

Marina Spendaryan (Spendiarova)

A Cluster of Bird Cherries



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The Word of Gratitude: *THE EDITORIAL BOARD OF THE FUNDAMENTAL
ARMENOLOGY EXPRESSES ITS GRATITUDE TO THE MUSEUM OF ALEXANDER
SPENDIARYAN AND PERSONALLY TO
THE DIRECTOR MARINA OTARYAN
FOR THE PHOTOS FROM THE ARCHIVE OF THE MUSEUM*

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Chapter 1

Time Bomb

When Nadezhda Sergeyevna Allilueva¹ wanted to find an English language teacher for her five-year old son, Vasili², Stalin's private doctor, Mandrika, suggested that his assistants write the surnames of their acquaintances who knew foreign languages. My friend wanted to accommodate him and wrote my name. The list was given to Stalin and he fixed on me.

At that time I was very young and a very open being. Life seemed to be a chain of amusing adventures and I accepted everything that came my way.

On that happy day, as it seemed to me, when I was given a pass to the Kremlin, I drank valerian, in order to enter the building calmly, the way a teacher is expected to do. Then I did my hair with the help of a box of hair slides, ironed my dress carefully and went along the street with a slow measured step. After I had the pass and it had been checked my calmness left me and I was in an ecstasy of joy at the thought that I was going to the Kremlin, to Stalin's residence. I began to walk along the Troitsky Bridge with my ordinary boyish stride. I forgot about my coiffure, as the hair slide fell off it and about carrying myself in the manner of a teacher.

I rang the bell of the residence, which was in the corner and a middle-aged woman opened the door. Everything was very ordinary: the walls were painted white and there were no carpets, pictures or vases. I was led into the dining room and feeling nervous I sat on the sofa and crumpled my dress which I had ironed so carefully.

¹ Nadezhda Sergeyevna Allilueva (1901–1932) was Stalin's wife.

² Vasily Iosifovich Stalin (1921–1962).



Nadezhda Alliluyeva
(1901-1932)



Spendiarova Marina.
Sudak, 1928

Suddenly Nadezhda Sergeyevna Allilueva entered the room. She wore a knitted, light brown suit, which clung to her ideal, neat figure. Her black hair was divided into a perfect parting and done in a tight bun. The placidity of a happy woman could be read in her delicate features, the gentle color of

her cheeks and the big eyes under the sable curve of her brows. Full of emotion I completely lost my composure, but she sat on the sofa next to me and told me something nice that made me feel her equal. It was then I noticed that when she smiled her upper lip exposed her gum and it was the only flaw she had, but it made her bashful and cute. I calmed down then and a simple talk began between two women.

First she told me about her son (who suddenly burst into the room, climbed on my knees and cried happily, “Hurrah, a young teacher!”). Then she told me about her baby daughter, Svetlanochka. At last (her gum showing in a blushing smile) she talked about her private life and how she had seen Stalin the first time (yes, she said, “Stalin”) when she was still a child, in the ‘basement flat’ of her father, a ‘qualified worker’. She met him again, when she was a ‘secretary of Ilich’³ and then they married. Then she began to speak about her husband with enthusiasm and told me how hard he worked.

“Do you know how much! He must, for example, read all the books that are published! All of them!”

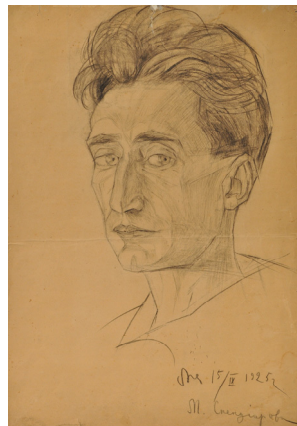
³ Nadezhda worked in Lenin’s office

This information brought me into a flutter, “All of them! But why should he?”

“Why? Because he must know everything that is going on in the country. He only has a rest during dinner and it must be absolutely quiet in the home at that time. That is the time when Vasenyka must be taken somewhere or one must occupy him with something.”

This is where I made a mistake. It was not the first time; it was already the second time. The first lapse was when I first began to teach Vasenkya and I was telling him the tale of ‘Red Riding Hood’. He listened to it with rapt attention it seemed to me. When his mother entered the room he cried out, “Mother, Mother! It turned out the wolf can speak.” Now I understood his excitement for he had never heard any fairy tales! “Children must be brought up on real facts”, Nadezhda Allilueva told me, “fairy tales generate evil fantasy so never tell him any fairy tales.”

The second lapse was more ‘serious’ and ‘tragic’ (I will tell how tragic later). The whole morning Vasenkya and I were walking in the grounds of the Kremlin and I remembered a phrase from Boris Pilniak’s novel, *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*: “the higher the office the more silent it is”.⁵ That day there was almost dead



Marina Spendiarova.

“A man’s portrait”.

Moscow, 15.08.1925⁴

⁴The portrait of the doctor who mediated for M. Spendiarova to work in I.V. Stalin’s house as a tutor.

⁵ Boris Andreevich Pilniak(1894-1937) was one of the Soviet Unions most widely read and popular writer in the 1920’s. In 1929 he was elected chairman of the All-Russia Union of Writers which was ostensibly a non-political and non-communist organization. *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon* was written in 1927 and was about a new species half- man, half-wolf as the head of state who was called Number One and the Unbending Man, a clear

silence in the Kremlin and only the steps of the sentries and the cawing of crows in the belfry of Ivan the Great could be heard. Vasenkya was climbing on every mound of snow and when we entered the corner house (this time by the back door) it turned out that his felt boots, socks and feet were soaking wet. The situation was terrible. The voice of a man was heard in the neighboring dining room and I could even make out the Georgian accent. Stalin was having dinner. It was very important to keep silent but the boy was whining and demanding that I make up the fire. I tried to make a fire with some damp timber that was lying on the grid, but oh God, it didn't turn out well. The nursery filled up with smoke and Vasenkya gave a cry that rent my heart. I could do nothing but knock on the door of the dining room. The answer to my "terrible confession" was the lovely voice of Allilueva, "Don't worry. Go to Svetlanochka's room, while I air the nursery."

This was the day when I met Stalin. I thought, "Remember this minute, Marina, you are in the same room with Stalin." I saw a stocky man at the table, perhaps even a powerful person, in a coat with a big head of dark, foxy hair and a face with moustaches, full of pockmarks. Allilueva said, "This is the new teacher of our Vashenkya." He stood up with an aura of power, but he was not tall. It numbed me so much that I could hardly make myself hide my surprise. He said something like, "Nice to meet you", and his dark, foxy eyes narrowed in a smile. I noticed a jug of milk and a bowl of huge oranges. How often I remembered that milk and oranges later.⁶

Then I made the third mistake. Nadezhda Allilueva asked me to come in at the front door or the backdoor, but never to come in at the private

reference to Stalin. He was arrested and 'tried' on October 28th 1937 and executed on April 21st 1938. He was re-habilitated in 1956 and his works began to be published again in 1956, although his last unpublished book was destroyed. From: *The KGB Literary Archive*, Vitaly Shentalinsky, Harvill Press, 1995.

⁶ See Chapter 2 page 14.

entrance of Stalin, so as not to bother him. But I was walking along lost in my thoughts and mixed up the doors. At that time the private entrance of Stalin was not yet guarded. I hurriedly went up the stairs and awoke from my stupor only when I saw the Georgian coat on the hanger. I should have gone back, but it did not occur to me that my lapse would look like a 'state crime'. I calmly entered the library of Stalin (I had not been there before) and understood that Nadezhda Allilueva was right: there were a lot of books. Ordinary not worn, they were lying on the table in the center of the room and were placed in the bookshelves helter-skelter.

Obviously this was the last straw to break the back of my host, and it was the reason that the next day she suggested that I move to their house. Why? First of all, Vasenkya needs a regular eye, the second thing was... At that moment Allilueva showed her gums in an anxious smile and I understood that I had to be fundamentally re-educated.

That day I went home with my head full of thousands of ambivalent decisions! Should I agree? Never! Maybe I should agree? And what about my lessons in art, which is the most important thing and my most interesting social life?

That winter I was living with the stage manager of the Moscow Art Theater (MKHAT), Valentin Sergeyevitch Smyshlyaev, and was happy to meet many remarkable people! For example, Michel Afanasevitch Bulgakov, author of the play 'The Days of the Turbins',⁷ Michel Aleksandovich Checkov, Heyrot, Afonin.... They usually got together on Saturdays and they named these days the 'Saturdays of Smyshlyalov'. First of all there was a supper with wine, toasts and funny jokes, then everybody sat in different corners of the only room and began to argue.

⁷ Bulgakov (1891-1940) was a novelist, short story writer and playwright. He graduated as a doctor from Kiev University in 1916. A Civil War novel *The White Guard* published in serial form was stopped by Party Line critics. *The Master and Margarita*, his most famous novel was published in 1967.

The Minister of Education was Lunacharski⁸ and it was a happy time for art. The innovative theater of Meyerhold was developing then.⁹ Michel Aleksandovich Checkov was playing in the romantic MKHAT. I remember how he was standing in the parterre speaking to Lunacharski during the interval. I enjoyed listening to what they spoke about! Of course they were talking about art. The 'Oresteia' was being staged and arguments about this production by Smishlyaev, a dreamy man with dimples and sad eyes, dominated the whole evening.

When I burst into the room everybody was sitting at the table. A young actor of the MKHAT, Zhilinski, raised his wineglass and said, "To the health of the Tsarist nanny!" Everybody stood up and repeated this toast. Tsarist nanny? I was too young to understand the fateful meaning of these words. At the same time I imagined a Tsarist palace of the 16th century and fat nannies living on gossip. I felt there was not enough air and I was afraid. I needed no arguments. Tsarist nanny! Never!

Next day I went to the Kremlin and said no to my 'queen'. I was very sad to say goodbye to her, but the feeling of freedom from the suddenly conscious dependence filled me with happiness. Did I think that all my life, youth, feelings, words and sighs were there to be watched all the time?

I met Allilueva twice after that. The times were already dark and the shops were already emptied. 'The feathers from the pillows of the peasants were flying all over the country'.¹⁰ The trials of 'the industrial

⁸ Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharski (1875-1933) was a Bolshevik in 1903. He was appointed the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment dealing with arts and education and was removed from his post by Stalin in 1929.

⁹ Vsevolod Emilievich Meyerhold (1874-1940) was a leading theater director famous in the 1920's for his revolutionary theater, Constructivism and the promotion of bio-mechanical acting. In 1938 the Meyerhold Theater was liquidated, in 1939 Meyerhold was arrested and he was shot in 1940.

¹⁰ This is a way of describing the removal of wealthy peasants, called kulaks, who resisted collectivization. In fact many of the people arrested and sent away from their farms and small holdings were not particularly wealthy.

party' and 'the workers in the meat industry' were going on. They frequently surprised and puzzled the citizens who were reminded about the Solovetski camp more and more.¹¹

I was walking in the foyer of the Art Theater during the interval when somebody called me. I did not recognize Allilueva at first with her pale face and long dark dress. But she was smiling with her bashful smile and the past came back to me immediately. I remember every word she said, "Why did you forget me? I remember that you studied singing and drawing...Do you still study in the Conservatoire? Invite me to your concert, surely! I am also a student in the Industrial Academy. Ring me up sometime, maybe I will be able to help you. So, goodbye." Lean and inconspicuous she disappeared into the crowd which was pushing towards the parterre.

I appealed to Allilueva a few months before her death. The question was about the transfer of my father's opera from the Experimental Theater to the Bolshoi.

The Stalins had already moved into the Poteszni Palace of Peter I. The same woman as before wearing a round cap opened the door to me. She led me up stairs covered by a red velvet carpet. Bookshelves made of red wood were on the way and I noticed huge male shoes under the coatpegs. Nadezhda Sergeyeva met me in that black, silk dress and light, pink blouse that she was wearing when she was in the coffin half a year later. She seemed to be thinner than before. We went along the narrow corridor stepping over a high threshold to Vasenkya's classroom. Being very excited I began to tell her the purpose of my visit. She tried to calm me down but there was none of the former calmness in her either. She didn't even sit down although she made me sit. She walked around the

¹¹ Solovetshy Monastery on a northern island became known as 'the first camp of the gulag' although, as it was established in 1923, the Gulag administration had not then been formed. (Gulag, Anne Applebaum, Penguin, 2003).

table and her face was pale and harsh. I will never forget her with that last woeful expression and her stern eyes under the dark segments of her brows.

She promised to help me. She and Aveli Safronovich liked 'Almast'¹² very much. She promised that she would speak to Aveli Safronovich and he would do everything. Aveli was a very good person who liked music very much (I was thinking, who was Aveli Safronovich and suddenly it occurred to me she meant Enukidze).¹³ "The new season will soon begin and your appeal will come true. You can go home quietly for your holidays. Do not forget to ring me up when you are back...You won't forget? Goodbye till autumn comes..."

¹² The opera 'Almast' is based on a poem by Hovhannes Toumanian and depicts the Armenians trying to defend their Homeland.

¹³ Avel Safronovich Enudkidze (1877-1937) was a prominent 'Old Bolshevik' and had, at one point, been a member of the Soviet central Committee in Moscow. He had written a book on the history of the famous printing press which had printed Lenin's commandments. He was accused of having deliberately minimized Stalin's contributions to the printing press although in fact, Stalin had nothing to do with it. In 1935, he was expelled from the Party and three years later arrested and shot.

Chapter 2

A Lasting Bell

The call came more than eleven years after my first visit to the Stalin household. That time was the worst time of war. Patrols were walking along the streets and checking the documents of passers-by. Everybody was used to night calls but this one lasted a long while. My husband and I were sitting on the sofa and he was reading aloud from a book by Sonka about the production of voice. Otherwise it was silent in the flat. A warm placatory spirit was coming from the kerosene fire, which was heating the room.

