiful in the Ukraine that year, there had been no one to gather it in. Vegetables and cereals withered and rotted in the fields.

Our driver, a peasant, wiped his tears with his sleeve as we drove past yet another agricultural graveyard. Far behind us, vivid tableaux of glades, clearings and lakes were being destroyed by the ravages of war. Yet here, paradoxically, we felt as though everything was oddly at peace in the beautiful harmony of nature – cruel irony, a malevolent joke at the expense of the creator.

All day, the driver only stopped to allow passengers to relieve themselves in the bushes, or to water the horses. We ate as we went. He tried to put as much distance as possible between us and the front line. I sometimes chased after the cart, leaping onto the back as it rumbled along, whistling as I dangled my feet before hopping off again to run barefoot on the dusty road. Mother denied Yosif this fun and games because of his 'heart problem' that the doctor had apparently diagnosed. I, on the other hand, had run errands for milk and bread from an early age. I was proud of Mother's faith in me, but I sometimes thought that my older brother sneered maliciously at my enthusiasm. He was constantly asserting his superiority and looked on me as a naive idiot. He treated little Roman like a complete nobody, and was often jealous of our mother's attentions towards him – she hardly ever let the youngest out of her arms. I was rather proud of being nicknamed 'the Golden Middle' by our relatives for my musical abilities. At the age of five, I had begun studying the violin at music school, and moved to the piano department a year later. I was quick at picking up popular tunes and playing them by ear, and even tried singing them to my own accompaniment. War, however, interrupted all this easy success. Both the music school and my street playmates vanished into the distance, like a wonderful dream. All we were left with was the noisy reality of the monotonously squeaking wheels of the cart, the driver urging on the horses and the burning sun over our heads.

After travelling for four days, we reached Dnepr. As we were about to cross the river, we were stopped at the bridge by a military patrol. The soldiers fumbled for a long time with Mother's documents, talked to the driver, then asked us to wait while they called their superior. Eventually, he emerged and explained to Mother that we could proceed no further because our horses and cart were being requisitioned for the war effort. We were driven over the bridge to

the outpost on the other side of the river, our luggage was unloaded inside the precinct, and we were supposed to wait until the authorities decided what to do with us refugees. Our driver returned with a piece of paper in lieu of our horses. Mother handed him an envelope which I guessed contained money. He gave us a look of pity, furtively crossed himself, and disappeared back over the bridge.

"You two, wait here," Mother ordered, as she brushed bits of straw off her skirt, removed the dirty scarf from her head, and smoothed her hair. "I'm going with Roman now, to sort things out. Remember, don't under any circumstances leave our luggage unattended until I get back from the office (which was what she called the outpost).

She looked at my brother and me. "Do you understand?" We both nodded silently and sat on top of our bundles, spreading out our arms over the rest. I thought these must be the trials father had referred to in his instructions to us at the start of the war. Our commander grabbed Roman by the hand and headed for the outpost. As she reached the steps, the duty guard at the gate shouted after her, "Where are you going, woman?" but it was too late. Mother decisively opened the door, dragging Roman in after her. Our youngest was a little scared of all the stern-looking armed men in uniform, and reluctant to go near them. Later, we understood that she had taken him along deliberately, for noise value, which worked out a treat. The office window was open wide, so although we could not see anything, we heard every word of the exchange. Mother asked him what he intended to do with us, since we had no means of transport.

The officer interrupted his telephone conversation, and replied that we were free to do as we pleased. Mother seemed to have been waiting for just that, and she pounced like a panther. Her maternal instinct must have instructed her exactly how to act when threatened. She began screaming hysterically and ruthlessly went for the foolish officer's jugular. "You, a Soviet officer, leaving me with three young children to spend the night under a bridge, at the mercy of fate!" Roman began to wail.

Soldiers rushed in, awaiting orders. With the ferocity of Kipling's Bagheera, she persevered in her attack: "And you consider yourself a representative of the Red Army? Only Nazis would act this way! Take us to the nearest town or district centre immediately, while it's still daylight, or you'll have to answer to a tribunal for the way you're treating the family of a fighting soldier!"

There was no stopping her. The chief of the precinct seemed to have lost the power of speech. He went into the next door office and apparently telephoned someone, since telephone operators and nurses began to gather around. They all tried to comfort the mother in distress. Roman was screaming like a slaughterhouse piglet. My elder brother and I were also sobbing, but did not abandon our positions. The whole scenario was completely out of place in this precinct.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a horse and cart appeared speeding over the bridge. It was the chairman of the nearest district coming in person at the request of the military authorities to settle the matter. He took us to his village on the spot, and organised for us to spend the night at the local farm cooperative centre. It was a warm welcome. We were fed, washed and put to bed. Even so, Mother spent a long time trying to consolidate our future security with this new protector. He was the mayor of the village, and promised to take us the next morning to nearby Zarnitza farm, where we could live for as long as we wished.

Worry prevented me from falling asleep for a long time. In the parlour, Mother was explaining to the chairman how we had ended up here, and how the bureaucratic senior officer had confiscated our means of transport and refused to help us. The old man tried to pacify her

with his velvety voice, and attempted to justify the young officer's uncaring cruelty by his inexperience and the general panic created by being at war. Anna told him that our father was supposed to come for us in two or three weeks, but the mayor restrained her optimism. He informed her that the enemy was unfortunately fast advancing into the depths of the Ukraine, and that we would consequently have to stay longer. Mother fell silent, visibly upset. As for me, I felt as though I had just been cut down.

The landlady woke us up at daybreak. The chairman was already waiting for us outside, with transport. After a rushed breakfast of milk and fresh warm bread, we set off, full of suspicion and anxiety, for our new home. Although Mother put on a brave face, we sensed her anxiety from the questions she was asking the mayor: "How far is this farm? Where will we live, and at whose expense will we eat? Is there a telephone or telegraph line? Is there public transport into Zaporojye district centre?"

Our new protector answered all Mother's questions clearly and patiently. He even promised, if the worst came to the worst, to take us to Zaporojye town council himself, to join the evacuation. This kind-hearted man inspired trust with his calm tone and presence. After one bend in the road, he reined in the horse from a trot to a slower pace. A fairytale view unfolded before us: on our left, orchards where women were picking fruit; on our right, in the distance, a series of streams where boys were washing horses. Far ahead, like little jewels, a scattering of white huts against the lush greenery. We turned our heads in every direction, rendered speechless by this idyllic village landscape. At the sight of the chairman, the fruit pickers cried out warm greetings and waved. He responded by waving his straw hat above his head. As we discovered later, his sister lived alone in Zarnitza. She had her own house, garden, vegetable patch and animals. In the summer, her grandchildren came from the city to spend the holidays with her. This year, however, they had changed their plans because of the war.

The mayor brought us to her, knowing she wouldn't refuse refugees shelter. Mother, who had discovered all this on our way there, promised to help out around the house and in the kitchen, to repay the hospitality. Klava was a friendly, energetic peasant woman of seventy, with a kind heart. With the help of visiting children and her brother, her household was in good order. Mother befriended her immediately, and we settled in, warm and safe. Yosif spent most of his time reading in the book hut, while I made friends with the local children of my own age. Every day, our merry band would rush to bathe in the streams. My new friends taught me to ride, and every time I came tumbling off the horse, they fell about laughing – and so did the horse. For a long time, I walked all bow-legged and with a sore behind, but I endured it bravely and refused to admit defeat.

After lunch, when the heat subsided, Klava would show me how to pull out weeds and water the ripening vegetables, how to pick berries from thick bushes and collect fruit under the trees in the garden. At first I had backache from lack of practice, but the many new things I learnt in such a short time from this sweet and boundlessly energetic grandmother more than made up for it. Mother sometimes worried about my health. She had no inkling of the immense pride I felt when flaunting to Yosif my expertise in distinguishing harmful insects from edible ones, and knowing the different types of root vegetable.

"Who wants to dig around in dung, anyway?" was his reaction.

"But you're quick enough to stuff yourself with salad or borscht, aren't you?" I replied, having the final word before rushing back to the hen house, the pigsty or somewhere else equally exotic in the vicinity.

While Roman was at kindergarten, Mother cooked, washed, cleaned house and, every single day, went to the post and telegraph office to check if there was news from father. She returned frowning and obviously preoccupied. Klava confided in whispered tones that Hitler foamed at the mouth like a rabid dog, and burned down everything in his way. As soon as they saw us children playing in blissful ignorance, the women would fall silent. Still, we could sense an end to the carefree holiday approaching, knowing our luck could not last. It was obvious that new tribulations awaited us around the corner. One evening at the end of our third week in Zarnitza, the telephone operator came from the post office to tell Mother that we had to get ready to leave immediately, and that the chairman himself would come for us early in the morning. "Here we go again," I muttered unhelpfully.