Suddenly the door bell rang. Usually soldiers checked my husband's military card and the mail and then left. This time they came in and they were wearing plain clothes so they were not soldiers, although one could guess as much from the military boots under the civilian trousers. They asked for our passports, first of all my husbands and then mine. I was looking for my passport for a very long time, but they waited very patiently, smiling very strangely with piercing eyes. Then I found it. One of them said to the other, "Is it right?" "Yes, it is right", the other replied. I was given a paper and I read the words, 'Arrest warrant' and a huge signature on it, 'Abakumov'.¹⁴

A person cannot embrace grief consciously all at once. At the first moment you do not believe in it, though you feel that it is the end. I thought that my arrest was a big mistake, as most of the arrested people in Stalin's times used to think. I did not even want to take my clothes with me. They took my rucksack and briefcase and put in it anything they could

¹⁴ Viktor Semenovitch Abakumov signed the warrant for arrest. He was in the NKVD administration and in 1946 he became chief of the MGB.

find. Even their words, “Take with you as much as you can” could not persuade me. I was repeating blankly to my husband,

– “Do not cry, this is a mistake, I will be back”, and I said goodbye to him very easily.

Everything that happened to me after that I remember as a dream. Ordinary people, who you can meet by the thousands in the streets, were making an ‘object’ of me, by compiling a list of my individual characteristics. I welcomed the call to the interrogation as an escape from the silence that was around me. I could think logically, carried forward by my own momentum. I was looking for human justice, even in the teeth of the machine. I wanted to argue, to defend.... When I was brought into the office of the investigator I saw the steadfast gaze of the enemy and I wanted to fight with him. I sat down on the black oilskin sofa and began to speak freely, powerfully and demandingly. And suddenly the mouth of the man, who was looking at me as I paused, opened with the mechanical cry of a robot as he began to scold me. This way of shouting words at me was thought to be right. I cowered down in the corner of the place where the prisoners must sit and knew that I could not expect salvation from anywhere.

I was called both in the morning and at night. The investigator was playing with me cruelly for his ‘operative aim’ and it was driving me mad. The torture of being kept from sleep and the dull fret which was touched off by the regularly repeated phrase, “Out with it – your crime”, at last defeated me. I could already understand the demands of my ward neighbor, an old woman with a quaking head, who was always asking me to remember more anti-Soviet action, as it was important for her to “add to the bunch of phrases”. I was trying feverishly to remember my foibles and telling them to the investigator and I was helping him to make a crime of them. But this was not what they wanted to hear. They were demanding something else from me. What?

Two people were already interrogating me, then one night there were three of them. The investigator had promised not to call me that night. I fell into a dead sleep after the all clear, but at midnight they woke me up and led me through the corridors that seemed to me, through my dizziness, like a Labyrinth of Hell. When I was brought into an unknown room, as wide as a hall, besides the two former investigators standing respectfully by near the wall, I saw a new, small, light-haired man, who was sitting on the table swinging his legs. He had a dandified, black suit and a black bow tie was sticking out from the collar of his snowy white shirt. I thought that I was in hell and that the man-like person was the devil. He began to rub his hands and laugh darkly when he saw me. I was ordered to sit on a chair in the middle of the room and I immediately bent my head on my breast and fell asleep.

Terrible curses were heard and I started up. The blue eyes of the Devil became white with anger. He began to hiss:

–“Did you not understand, comrade Kaplan, that it is impossible to fight against Soviet power?”

–“Am I ‘Kaplan’ ? What did I do? What do they want of me?”

–“Do you understand now that Soviet power is very strong?”

Did I understand? Then it occurred to me to say,

– “Do you think that Soviet power is you? It is the MGB.”

He leaned back and began to laugh in his gruff, flat voice.

The circle of harassment was becoming tighter and tighter. By small sharp questions from the investigators my memory led me back to that time when I was working in Stalin’s house. On that occasion I thought that they were looking for the author of the phrase “Tsarist nanny”. But what could they make out about that? From where? It was I myself, in my youthful stupidity, who told about that and my visits to the Kremlin, everywhere. But my heart was calmed, they did not know anything about “Tsarist nanny”.

Suddenly the investigator asked me,

– “What do you say when you are asked about the reason for the death of Allilueva?”

The image of Allilueva dear to my heart at once appeared in my imagination and I pleaded:

– “Tell me, perhaps you know why she died? I do not know. I went to her place half a year before her death and she was absolutely healthy. What happened? They said she died of appendicitis but in her coffin her throat was tied up. Why her throat? Don’t you know?”

Selected curses made me keep silence. The focus of the questions was becoming narrower. Now it touched only Stalin and his image and did not leave me alone for a single moment. At last a direct question:

– “How do you feel about Iosif Vissaronich Stalin?”

His figure came clearly to my mind. I saw Stalin in a dim time, when good people were taken to prisons without any obstacle, when stores were locked and sealed in the government and houses for specialists, when the people who built socialism prepared a little suitcase, with the most important things in it, before going to sleep because they might be arrested at any moment. He was standing on the mausoleum of Lenin with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat and he remained cold and alien to his distracted people mad from worshipping him.

I saw him in the Bolshoi Theatre. It was in 1939 at the last concert of the ten-day festival of Soviet music. I was seated in the composer’s box, which was just opposite the government box. Lemeshov was singing a children’s song on the stage. I was not interested in this music and I went on looking through the opera glasses at the members of the government. Molotov, Koganovich, Kalinin, Malenkov, Shvernik, Andreev... Who was that man with the shaved head and tired, red eyes? Stalin was not there, but he had been there a little while ago. I kept looking through the opera glasses and found a figure in a jacket walking back and forth. Moustaches.

Familiar dark, foxy hair. Now it was grey and I saw in fact how it moved with his heavy steps. His hands were behind his back and he bent his head forward. There was an elf-lock on his forehead and his face was in shadow, but I must catch his face. A composer, sitting next to me, was tapping my arm:

– “Do you want all of us to go to prison? Are you mad to examine the members of the government through the opera glasses?”

I was still holding the opera glasses. I must catch his face, because he was alone with his thoughts. Nobody could see him, besides me. I must see his face. He stopped and turned towards the auditorium. Here it is! How could I not have noticed before that the cheekbones of Stalin are special? He has the cheekbones of a tiger that lie close to his rather slanted eyes, like a vulture’s eyes. It seemed to me that his moustaches were stirring – who was his new victim? The composer took the opera glasses out of my hands. Calming down I asked him:

– “Can you tell me who that man is with the shaved head and the tired, red eyes?”

– “Kosior”¹⁵ he replied.

...The insistent voice of the interrogator was very close, next to my face. He was sitting at my table and he was looking at me fixedly. “I am asking you. How do you feel about Iosif Vissaronich Stalin?”

– “I hate him.”

It was the end. I was caught. What was the matter with my tormentor? He was looking at me with inspired eyes. His face was so close that I could feel the heat of his breath.

– “Take the bull by the horns and tell me everything... But don’t be afraid...Did you want him to die?”

¹⁵ S.V. Kosior (1889 –1939) was General Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party (1928-1938), deputy prime minister of the USSR and member of the Politburo of the CPSU. He was executed in 1939.

I imagined those big oranges and the jug of milk. I had thought many times that he would live forever to kill generations of people because of his healthy meals.

– “I wanted him to die.”

Then I heard gentle notes in his voice:

– “Tell me more...You wanted to kill him...You wanted to leave a bomb...That is why you went to his apartments...You wanted to smother him with smoke...But you could not do it...Then you decided to enter his library...Speak and you will feel easement!”

But I woke up then. It is better to say that the light dawned for me and I became aware. Here it is, what they wanted of me! Mad men, was it a tragedy? No, it was a comedy. A bloody comedy. All of us are buffoons. That light-haired devil, the interrogators, the old woman with the shaking head, me and everybody! Will anybody who never experienced this understand me?

Chapter 3

The Cluster of Bird Cherries

Once when I was sitting in my corner behind the door colleagues of my interrogator entered his office. They said:

– “Show us yours, ‘Kaplan’, and when he pointed at me they began to look at me with curiosity. My investigator looked very self-satisfied and it seemed that he wanted to say, “Here is what I picked up!” I did not jump up and I did not shout, “Stop this foolishness, you know very well that it is drivel, only drivel”, but I sat silently in my corner and I was a little ashamed by their curious and pestilent looks.

Under the threat of death all of us had to lie and usually the lie had the shape of truth. The lie began from the top and its victims were both prisoners and investigators, but the former were suffering, while the latter were fishing in murky water. The investigator beat one of my neighbors in her cell. She had been a member of the party since 1917, but he beat her senseless until she confessed that “she saw Stalin in her dream with a bloody sword in his hands.”

My investigator was rather merciful, because I remember his compassionate look when the other investigator sadistically told me about the arrest of my husband. I also remember his eyes when it was said that the war had ended. It was late at night and both of us were sleepy. We could hear cars hooting from the Lubyanka and the radio was whistling in the receiver. Suddenly after the radio signals we could hear the solemn voice of Levitan.¹⁶ The investigator jumped and I could see happiness in his

¹⁶ Yuri Levitan (born 1914) became the Soviet Union’s most important radio presenter after Stalin heard him reading a newspaper article on late night radio.

eyes. I even forgave him the oaths with which he replied to my question, "Did the war end?"¹⁷ That was his habit and at this moment both of us were very happy. The investigator led me to my cell and I told the happy news to every soldier and prison guard on the way. One of the female guards smiled at me and I understood that it was right.

The next day blue strips of paper were pulled off the windows and nobody was called to interrogation. The next day, the day after that and the third day... it was freedom. The happiness of victory, the end of bloodshed could melt even the roughest hearts. We did a hairdo, ironed our dresses with the kettle and brushed the floor. We were continually trying to predict our 'freedom' guessing with the help of a bone or doves. Standing on the beds in, order to see the space above where the windows were covered, we watched the doves which were sitting on the windowsill of the house opposite.

– "Two of 'my' doves have flown away, two of them are left, I will be in prison for two years." "I have only one foxy dove! Hurrah! It means that I will be here for only a year."

– "Comrades, comrades! What a miracle! All the doves have flown away! Nobody will stay here anymore! Freedom!"

We were in our second childhood and every trifling thing made us happy. We danced and did not pay any attention to the Judas window, the eye stuck in the glass was in these days our guest joining in with our joy. He regulated me in a friendly way when unthinking, forgetting about caution, I gave freedom to my voice, "Be quiet, a little bit quieter, do you hear me?" and I was singing for this kind eyeball.

But on the fourth day they began to call us again. Nothing had changed and again there was the cursing, the torture of no sleep and being frightened by the arrests of relatives and close friends. What was surprising just at the first interrogation was the devilry, the real devilry of the investigators, which made us forget our last hope of being saved.

¹⁷The Second World War, 1939-1945. The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945).

The whole world was in darkness and there was no happiness at all. The joy, which had been unable to melt the most cruel heart, seemed to me to be false. There was no joy at all. One day a doctor on duty entered our cell. Her white coat was unbuttoned and on the lapel of her crumpled pink jacket was a cluster of bird cherry blossom.

When I remember my life in prison I try to remember the features of my friends in prison but it is in vain. Their faces disappear in grief like the faces of the martyrs on the brown background of ikons. But the image of that young doctor, who emanated the light of youth and was full of life, comes clearly into my mind.

She gave us medicines and wanted to leave but we surrounded her. Somebody asked if she was going to the countryside and another person asked if she had a lover. Somebody wanted to know what kind of songs the people sang. I imagined a puffing, resort train that was going alongside the shady road, sounds of a harmonica and singing, a glimpse of bird cherries in the depth of the forest, heaps of bird cherries on the shop counters and in the hands of the passengers, happy young people, happy mothers, happy married couples and it was not a dream, it was so very real that our horrible reality seemed to be an unreal nightmare.

The doctor was silently retreating to the door, she was afraid to answer the call of her heart anymore. Somebody cried and somebody asked her to leave us her cluster of bird cherry blossom. Everybody repeated that appeal but she kept retreating to the door and I could see a blush of excitement on her cheeks and her fluttering downcast eyes. Suddenly with quick, frightened fingers she unfastened the white cluster and gave it to us. Joyful cries were heard and after that we could hear the clank of the keys in the lock.

All the thirst for a lost truth fell on that small cluster. It was passed from hand to hand and we held it to our cheeks, our breasts and our eyes. We were smelling it as long as we could until its small flowers naively looking at the world lost their freshness and became yellow and transparent.

Chapter 4

Deliveries to the Actress

Everything was done the way it should be according to the scheme. I was accused and taken to the camp. When the train started I experienced a bitter feeling like an expatriate. Thousands and thousands of exiled people had this same feeling. I cried only briefly as I had already got used to bars and that is why I was not shocked when I was put into the Stolypin compartment with my things.¹ My mood began to get better and the feeling of being an expatriate changed with the feeling of freedom from prison life and a feeble hope for better times.

The deportation under guard was disembarked in Vologda and we were taken to a transit camp. After the sinister silence of the Lubyanka I was greatly surprised by the noise there.¹ There was a mixture of footsteps, shouts and singing that resonated in the arches



A deportation under guard

of the Ekaterina prison. We were led through damp 'catacombs' that were sodden with the stench of stabling and the similar smell of prison.

We were led, then interrogated, again we were led and at last we were brought to the half-dark front bathhouse which was full of naked women. When I entered the bathhouse I was washed down with

soapsuds, kicked by a group of people, fell down and then got up. In spite of all this and the fact that in that crowded place I had to touch other's sleazy bodies the hope for better times never left me.

I even began to sing and my voice rose above the noise of the water. Women turned around and I fell silent, but it was too late to back down. The thirst for something new, for a song was very keen here. Should I begin to perform there in this way? I tried to refuse but suddenly many men, smartly dressed in padded jackets, rushed into the bathhouse. Now it was not a plea it was a demand. I tried to hide behind the bench but the women took me from there and I had to sing in the suit of Eve behind a living screen of naked bodies. I began to sing the whole 'prison' repertoire that I had elaborated in the Lubyanka, that is sad songs. I don't think that any female singer could have had such a success even if she sang in the richest dress and with the best scenery.