We quickly packed our few belongings and went to bed. Mother stayed up, busying herself in the kitchen and the parlour. She washed, cleared and cleaned every last speck of dust, not to leave any dirt behind us in the house. Not for nothing did our relatives in Odessa call her a cleanliness fanatic. As I drifted to sleep, I could hear Klava through the wall, in the bedroom next to mine, praying in despair as she repeated "Holy Mother of God, have mercy upon us." Once, I noticed her hiding an icon under her old mattress. I longed to see the image on it, but was too shy to ask. Father used to tell us, "You must always restrain your curiosity if you don't want to attract misfortune or get into trouble." What did he mean, though? My touching other people's things with dirty hands? So should I wash my hands before handling other people's belongings? The whole thing seemed strange.

Before dawn, we loaded the now familiar cart. Our kind protector Andrei Petrovitch kept urging us to hurry, as the journey before us was long – five hours to Zaporojye, where we had to catch the evacuation train to Lugansk. Klava handed Mother a bag of food, a can of water and two bottles of milk. Hiding behind her brother, she quickly made the sign of the cross over us, holding back her tears. As a mark of gratitude for everything, our mother offered our silver cutlery wrapped in a tea towel as a gift, which Klava vehemently declined. I was so sad about leaving this kind old woman that I jumped off the cart, ran to hug her, and head butted her in the belly. She kissed me on the head, put me back on my seat, and said, "God be with you, Annushka!" The mayor cracked the reins, and we were off again towards an uncertain future, but which was to take us closer to the front line.

As usual, Mother travelled next to the driver. I sat on the bags, with my back to them. Yosif and Roman were on the main seat, facing in the direction of travel. I wanted to keep Zarnitza in view for as long as I could, as it slowly vanished into the distance, and to say goodbye forever to something which had become an indistinguishable part of me after such a short time. The red orb of the sun was only just rising from behind the horizon. Housewives were chasing cattle out of their homes. Cows were lowing their greetings to one another, and gathering at the back of the farm. With his stick, the old stockman was prodding them towards the streams, where they would graze in their own vast meadows for the rest of the day. Once we had rounded the bend in the road, everything vanished as though a curtain had fallen on it, and I began listening in to the conversation behind me.

"The Germans are bombing Dnepropetrovsk. It's a military target, like the other industrial centres. We won't be able to keep the enemy back for much longer."

Mother was frightened. "But that's so near – we must catch the train at all costs!" she exclaimed. Then, as though suddenly remembering herself, she dropped her voice back down to a whisper. "Tell me honestly, is this really the last evacuation train? I need to know what the

situation is for the children and me. You know what the Nazis will do to us if we get stuck in Zaporojye!"

"Don't worry yet, Anna. I'll do everything in my power to send you and the children deep inland."

"Thank you so much for your help. You're our only hope."

"You needn't thank me. It's an honour for me to ensure that your family is safe. But for my plan to succeed, I need you to stay calm and trust me."

"I promise," Mother replied. "Only please tell me your plan, so I can feel a bit more at ease."

"Well, my daughter works as a dispatcher at the goods train station. In an hour, when we reach my village, I'll phone her from my office and ask her for help. She won't refuse."

At that moment, Roman woke up from dozing, and asked to get some air. Mother asked to stop and all three of us, bladders bursting, walked into a sunflower plantation. It was the first time we had seen how the seeds grew. Before the war, father had spent years working in a factory that extracted sunflower seed oil, and crushed the shells to a pulp for horses, pigs and cattle. I asked the chairman's permission to pick three sunflower heads, and we distracted ourselves by nibbling on the seeds like squirrels for the rest of the journey.

We stopped for a break at the district centre. While the mayor was phoning from his office, we had lunch in the buffet, and lay on the grass of the municipal garden. At the same time, a woman from the district council fed and watered our horse, chatting with Mother about something or other. I perked up my ears, expecting to hear news.

"Any news, Andrei Petrovitch?" our leader asked impatiently.

"My daughter promised to check the timetable of trains going east, and asked me to call her again when we get nearer the town."

"And what about the evacuation of local people further inland?"

"She doesn't know exactly because in the last three days, all the trains have been dispatched as and when, without following an exact timetable."

We spent the remaining two hour journey in tense silence. Andrei Petrovitch kept urging the horse on, and glancing at his watch. In the distance, ahead of us, the outskirts of Zaporojye became visible. We stopped at the suburban post office and the mayor called his daughter again. He took a long time, and when he finally returned, it was obvious to Anna, from the expression on his face, that our problems were not a priority.

His daughter said that the evacuation train was full to bursting with local refugees, and had therefore left an hour earlier. The remaining families with children had been taken to the station waiting room until tomorrow's train. When Mother tried to say something, he stopped her with his hand and announced that this would not be a problem for our family. They were going to try and make an exception for us, as a mother on her own with three children. It would therefore be better if she kept quiet and left the decision to the people whose job it was.

Mother consented, and we drove to the freight station. On the way, we were stopped several times by military patrols. Each time, Andrei Petrovitch showed his official government documents and they let us through. It was evening before we reached the marshalling yard. The mayor's daughter, Larissa, who was about Mother's age, was waiting for us. She and her father carried our belongings into an office, and told us to make ourselves comfortable in the armchairs and on the couch. Then they asked us to wait there and not go anywhere while they organised our departure that same night. Roman was misbehaving, Yosif was going on and on about the mayor and his daughter not coming back, while I insisted that a man like that would keep his word and never lie to us.

A couple of hours later, they did return. They sat at the desk with Mother, pencil and paper in hand. Andrei Petrovitch began explaining the complicated situation, and writing down instructions, the names of the engine drivers, and the least dangerous route east.

"Unfortunately, there are no closed freight trains scheduled for tonight," Larissa said. "Dnepropetrovsk is under continual bombardment, and the same will start here any day now. There are open wagons carrying iron eastwards through Makeyevka. Both drivers – the engine was repaired in the depot here – will take you with them in their cabin until that junction, where they'll take on open wagons transporting iron to Lugansk this very night. We have no legal authority beyond that point. In the morning, as soon as you get there, you must go immediately to the local evacuation point, where they'll explain everything about refugee transportation onwards that the Lugansk authorities have organised. The only serious problem is the part from Makeyevka to Lugansk, which will take three or four hours. You'll have to travel in an open wagon with red ore, though it'll be secured by tarpaulin."

Mother listened without interrupting, her eyes growing wider. From the front line not far away, we could hear the roar of guns and, on the dark horizon, we could see the glow of flares or shells, confirming the approaching threat.

"Anna, are you listening? Don't get distracted," Andrei Petrovitch continued. "The engine drivers will help you in Makeyevka; they both have large families. The crushed ore will be like a mattress for you. They'll put you into one of the front carriages to keep an eye on you during the journey. These," he demonstrated, "are the straps for securing the tarpaulin to the walls of the wagon. Once the ore is loaded onto the carriage, it's arranged in a conical shape. Each one of you will be strapped, like a parachutist, to a bundle or a case, counterbalancing the other side of this cone, with a 10–20 cm gap between you and the belt. That way, you'll be able to turn around from one side to the other while the train is moving. Trains are fast at night, so your discomfort may not last as long as we think. My daughter and I fully appreciate that it's by no means the easiest way to save your children. But you don't have much choice. Either you stay at the passenger station with the other refugees, and wait for tomorrow's train, or set off with the engine drivers immediately. I'm afraid that's really all we can do for you. As a mother, Anna, it's entirely up to you."

Andrei Petrovitch stopped talking, and waited. Mother stared into his eyes for a long time, as though checking that his proposal was indeed real, and not some awful nightmare. Then she rose slowly, and said "Right – let's go!" – so we went to the station with our belongings. The drivers were already waiting for us at the buffet. They quickly picked up our things and led us over the rails to the locomotive. Mother carried Roman in her arms, while Larissa held my hand. Yosif walked alone behind us, showing off his independence. The locomotive was already standing by. The drivers skilfully tied our luggage to the hand rails and helped Yosif and me climb into their cabin while Mother said emotional goodbyes to the mayor, and his daughter gave last minute instructions to the drivers.

Finally, we were all cooped up in the small, sweltering cabin. Quietly at first, the locomotive started to move. Mother waved her scarf out of the window at our saviours for a long time, until they disappeared into the gloom. I sat on the floor in the corner, and thought this must the beginning of the second 'trial' father had foretold. One thing I could not understand, however was why had we embarked on such a risky a journey when we could have joined a large group of other evacuee families, like people did in other cities? It seemed that Mother had a blind faith in the radio broadcasts that assured us that we would soon beat the enemy, allowing

us return to Odessa before long. Father had always been wise; I will never know what pushed him to take such a risk.