Some 'stupid persons'¹ told me some crazy news, as if it was a reward instead of flowers. It turned out that we should wait for great Stalin's manifesto! It will shake the whole world! Where did they get this news? They got it from those who are in 'freedom' and from their relatives. What ravings! Can 'Macbeth' act with such grace? Is he not afraid of the shades of his victims? It cannot be so but I did not want to argue. I was as happy as everybody. When we were brought to the cell I wanted to tell this news to the women who were sitting on the floor. But at once I understood that they were not in need of such openness. The window of the cell was right under the roof and there was a dim oil lamp on the windowsill. There was also a dirty, bad-smelling stream of water leaking from the toilet pail.

Women silently crowded round. I called two companions and we sat on our things and opened the bag of food. Suddenly I heard a powerful voice, "Madam, come here." I half -stood, looked around and saw that there was a blowsy woman, who was sitting on the only chair in the cell. Two short-legged blonde girls were standing on either side of her – her bodyguards. They were 'urki'¹ without any doubt, I recognized them by the

description of my neighbors in Butyrka prison. They had already been in the camps and were brought to Moscow for re-interrogation. I had been told that when you enter the 'criminal world' show that you are not afraid of them. Pretend that you are a trainer who enters a cell full of wild beasts.

I said loudly, "If you want to speak to me come up. What do you want?" "Take off your furs and felts and give them to me." I mobilized all my force and entered the cell full of wild animals. Squeezing my fists and looking straight at the 'urki' I yelled, "What else? Do you think that I am afraid of you?"

What a repulsive face this untidy thief had, the mug of a cat that came out of a cesspit! Dim, vicious eyes and a disgusting grin with a golden crown on the canine. I had to get over the disgust and follow the second piece of advice from my prison neighbors, which was to ask the 'urki' to have dinner with us. They accepted at once. The girls were very hungry and shoveled up the food. According to my prison friends in Moscow this was not enough which is why I had to sing one of my sad songs which touch the soul. I sat down on my bag full of things, the 'pacified tigers' lay down by my legs and I began to sing. The oil lamp began to go out and there was a snore in the cell, but I was still singing. I fell silent only when I felt my voice getting hoarse. The girls moved away and I pulled my furs over myself and my two friends and fell asleep.

I woke up very early as somebody was calling me, "Actress! Actress!" I opened my eyes and saw a red-cheeked girl with brisk, black eyes bending over me. It seemed to me that she was also a 'criminal'. I could hardly understand her speech which was full of underworld language. "They are 'cheap'...You were not greedy....you voluntarily opened your cider, and they..." I jumped up and began to check my things. My bag was empty and the bag of food had disappeared. "They stole everything while you were singing," said the black eyed girl obviously saddened by the behavior of the 'cheap girls'. Then they didn't stay near you and in the morning they asked the guard on duty to change their cell."

They had taken the clothes from my bag while I was sitting on it. It was very embarrassing and I was ashamed. I saw myself singing loudly and stupidly while that was going on. As if justifying herself the red-cheeked girl kept steadily repeating, "Don't yield actress, I will get everything back from them." She called the commandant and went with him to the other cell. She brought back some of my clothes, but they had eaten all the food in the bag!

I had to get over the hunger, but this girl's behavior was so surprising that I could not concentrate on myself. She wanted to defend the underworld law of gratitude with such passion that I was amazed. She was struggling for the sacred and noble in her world, which was cursed and neglected by everyone. After the failure to find my stolen things she took out a little onion and shag. This was repeated every day. Later she was taken to another place but while saying goodbye she said that other local thieves would look after me.

Next day as soon as the door of the cell was opened a barefoot, shaggy girl wearing a rough shirt was pushed into the cell. Her lively voice still had the sound of freedom, "How do you go on? Is there any news?" This new girl passed all the prisoners asking them joyfully and caringly, "Why are you imprisoned? For stealing hay? And what about you, unhappy? And you? You are here according to the 16th article?¹ Our brother..... Never mind, you will sit here for some time and go out and then you will be back again. And what about you? According to the 58th article?¹ Political? It means nothing....." Then she walked and tap-danced suddenly in the cell and then asked seriously, "Where is this actress who was cleaned out by the cheap people?" They pointed at me and she quickly came up to me and put a parcel on my knees and said solemnly, "It is for you from the thieves of Vologda."

Her little face was so sweet with a small, duck nose, round brown eyes and full lips that I tousled her rough hair, cut all anyhow. It seemed to me that this was the first time in this girl's life that somebody showed her some affection and that is why she was so surprised. I divided the parcel

into two parts and gave one to her, but she proudly refused it. Then I put it on her knees and she awkwardly took a small piece of the stale bread and keeping her questioning eyes on me began to eat it greedily. All the time she was looking at me plaintively. Then she put her things next to mine, lay down and fell asleep, smacking her lips like a child.

Several prisoners wrapped in grey scarves were knitting peacefully in the far corner of the room. They were knitting with the wooden sticks that they took out of the bread. Several kolkhoz women,¹ who took some hay from a field, were sitting by the wall with their poles and sacks, being frightened of the 'urki'. Other girls carelessly talked to each other. They were accused because they left their work early. They were climbing on each other's shoulders trying to look out of the windows and speaking to the men who were out for a walk. Virtuous 'westers'¹ were sewing ornaments on to aprons with the help of fish bones and were criticizing them silently, keeping under their eyelashes their condemnation of the other women's frivolity. I was sitting in the same place on the floor and trying to understand every detail of my cell-mates' behavior and where they could find so much energy to withstand the life.

When it got dark the 'evening of songs' began as it was the usual thing for every evening. These songs were sung in chorus and I sang alone. Usually I sang the war songs that were very close to us, they were songs from the front. I was singing sitting on the floor and I was always imagining my husband, who never left my mind:

“Now we are very far from each other
There are snows between us...
It is very difficult to reach you
There are four steps to death.”

We were never afraid of the thought of death and it always seemed very ordinary and usual. In spite of trying to overcome my squeamishness I could not get used to black soup with unscrubbed potatoes and little by

little I lost my strength. I do not know if it was humility that I gained from those ordinary women or if it was numbness from the absolute hopelessness, but the state of comfort did not leave me. The joy I could get was gleaming in the background. I remember how impatiently I would wait for nightfall when I could see the first star through the bars. It seemed to belong to us and be connected with our grief. I would look at it and listen to the clear, transparent voices of the girls, who had played truant from their work, and were singing dreamily holding their knees and leaning towards each other:

“The girl was following the fighter to the front,
On a dark night she had bid him farewell from the porch of her home
Until the boy could only see through the fog
That there was a light in the girl’s window...”

Usually the singing continued until the all-clear signal, but sometimes it was interrupted by the creak of the opening feeder. Women were putting aside their work and were very surprised because the sound of dishes and spoons which echoed during the supper hours had died down long before. Then their faces were brightened by a smile and they looked kindly at each other. In the hole of the feeder I could see a thin hand holding an irregularly tied parcel. I could see a glimpse of a smiling face after which came the loud voice of the next messenger from the black-eyed girl, filling my soul with joy, “Parcel for the actress.”

Chapter 5

“This is a Camp”

At last November 7th came but amnesty was not declared.¹ The holiday was marked with a piece of liver, in addition to the black soup. “Softheads” hoped that the amnesty would come on the threshold of the New Year.

A forced march of prisoners to the North was arranged. When they moved us from the transition point to the railway station one could see grey people with grey bags on their backs. Sometimes there was a command, “Sit down” and people sat in dirty pools. The soldiers counted people and the grey behemoth continued on its way. We were pushed one by one into wagons. People, like sheep, ran through a corridor into the barred carriage which was like a cage. As many people as possible were pressed together in the carriage and that is why, with my face pressed to the bars, I could breathe the air of the corridor and see the grey window when it was not covered by the backs of the guards. I was almost the last to be pushed in.

On the road we were given fish which was so salty that it seemed to be a poison. After it even horse-sized portions of water could not slake our thirst. Then humiliating suffering began. The young guards were enjoying themselves and despite the cries of the women they only let us go to pass water twice a day. I shall never forget the ashamed appearance of male prisoners when they passed by our barred opening cautiously carrying in front of them boots overflowing with piss.

The further north we traveled the more prisoners were unloaded. I was called alone. I saw the infinite snow plain with the black peaks of fir trees and the twinkling stars. North...

The air froze my head, my legs jammed in snowdrifts all the time, but the careful hand of the camp guard pulled me out of them. God bless his name. God bless the name of all those who have pity for prisoners.

All the lamps were lit for camp transfer. The haggard faces of women, who looked at me from the top of the two-storied barracks, were the color of soot. The regulator of the transfer invited me to have a rest in his cabin in the morning. He admitted to me that he was arrested 'for a robbery on the high road', but I trustingly followed him. The feeling of equality, which I had found on the floor of the transit camp, had freed me of fear before people. I settled down on the bed of 'the robber' and plunged into a dream. A drunken voice woke me up, "Have you brought the girl from the agricultural forced march?" The voice of the regulator answered him as roughly, "I have brought her and the reward." "Trousers from the cloth of the commandants. Is the girl a good one?" "The one you ordered." "Bring her here!" I heard the cry of the maiden and understood that they were checking 'correctness'. Again the same voice, "Well done regulator."

It is silent in the cabin, but I do not want to sleep. I go out of the screen door. Smoking a cigarette the regulator looked at me derisively: "Were you not asleep? Did you hear? There is nothing to be surprised about. This is a camp and everyone saves himself as he can."

This is a camp....I have been given the duty to wash floors and I have taken advantage of this to slip into the camp center. Poor men with bloodless faces wandered along the dirty trampled snow. I entered the tidy barracks and found warmth, cleanliness, curtains, embroidery on beds and the smell of pancakes. In the barracks there was nobody on duty except for an old woman. "Who lives here?" I asked. "Wives." "Whose wives?" "Camp."

“Men are so fearful here that they can hardly stand on their own feet!” “They are...Wives of ‘stupid’ persons live here.¹ Their husbands are bookkeepers, bootmakers and dressmakers... Where are you from?” she asked. “I am from Moscow.” “That means you are a Party member.” “No, I do not belong to any Parties.” “Then why are you here?” “Is it not a Soviet camp here?” “It is a Soviet one but people who are brought here from Moscow belong to the Party.”

During the transportation I had been given a parcel from a ‘brother Armenian’, who was giving part of his daily portion of food every day. After several days I was told that the next forced march for me was to a farm. I accepted it as inevitable as a feeling of fatality never left me.

Wood was crackling in the fireplace of the barracks. There was a smell of green cabbage soup that was heated in rusty bowls and of burning rye bread. Prisoners were busy with sewing. Some of them were sewing with needles that were taken from the prison shirts while others sitting near the bedstead were spinning from the dirty cotton of the short coats. Lying on the bed of boards I was listening to talks between prisoners: “Why are you here old lady?” “Because of the cattle,” was the reply, “When the Germans entered the village our head villager ordered me to take them away. I herded the cattle into the forest, but there was a storm and I lost them. I didn’t know it was betraying one’s country but the investigator said it was a betrayal.”

“What about you, grandmother?” asked another prisoner. “They say I wanted to kill somebody but I don’t know whom.” I sat up in my bed and asked her, “Granny maybe it was Stalin?” “Of course it was he.”

We were waiting and were told that we would be sent in several days. We were given cotton clothes and felt boots, but of course they were not clean. Suddenly....you know that sudden things may often happen in the camps. On the threshold of the forced march a Crimean Tartar asked me to come to the lookout. He was already freed and was

playing in the orchestra of the town's theater. He carefully put some questions to me and the next morning they took me to the theater.

I felt that it was a dream in comparison with my sufferings of the last year, not real life but fantasy. I was sitting in the entry under the gun of the guard and I could see made-up women with dyed hair, princes in red clothes, dancers, clowns.... Laughter, fragments of operettas, the drumming of high heels, a mixture of the past and the present. There was something of the 'underground world' where the Moscow actress, who had melted into thin air since 1937, shone. I also recognized the actor who was worshipped by young people and who disappeared at the same time.

I was asked what I was going to sing during the audition and I said at once that I was going to sing 'Pauline's Romance' from the Queen of Spades.¹ I was not even afraid of my own daring. The 'disappeared woman singer' brought me some bread, potted meat and a thermos with strong tea. I felt that my blood was getting warmer and my voice came alive. When I went on the stage I felt nothing but pleasure with the music and grief for the past. I was singing as if I was in a dream and even the applause did not wake me up. Only when the 'disappeared film actor' kissed my rough hand I wanted to cry.

In the transit camp I became a famous person at once. The doctors came up to me, took me to the hospital, cleaned me from lice and laid me down in a clean bed. The felicity of cleanness that enveloped me was more real to me than any other honor. There was a tub of pink begonias on the window sill. I was stirring sugar into hot tea. Brother Georgian brought me canned peaches and brother Azerbaijani, who was a cook, baked a small cake for me. Figures of real people became more concrete, this was real life. I got used to the prisoners and began to look at them with love.

The male nurse, who was to look after me, was an ex-driver arrested in 1939. A gentle, blue-eyed man with a moustache he had a small hardly noticeable wrinkle on his forehead. "Why were you imprisoned?" I asked.

“For counter revolutionary actions.” I could hear that his voice held something of pride in these high words. “How was that worked out?” “Once I drove for Bukharin¹ and in 1937 I boasted about it when I was drunk. They informed on me....”

I was getting stronger day by day. There were no gowns in the hospital and all of us – men and women – wore the yellow clothes meant for men. As we stood next to the fireplace everybody wanted me to pay attention to them. There was one fair-haired, blue-eyed man who looked like an ancient Gaul, a cavalier of the middle ages, a musketeer. Everybody stood aside when he came and time after time he took a knife from the side of his boot and began to juggle. As was my habit I asked why he was there and he began to count on his fingers the number of people he had killed. He was the son of a professor from Moscow. I saw a photograph of his mother, an intelligent looking woman with sorrowful eyes. We talked about the Moscow theaters, exhibitions and concerts as if we were in a noble dining room. I kept a very straight face and didn't even make my eyes twinkle at him.

We were discharged at the same time and he carried my clothes very gallantly. I was given a box room as the barracks for the ‘camp's women’ were not suitable for the ‘prima donna’. Extra food was brought to me and when I took a bath women offered to wash my back. I met some ‘fool persons’ who greeted me and asked what they could do for me.¹ But the best ‘servants’ were the thieves at the camp center who were under the control of the fair-haired fellow. Those who were drivers were stopping quietly and asking to take me to the theater when I was going there for a rehearsal. Dozens of children cleaned my room, seeming like gnomes as they cleaned the floor and getting wood from somewhere chopped it and lit the stove.

The fair-haired fellow came to my room when it was clean and sat himself down on the chair, putting his knife next to him so as to make fun of the guards. Sometimes I was afraid when he was there as I noticed that his

eyes became very blue with red sparkles in them and it seemed to me that my life was on a knife's edge. However our conversations had such a high tone that little by little I lost my fear of him. He liked to speak about his mother and I tried to persuade him to return to a calm normal life. He would think deeply and I looked at him with hope. Suddenly it became known that he had strangled someone and he was taken to the penalty area.

I was getting higher and higher. Not only the 'disappeared actor' but also the conductor and the free director kissed my hand. They were preparing me for a performance with the symphony orchestra. Pulling myself up I began to work on the most difficult aria from 'Joan of Arc'¹. I was singing better than I did when I was in freedom, but I was overstrained and the effects began to be felt day after day. In spite of the fact that I was at the highest point of the camp I had the feeling that I was on the floor of the Vologda transit camp. The most important thing was the attitude of the camp manager to my performance and he had ordered them to write my name on every placard in the town. At the general rehearsal I sang with my final effort so that on the day of the concert I lost my voice and ran to the doctor. My vocal chords were in disorder and it was impossible to sing.

The storm broke next day. They took my identity card, they took my off my furs and dressed me in a cotton cloth of the '40s and they took my bed. I was not allowed to be given parcels and they gave me the worst barracks in the camp. I lay down on the bed of wooden boards, which a poor worker gave me, put my hand under my head and fell fast asleep. Poor women were looking at me as if I was a dead person then somebody said, "Do not be sorry. You should get used to it. This is a camp and the prisoners do not have any fortune. We live the way the chiefs want us to live. Today you are a princess, tomorrow you are nothing."

Chapter 6

Not a Cow or a Horse

Now I made a very miserable appearance in a hat that was a half-hat, an old reefer and trousers made of cotton, tucked into felt boots which were not a pair. All those who had honored me, meeting me now on prison camp detail, did not want to greet me anymore. The only place where I could hide was in the dark barracks whose inhabitants had got used to every trouble and tragedy so they did not pay any attention to me. They lived on boards and coming back to their houses after a difficult working day they got some rest in the coziness of the 'home' which was given them. Maybe I was the only person who paid attention to others' lives and I always watched them.

A woman, who was a laundress, was sitting on the lower board near the barrel with yeast and boiled water and I thought that she was probably one of the early criminal inhabitants of the camp. She had a dark face which was very much like rye bread. She sat on the edge of the board and she was afraid to crumple the starched fancy work and to disturb the majesty of the pillow that had the following inscription, 'Sleep calmly, my darling'.

Komiachka, from Komi ASSR,¹ in a boyar dress and red sarafan¹ embroidered with ribbons, had the same pillow. She was a dishwasher and dressmaker. Everybody, who lived on the lowest boards, had pillows with the same inscription.

There was only one pillow that was lying in a vertical position and had no fancy pillowcase on it. The host of this pillow was a serious, sad woman, Irina Kalistratovna Gogua. There was a photograph of a girl and a

pile of books on her bedside table. When she came back from work she spread a white cloth on the table and ate the camp soup with a spoon that she had brought from home. She was here because she had been working with an ex-Soviet leader. Already here for ten years she will be here forever living in one camp or another in the darkness of the barracks. She observes the rules of a civilized person so as not to disappear or melt away and I think that she is a hero.

However I don't want to decorate my prison corner. I sleep when I put my clothes under my head and everything is all one to me. The people who sleep on the highest boards sleep on the wood. They are village workers and they have also become indifferent. They come back from work, eat their food and go to sleep. One of them is a short-sighted chemist and she sleeps under an umbrella that keeps the bright electric lights away from her. The open umbrella is not a usual thing on the highest board and it is enough to make everybody hate this unhappy chemist.

There are no camp husbands, but there are two heads on the pillows of the inhabitants of the lower board. Nobody is ashamed of making 'love'. They make love in front of everyone and no one condemns or discusses this. I would have preferred not to hear both its rude expression and the sound of rats that began to play after their sleepy day. I still could not sleep and this only disappeared when I began going to the collective work and came back dragging my feet and falling on the boards without any strength.

They put me in the group of the 'worst' and it consisted of those men with bowls who were crowded next to the window of the canteen. We were taken to the turf pit and made to work with a pick. The pick was very heavy and after I lifted it I fell down in a bank of snow. It was February and there was a freezing wind which chilled one to the bone so it was impossible to stand still without working. I took the shovel but an angry brigadier snatched it from my hand. I was hitched to the cart and the whole day I pulled it from the pit to the field spilled out the turf and went back. I waited for the break as a time of great grace.

We used to make a fire in the middle of the field and sit next to it so closely that our boots were burning but we were not sorry about that. If we had tobacco we smoked it, but that happened very rarely. While we smoked it one after the other I looked at my companions. All of them had had a long term of imprisonment. There was a peasant with a beard, a kulak, who was imprisoned in 1929 and he had tried to break out several times unsuccessfully.¹ There was also a young fellow who was a victim of the famine in Leningrad. Getting out of the blockade he had stolen a loaf of bread and he was caught and imprisoned. When he was set free he stole again and that is why he was arrested again.¹

The passion of sympathy was born in me, I say just sympathy because all my personal sufferings were absorbed by it. I did not feel anything anymore, but only thought about how to feed my friends. Every evening swallowing poison soup I passed from one women's barracks to another and took whatever was left in the bowls - moldy, green crusts of bread, pieces of baked pudding, gnawed bones. Shreds of tobacco were sacrificed as well. I went to sleep happy because I knew I could feed my big children the next day. When I came back they ran to me like hens and picked up the small pieces of food. But the happiest moments were during the break time when we sat next to the fire and I gave them the tobacco. Then we began to remember what it was like in freedom. Life in freedom was so far away that we thought it was like the sun, happy and bright, without any grief.

The Spring of the North came with melted snow and slush, so it got harder to work day by day, but now I had a partner. She was a square-built, very strong Estonian. As she was taller than me the whole burden of the cart was on her. I ran beside her as she carted. I understood by her behavior that she came from farming people and so she was very close to the earth and to farm work. She tested the turf and the black earth with her hand, she looked in the bunkers and wiped off the dirt from our sledge runners. She carefully fastened us up to the belts as with a favorite horse. Then I noticed that there was something she didn't like and I saw the sparks of virulence in her unthinking eyes.

It was getting warmer day after day and it was so easy for me that as I walked next to my partner I was listening to the songs of the sparrows. However, I did not enjoy the Spring and my rest for very long. The end came one bright Spring day when rivulets were running along the road, which we worked beside, and there was a smell of last year's silage and wet ground. We brought the cart to the hole and began to wait for our turn. A horse and a thin cow harnessed to a cart were standing before us. Taking pleasure in the idleness I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sun's rays.

Suddenly my Estonian partner shouted loudly, "I am not a cow and not a horse." With a sharp movement she took off the belts and ran away through the ditches of the field. There was an ox that was pegged to the ground. She detached it and wanted to come back when she saw another worker coming up to her. She ran away and hid behind the hill and at that moment I was in despair, thinking only about one thing: that I would have to work alone. Suddenly the girl re-appeared marching like a winner holding something in her hands. It looked like a shield but as she came closer and closer I could see that she was joyfully holding a handbarrow in front of her, which was meant for the use of human beings.

Chapter 7

Prisoner in Freedom

In the summer the Estonian was taken to sow seeds and the men and I were taken to the baling of the cut hay. We worked in pairs and it was very difficult work. Meanwhile there had been an investigation into the reason for my refusal to perform with the symphony orchestra. The doctor gave a certificate proving that I had had a problem with my voice and I was removed from the collective work and taken back in to the theater. That last day, without any strength, I slept during the break with my head in the hay and three or four days later I was traveling in the first class cabin of a ship to the road shows. In those days there were twenty male prisoners and only one woman – me – in the troupe. They had to put me with the free actresses and the contrast of this day with the previous days made me very excited. The feeling that I was a prisoner in freedom was making me drunk. I was thinking, “What if the passengers knew who was traveling with them?” We were not allowed to reveal to anyone the secret of who we were under the threat of being sent back to the guards in the camp. The necessity of keeping the secret excited me. I put on the best dress that was provided, gave the best tips and walked very proudly on the deck of the ship with heroes decorated with the medals of the Soviet Union.



When we arrived at Siktikvar¹ I was put in the best hotel. I took a bath covered myself with a shawl and went to the hairdresser. The manicurist was very inquisitive as is the habit of every manicurist. I let her do whatever she wanted to do with my hands and with a light heart I told her some unreal things. Then suddenly I heard a familiar voice: "If there is nobody else for the manicurist I will be next after you." I put the shawl over my face up to my eyes and turned round. Yes, of course it was she, a friend from Moscow. My hand began to shake and the manicurist pulled at my trembling hand. She tried to warm my hand with hers but nothing could help her. My hand continued to tremble so much that the nail varnish could hardly be put on my nails. At last the manicure was, with difficulty, finished. I covered my face with the shawl and rushed to the door, but I was called back by the irritated voice of the manicurist: "What about the money, will you not take the receipt?" I was obliged to take the receipt go to the cashier's window again and return to that 'devilish' manicure table.

I felt the puzzled look of the woman customer. Then she stood up and came over to me. "It is you, that means it was not true that you were arrested. Thank heavens! You decided to leave us for a very long time. You decided to give road show concerts. Of course one can't earn anything in our place. I have also been busy with that for about three months. It's a pity I will not be at your concert. My train tickets are in this pocket. Dear, how glad I am! I will tell everybody that I saw you in freedom." I do not know how I reached my room because my feet could hardly walk. I lay down on the mattress feeling shaken to pieces. At that moment I was dreaming of the dark barracks, the rough bed where I need not keep a secret and I could say who I was....

The actresses who were in freedom met me with laughter. Several times the passport inspector had come to look for me demanding my passport! Here she was coming back again. I rushed to my bed and lay down with my dress and shoes on, covering my face with the pillow. It was

becoming impossible to stand this situation! Freedom got in the way everywhere! One of our actors, arrested in 1937, was found in a ditch. Many children were looking at him lying in the ditch and he was crying and telling them about his bitter fate. We wanted to take him from the ditch but he did not want to come out of it. The military police came, the old actor was tied up and the next day he was sent to the camp under the control of a guard.

I am afraid of the daylight and I return to the hotel by the back streets. When we are free in the evening we go to the local theater with the whole company. I sit on the last row but our camp guards in civilian suits come and take me from there. They tell me, "The general ordered us to make you feel as if you are in freedom. Why do you want to hide? There is nobody who knows you here." Obeying the order of the general they are looking after me so that I feel myself as if 'in freedom'. They make me sit at the nearest table to the Komi government table and they sit next to me behaving like chevaliers offering me wine and sandwiches.

People sitting at the government table proposed a toast to Stalin's health. A 'chevalier' filled my wine glass and at that moment as I began to drink the toast I was very envious of my friends who sat at the farthest table in darkness. Everyone drank the toast but I didn't want to! However the 'chevaliers' look at me and I bring the glass to my lips. Again I am walking on the deck of the steam ship. I want to stay alone - the river and I and no-one else with me. My freedom is in never-ending meditation and in continually changing landscapes.

We live in vans in Katlas, the theater, canteen and seaside are next to the railroad. Every day I pass along the trains, put letters in the Moscow train and pass by. Once I stopped and began to dream that I was going on the train. I found my place and put my things next to me, the train started and I was going further and further away... Suddenly I noticed somebody gently touching my hand. I turned around and saw that it was one of my 'chevaliers'. He had the eyes of a hunter and a wide smile, which together

with his keen glance seemed malicious, "Ah! I too want to go to Moscow," he said in a mysterious voice, "I would sit and go but they do not allow me to. I would like to get to paradise but my sins do not allow me to go there. Why are you standing here Marina Aleksandrovna, let us go and have dinner." He took my hand and carefully led me to the canteen. His hand held mine fast like chains.

I look for freedom in the empty town park. Every day when the group has a rest in the wagons I go to the town park which was abandoned during the war. The gates are closed but I go through a hole that has been made in the fence. Broken kiosks, overgrown paths and flowerbeds, this is where I can enjoy a deserted place. A deserted place and freedom are all the same to me. Everything enjoys the absence of humans and the natives enjoy a full free life. Bugs and bees buzz in a thicket of grass like a jungle, not disturbed by anyone. The lace of spider's webs is glistening in the sun. Thorns stick to my dress as I wander on and on through the desolate kingdom gazing into the thickness of plants full of buzzing insects. Suddenly I wonder whether this can be real as I see in a clearing a crimson rosebud, neither very red nor very pink, but a third color. One can only see this kind of rose in the Crimea in the poorest flower gardens and it has an especially pleasant smell. Does it have the same smell here in the North? I kneel in front of the rose, draw its fresh stem towards me and smell the sharp aroma of the Crimea and my past in the Crimea....¹

I go to see the rose every day. Nobody knows my secret but I'm afraid they will find out about it from the happiness I feel and which I cannot hide. I wait for the 'dead hour' impatiently and then I go quietly in the direction of the garden. Then I go faster and faster pushed by my eagerness. The rose blossoms very slowly.