Anna sat on some sort of crate, with Roman asleep in her lap. My brother and I fidgeted in different corners of the floor, so the engine drivers kept having to step over us in order to move around. They communicated mostly by mime and gesture because of the loud rattling of the wheels and the engine. Fortunately, the train ran at full speed with few interruptions, save for the occasional stop at a junction to change points and replenish the water. Dozing fitfully, we only realised that we were approaching Makeyevska when we were woken by the calls of a military patrol asking about the things hanging from the external handrails. Our drivers told them the dramatic story of the family of a fighting soldier, and Mother produced a sheaf of documents which the young conscripts studied, torch in hand. They scrutinised every corner of the cabin, and even peeked into the burning furnace. Then they exchanged bewildered looks, and saluted us.

After that, everything proceeded according to plan. The drivers found their next train already waiting for them, fully loaded, and the local signalmen attached our locomotive to the open-top ore wagons. Before anything else, Mother dragged us behind the carriages to relieve ourselves, and the men's strong arms helped us climb on top of the loads, our feet pushing against the inside walls of the wagon. One of the drivers attached my brother and his large bag to the other side of the ore cone for balance, as had been planned in Zaporojye, while his colleague did the same with me, but with less of a counterbalance. Mother, watching from below, held her head in her hands with disbelief at what she was seeing. As if that was not enough, Roman, deprived of sleep, sat wailing loudly beside the rails.

By contrast, my brother and I both found it quite fun to be tied to our rucksack counterbalances. It all seemed unreal, like a cheap vaudeville act. Finally, the men heaved up Mother and Roman, tied them together at the waist in a hugging position to balance their combined weight against the suitcase. Once again, we checked that all the fastenings were within reach, and that the extensions could be stretched. As a precaution, the drivers made us wear our jackets and berets, even though it was a warm night. They explained that travelling at full speed in an open-top wagon would get chilly. Bright stars dotted the sky, and searchlight beams scanned the sky. An ominous, brooding silence had fallen over the blacked-out city. There was something mystical about it all.

After the drivers had once again checked that the wagons were securely linked, we were ready to embark upon the next part of our adventure. "Dear Father," I wrote in my head, "the cruel trials of the war continue." We were all so exhausted that, unsurprisingly, we soon fell asleep, lulled by the rhythmic sway of the train. Only Mother did not sleep; she kept a watchful eye on us, like the mother hen I saw in Klava's coop. The drivers took it in turns to climb into the wagon to check on us at regular intervals. When they called out, Mother would wave an 'all's well' gesture with her free arm. Later, she would always remember these men, so coarse and yet so full of natural kindness, sincerity and respect for a woman with three children. When we reached Lugansk, she practically had to force our selfless saviours to accept the family silver, as a token of our heartfelt gratitude for their patience and help.

"Mummy, teach told us that gold and silver are precious metals. So why are you giving away our things?"

Anna smiled at my attempt to be clever. "First of all, it's teacher, not 'teach'," she corrected. "And secondly, such treasures can sometimes cost people their lives."

I was surprised. "I don't understand."

"Idiot," my older brother began.

"You're the thick one!"

"You're still too little to understand," he went on, patronisingly. "If thieves find out we have silver, they'll want to steal it, see, and could even kill a little squirt like you for it."

"You – you're nothing but a... a sunflower!" I finally retaliated, failing to find a worthy riposte.

"And thirdly, Misha," Mother interrupted, "you must always be civil to people, especially kind strangers who've just saved you from harm."

And so there it was – another life lesson for me. A woman porter with a cart took our belongings to the evacuation point at the station, where the benches were occupied by families waiting for the train east. The porter took our documents to one of the windows, and returned to say that we'd be seen in half an hour. When Mother offered her a rouble in thanks, the woman beamed and asked if we wanted anything from the buffet (where all they had was buns and tea). Within a minute, the three of us were devouring stale buns, and scalding our tongues on hot, sugarless tea. Mother tried to remind us of good table manners but after a long sleepless night, we were much too hungry and crotchety for that. When the official called us in, Roman was fast asleep on top of our bundles, Yosif was re-reading Jules Verne for the tenth time and I was subjecting Mother to interminable 'why?' questions. She took me with her into the interview room to avoid any possible scrap between me and Yosif, who stayed to look after Roman and our belongings.

The supervisor turned out to be a sullen-looking woman, obviously weary of dealing with tiresome refugees. "Not all executive committee members have the kind of patience to deal with people who've just lost their normal way of life," thought Mother, readying herself for a fight with bureaucracy. After completing our registration papers, the supervisor announced that we had been added to the list of evacuees leaving at ten that evening on the train for Uzbekistan. Our commander suddenly sat up.

"Excuse me, but is that the only place you're sending people, or are there others?"

The supervisor was indignant. "Why don't you want to go to Tashkent?"

"Back in Odessa, my sisters and I agreed that we'd all wait for one another in Stalingrad, so we can all live together and help each other out…"

"You don't have a choice," the supervisor rudely interrupted. "You'll go wherever we decide to send you, and where other people like you are going. Here are your documents, your coupons for the trip and the food. Have a good trip."

We said goodbye and went back into the waiting room, stunned as if a bucket of cold water had just been thrown in our faces. I could feel Mother's hand shaking on my shoulder, either from anger or exhaustion. I didn't know how to help her, so I sat her down on the nearest bench and, as usual, began to pontificate.

"Anna Davidovna, you're always telling us that we should take a deep breath whenever we feel very sad." She pulled me to her and, for the first time ever as far as I could remember, she pressed my hand against her cheek. How long this blissful moment lasted, I don't know, but it was interrupted by the familiar voice of the woman porter.

"Madam, do you need any help?"

Anna opened her eyes. "No thank you. Or, actually – yes. My name's Anna – what's yours?"

"Darya. Why are you upset?"

My mother spoke quietly. "I need information and some help if you have time when you're not working."

"Don't worry about that, for God's sake. I've also got children and a soldier husband. How can I help?"

Mother explained our predicament, asked the time of the next train for Stalingrad, and if she knew of anyone interested in buying a pair of golden earrings cheaply. Darya listened, nodding; she thought a little, and then replied, "There's no direct train to Stalingrad on the timetable. Only two carriages – a communal one and another with compartments – which they attach to a train which stops every morning at eleven-thirty at a station not far from Lugansk."

"There's four of us, plus luggage, so we really need a separate compartment," said Mother.

The porter was clearly concerned. "Yes, but compartments are very expensive and, to be honest, they're not even for sale because they're reserved for authorities or important guests."

Mother had an idea. "Yes, but we're the family of a high official in Odessa."

Darya gave a calculating smile. "May I see the earrings?" she asked, curious. Rummaging in her handbag, Mother revealed a glimpse of her wedding present and produced a receipt showing the number of carats and a price of 750 roubles. "I'm prepared to sell them for half that in exchange for a private compartment and prepaid tickets all the way to Stalingrad," she stated firmly. "I'll also give you something to thank you if you manage to sort us out."

"I don't know what I can do. I need to speak to the woman on duty at the station. See – that one over there, in the red cap. We've been working together for fifteen years and often help each other out. After all the men went to war, we women all got closer, all of us 'friends in misfortune'." She nodded in my direction. "Only women know just how much energy and money it takes to raise these children of ours."

"Darya, I always appreciate favours. I won't let you down," Mother replied. They spoke in such hushed tones I couldn't hear half of what they were saying. The porter went to see her colleague, while Mother and I returned to our spot. On the way, I resumed my litany of hows and whys, but she immediately put a stop to my curiosity and even forbade me to mention the subject until we reached Stalingrad. Although I was hurt, I promised to be as silent as the grave, happy that it was me and not my brother to whom she had entrusted this family secret.

As we neared our bench, we saw Yosif doing 'the Georgian dance'. He always clutched himself and swung his legs about when he was desperate to pee. I stayed to keep an eye out while the boss and my brother rushed off in search of a toilet. I still couldn't get the same question out of my head: why did Mother not want to go to Central Asia with all the other refugees? I remembered father categorically stating, back in Odessa, that they would never let the Nazis advance beyond the Volga. Perhaps that was why Mother didn't want to go too far away, so that she could reach father – and our relatives – more easily. Mother returned with some food, and my brother made a makeshift table out of our suitcase and bags. In anticipation of the long-awaited meal, we sat around the appetizing packages and had barely started on our modest repast when Darya came to tell us that her colleague expected us in her office on the second floor during her lunch break. Although Mother looked the worse for wear after a sleepless night, she fixed her hair, applied powder and lipstick, and with a clean blouse, she studied herself in the small mirror with satisfaction.

The duty officer received her with a friendly manner, and invited her to sit down. First and foremost, she was interested in the jewellery. She fingered the earrings for a long time, examined them through a magnifying glass to check the make, the number of carats and the price tag. She even held them up to her ears, looking at herself in the mirror. In the end, she offered only 300 roubles rather than 375. Mother had no choice but to accept, even though she still had to pay some 100 roubles for a four-bed compartment. As for food, Mother would have

to come to an arrangement herself with the conductor; if these conditions were acceptable, the duty officer would get the money and the tickets and meet her downstairs in the buffet at six o'clock, when her shift ended. Hoping for a positive outcome, Mother agreed and asked my brother and me to be her constant bodyguards for the next two hours. We gladly agreed, although we could not work out whether she was joking or being serious. Later, she explained that she was afraid to be left alone while carrying a box with expensive jewellery or a large sum of money without any insurance.

At six o'clock sharp, the duty colleague (now without her red cap) walked past, and Mother followed her to the buffet after ordering us to stay put. They sat at the staff table and were immediately served tea. In the hope of hearing something secret, Yosif and I stared at the two women calmly talking, but we didn't notice anything untoward in their exchange. When they had finished their tea, the two women parted naturally, as though they would meet again in the same place tomorrow. Not until much later, when we ourselves would have to sell our personal effects for a loaf of bread during the famine, would we realise just how dangerous it was to conduct monetary deals with a public official in wartime. For us, however, it was a true 'to be or not to be?' moment, and we couldn't fully appreciate the reasons for Mother's sadness. We spent the night in the waiting room, lying on the floor or the benches like the other refugees around us; in the morning, at ten o'clock, the woman porter took us to the train.

The conductor of the compartment carriage asked to see our tickets with some suspicion, but as soon as he read the note from the duty colleague, he helped us with our luggage and installed us in the compartment next to his own. Anna said goodbye to Darya and handed her an envelope. They both ended up in tears and embraced as they parted. The conductor arranged our luggage on the top racks. Yosif and I were assigned the middle bunks, while Mother and Roman had the lower ones. The bedding was snow white. At the end of the corridor, there was a toilet with the sign saying 'Do not use while in a station'. It made Yosif and me giggle.

"What's the matter?" asked the conductor.

I pointed at the sign. "What if you really have to go while you're in a station?"

"Well, if you really, really have to go, then go into the bushes," was the blunt reply.

Yosif was shocked. "What if the train leaves while you're in the bushes?"

"Then you run after it, and jump on," the conductor retorted.

"But it's difficult to run with your pants down," I said. The conductor burst into a loud laugh. Hearing the noise, Mother rushed out in alarm.

"What have you two done now?" The conductor stood up for us. "No harm done, Madam. You've just got two bright lads."

Mother called us back into the compartment, told us about the day's arrangements, and asked us not to bother anybody else with our questions but her, otherwise we would be spending the whole day shut up in the compartment. We gave her our Scout's word.

Our short train started, leaving the industrial city of Lugansk behind, looking dark and untidy. With its huge smoking chimneys, houses covered in soot and grimy streets, it looked nothing like our colourful Odessa. Mother persuaded us away from the window and sent us to explore the adjacent communal carriage, instructing us to stick together, to talk to no one and be back in five minutes – enough time for her to wash Roman and change his clothes. It was our first reconnaissance mission, and we would have to report our findings to the boss. A long time ago, we had played war games in the street with our friends, but it was no game now. We understood that Mother needed information, and was training our independence and initiative. Our first-class carriage seemed deserted with all the compartment doors shut. There were few

people in the communal carriage, but it differed from ours in its simplicity and unpleasant smell. For some reason, the passengers eyed us with suspicion, and moved their bags away from us. Upon our return, we reported our findings, talking over each other. The conductor announced that we were approaching the junction halt and warned us that the doors would be kept shut while the carriages were linked to the main train for Stalingrad. As for meals, he said that he would give us tea but we'd have to buy food at stations during stops. The restaurant car had been closed since the start of the war because of food shortages. Once again, even in these splendid surroundings, there was yet another trial to endure. Who would run for food at every stop and be back in time? Mother with little Roman? Yosif, with his so-called 'heart condition'? No. The responsibility for errands would fall to me yet again – except that this time, it would not be just running across the street in Odessa to get bread. This time, I might have to run across several tracks carrying frequent fast trains. No thanks! There was someone older than me here. Let him do the running!

I lay on my bunk, staring out of the window. Our two carriages were being linked to the tail end of a long train. I calculated that we'd stop a long way from the actual stations, and the food stalls were usually in the middle of the platforms. You would always have to keep a hand free in case you had to grab the railing of a moving train, just as my friends and I used to do in Odessa when trying to jump onto moving trams. I was considered an expert at such tricks. If our mother had ever seen the kind of acrobatics I performed on a tram driving along the street, she would have had a heart attack. Now, however, this experience might come in useful – it could even make me the family hero and, even better, rub my older brother's nose in it.

The scarcity of food was a powerful incentive. Besides, the train proceeded at a snail's pace, frequently stopping to give priority to freight trains carrying weapons or food supplies to the front. At the first small station we stopped at, women walked alongside the carriages, selling buns with cream cheese, hard-boiled eggs, potatoes, tomatoes and various fruit. Anna leaned out of the window and called out to them, but they did not want to trudge so far down the train. The conductor, who was standing at the entrance to the carriage, suggested she give the money to one of her sons, and send him. My brother immediately ran into the compartment, but I had already caught Mum's hand and was begging her to give me the money, assuring her that I'd get back safe and sound. Grabbing a few coins from her hand, I skilfully slid down the door handrail, right past the astounded conductor.

"Look at him go!" he shouted. Our commander was shouting something after me, but I was already by the seller. "How much for the basket?" I asked, breathless. "Two roubles, son." One contained eggs and potatoes, the other, fruit. "I'll take both!" I said, handing over the money in a rush. The other hungry passengers were intent on haggling, so she pocketed the money without even counting it, while I struggled with the heavy baskets. I wasn't sure I could manage to carry them. From the train windows, I heard cries of "Go on, boy, you can do it!"

Suddenly, I saw my brother running towards me. Mother must have booted him out of the compartment. Carrying one basket each, we reached the conductor more quickly. He cheered, then helped us onto the train.

Anna was very pale, with tears in her eyes, smiling. "Well done, boys. Only Misha, don't ever do that again. You could have been left behind," she said, squeezing my shoulder with a trembling hand. "Don't worry, Mummy, I'm a big boy now."

Once back in our compartment, she asked, "How much did all this cost?"

"Two roubles a basket." She looked puzzled. "But I only gave you three roubles in all." I hadn't counted the money, and the seller had pocketed it without checking. Yosif's attack came

quickly: "On our way back to Odessa, we'll pay her the difference," he chirped, grabbing an apple from the basket. Mother stopped him, and told us to go and wash while she prepared a picnic. I was dying to ask my brother if it had been his idea to run and help me, or whether Mother had forced him. Then I suddenly remembered father warning me against becoming too arrogant. It had been after my great success playing the piano at his factory concert. That was when I first became addicted to the limelight. Astute as ever, he had taken me down a peg: "Misha, that saying of old is quite true – never love yourself in the art but the art in yourself."

Although it's sometimes nice to think of yourself as something special, above the rest, I made sure his advice was stamped on my brain, even then. I suspect father was speaking from his own experience. Although he loved music, how else would a relatively uneducated proletarian know about art?

For my seventh birthday, he bought me a splendid dark brown piano. "Go on, son," he said, "Learn to play properly. They say you have exceptional talent." Whenever he came home from work upset about something or other, Mother would whisper to me: "Go and play for father – something lyrical from your Ukrainian repertoire." So, after dinner, I would sit at the piano and softly play a few popular folk songs. Father was born and raised in Zakharievka, a village in the Odessa region, and he loved hearing the familiar tunes of his childhood. In those moments, he would usually sit on the couch and hum along as I played, gradually dozing off as he surrendered to the tiredness of his body. That was as far as his musical entertainment went. Full after our impromptu meal, lying on my bunk, I could not help but think back to peacetime. To the rhythmic sound of the train wheels, vivid faces and scenes flashed before me, as if they were only yesterday.