The day when I anticipated it would be in full bloom the garden was filled with people. Hammers were thumping, saws were screaming and the gates were open, but I went in through the hole. A feeling of danger did not leave me. The presence of people could be seen everywhere; bushes

were crushed and blades of torn up grass lay along the edges of the paths. I could not find the way to my rose and I could not see the crimson spot. Here is the bush of woodbine and the curve of birch. I look and find the stem has been roughly cut off. Why is this? What a barbarity! I hear the voices of people coming and I tremble with fear. They'll think it is I who is guilty of the robbery of the rose! I run out through the hole leaving part of my dress behind.

I ran along the empty street sensing someone was chasing me, but when I stopped there was nobody in the street. Where could I find refuge? The market was not crowded. I sat down next to the hens whose legs were tied together. Then I went down to the river where there was nobody at this hour. The clear watercourse calmed me down. There was a place I liked to go where there was a log bleached white by the water and I liked it because there was never anybody there at that time. Afterwards I went there every day.

Once I saw a woman who was sitting next to my log. She seemed to be at the seaside as she had an umbrella, a beach towel and a book. I went further until the figure of the woman was out of sight. When I thought I was free of the feeling that pursued me of not being free I decided to look at the river. I heard the sand rustle and the woman was coming towards me carrying her towel, umbrella and book. She put her sheet next to me and said, "You are alone, I am also alone so why do you not want to get acquainted? I am a doctor from Leningrad come on a business trip. What about you?" "I am an actress." "I think you came here with the theater to give road shows." "Yes, of course." "You live in the North? Is it possible?" "I am from Moscow." "You came so far! What made you take such a long trip? I think you must get much money from this trip. Perhaps your husband and children are waiting for you at home..." I was irritated by her chatter and said, "I am not here by my will." "Are you an exile?" "I am a prisoner." She struck her head and awkwardly embracing me began to ask: "A prisoner in freedom! Can it be this way?"

I explained everything to her as she hugged me tightly and with her eyes full of grief she kept on repeating, "Will you go back there after your road concerts?" "My martyr, my martyr" and she kissed my hands and my shoulders. She began to cry, her father had also been arrested in 1937 and she did not know where he was. She said again, "There again...You are a martyr" and she went on kissing my hands and my face. She did not know what the camp was like but she knew the tragedy of the prisoner. She felt it in such a realistic way that I didn't feel so sharply scared myself. I put my hand on her breast and crying I repeated after her, "Yes, I will go back there again...."

Chapter 8

Island of Salvation

When I came back to the camp I got seriously ill and was put in hospital. For several days I was close to death and I knew it but I was not afraid. I thought that there was no distance between imprisonment and death and so little of real life was left that I did not want to cling to it. I was only sorry about my relatives. I repeated the verses of Shiraz which my sister, Tatyana, had translated.¹ I cried imagining her grief and whispered while shedding tears:

“I did not stop to dream
That my stork did not fly away
He brings Spring to us from blue heights on his wings
Let fortune play jokes on me
But she cannot reign over my dreams
I am not deported from Paradise
Who has wings will not fall down from the clouds.”

Workers came from the dark barracks and put a black piece of rag on me and began to read a prayer. The senior physician kicked them out. He also kicked out the Armenian hairdresser who came in the name of prison friends – Armenians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Uzbekis, Ossetians, Ingush, Tartars – to bother about the coffin and a separate grave.

The senior physician visited me in the morning and in the evening. I could hear his steady steps and could feel his concentrated look at me which inspired me with hope. He told me, “You will live”, but I did not know whether he believed his own words or not. His will to raise me was

so frank that my dying heart unwittingly began to revive. At last I recovered and the feeling of Spring and life awoke with that recovery. It turned out that it was worth the fight against death even for all the little things that were left for us prisoners. Those 'little things' were the sun, the trees, the flowers and most of all, people, the heat of human sympathy. I think that only in childhood had I had this feeling of the joy of awakening. I gave my joy to everybody and I could feel the joy spreading along the corridors even in the way people said good morning, "Good morning!" I recognized the familiar voice of the chief keeper, a red-cheeked Moldavian with very black hair sticking up. "Good morning!" "Good morning!"

My memories of the hospital were very dear to me because there I found out that it is worth living in spite of not being free. Next to our hospital there were beds of vegetables and potato plantations. The chief physician was promoting the idea that persons who had been ill should work as he thought that this was the best therapy to help them recover. People in underwear and striped pyjamas were walking about the hospital grounds as if they were laborious ants. Somebody was wheeling the barrow, another person was sweeping, others were digging and yet others were cultivating the ground.

This hospital, Olpa Number One in Ukhtizhemlag, was called the "island of salvation" by the prisoners.¹ Ill persons were not let out until they were completely recovered and those who were hard working were kept on at the hospital as helpers. Some young people were generously taught to become nurses. The chief physician had the idea of setting aside a separate room for those who would be set free in the near future. This was in 1947. I was in the same pavilion with jaundice and I visited them very often. Having heroically survived all the sufferings and humiliations of interrogation, hard work, cold and famine these people were not able to stand this last thing.



A torture of impatience gripped the prisoners during the last months of their sentence. Only amnesty could help them, the sudden disappearance of the chain which they had

to carry with them till the end. But there was no amnesty and this impatience killed these martyrs. Only one Georgian with a nose like an eagle and deep eye sockets was left in this big ward at the end of 1947. There were only a few days left before he would be free.

One dark, polar morning the smell of carbolic was in the corridor and gauze bandages appeared on door handles. Several cases of erysipelas had been found in the wards.¹ What about Georgadze? Georgadze? Georgadze is healthy and cheerful. He has just received a parcel from his relatives with his needs for leaving the camp. And then I was told that Goergadze had been moved to the other, non-infectious wing. But in the evening, when I went to see him as usual I saw death within him. His face was flaming, veins were beating in his temples. When I spoke to him he returned to life with difficulty and wheezed without opening his eyes: "See I am dying. I had to suffer for ten years so as to die ten days before becoming free...." I put my hand on his forehead and noticed that his head was burning hot. Suddenly his eyes opened and he looked at me for the last time. The old man brokenly squeezed my hand and said with an inhuman effort: "Tell those fool persons", I understood that 'fools' were those in freedom. "They are dying with the name of Stalin in their mouths, but I damn him!" An hour later I saw Georgadze calmed down. His head was deep in the pillow and dark lids were deep in his eyes. His parcel was

still on the bedside table and one could see two bars of chocolate and home-made woolen socks inside it.

My illness was getting worse and I had to go to bed. I felt so weak that I had to accept the help of the Romanian attendant. He belonged to the party of social democrats which means the fascists. He was delicate and kind so everybody liked him. I liked his knowledge of history and each time he told me something he did it with pleasure. He gave me history lectures in perfect French. He was also very sorry about the death of Georgadze and I told him about Georgadze's last words. I could not believe the sharp reaction. The fascist sang an unheard of panegyric to the communists! He said, "Your Stalin is a genius. He has found the only way to put everybody under his hand and he has cemented the whole country with fear. We also used fear but it was elemental, that is why it was said to be cruel. Stalin stopped being the adorable leader and created the strongest state in the world with the help of fear. Everybody is connected with fear; I am afraid of you, you are afraid of me, both of us are afraid of him, he is afraid of her and so on. It is perfect!"

I was looking up at the fascist and I could see his ugly face with his chin turned into the nostrils below the hawk-like nose, his small eyes glinted in his eyeholes, his lower lip joined his upper lip and moved in a grin. It was impossible to argue with this fanatical person. I was so busy looking at him that I did not listen to him. Then an icy fear came over me. I closed my eyes and tried to rescue myself from that fanatical man, but it did not help. His crooked, cruel words became more assertive:

"Everybody is fond of Stalin because of this system. They do not understand the extent of it but they deify him. If I am not right then tell me why the Soviet people who profess the most humble learning in the world worship Stalin. Nobody ever had such paradoxical glory. Fame for talent, even for wealth is understandable. But fame for cruelty?" The nostrils closed, the eyeholes narrowed and his lips opened. The person

burst into laughter. “Are you saying Macbeth? Henry IVth? Sultan Gamid? Why not? Vanity and cunning are important to the governor. They reproduce irreversible cruelty, cruelty is the force.....”

I was looking at this person with hate. I wanted to pinch his nose very hard so as to be able to close his snake-like lips. At last the torture ended as one of the patients asked him to come to her. He went to her with his usual smile, hurried to the toilet and brought a night chair to her. Again he became a normal person with the stout head of a Romanian with black eyes and a kind smile.

Chapter 9

About Love

I was taken to another wing of the hospital. My neighbor there was an ill nurse who was a very nice woman with chestnut hair, which had more gold in it than all the blonde-haired girls taken together. I liked to look at her bright locks when she was combing it in the light of the pale northern sun. I was also amused by her eyebrows which looked as if they were clearly embroidered and the skilful movement of her fingers when she was knitting or sewing. She bought parcels with the money she earned and sent them to her son. It seemed as if he, a thin boy with his mother's mild eyes, was present in our room because of his mother's description of his features.

My husband was also an invisible inhabitant of our ward. I had never done very much sewing but I began to sew the design of the Bulgarian cross. I was pretending that my husband would be very happy when he saw this new demonstration of my love for him. Thus slowly we were getting through our illness, partings and the unpredictable future by warm love for our close relatives. Once I said to my friend, "Today I woke up with terrible grief in my soul. I felt that I would never see him again. What do you think? Is it just a feeling?" She did not put her work aside but told me, "Sometimes I also think about it, but it seems so to us because we love." Because our souls were calm and our feelings stable it made the young people tell us about the secrets of their hearts.

Love in a camp is very sad and often tragic. I cannot forget the love of the twenty year-old communist, Kolya, who had been arrested for something he said just after a battle at the front. His face was fairy pink,

which meant that his heart was ill and this had happened because he was suffering very much, as his arrest was a mistake. All of us were sorry for him and looked after him but one blue-eyed nurse was very much attached to him. They loved each other with a deep, sincere love. I could see them together in the duty station. Both of them knew that Kolya would not live for long and they were very sad because they felt that parting was very close to them. Kolya died and the attendant, a Spanish anti-fascist pilot, then fell in love with the nurse. He had come to the USSR for airplanes to take to Spain and was out of the country when Franco won. He had been offered Soviet citizenship and when he refused, he had to go through prison tortures and at last found himself behind the gate of the Stalin camp.

The love of the Spaniard, in spite of not being mutual, was sunny and something that could make me believe there was happiness in the world. It was like a never-ending serenade because Spanish music and dances are full of love. In the morning when he passed by our window he would look in and say, "Good morning!", and the whole day we would have a zest for life.

Sometimes in the evenings after the last round of visits the doctors and nurses came to our ward. There were many themes for conversation. We would read letters from home, talk about the new patients and at the end of the evening we would talk about love – our own or another's. We would tell stories of comic or tragic love but they were always clear and had a bright outline. Then it was my turn and I could not persuade everybody that I loved only one person and that I did not have any love affairs in the camp, so I had to tell a love story from my past discarding trifling events.

At last I remembered and memories appeared one after another so that I could hardly tell them apart. In that far past I was a teenager with a long braid and a bow. My friends did not like the young man who came to

see me riding a horse straight from the front. He was very angry and caused a lot of harm to flowers, trees and bushes. Only I could see, as he kissed me in a boat on the beach, that he was not only kind but had unlimited loving in him, in spite of the constant bitterness of his feelings. This was the bitterness of a Jew who had been conscripted into the White army. What had happened to him after? What had happened to him after? There was silence in the ward.

“His name was Alexander”, I remembered, “What about the last name... the last name was Varshavski.” We were shocked by a cry from one of the nurses. “What about the year of his birth?” I saw the white lips and widened grey-blue eyes of the doctor of our wing. “Who is he for her? Is he her husband, brother or lover?” I was so excited that I could not count the date of birth of my beloved. I was stuttering, “In those days he was 16 or 17....” The doctor went out of the ward and we could hear her stumbling steps in the corridor. Five minutes went by and I wanted to go after her. When she came back I saw some triumph in her walk and in her eyes. It seemed to me that she wanted to expose some important secret to us. She handed me a piece of paper covered from top to bottom with writing.

“Yes, he was born in 1903. Your Varshavski is a lame duck. Why did you not tell me about him before? Listen, yesterday at the same time and the same place”, she pointed at the wall next to my bed, “Alexander Varshavski died.”

Chapter 10

Fire in the Theater

In the Autumn of 1948 bad times came to our place. The prisoners were whispering to each other, “What has happened to ‘our father’?” It seemed that we had won and the victory would be famous all over the world....What is he agitated about this time? All the bad changes in our lives we used to connect with Stalin. “Did he know?”, asked those who were trying to find an explanation for their love of the ‘leader’, which is full of fear. Did he know about it? Yes, he did. Because our fear and the only tragic-comedy in the world was the demonstration of his vanity, cunning and cowardice!

The first stage of other prisoners with severe charges against them was forming – in a direction full of malicious secrecy. Their identity cards were taken from those who stayed in the Ukhtizmalag. The guards took the artists to the theater in trucks and in the evening sky brought them back to the center of the camp. Our theater was a white building set against a background of black spruces. It was a wooden theater with light columns along the façade and it seemed the only place of refuge for us. I remember when I was going into the corner of the theater, with my part in my hand, I was trembling with fear as I did not want to be taken and led to the cattle train with its unpainted, wooden steps.

The first stage finished and the marriages and friendships of the camp were denounced. The theater was getting ready for the operetta, ‘The Princess of the Circus’¹. Everybody knew their role by heart and was trying not to lose it. The prisoner ‘stars’ did not refuse to take even the smallest part, they would even join the chorus and the theater was buzzing as if it was a hive.

At the beginning of 1949 there was an order to keep the prisoners, who should be freed, until a special order came. After this order, several prisoners who should have been freed, died in the camp. The attendant, who drove Bukharin in his car, had a stroke and a few days before his death I went to see him. One of his cheeks was moving convulsively and as he looked at me with surprise he tried to say, "My daughter will come for meWill they let me go with her?" His other cheek did not move and I could see a teardrop on it.