These reveries were, however, regularly interrupted by sudden flares and bursts of fireworks. When the sirens started, signalling the approach of Nazi planes, I woke up screaming, sat up with a start, and banged my head against the top bunk. The locomotive whistle signalled our approach to a large station. Mother smiled and patted the bump on my head, Roman laughed and Yosif teased me and threatened to tell the conductor I had broken the wooden bunk with my hard head. Naturally, I tried to punch him in the nose, but he turned away. Mother stopped us, and asked us to run to the station to buy a few bottles of lemonade or fill up the aluminium can with drinking water.

We got ready – Yosif with the can, and I with the string bag and two roubles in change in my pocket, and went for the exit. The conductor explained where we could find the water fountain and told us to get back to the train as soon as we heard the whistle. If the train had already started, we were to board the nearest carriage and find our way back to our own thereafter. Many women were crowding around the water fountain. I pushed my brother forward.

"In the Soviet Union, children don't need to queue!" I shouted, but no one paid any attention. "Yosif, don't wait for me!" I shouted over the crowd. "As soon as you've got the water, we'll meet on the train!" As usual, he tried to say something, but I was already running towards the buffet, swinging the string bag. There was no lemonade – just some dry biscuits and sweets. I asked for two roubles' worth of biscuits. The vendor weighed out quite a large paper bagful of biscuits, and pushed it into my string bag. "Give me the money," she demanded. I poured out all the coins in my pocket onto the counter.

"There should be a little more here," I lied, probably hoping that she, like the woman with the fruit basket, wouldn't check the money. Instead, this one insisted on counting every coin. I heard the train whistle. In a panic, I grabbed the purse string off the counter and dashed for

the door. Someone shouted abuse after me, but the thought of the departing train carried me at lightning speed. On the platform, I could see no one at the fountain, so assumed everyone had returned to their seats. I heard my brother calling me, standing outside the carriage opposite, waving. The train suddenly moved, and the conductor pulled my brother onto the gangway. I leapt carefully over the tracks and, as I had always done, calculated the distance in relation to the accelerating train. I focused my attention on the entrance three doors away from our carriage, and ran diagonally towards it. The train was gaining speed very gradually. The doors of all the carriages were still open so as to accommodate late passengers, and the conductor standing by the third door guessed my intention. He pulled out the steps, and stood down on the top one, waiting for me. I ran a bit further along the moving train, grabbed the railing with my left hand, and prepared to push against the ground with my right foot. Swinging my left foot onto the top step, the conductor's hands grabbed me and pulled me up, along with my string bag. I was obviously not the first to board a moving train, judging by the absence of scolding, but also – to my disappointment – of any congratulation.

I waited a couple of minutes while Yosif made his way back through two carriages. "Good for you, little brother!" he cried out as soon as he saw me. It was the first time in my life that he had ever genuinely paid me a compliment. We made our way from one carriage to the next, through people and their luggage, spilling precious water, until we finally reached our compartment. Mother was not very worried, since the conductor had already told her were coming.

Waiting for me in the gangway, he asked kindly, "Hey, brave little soldier, where did you learn tricks like that?"

"On the trams in Odessa," I said proudly.

"And how old are you?"

"He's only nine," Yosif remarked dismissively.

"And a half," I added. "Why?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll amount to something," he concluded.

"But he'll always be stupid," my brother/enemy hurriedly added, leaping out of the way before I could kick him where it hurt.

"That's enough, you two!" said the conductor, placing himself between us. "They're waiting for you in your compartment. Go!"

Mother was delighted to see us back safe and sound, and thanked us for bringing the food.

After dinner, she reminded us that we'd be arriving in Stalingrad in the morning, and that we would have a very busy day formalising our evacuation, organising accommodation and so on.

"So, after dinner, we must go to bed early," she said, "to make up for the two sleepless nights we've had. We need all the energy, concentration and self-control we can muster, for this new and no doubt difficult life that awaits us in the big city, until we're reunited with father. Sleep tight."

Chapter 2

ESCAPE FROM THE NAZIS

The refugees were many on our train. On arrival in the morning, we were met on the platform by the appointed staff with Red Cross armbands. They sorted us into families with children or with old people, put us on nearby buses and took us to the various Stalingrad evacuation points. They were ancient, shabby buses that creaked and jerked over bumps on the road, prompting sighs from the adults and giggles from the children. The city looked like a military base. We passed lorries carrying soldiers, and anti-aircraft guns stood to attention in the squares; the windows of all the houses had newspaper crosses glued across them, to prevent the glass from shattering in air raids. Such sights provoked great curiosity in the children, but the adults reacted differently. Fears of an uncertain and dangerous future were ingrained on their anxious faces. Mother kept staring through the cracked window of the bus. Her instinct, which unfailingly signalled impending danger, now warned her that our prospects in Stalingrad were grim. Possibly, even fatal.

The bus stopped outside a sumptuous villa that looked like a museum, with a garden surrounded by high railings. We were lead into an enormous hall, where our documents were taken, and we were asked to store our luggage temporarily in the basement. After that, we all went up to the second floor, where everyone was placed according to available space. Our family was offered a large, bright room, where four of the existing twenty-four camp beds were still unoccupied. The official explained that this was Hall No. 3, and was reserved for unaccompanied mothers. There was a nanny permanently on hand to help with infants, a separate toilet and bathroom, a library and a medical centre on the first floor. She also said there was a post and telegraph office nearby, a tram stop across the street, hot water, working heating, and that the accommodation was free of charge.

There were two leisure courts in the gardens of the evacuation campus – one a children's playground, the other a sports field for older children. I spent practically all day playing football, volleyball, drafts and other games with my peers. Yosif was also lucky enough to be able to read library books in the garden; Mother took Roman to the playground. Everyone went to eat and sleep at the same time. While the little one was playing, our mother and her fellow residents chatted about the war, their families, and the local problems.

From the very first day, our mother – a hygiene fanatic – was taken aback by the carelessness of the administrative staff towards new arrivals. Of our group, no one was asked anything about where we had come from or how we had travelled to get here. No medical checks were carried out before living in such overcrowded accommodation. No training was given on elementary personal hygiene when living in close quarters with other families. Many children would arrive in such a dirty state at mealtimes that the server had to send them to wash before eating. There was no laundry, except for a few bowls in the communal toilet in the basement, and some

washing lines in the garden. Most of the residents never changed their clothes, and stank accordingly. All the mothers worried about an epidemic, and duly complained to the management but all they were told by way of reply was that all the rooms and toilets were washed and disinfected every day. As for personal hygiene, that was the responsibility of the evacuees themselves. This answer did not satisfy Mother. She went straight to the manager and warned: "If my children catch anything, I will start legal proceedings against you personally, on the grounds of professional incompetence."

The manager glared at Mother, aware that, in this instance, she could not fob her off with an empty promise.

"Have you finished?" she asked, sternly.

"For now," Mother replied, marching out with the decisive gait she adopted in such situations. That very evening, notices were put up on the door of every room, summoning all the residents – including the children – to a meeting on the first floor after breakfast, at ten a.m. It seemed this meeting was the result of a telephone conversation between the manager and the municipal authorities. The manager obviously did not want to take on the responsibility for the refugees' personal hygiene. Mother was getting ready for her role at the meeting. Early that morning, she told us to scrub thoroughly, wear clean shirts and wipe the thick layer of dust off our shoes. Some of the other mothers also brought their children along spotlessly groomed, but by no means all. Obviously, not everyone had a change of clothes, or the means to buy one. They could not understand the reason for this meeting and were a little concerned.

The manager began the meeting by insisting on the observance of the house regulations on display by the main entrance. "The report we have received from the sanitary inspectors," she continued, "States that many residents are not complying with basic personal hygiene, which could lead to an epidemic of disease. For this reason, starting from today, I will not allow anyone into the dining room with unwashed hands or unreasonably dirty clothes. Please do not remove the soap from the communal toilet in the basement, and use your own towels. Are there any questions?"

Nobody spoke. Looks were exchanged. Anna raised her hand. "I have a question and a request. Could you please put extra washing lines in the basement?" There was a clapping of hands. "And another thing. Could you please ask the city council to give a small allowance to enable those single mothers in dire need to buy a change of clothes for their children? I don't mean me. That will make it easier for them to keep their children clean, and not put others at risk."

The hall fell silent while the manager conferred with the municipal official next to her. Then, surprisingly, she spoke directly to our mother. "Please urgently draw up a list of all the children in need, specifying their ages – no older than thirteen. The social department will look at your application and provide this assistance." And so it was that after the meeting, just three days after our arrival at the evacuation point, my mother was appointed leader of the community. The other women started coming to her with complaints and for advice. As far as she could, she listened to them and advised them even though she had enough on her plate already, with us three to deal with. Trouble, however, was just around the corner.

As expected, the municipality did nothing. The hygiene in the evacuation point deteriorated noticeably. Eight days after we moved in, one of the women's small children was taken ill almost at the same time. The nurse assumed that their fever and vomiting was food poisoning. Anna discovered that they had not been vaccinated against scarlet fever, measles, smallpox or other contagious childhood diseases. She gathered together the mothers of the other children

to explain the potential dangers, and they went to the manager and demanded that a doctor be called immediately, as they were all sharing a room with the sick children. The manager said that the city hospitals were crammed with wounded from the front, and that all the doctors were so busy that they came out only in exceptional cases.

"This is precisely the kind of case which could lead to tragedy," protested our Bagheera. "I have asked the other mothers, and in our room there are only four teenagers apart from my two boys who have been inoculated. The other thirteen, including my youngest, have no protection whatsoever."

"You're putting our children's lives at risk," chimed the other women, "And you will be held responsible!"

The manager called the nurse, instructed her to take the sick children immediately into isolation at the medical centre, and call for the doctor straight away. The doctor promised to come the next morning, but another child was taken ill that same night. This time, an ambulance was called, and all three children were taken to hospital, where measles was diagnosed. Medical teams arrived in the morning and occupied the entire evacuation point; in an obvious panic, they disinfected every corner of the building and isolated all the occupants of our room in a purpose-built annexe with a separate entrance from the garden. All these safety measures were too little, too late, however. Children who had not been vaccinated against measles were taken ill, one after another, almost daily. They were urgently taken to hospital with their mothers. There were only four healthy children left: Yosif, myself, and two sisters who, like us, had been vaccinated. Their mother kindly looked after us while our mother had to go to the hospital twice a day to nurse Roman.

In the hospital, the situation reached catastrophic proportions. The children could not be treated because of the shortage of medicines. Priority went to the wounded, so that they would recover as soon as possible to be sent back to the front. In time of war, sick children were apparently less worthy of medical attention and trying to save them in these circumstances seemed frankly almost impossible. Unable to prevent impending death, the medics turned away in shame while mothers watched their children's lives ebb away. As these women were not allowed to spend the night at the hospital, they would rush frantically out of the evacuation point every morning, with just one hope: to spend one more day with their child. Asked how long children would survive in these circumstances, the doctor could only sigh and reply, "One week at most."

Weighing the life of a sick child against that of a wounded soldier, it makes sense to save a generation rather than an individual. If a baby survives at the expense of a soldier in wartime, the enemy has a better chance of winning. If, on the other hand, the soldier is not sacrificed for the sake of the child then, once the war is won, he is likely to produce more than one child, and thus begin a new generation. Yet every mother is understandably deaf to this life and death equation. The child conceived in her womb is not merely part of her flesh and blood but the physical and spiritual bearer of her genetic inheritance. So when Mother heard that Roman might have a week left to live, she asked the doctor during one of her visits what he would do if this were his own child, given the lack of effective medication.

"In the old days," he said in a hushed tone, "They used to treat measles with honey and chicken broth. That's all I can say." Mother thanked him and told Roman that she would travel to the far distant market the very next day to buy him a chicken, and that Yosif would be looking after him all day instead. While I played with Roman in his ward, Anna went to find out from the hospital staff where in Stalingrad she could buy honey and fresh poultry. At first

they smiled, thinking she was joking, but then advised her, in chorus, to go out of town where, in one of the small villages, there may still be honey and live birds. That evening, our commander-in-chief warned Yosif that he would have to take her shift at the hospital for a day or two to take care of the little one, while she and I would go in search of medicine.

At dawn the next morning, we walked all the way to the central station and took the bus southeastwards. About an hour into the journey, Mother asked our fellow travellers where we could buy honey and chicken for a sick child. They gave her the name of a nearby village with a larger population than its surrounding hamlets. As we were getting off, the driver forewarned us that he'd be driving through on his way back in four hours' time, but would not wait. We had only three hours for our search.

The first thing we did was go into the village shop opposite the bus stop to ask where we were most likely to find the provisions we sought. The shopkeeper came out on the porch and pointed us in the direction of large farms on the edge of the village. Her eyes followed us for a long time, wondering what could possibly have brought us here, in the middle of nowhere. We had no luck in the first two houses, but were met at the third by a large dog and its miniature owner. "What do you want?" she shouted. Mother briefly recounted our plight. The woman studied her from top to toe, then me. Then she hushed the barking dog and pronounced, quite firmly, "There's no bee honey – only watermelon honey. Maybe we can find you a chicken, too. But how exactly are you, a tramp, planning to pay? Money's no good to anyone, nowadays. Have you got anything more valuable in there?" she said, pointing at Mother's handbag.

Mother took out a paper bag, and unwrapped a beautiful burgundy velvet tablecloth embroidered with gold thread. Surprised, the woman quickly stopped her, looked around, and invited us into the house. In the parlour, she spread out this rare example of fine craftsmanship on her table, checking for hidden flaws. "You didn't steal this, did you?" she sneered.

"Wedding present," replied Mother through gritted teeth. The women crossed glances like duellists, but said nothing. "All right," said the peasant. "I'll give you two jars of honey and a chicken for this. All right?"

Mother nodded, and we followed the woman into the inner courtyard. On the way, I keep pinching myself to wake myself up. I thought this must all be a dream – scenes from a play. How is that possible, I wondered? How did Mother know that the tablecloth would be worth more than the money she had such trouble obtaining? Why is she tolerating being called a thief by this woman?

There was a vegetable garden in the yard with a large tree stump in the middle. The peasant woman told us to wait while she went indoors and came out a few minutes later bearing two jars of honey, which she placed in front of my mother on an earth mound. Then, she went to the hen house. The din of squawking birds soon died down as she emerged carrying her a cackling hen upside down, by its legs. Evidently used to doing this, she picked up an axe, flung the hysterical bird over the tree stump and, with a decisive swing, chopped off its head and threw the fluttering carcass on a nearby pile of hay. Mother quickly covered my eyes with her hand, but I could still see through the gaps in her fingers how, in the throes of death, the head and body kept jerking independently from each other in different parts of the yard. I felt my flesh crawl.

"You can take it once the blood stops," said the peasant woman gruffly as she stepped into the pantry. I felt I was going to be sick. Mother dragged me to a water tap in the corner of the yard, splashed my face with cold water and, cupping her hand, made me drink a couple of sips. The woman came out with a rope and a dirty feedbag. She tied the bird's throat firmly, put it

into the feedbag, and placed it next to the honey. Then she said, "Here are your goods. Now go, and God bless."

We were taken aback by such rudeness. Still, we rushed back to the bus stop. The village shop was still open. Mother went in to buy us some underwear, socks and a few other essentials while I watched out for the bus. Back home in Odessa, everyone knew my piratical whistle signal. On the way home, I asked Mother where she was going to cook the chicken, and if she thought Roman had the strength to eat it all by himself. She smiled. "The cook at the evacuation point will prepare the chicken for something special in return."

I was curious. "Money or jewels?"

"Whatever seems appropriate. It's not up to me."

"How will you pay when you have no more precious things left?"

"Time will tell," she replied, evading the question. "As for the chicken, Roman can only drink the thick broth, so the meat is for the family – you included – to eat."

I smiled to myself, anticipating the taste of chicken, which I had not had for over two months. "And what are you going to do with the second jar of honey?"

"I'm going to share it with my neighbour. Her daughter is the same age as Roman, and she's also in hospital."

"Oh, Dina," I said. "I don't understand why we have to give things away to strangers, when we had such trouble getting them ourselves."

"First of all, they are not strangers. They're our people. We live together. And, secondly, Dina's mother often looks after Roman while I have to leave the hospital to take care of us all. She helps me out like a close friend, and I want to give her something in return. And, finally, Dina and her mother are very poor, and can't afford to buy medicine. If we don't help, the little girl might die. Is that what you want?"

"In that case, we must be sure to share the chicken broth, too," I exclaimed.

"This must all be a secret," Mother replied. "If people find out where we've been today, we could get into a lot of trouble, so hold your tongue."

"I won't say a word to anyone, I promise."

We were late for dinner, but the cook allowed Mother to prepare the chicken in the storeroom. She made the broth herself after everyone had gone to bed, so that no one would bother her. Dina's mother gave us the day's news, and said the medical team had decided to transfer two sick children into a separate ward reserved for those for whom there was no hope left. The next morning, out of the thirteen sick children, only eleven remained. When the doctor came on his rounds, he prescribed Dina and Roman boiling water with honey twice a day, on an empty stomach and, for lunch, a large bowl of broth. He said that if they could maintain this diet for three days, there might be hope of recovery for them. At the evacuation point, the parents of sick children walked past one another in silence, not even looking up. Numbed, they waited for the end of their loved ones, powerless. As the week went by, every day claimed one or two victims until only Dina and Roman were left. Eleven little lives lost through lack of medicines – eleven victims sacrificed in the name of the future.