Information came from the 'great land',¹ that those who were set free in 1947-48 were to be arrested again. Another long stage was being prepared in our Ukhtizmalag Camp. Somebody saw the names of the artists in the lists, but then they were crossed off.

We were rehearsing in a feverish way and it seemed that we were never so disciplined and well consolidated. All the tickets were sold out several days before the first night. The dress rehearsal was going on with grease paint and full costumes. The first and the second acts were perfectly performed and when the curtains opened for the third act the whole hall applauded. I remember the satisfied face of the director who was sitting in the parterre. Then he said, "There was not even one fault."

There was a duet with the hero and heroine on the apron stage. When I remember the golden-haired Princess of the Circus on the shoulder of Mr. X it seems to me that it was only yesterday. We were waiting for the final note after which the chorus would begin its work. But instead the heroine clearly said, "Keep calm, comrades, do not panic but the theater is burning." And then we saw the flames of a fire which was coming down from the attic and was damaging the ceiling beams. Our whole tense experience and the new triumph of the theater stopped immediately. The electricity was turned off and by the light of the fire the faces of the actors were brazen-red. I remember open mouths and eyes full of fear. I remember even the clang of the instruments being taken from the orchestra pit and the unsparing crack of the fire. There was panic

among those milling about on the stage and the stairs which led to the dressing room were in darkness. All this lasted only five minutes but it was difficult to find clothes in the darkness.

I do not know if it was the brigadier, who was not panicking and in a voice which calmed the actors, called for heroism, or whether it was the voice of conscience and a gratefulness for the theater, but as if in obedience to the wave of a magician's wand the imprisoned actors started to work pulling out from the flames whatever we could save.

"Take out the boxes with essentials very carefully!" We could hear the voice of the brigadier. "We will", the ready voices answered. "Did you take everything out from the library?" "There is not even one piece of paper there." "Who is free? Take the notes and the books and put them as far away as possible."

The only free person was I. I could not find my felt boots in the darkness and that is why I could not go after my friends who were carrying out the things from the theater. Carefully gathering up the notes and books I walked in my ballet shoes through the snow drifts and although in the depths of grief, at the same time I felt that I was doing something important, though little enough, to participate in that general heroism.

"Do not try to get into the rehearsal room. It is full of fire." The Brigadier's voice was heard. "But there is a piano. It is impossible to take it out. Finish with the dressing rooms. Hurry up! The wind is coming."

The theater turned into one big, sibilant, hissing fire. Only the left wing of it was still dark where the dressing rooms were still untouched by fire. The actors were running out wearing whatever they could put on from the dressing room, varicoloured tabards, corselets and helmets.... The fire was becoming stronger because of the wind and the flow of water from a pump, which had arrived late with the firemen, was so small that it could not dampen the fire.

Everything is ended" the Brigadier cried out, "Is there anybody still in the theater? Did everybody come out?" "Everybody!" Boleslav is not

here!", somebody cried out. "Boleslav! Boleslav!" "I saw him in the library." "We were taking the chest from the dressing room." Suddenly I remembered the tenor of Boleslav in the depth of the theater. "Boleslav! Boleslav!" His name seemed to be something golden in the fierce fizz of the fire. Suddenly we saw the figure of Boleslav in the corridor of flame carrying something huge as he stood in the flaming doorway. Everybody ran to him with a cry of glory to catch the thing he was carrying and I saw on the melted snow, covered with ash, our old piano for rehearsals.

Was it happiness? Yes, of course it was happiness. We were feeling it when we were kissing and pulling the hero, Boleslav, to our hearts in the crowded truck on the way back to the camp. After that everything was in darkness because it was very miserable and ugly. Only one brick wall was left of the theater and nobody could tell which wall it was. After that we rehearsed in the club on the square and we tried not to look at this wall when we passed by.

At that time, the second stage was formed which was to be sent far-away in an unknown direction. In the office the dark faces of people were seen here and there, who were losing the life they had become used to, even though it was a temporary fate. Nobody waited for good news and everybody was ready for the worst. At night we were called for questioning. The 'ambulatory commission', which was to investigate the case of the people who had set fire to the theater, came to our camp and asked the same questions every day. "Where were you when the theater began to burn?" "Who was in the dressing rooms? Who was behind the curtains? Who was in the parterre?" "Who was the first to notice the fire?" They were asking us these questions indifferently and turned over the pages of our 'cases' which were lying on the table in front of them.

All of us knew that the reason for the fire was the fault of free electricians, but we were keeping to the camp principle, 'Nothing was seen or heard', and kept silence. Did they really need the truth? They were masterly at evading reality in spite of it being obvious. But our destiny was

pre-judged. I do not know how the news concerning us reached us word for word from the main office. It turned out that the members of the commission mentioned to our camp bosses, who were trying to do everything to help us, that there were terrorists in the group of artists. The commission was from the government and was very powerful in Moscow. There was no sense in trying to persuade them by telling about the deeds of the actors who saved the goods from the theater. That is why several artists were included in the list of the next stage and my name was also there.

Chapter 11

In the Unknown Column

Our names were read out late at night and in the morning we were lined up for the transportation. We had to wait for a very long time and I used this chance to go and say goodbye to my friends at the hospital. These days everybody thought that those who were sent to the next stage would die. My friend the nurse was saying goodbye to me as if I were fated. She grasped my rucksack and whispered, "Do not go there, maybe the chief physician will do something." She came after me trying to believe that it was possible to save me, but a malicious will from Moscow had prepared another destiny for me and I had to obey. I understood that I could not change anything.

I felt sharply that I was fated when I went to say goodbye to the chief physician. He was sitting at the table in his long office and when I went in he mustered up his will so as to be able to inspire me with patience and hope. As I was leaving his office I turned back and noticed that he was very sad.

In the transit camp we were put into newly built barracks. They were full of beds and the ceiling was dark with smoke.

Cheerful urka¹ girls in kubankas¹ and short reefer jackets were walking here all day and night as if they were on the main street. The 'political' women, grey-haired and pale, were all in one heap on the top wooden boards nestling close to each other like frightened birds. We joined them and our new life began. Maybe it was not life at all; wake up, drink hot water, then something like soup and again hot water. Only our notes from Olpa were left from the previous life and the melodies that we sang not long ago. All of us belonged to a type of frightened prisoners and

some cases were so bad they had to be isolated. I was lying on a wooden bed day and night, night and day. For the first days I could feel grief but after that nothing else was left, only a vacuum which sucked up the sounds of the transit camp.

We were waiting for the next stage for a month, maybe more. After that we were put on small, cattle trains and my new trip began. I lay in prostration and I did not want to remember the past or to look at my future. At dining hours the doors of the train opened and we looked at life, at a guard joyfully running with a pail, at sparrows, the sky, snow, rails....Then the doors closed again, the bolt was fastened with a rasping sound and we continued our journey in darkness, which was only interrupted by the sound of the tapping of the guards on the ceiling of the train. We were taken out to be checked at night. Like mad people we jumped down from our boards and still sleepy stood trembling with closed eyes in the middle of the wagon.

Our life in this stage gradually formed. The women had already begun to chatter, discussing food, baking crackers. Some managed to drag through forbidden needles and cottons and completely calmed down, they embroidered and darned. By the intuition which one could gain in prison, the women guessed the whereabouts of the station, the hours of feeding, the names of the guards and the hours of their watches. All this led to discussion and caused disputes.

We were taken to the bath house in Sverdlovsk. Enjoying the air and the opportunity to move, our unending chain walked with a vigorous step on the snowy ground. Sverdlovechane were crowded on the sidewalks looking at us with curiosity and with pity. One woman looked at me and began to cry loudly. Another woman tried to give a piece of bread to a prisoner but the escort shouted roughly at her.

We went back with a more easy and vigorous step. We were pleased that we were released from dirt and from insects, and that we had washed our clothes and when we returned to our train we would be given boiled

water. Sverdlovechane were again crowded on the sidewalks and the peered at our persons with curiosity. A woman pointed at my small sobbing friend to another woman marching among the ranks of prisoners and both of them nodded grievously.

There was a breath of home in the train, which was full of washed clothes. We dried and combed our hair, darned our clothes and settled down closer to the heated oven. After that we were drinking the barely sweetened boiled water and telling each other news which we had heard in freedom. We were doing it all with such pleasure, which is unknown to people living in well-being.

So we were going to 'Ozerlag',¹ which is located near the city of Taishet. It is a camp on the shores of a lake so it should be beautiful there. At night when we were all turning over by an unsaid order, first on the left side and then on the right side, I dreamed about the Siberian lakes in the middle of the taiga.¹ The terrible presentiments dissipated and gradually I got used to stage life. I leant towards the small trellised window, the only light source and saw the escaping snow plain. Taishet ...it sounds something like Tashkent and an exotic Buryat city. Taishet is somewhere in the Southeast of Siberia and we travel to the southeast. Arming my imagination more and more I jumped over all our unhappy experiences: cold, famine, night examination, monotony and boredom. I dreamt and sang and a holiday was created in our cabin.

The collision with reality took place on one of those same stage days. Doors opened in front of us and we saw mountains of coal, trucks full of dirty snow. I do not remember where we saw an inscription Taishet – on a signboard of the station or on the unhooked commodity car, but nothing could strike my imagination so painfully as this sad station, which appeared to be the 'exotic' city Taishet.

The train started and we were carried to Ozerlag. The night fell and turmoil began in our dwelling on wheels. We were collecting things together and bags were dumped from the upper beds. Then we got down

from the train and stood on the side of the railway line. The long blind train passed by us with a creaking and clang of the bars. There was motionless taiga on both sides of the railway. We began to move and dim fires were seen in the distance on a hill. At last we reached them and again there was a clang of bars. The gate opened and we saw dark houses, military figures vaguely showing in the darkness and a woman in a reefer coat with a round bat in her hand like a table tennis bat. She was a regulator but also a prisoner.

Hope had not yet died in my soul. Actually there was no dream in my mind; as if in a trance I asked a question which had been stirring in me for a long time. 'Have you an amateur performance?' Gloomy snicker and then, "Amateur performance? We do not even have a radio. We have nothing. Tomorrow you will see." That night, being settled in the barracks we saw that there was no glass in the windows and that the women were warmed by their own heat, as they nestled against each other.

In the morning we were given sodden, under-baked bread and liquid porridge. We also got something looking like it in the afternoon and the same in the evening. But all these were trifles in comparison with the most important thing; we did not have work and an address. This news gave birth to grim thoughts. Most of the people here were foreigners. There were a lot of people from the west, sectarians, and only a small percentage of Soviet people with heavy sentences. We sadly wandered in a zone. Then, "Ozerlag – camp on a lake?" We were lifted by laughter, "What lake? Special Closed Regime Camp."

There were good reasons why we were in low spirits, but nevertheless, counter to our dim life the March sun sparkled, silver sparks played on frozen white snow and the air was impregnated with the aroma of pine needles, not only the familiar pine or fir tree, but also a sharp, spicy aroma which was absolutely new to me. We were taken to the forest behind for wood and I looked for the source of this aroma. It was a stout fir tree reminiscent of a cedar of Lebanon. The Siberian firs were green

against a background of pink, sunset sky. The stones which we were carrying in a column like ants in this zone were heavy, but I did not notice their weight, I was so struck by the greatness of the rust and green colored, wild taiga. Spruce and fir trees with huge branches lying in heaps under them, struck by lightning – red from the scorched pine needles.

The whole column was in a death-like despondency with dim eyes and languid movements, so it was necessary to act. First of all, it was important not to become wild and books would help if we could find books somewhere. Even just one book would do and the book was found. In the grey bag of one of the hungry women of the stage *Eugene Onegin* was found. We read it together and alone, we learned it by heart and recited it. It was a beam of light in the impenetrable, uttermost darkness.

A prisoner, who had recently been arrested, appeared in the column as if precisely lowered on a parachute. She had her hair cut in the style of the twenties and wearing a beret she was wreathed in clouds of cigarette smoke. She still believed in her validity and waited for early freedom. Happily she turned out to be a historian. We directed her romantic ardor onto education. We surrounded her greedily and she gave a lecture on history to the attentive women.

It was high time for music now. We understood its necessity, its life-giving force. The chief of the column also dreamed of music to our delight. He was a good-natured Ukrainian and like us he did not understand the mystery of the treatment of prisoners in the Ozerlag camp. As soon as we began talking about music we became the owners of a small accordion, which belonged to the chief of the station. It was a miracle, but it was necessary to take possession of the miracle. Every day the pianist from Ukhtizmalag worked at it. First of all inarticulate sounds were heard, then the 'Dog Waltz', a foxtrot and at last the difficult accompaniments of songs.

Music brought the whole column together. Women carpenters appeared and got permission to build a stage in the canteen. Artists were also found in the camp and the guards got paints for them so they could paint scenery. Amateur actors studied the play under the direction of a professional actress. A prisoner who was an actress of the Bolshoi theater organized the chorus. Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians and Belarusians all sewed national costumes for participation in the dances. A real concert was held on May first in our camp deep in the heart of the taiga by an unknown column and the tale about it was carried down the line.

Chapter 12

Cocoa with Cake

The management found out about our amateur performance and the strongest of us were enlisted in the Central Cultural brigade. We were put into a men's camp at an auto repair factory. When the guards led us along the alley, bordered by flowerbeds and neat houses, we saw men's faces standing next to barred windows. At first, we were afraid of the bars at the windows of the Special Regime Camp. On the same evening we learned about the second measure which had not yet been carried out on female columns; after the evening check prisoners were locked in the barracks for the night.

The next day after our arrival a concert was held. I distinctly remember the inspired faces of the listeners and I could sharply feel the 'esteem for women'. This feeling is unavailable to women living in a mixed human society.

Every day actors arrived in the camp. An orchestra, chorus, drama and operetta were organized. On Saturdays we performed the program to free people and on Sundays the performances were shown to the prisoners of our camp. There was a glamour about art to the leadership and this gave us some privileges. The camp men were allowed to attend rehearsals and we received the private right to communicate with them during breaks.

I had never met so many rare and noble people in the same place. The majority of them were caught up in the Patriotic War.¹ They had not killed themselves in the name of Stalin when they were surrounded by the enemy. The old engineers were there – the first builders of Soviet industry

– and ‘old (not old at that time) Bolsheviks’ – heroes of the Revolution. I remember how I joined in their conversation once when I came down from the stage.

We were talking about Stalin in a whisper; whether he would be exposed one day, whether they would understand that we were innocent. Many people in my company were in prison for a second term. The habit of long-term imprisonment benumbed the will and they considered themselves doomed. False love for Stalin had deep roots, it went too far. “Maybe some day, though after his death.” “It will be difficult to find such brave people.” But I knew instinctively that the right kind of people would be found and tried to transfer my belief in that idea to them with the help of songs. I think I was not the only one who thought this way. All of us tried to dispel the camp gloom with the help of art. It was worth the graduation from the conservatoire, to get experience in art and music for the sake of their smiles. Let my friends in art forgive me for spoiling my career, which I had chosen in freedom.

Despite window bars and locks it was the most useful time in our artistic activity, though not all my colleagues admitted it. Even those of them who lived a selfless life in camp and who blossomed under unusually magnificent color of love towards ‘brothers’, tried later to betray and keep in oblivion those original, light days of our life.

In the autumn Ruslanova was brought to our column.¹ Her affable smile immediately won our sympathy and from the first moment of the meeting she became the heart of our cultural brigade. From the very beginning she wanted to serve the prisoners. When we came back to the barracks after the rehearsals a hot oven and cake were waiting for us there. She baked Lenten pie from flour which she had traded her share of food to obtain. I can still picture her, slim with a pale face in an apron with a towel over her shoulder while she tenderly gave us ‘what God sent’ and later removed the utensils.

Ruslanova began to sing. At first she had refused to give performances before the chiefs, but as they threatened her with a prohibition against acting for the prisoners she conceded. She was ready to sing for the prisoners day and night. She went to the factory at night and sang there. The prisoners loved her but she was feeling worse and worse. She was sent to the prison hospital and owing to her insistence I was allowed to stay with her for a day.

Lying next to each other on the beds we recollected freedom and it seemed very tempting to us! We were dreaming about refined dishes because we were always half hungry. What sauces and fancies we remembered during this cozy evening in that prison hospital!

Before sleeping I said, "Now most of all I want to have a cocoa with cake. Nothing else is needed." I fell asleep with this unrealizable dream and I did not know what turmoil then began in the medical service.

It appears that Ruslanova called the hospital attendant and ordered him to visit everyone who had received parcels and to ask them for condensed milk, oil, egg powder and flour. When her order was executed she made a big fire in the oven and cooked all night. At first the cake was not a good one. Then she succeeded with the cake but it was not properly baked. At six in the morning I was woken up by the gaze of my friend fixedly directed at me. She wanted me to see that my dream came true at the first moment of my awakening. In a grey hospital dressing gown and grey kerchief, tired and exhausted after the sleepless night, she stood next to my bed, holding a glass of hot cocoa in one hand and in the other a pan containing a round, appetizing, rosy cake!

Chapter 13

Heroism

In the middle of June a host of mosquitos were in the air. Mosquito nets did not help anymore and there was no escape from the insects. Workers came back from the forest bitten and covered in blood. Attracted by the shine of the eyes the mosquitos bit the mucous membrane and closed up the eyes so that people were becoming temporarily blind. Some of the guards of the tree-felling columns used the invasion of mosquitos as a means of torture. They took prisoners, whom they wanted to punish, to the forest, undressed them and left them with bound hands. Some people died but the murder of guilty prisoners was not considered to be a crime. On the contrary the murderers received awards, so the 'draftee' guards killed prisoners for the sake of the promised award. They killed them in a 'prohibited area'. Then the fence of the 'prohibited area' was rearranged, so the corpse appeared to be out of that area.

We accused the Stalinists of being the murderers and torturers of defenseless prisoners. One man of this breed was in our column. He occupied the post of chief of the column's schedule and his last name was Rizhak. He was dirty, careless and always unshaven, with the gait of a bear and the mien of an angry, wild boar. I do not know whether he had killed any prisoners but he was systematically destroying the lives of the helpless women, who were in his charge, taking away everything that could brighten up their minds a little.

He came to the zone at different hours and confiscated different things at the hour of inspection, so it was impossible to hide them beforehand. I remember how his hands shook when he rummaged through the poor

female rags and I imagined what kind of happiness he felt when he listened to the plaintive cry of exhausted workers finding out the loss. As a true Stalinist he was cowardly. After he noticed the attentive attitude of the commandant of the camp to the actresses of Ozerlag who once visited the tree-felling column, he treated us with civility in a servile way. But he also hated us because of his cowardice! To do well in a regime camp a person must not only be kind but also brave. This refers especially to the commandant who is called officially and authorized from above to be cruel.

One young duty officer with sad, black eyes loved music very much. He regularly came to our concerts and at that time the concerts were especially lyrical. Apart from the solo numbers accompanied by a plaintive guitar, we also sang quintets. Each of us found her own voice and we sang in harmony. It seemed that our art was able to heal many wounds, something sacred appeared in the column and it helped the forest workers to bear their agony. The duty officer usually sat in the front row and after the concert he came on stage and smiling at us stood beside our party not daring to express the admiration of a profane outsider.

Nevertheless, once he came up to me in a courtyard of the zone. He stopped me at a distance of half a meter, which was legal by camp law, and asked some questions concerning my father's music. I forgot about the rule and began to say a lot, loudly, about my father and his friends, about the lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov and about my father's life in Armenia. Approaching closer and closer I did not notice how I put my hand on his shoulder. He was younger than I and not very tall and he listened to my story with awe! Suddenly I felt him looking somewhere beside my ear, but I went on talking without feeling the immediate danger. His face became paler and paler so I turned round and saw that Rizhak was looking from behind the wall of the barracks. I have never seen such an expression of complete gloating. The prisoner was absolutely close to her commandant and the hand of the prisoner was on his shoulder - that was

something to delight in. He hardly breathed and there were beads of sweat on his face. He looked and looked and could not see enough. And what a smile! The broadest, predatory smile anticipating the prize!

Jumping back from the chief I shouted, "Why did you not stop me? You saw him a long time ago! And I....I forgot that I am a prisoner!" There is nothing more perfect than the smile of the man who knows about a forthcoming scourge and is not sorry about the act which has caused it. Looking at me, completely timid, the young man said, "I wanted you to feel free for a little while. I perfectly understood that you had forgotten all about your situation and I did not want to remind you of it."

Chapter 14

Last Concert

In that same autumn the heads of the Taishet camp restored the Central Cultural Brigade and we settled down at the transfer camp. A famous pianist from Moscow was there with us and we were given a piano but it sounded like a wet drum. The pianist tried to play on it, then left it and began to exercise his wonderful fingers on the table. I frequently observed him playing on the table or on the windowsill. Sometimes it was melancholy and sometimes it was with the purpose of warming up his hands. Noticing my glance he smiled embarrassed and hid his hands, but then his fingers continued their exercises again and his eyes lit up with a musical idea. He became sad and more and more silent. Then he became happy and spent his days at metal work. Together with the mechanic he was engaged in some constructive calculations. At last the piano disappeared from the stage and we found it in the metalwork shop behind sheets of iron and hanks of copper wire. The pianist came in to dinner very cheerful and let his fingers free.

Looking through the window of the metalwork shop we saw the piano with its insides out. Then they were put back into place and plaintive sounds of adjustment were heard. At last the workers of the transportation camp saw the piano brought back on to the stage. Sitting in the small room of the cultural training unit we awaited the arrival of the pianist. We could see through the crack of the door how he climbed onto the stage with smoothly brushed hair and wearing a tidy, white shirt. At that moment the chief of the cultural training unit came into the small room. Heavy and always sleepy he called us over to the desk and, smelling

of vodka, read a document which he had just received. It said that henceforth the prisoners of the regime camp were not allowed to be engaged in art; the cultural brigade must be dissolved as from that day and the piano must be taken to the city. We pleaded with him to wait until the evening. We said the pianist has just sat down at the piano for the first time and he had worked very hard to repair it! The first sounds of the keys came from the stage. We pulled at the official with our hands and implored him to let the pianist play, but the 'document' was everything for him and it was impossible to change his mind.

Someone ran to fetch the commandant responsible for emergency action, a senior experienced man whom everybody respected. He sat in the front row to listen and all the prisoners of the transfer camp sat behind him in the club canteen. The mechanic was among them festively dressed with his face flushed with pleasure. We settled quietly on the stage and the pianist tightened his shabby cuffs and put his hands on the keys.

I do not remember what he played because only he reigned over the music. Only he and he was Topilin.¹ His skill, the force of his spirit, his tragedy, all completely overwhelmed us. It seemed that he grew larger and that the ceiling rose above him to expose the sky. Dead silence reigned in the club and our girls put their faces in the collars of their reefer coats, so that their woeful sighs could not be heard. The pianist played on and after each piece the club burst with applause and exactly as in large concert halls he rose and respectfully bent his head to his chest.

The commandant of the cultural training unit did not know what was happening. Glancing through the door of the small room I could see him sprawled in an armchair with an open mouth from which snores could be heard. The pianist played on and suddenly the door to the stage opened widely to reveal the figure of the sleepy commandant of the cultural training unit on the threshold. He looked around with sleepy eyes and then approached the pianist with decisive steps and put his red 'paw' on

those divine fingers. "Stop, that's enough! The decision is the decision. It says that music is forbidden for the prisoners, so it is impossible to play anymore. Cover up the piano."

The pianist sat bowed down as if all the ceilings of the world had fallen onto him. Prisoners cried out, "The parasites! The barbarians!" and the voice of the mechanic was heard above all the others. The commandant responsible for emergency action left the hall, crooked and bent as if he were a very old man. The artists surrounded the pianist and began to weep.

Chapter 15

The Power of Song

Again we were disseminated on a line but this time we women were not separated and all of us went to the mica factory. As soon as we found ourselves in the zone we felt that our situation was aggravated; without a chance of rest or refreshment we were sent to spread compost. Actresses who were still attractive had to scatter the dung with their manicured fingers. It was a curious sight which made the free women out of the zone gather around us.

Later the commandants came and we recognized Frosenchsky by his huge belly and florid physiognomy. The girls of the mica factory had time to tell us about his villainy. We also recognized Commandant Petrov by his Mongolian eyes and his boots made to shine by the perfect performance of camp orders.

The face of the third commandant had only a nose and his other features seemed to be secreted behind this extreme olfactory organ. I sighed, "What a nose!" and this sigh brought my destruction. From the next day 'the nose' began to shepherd me to every job in the camp without giving me a chance to recover and think. Reveille was at six o'clock, breakfast was on the move, monotonous work in mica dust for 10 hours and after that we had to unload bricks under the humiliating shouts of a soldier in the tower. "Hey! Actress! To manhandle a brick does not mean to sing! You are carrying too few bricks take four more!" Night duty was watching the kitchen and ...wait, is it Sunday tomorrow? We should go behind the zone to extinguish a fire.

The air of the taiga weakened me and I fell asleep in the high grass. He, my persecutor 'the nose' found me there, I woke up to his rough shout and in some minutes found myself facing him and all of the guards. They had guns behind their backs and it would have been very easy for them to shoot me.... And so everything went on in this way. I was hiding from 'the nose' wherever it was possible. Probably just because of his ugliness, which shocked people, the chief of column 0-27 was angry with the whole world. I saw the exasperation with which he destroyed our stage with an axe and with what pleasure he watched the destruction of the cultural training unit room, as he pulled out flowers from the beds and grubbed up the magnificently blossoming lilac bushes.

I remember him standing on a hastily hammered together dais with his assistants and announcing to us in an odious voice that we were not brought there for re-education but to be punished and that we only had the right to work. Several days later, playing on our patriotic feelings, he called for a subscription to a loan. All the benches were taken out of the zone and the radio wires were cut. We were only allowed to write letters home twice a year. Huge numbers were put onto our backs and the barracks were locked at night. All this was done by the order of the Gulag but in our column it was done with special haste.

Only friendship was left for us and when we were in trouble that became stronger. All the actresses lived together in one of the barracks, we worked in the same factory behind one table and on Sundays we went to the ruins of the cultural training unit and sang quintets pianissimo.

Once a small listener appeared among us. A black and green lizard crept out of the plinth and up to our legs. We began to sing more softly with lowered heads so as not to frighten it. It listened so attentively that it was impossible to offend it by silence. We inclined our heads and sang to its beady eyes. After that it came back every Sunday, but once the heavy steps of the inspector frightened our small friend. We sprang up in the

middle of a chord expecting a terrible penance, but the inspector ordered us to sit down again by a gesture, sat himself down on the table and asked us to sing something. We sang him our whole repertoire as he smoked a roll-up cigarette. When we had finished he asked us to break up and not to tell anyone he had listened to us. Then he spoke slowly in the Siberian dialect, powerfully uttering each word: "I wandered girls, along the column of the dispersed section and suddenly I found a group of artistes. I cannot understand why it disturbs the authorities."

The next Sunday we organized a little concert in the barracks for the whole colony. We checked the zone and listened to drunken voices that reached us from beyond the fence, then we put a watcher at the window and the concert began. As if they were standing in front of me now I can see the faces of our listeners full of enjoyment. There were so many people, old and young, crying and in deep meditation, on boards, under boards and all over the floor up to our legs!

First of all we sang quintets which we sang quietly and very sadly. Girl woodcutters were sitting in front of us, looking at us without lowering their brilliant eyes and holding bouquets of lilac orchids in their arms. They asked us to sing something joyful. One of our singers sang them a popular song and the listeners were getting into a very good mood. The applause was hushed at first and then the rumbling got louder. It was already impossible for them to repress their pulsing pleasure in life. Someone shouted, 'Habanera!'¹ and I began to sing. At first I was singing cautiously and then I got more and more courageous. The look-out at the window left his post and the girl woodcutters jumped up surrounding me with their bouquets. The women came from under the boards and crept up very close. Everybody waited for me to allow the deep music in my soul to come forth. I gave a final fortissimo F sharp and the barracks shouted with joy.