Hitler's men had slowed down but were approaching with renewed tenacity. In the evening, the horizon was once more bathed in the glow of silent explosions. We couldn't wait for Roman to be fully recovered before running away from the enemy yet again. Mother wanted to go to Saratov, but there was no direct train. We were forced to buy double-priced tickets on the black market to Kamyshina and to take a bus from there.

Parting with Dina and her mother was very emotional. Our Bagheera was secretly proud of saving the little girl's life, and how this act had brought her closer to her mother, who was on her own and who would inevitably have to be left behind. Charity begins at home, they say; survival is a rule of nature, unalterable. And so it was with a heavy heart that we embarked on yet another journey, to face yet more adventures.

The winter of 1941–42 was harsh. The bitter November cold forced us to wear half our luggage on our bodies. Mother sold the suitcase containing father's things at a crowded market in Stalingrad; she had hoped against hope for as long as she could that he would come for us, and may wish to change his uniform for civilian clothes. But at this point, even we children knew that the end of the war was far from near. With each item of father's clothing she sold, she gave a deep sigh, as though parting with him forever. Even so, she insisted that father was alive and thinking of us. "We'll all be together again, and soon."

The long train was crowded with refugees being evacuated to Kazakhstan, and we reached Kamyshina without any problems, hardly ever stopping. However, when we arrived at the bus station, there was a long queue at the closed ticket window. "Wait here," Anna ordered, with a hopeless hand gesture. Grabbing Roman, she left the hall and went to the bus park, in search of the driver of the Saratov bus. After a half hour, she returned, apologising for the delay. She told us that our bus was leaving in an hour, and that we had to eat before that. The rickety old bus was packed with local women with empty baskets after selling fruit and vegetables on the Stalingrad market.

At nightfall, we stopped to sleep in a large farm by the roadside. The driver told us that the road was closed to civilian transport in order to leave room for military vehicles. The women with baskets who came from neighbouring villages left in different directions. In the coaching inn, we were given some tasty soup, and there were straw mattresses laid out side by side on the ground for us to sleep on. The hot food and the smell of freshly baked bread warmed us up. We slept like logs, until the driver woke us up before dawn, urging us to get ready. We were about an hour and a half away from Saratov. The bus proceeded slowly in the semi-darkness, its headlamps unlit because of the blackout. At one point, the driver stopped the bus and stepped out onto the road. We saw the familiar flares on the horizon ahead of us, followed by the dull echo of explosions. The horizon was aglow with red from the fires. The passengers stood still, rooted to the spot in fear, afraid to break the silence. "Horses!" said the driver, as though giving the order to himself. As we drew closer to the city, we heard the growing sound of ambulances and fire engine sirens.

The driver said that the Nazis had been bombing the city for four nights, and that there were many dead and injured in the streets. He added that he would regrettably not be able to drive us all the way, but would do his best to take us as far as the central bus station, where they would help us to continue on our journey. Yosif's eyes and mine were popping out of their sockets. Thanks for nothing, I thought – dumping us like that! Mother tried to calm us down, promising that we would not be staying in Saratov long. The other passengers were talking anxiously to one another and, in panic, all fired questions at the driver at the same time. He calmed the general hysteria with a brusque honk of the horn: "I need total silence here, so I can concentrate on getting you to the city centre."

At the entrance to the city, the duty patrol told the driver the best way to get to the central bus station. For the first time, we saw from up close firemen bravely trying to extinguish fires, nurses carrying the injured into ambulances, soldiers from an engineering regiment digging in the ruins of a house in the hope of saving people trapped in underground shelters. No wonder

elderly policemen kept stopping our bus, demanding to know how the driver had got there and what these poor refugees were doing in a burning city. The passengers, in total shock, resigned themselves to their fate. But not our Bagheera. We could see, deep in her eyes, that she was hatching a new plan of escape.

At the bus station, posters announced that three days earlier, on 7th November, all local and inter-city bus services in the Volga region would be suspended, and the buses handed over to the garrison for transporting the wounded. Passenger trains and city trams would continue as normal, however. Refugees were requested to go to the municipality for help regarding their evacuation inland, and all the passengers rushed to the tram stop – except our own commander-in-chief. She took us to the toilet and made us wash and comb our hair before going to the station buffet. After tea and a snack, she went with Roman to sort things out, leaving my brother and me with the boring task of looking after the luggage. When Mother finally returned, Roman ran towards me, brandishing a new toy – a torch, which an unknown female driver had given him in the bus yard. Mother had spent a long time discussing with her the possibility of travelling north, alongside the Volga, where there was no rail line and now, not even a bus service. Both women commiserated with each other about the hardships of life without a husband, and then she suggested to Mother the only available method of transport to the city of Marx, to which lorries returned every evening with empty containers to the food canning factory, after delivering to the military units.

Marx was an industrial town in the north of the autonomous German district. The German immigrants had recently been exiled to Siberia, thereby vacating a lot of living space for refugees. Even as recently as two days earlier, regular buses brought refugees to Marx before being requisitioned. Now, unfortunately, that option was no longer available to us. Still, we were optimistic. It was not the first time we had encountered an obstacle but, under the guide of our c-in-c, we knew we'd be safe.

"March ahead, Cossacks!" she commanded and so, hoisting our rucksacks onto our backs, we walked to the tram stop. My troubled mind was full of questions. Still, Mother must have good reason for not disclosing her plans. She must have noticed our long faces and puzzled expressions but, like the military leader I half-imagined her to be, she decided to ignore them and teach us instead to be loyal soldiers who obey authority without question. Like all children, we had blind faith in our mother, and would have happily followed her to the ends of the earth. If we sometimes complained and whinged, it was because we were genuinely exhausted by the constant travelling, and missed our father, friends and normal lives.

The tram arrived, empty and without a conductor. Anna asked the driver how many stops it was to the petrol station. "The second stop after the city council," he said in a weary, wheezing voice. "If the German machine guns or bombs start," he added, "throw yourselves down on your sandbags and cover your heads with your hands." It was only then that we noticed that the side windows of the tram had been replaced with plywood, while the front and back window had no panes at all.

"What about the fares?"

"No fares," came the curt reply, as he noisily started the engine. There were hardly any passengers at the stop – a few boys would occasionally leap onto the tram, and chase after each other. They reminded me of my own escapades on the trams in Odessa. Roman was asleep on Mother's lap, Yosif was taking in the town through the back window while I kept replaying in my memory pleasant episodes of life during peace time.

Suddenly, my reverie was interrupted by the loud wail of sirens. The driver braked and yelled, “Get down!” before throwing himself on the floor by his seat. Mother covered Roman with her arms and gathered us close together on the floor, dirty and wet from the snow, with our rucksacks lying on top of us for protection. That’s all we need, I thought, just as a deafening explosion happened nearby, its powerful shockwave momentarily throwing our tram a few millimetres in the air but failing to overturn it. Roman started crying, the driver moaned, and my brother and I could not speak. Our commander tried to ask us something, shaking us by the shoulders, but we were stunned and unable to utter a word.

The explosions were endless. The roof and walls of the tram were bombarded with shards of glass, lumps of brick and other debris. Passers-by caught up in the raid ran into our tram for shelter, many already bleeding from their injuries. Every minute of the bombardment felt like an eternity.

When the sirens sounded the all clear, the city filled with the wails of fire engines and ambulances. Accustomed to these attacks, the city’s residents always carried first aid kits. They bandaged one another’s wounds, picked up the wounded in sight, and calmed down those in shock, as though they had been doing it all their lives. The driver announced that the tram would not be going any further since it had become a medical emergency destination for the ambulance service. Mother comforted Roman, who was crying, got my brother and me ready to leave, wiped our faces with her handkerchief, perfunctorily dusted off the front of our clothes, checked that our luggage was still there and led us out of the ill-fated tram into the street.

She told us not to look around at the victims of the raid, and stick together. My brother and I nodded, still dumbstruck. The driver told Anna the quickest way to the petrol station she wanted to reach, and advised her not to walk too close to bomb-damaged buildings.

Just as it had been on the morning after the air raid, the city was filled with the blood-curdling wails of ambulances and fire engines. Having witnessed the results of the damage after being caught up in the Nazi bombing, the buildings were still miraculously in one piece. Moreover, something strange was happening to us now, after the raid. As we walked slowly down the streets of the devastated city centre, past smoking buildings, stepping over the bloody footsteps of the wounded and the dead, we felt no fear or nausea. Bizarrely, it was as though everything was as it should be. Mother kept telling us not to look in order to protect our emotions, unaware that her boys had been anaesthetised from all feelings of horror or disgust.

After walking for half an hour, we reached the main square. For some reason, the Nazis had not bombed the old municipal building itself, although many of the surrounding houses had been destroyed; perhaps, in anticipation of an easy victory, they deliberately preserved such historic sites in order to turn them into their own headquarters when the time came. There was a canteen on the other side of the square. Mother decided to stop for a rest, since Roman kept whimpering that he couldn’t walk any more, and my older brother had sulked the whole way, either as a reaction to all the dramatic events or simply because he was tired and hungry. There was no food in the canteen, apart from rice soup and cold macaroni, which we ate ravenously, washed down by murky water. As the waitress was clearing our table, Mother asked her in hushed tones whether she knew anywhere one could buy vodka. The waitress reacted in disbelief, as though she had been asked for a plate of caviar.

“We’re going to visit my uncle, outside town,” Mother explained. “And he asked me to bring a couple of bottles. I’ll make it worth your while. Please, help us.”

The change in the waitress was dramatic. "Well, if it's for your 'uncle', that's different. I'll ask cook – he knows everybody."

When she walked away, Yosif and I both stared questioningly at Mother, wanting to know. She simply smiled and whispered: "Just eat your macaroni, you two, and don't meddle in adult business. It's nothing to do with you." Rebuffed, we returned our attention to our plates, knowing full well that argument was futile whenever the boss took that tone.

Roman was still eating his soup when the waitress unexpectedly placed half a glass of milk before him.

"Compliments of the chef," she said. Wiping the table with a cloth, without looking at Anna, she whispered, "There's only homemade vodka. Twenty roubles for two bottles." Mother nodded her acceptance and then thanked her in a loud voice for the milk.

"When you're ready to go, I'll see you out," said the waitress before walking away again.

After we finished eating, Mother took Roman to the ladies' toilet, while Yosif and I went to the gents'. On the way, she told Yosif to transfer his books from his rucksack to mine. "Twenty roubles!" he protested, "That's a fortune!"

I replied with father's maxim: "Our lives are worth more." Putting his books into my rucksack, Yosif wondered why.

"To make room for the package the waitress is going to give us," I replied, as if it were obvious. They were waiting for us as we came out of the toilet. Mother took Yosif's rucksack, and gave him hers. He was about to say something, but one look from Bagheera stopped his tongue. The waitress came out with us into the canteen entrance hall and exchanged the package she held for the agreed sum and gave directions to the petrol station. As we left, Mother slipped the package into Yosif's rucksack, put it on her shoulders and helped him to put on hers which, although larger, was also lighter. Only then did she explain to us that cash was not always the best bargaining tool for unofficial deals. As it turned out, she eventually had to pay both bottles of vodka for our next trip north.

"I'm telling you this in confidence," she said, "It's a secret, so don't let on."

It didn't take us long to walk two tram stops. There was a large garage for vehicle repairs at the petrol station. Mother found the supervisor and mentioned the name of the woman driver from the central bus depot. He introduced himself as Ivan Petrovitch, and started asking us who we were, where we were from and how he could help us. Mother showed him her documents, and asked him to recommend a responsible lorry driver who would be making the unloaded return trip to the town of Marx that evening, after his delivery.

"I'll make it worth your while," she promised. Upon this, the garage supervisor looked at us attentively, his eyes lingering on Roman. "Many refugees have been using this route lately, but they're adults who can bear the discomfort of travelling in an open truck. Winter's coming, all night on the road, and here's a mother with little ones. Anything could happen." He seemed to be talking to himself. "Madam, you're taking a big risk with your family. You must assume all responsibility," he said.

"It's still better than what we went through twice right here in your city today," Anna protested, "And tomorrow may be even worse. We can't just stay here and wait to be killed when there's even a small chance of saving ourselves. Please help us, Ivan Petrovitch."

"All right, all right," he said, trying to pacify the woman, who was clearly upset. "I don't want anything from you, Anna. I'll do everything I can to help your family, in my capacity as a Council Deputy, but I'll not be held responsible for your journey. You need to give me a

disclaimer, that you're making this journey and have made an agreement with the driver entirely on your own account, and that you take full responsibility for yourself and your children."

He handed Mother a sheet of paper and a pen. Once she had signed the document, Ivan Petrovitch told us to wait while he went into the garage. When he returned, he told us that there were two vehicles bound for Marx that night, and one of the drivers was prepared to take us, so long as we were dressed for winter, including hats and gloves. Aghast, Mother looked at her watch. "But we've only got half an hour before the shops close," she said weakly.

"We've got time," he said. "I'll give you a lift in the breakdown van. Leave your luggage here in my office, and don't forget to take money with you."

We rushed to the shops, piled on top of one another in the commodious cab. While Ivan Petrovitch waited for us in the van, we ran up and down the shop floors, buying winter clothes. Even young Roman tried to keep up, shouting, "Wait for me! Wait!"

Without taking time to choose, Mother grabbed bootees, leg warmers, jackets, jumpers and other warm clothing, only stopping long enough to make sure they were the right size for every child. Seeing us return laden with heaps of clothing, the garage supervisor burst out laughing. He loaded our shopping into the van, and then drove us to the nearest grocery. The three of us stayed in the van while Ivan Petrovitch went shopping with Mother. He explained that if he accompanied her, she would be able to buy produce that was not normally on general sale, such as cheese, salami, apples and other wartime 'delicacies'. When we caught sight of foods we had not eaten for four months, we could not stop our eyes from lighting up and our mouths from drooling, but our commander was firm: "Not now. We'll have our feast before leaving."

Fedya, the lorry driver, was waiting for us at the garage. He wore the uniform of a military supply officer. The supervisor introduced him to Anna in his office, then went to the garage. While we unpacked our shopping and tried on our new clothes, Mother spoke with Fedya to discuss essentials such as the weather conditions, the route, the safety measures and so on. She showed him the package of bottles and told him he would have one as soon as we were all loaded on the truck, and the second once we had arrived in Marx. Unshaven and in a dirty uniform, our driver didn't look too respectable but we had to make do with what we could get. Fedya outlined the plan for the journey. Mother and Roman would ride in the cab, while we two would travel in the bed of the lorry inside the empty plywood tinned food crates, under a thick tarpaulin. We were only allowed to travel lying down with our rucksacks under our heads or sitting down; on no account was standing up or even kneeling permitted. Ivan Petrovitch came in and suggested he and Fedya give us their own sheepskin army jackets to keep us warm, on condition that Fedya returned Ivan's when he was next back in Stalingrad. Mother instructed us to put everything back into our rucksacks and clear up, apologising to Ivan Petrovitch for all the mess and the trouble. He smiled, and said in Ukrainian, "That's all right. I love trouble."

The garage and filling station were open twenty-four hours a day. We took our newly packed rucksacks and bags into the entrance hall, where the workers normally had tea by a large samovar, and waited impatiently for Mother to prepare our feast. Ivan Petrovitch spent a long time talking to Fedya in his office, then came to tell us that they had agreed that should anything unforeseen happen, Fedya would transfer us into the lorry driven by his colleague Vassily, who would then get the second bottle of vodka in his stead. Wishing us luck, the supervisor said goodbye to us and gave Fedya his soft sheepskin jacket. The driver said he would be back for us at eight o'clock, and that we should be ready to go then. Mother made us wrap

up as though we were travelling to the North Pole. As usual, my brother started making a fuss, but Mother would have none of it.

"If you don't do as I say, we'll leave you behind."

"What do you mean, leave me behind? Where am I going to go?"

"You'll stay here in the garage, and work for Ivan Petrovitch as an apprentice," she said.

"Great! Good riddance!" I cheered (having taken the precaution of stepping aside first).

Roman giggled, and promptly received a clip on the forehead from Yosif for his pains. Mother instantly slapped his hand. "I'm warning you, don't you ever touch the child again, or you'll be sorry."

Big brother walked away, sulking as usual. Roman, feeling sorry for him, followed and offered his little torch to play with. Anna checked our rucksacks even more carefully than usual, and repacked our luggage with the new purchases. Her maternal instinct constantly led her to anticipate the worst for the impending journey. Remembering the other times we were helped by strangers, I asked if she had remembered to thank Ivan Petrovitch.

"As I've already explained," she answered with a knowing smile, "Not everyone can be bought with money. While you were trying on your new clothes, I slipped a small keepsake into his desk drawer – a little jewellery box with a silver tie clip and matching cufflinks."

"But those are father's!" I protested.

"Before we left, father told me expressly never to spare anything if it helps to keep us safe. Jewellery comes and goes – but we only have one life."