I saw two figures in military dress at the window then everyone jumped up from their squatting positions and ran up to the doors of the

barracks. Immediately there was absolute silence. Petrov, the commandant of the regime camp, entered with the maintenance inspector. He asked in a thunderous voice, "Who was singing?" Everybody remained silent. The image of the forthcoming prosecution paralyzed me but it was necessary to confess so as to remove suspicion from the innocent. I spoke with difficulty, tongue-tied, "Me, Citizen Commandant." "You!" He examined my poor exhausted figure mistrustfully, "It is wonderful! Sing once more!"

Chapter 16

F – 185

We were allowed to have amateur performances and the radio was also allowed! We were even allowed to plant flowers in the zone. All the other items of the regime charter were kept. The sight of figures of prisoners, with their numbers sewn on to their clothes, was an unpleasant reminder of signposts, especially when the whole column was walking in line. But we got an opportunity to engage in our art and that was the main thing.

During our hours of work we could not wait for the evenings. It was clear to see in the way we cheerfully ran from the workshops to the canteen, hastily swallowed the same oatmeal soup and then entered the cultural training unit which had been re-built. The guitars, mandolins and home-made dresses ornamented with patterns of gold mica dust hung on the walls. The women joiners constructed a new stage for us, an artist altered some dark blue curtains and to crown everything the commandant of cultural training brought us that accordion which we had used on the unknown column.

I was nominated as the chief of the artists and I got passionately engaged in the organizing activity as we prepared for an October concert. Then suddenly I was called to be transferred. It was in the evening and that particular evening we were given patties with carrots. Patties with carrots were a big pleasure in the camp and I had been looking forward to it since morning. But I didn't even notice what I was eating. I asked the chief of the cultural training unit, "Maybe it was not me? Maybe they mixed me up with somebody else?" He looked at the label on my back and loudly read, "F – 185 you are called under this number. The names of the prisoners are not given over the phone."

Sitting in the prison wagon I thought up new reasons for my transfer. At last I came to the conclusion that I was being transferred to Tsarmza to organize the central cultural brigade. I went on foot from the station with my neighbors from the transport. They carried my things and we walked amicably and cheerfully. When we could see the gates of the Tsarmzovckoy column a cart came up to the guards following us and they came after me. I couldn't believe that I would enter the gates of Tsarmza on a cart. ¹Suddenly I heard the words that froze my dream. "F – 185? Is there any F – 185? Conduct the transfer faster!"

Familiar guards, duty officers, even transferring 'fools' did not answer my greeting when I was led into the zone. Someone from my recent listeners said, "Did the woman arrive? Lead her to the bathhouse." As soon as I began to undress the guard came after the 'woman' and led me away to take pictures. After the bath I was taken to the female zone. My prisoner friends told me they had learned from somewhere that I would be taken to Moscow. Shall I be interrogated again? The term of imprisonment for 'terror' is twenty- five years now. Am I really going to be interrogated all over again? Who has betrayed me? My bed was near the door and when I fell on to it I lost all my strength. The news about the Lubianka burnt into me. As the barracks fell asleep I lay in terrible loneliness. I wanted to shout, to beat on the wall and not to exist.

I needed a cigarette but where could I get one from? I quietly passed the bedside tables at the heads of the quietly sleeping girls but there was not even one small cigarette butt. Then I heard the steps of the guard in the corridor. I opened the door a little and saw the soldier. But soldiers hate prisoners so I couldn't possibly ask him for a cigarette. Then the guard turned back to me and the barrack light fell on his dark face. He had large convex eyes under dark lashes, a large nose.... "Are you Armenian?" I asked. "Yes, I am" he replied. "I am Armenian also," I said. He looked at me mistrustfully because to be Armenian is a rare thing among the women prisoners. "What is your surname", he said. I did not want to answer

quickly because the name now had such a deep meaning for me. It was connected with the things that are close to my heart, it was home, it was native land, it was my father.... He shouldered his rifle impatiently and turned to the exit from the barracks. I called to him, "Citizen, soldier..." He stopped and looked at me as if he were waiting for something. I said slowly, feeling for each syllable, each letter coming from my heart, "My name is Spendiarian." Then it was easy for me and I did not feel lonely anymore when he opened his eyes wide and asked, "Was his name Alexander?"

Chapter 17

On New Year's Eve

I am in the Lubianka prison walking in the yard next to a woman with a lot of hair. The girls in our camp are old-fashioned. There are no new books in our camp library but my neighbor in the ward tells me about the authors who are unknown to me. The laws have progressed so much.

The prisoners in the Lubianka lived on cabbage during October. There was neither fish soup, where we could try to find pieces of fish, nor were we given any porridge. My neighbor was crying, but when volleys of salutes were heard she stood on the bed and saw how the flames of multi-colored stars were twinkling, then she put her head on the pillow and continued to cry. To console her I told her stories about the camp. I said there was life there and there were many pleasures as well. On October days we would arrange concerts and bake pies from black bread. Very good concerts and very tasty pies. The woman looked at me with pity: “‘Tasty’ pies from black bread and probably the same ‘good’ concerts. Are you so much weaned from normal life that you can praise camp life?”

I am taken each day for interrogation and I go quietly, as if to work. The inspector called me a sparrow for the shooting, that is, very experienced. I am not afraid of his trained expressions, his intimidation and artful dodges. My task is simply to protect my doctor friend, whom they want to arrest by any means. My mind is completely clear and there are no fluctuations, either in the common chamber or in the cement box of the single cell. There is no window in the single cell and it is incredibly hot and stuffy. My prison-issued dress on a naked body is nearly in shreds, but my soul is still simple and free because of the way I think. They do not let me die. At the first signal of the duty doctor they take me up to the

common ward. I ask the recently arrested Muscovites: "Against whom is the new campaign conducted? Who are arrested the most?" They answer: "The doctors and pharmacists", and with enthusiasm they tell me about the alleged mass poisoning of children.

I do not ask anymore, but move aside and close my eyes. I would like to be separate from them. They live deeply in a lie and play a miserable role in the tragic-comedy, so I go away and think about something else. At first he was afraid of the Leninists, then he was afraid of the generals, who differed at the front, and now he was afraid of the doctors. Perhaps this meant that he was near to death. I do not share my thoughts with anybody. It is said that every third prisoner is a denouncer and visceral fear is getting stronger.

What would the year 1952 give to us? I met it under difficult conditions, in such terrible conditions I met the New Year! Now I live in my native city and many of my relatives and friends live under its roofs. When they remember me their faces become gloomy. I am not present and life passes over as it does over the person lying in the grave. At New Year I was with them in my mind. I saw them running from one shop to another and carrying their shopping home. Then I saw them sitting around the table with lifted glasses....I quietly sang New Year songs to them as we had done in our childhood.

By the will of the inspector my existence in the Moscow prison was hidden from my relatives. The other prisoner had left her little child and her old mother at home. The third one had been a prisoner once before as she was the wife of an arrested Bolshevik who was shot in 1937. She spoke about her husband in a whisper. He was one of Lenin's closest friends back in the times of the underground activism.

She was brought in a week before the New Year and she found in her pocket two bulbs of onion, an apple and a small piece of bread. We spread a clean towel on the table and placed all our riches on it. The onion bulbs were gently gilded next to the pink apple and even the piece of bread seemed pink to me, its whiteness was so unusual to me. It was ten o'clock,

the hour of sleep, but we lay in bed and did not let ourselves sleep. We listened to the steps of the guard in the corridor. Guards are also people and at eleven o'clock they would gather in one small room and meet the New Year. The steps ceased. We joyfully pulled off the covers and sat on our beds. If one concentrated on listening to the silence it would be possible to hear the clock strike on the Kremlin tower.

Then steps were heard in the corridor. They were doubled - one is the guard and the other the censor. Someone would be led to interrogation on New Year's Eve! The steps came nearer and stopped at our door then the hatch opened with a screeching sound and the state voice announced, "Interrogation of M.....Get ready quickly!"

The Leninist's wife shivers with a fine shiver so that she cannot put her hands in the sleeve of her dress. I help her, smooth her hair and see her to the door. Then I wait. Here it is the stroke of the clock on the Kremlin tower and all the world hears it! The onion bulbs are glowing and the apple shines pink on the white towel. Eight years in a camp taught my neighbor to be pleased with trivialities. She triumphed so much when she found the 'New Year's Fairing' in her pocket!

She did not come back for a long time. My other neighbor had already fallen asleep on the bed, but I was still struggling with a dream. As it overcame me I woke up to the noise of the fall of a heavy body. She was lying unconscious on the floor, this wife of a Bolshevik-Leninist shot in 1937. I tried to lift her but she was as heavy as a corpse and her face was very pale. I hit the door with my fists and kicked it with my legs. "Come here quickly torturers! Look what you have done! Parasites! Barbarians!" In a moment the chamber was full of people. The on-duty doctors and guards looked at the motionless face with fear for their own destiny. They put the woman back on the bed and began to squeeze life back into her. She gradually came back, recovered consciousness and entered into prison life again.

The world of Stalin was still strong, but the end was coming closer and closer.

Chapter 18

The Death of Stalin

The radio was silent and the newspapers did not come. The guard was sent to Taishet for the newspapers but he drank too much and dropped them in a ditch. The eyes and noses of free people became red and one could hear fear in their whispers, but we were very far from knowing the truth.

I was exempted from work at the factory to prepare a concert for Women's Day. It was silent and warm in the cultural training unit room. I can see now our artiste, Raisa Markova, with her glasses lowered on the end of her nose and next to her the Hungarian dresser. They are grinding mica for gilding and neither I nor they are thinking about anything important.

Our cultural organizer, Tania Gureeva, a former heroine and fire fighter in the felling column, lifted her eyes to the window and said in a quiet voice: "Somebody died out of the zone. The mourning portrait hangs." We climbed onto the window sill but we could not see the face, only the black strip of the frame. "Let's go up to the attic." First of all I approached the attic window, "Moustaches!!!" Forgetting ourselves with happiness we rolled down the ladder from the attic. The chief of the cultural training unit came with a terribly pale face. We associated his pallor with the silent radio, with the newspapers which fell in a ditch, with the red eyes of the free people and lastly, to the moustache.

"Someone has died," I said, looking steadily into his eyes, "we do not know who, but we doubt if it is possible to rehearse. Maybe some member of the government died, so we do not know whether it is possible

to dance or not. The girls will come soon from work and we do not know....” The chief also did not know whether it was possible to rehearse, obviously there were no orders from Taishet. He said that a major escaped and died behind a zone. All the chiefs ran from us being afraid of our steady looks at them.

We did not rehearse, had no supper and did not sleep. We wanted only one thing - to feel the reality of his death. We found out on the funeral day although the whole camp had already guessed by that time but stayed silent.¹ The rustle of the mica plates went on in the mica factory as the female hands moved quickly at their work. Our well-fed guards pattered quickly onto the workshop and we prisoners, in our white kerchiefs, continued to work, everyone with lowered eyes. The men stood in the middle of the workshop and loudly confirmed our guess. We heard his name, patronymic and surname. We found out that he was being buried at that moment. We heard the hooting of trains and it was the only notification of our immense happiness. No word and no smile was seen in the workshop, they found out nothing about our secret happiness.

The camp was silent for a few more days and then we started talking. Not about him, everything was finished with him, but we were speaking about freedom. This was the origin of our recollection of perfection, of the beginning, of morning of a new dawn. Again I felt wings on my back and then I knew the meaning of the expression ‘to walk on air’. I just flew about the zone, dispersing the doubts of the skeptics, instilling hope in the patients and the old women and even transforming the obviously poor future into a fairy tale.

Notification about the amnesty came in the Spring and at that time, after an amateur performance of ‘Lyubov Yarovaya’,¹ the camp chief climbed on the stage, decorated for the play with red banners, and announced freedom for all. We began to kiss the chiefs, the guards and the soldiers, but the next day we found out that the amnesties were only for short-term prisoners (there were none present in our camp) and

robbers. The pythoiness of freedom was our historian, Livivna, who was a romantically minded communist. She had a surprising feeling for the events. Waking up early one morning in the upper part of the hut she immediately began to say in a sharp voice: "There will soon be a mass decrease in the terms specified for amnesty and people will leave for home in packs. Also mass re-habilitations will begin and the camps for political prisoners will become empty."

Those who lived would see that. Only to be able to live. When a protocol commission arrived at the column the women were praised before each other about their illnesses: even a paralysis or even worse, a cancer, was considered a trump card as an opportunity to see freedom before death.

Freedom... Freedom... It was seen in the letters from home, between the lines of the newspapers, spoken in infinite whispers and news coming out of the zone. Freedom waited for everybody but the blessed time of beginning did not have individual features yet and we dreamed of it together – old and young, those with family and those alone, the healthy and the dying.

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The Editor's Afterword

At the end of two years living and teaching in Yerevan, Armenia from 1999 to 2001 I had the opportunity to research and edit this extraordinary memoir by Marina Spendiaran (Spendiarova). I feel privileged to have been given this task.

There are many histories of the Gulag and how its inhabitants fared, both in non-fiction and in fiction. This account is special to me for three main reasons: the first is that it was written by a women, who was innocent, but spent 16 years in the camps with other women from many different backgrounds. The point of view is therefore female and many of the experiences she describes are womanly and peculiar to that gender. Secondly, even in her stories about the very worst situations her compassion for others effaces any hint of self-pity. She raises her voice in song in order to raise her spirits and those of her fellow inmates. Thirdly, she can look back on terrible events and describe them, often with great humour and irony.

My thanks to Mark Grigorian, who gave me the Russian text of Marina Spendiaran's book¹⁸ and a student's translation, my husband, John W Mason, who steered me towards the most useful history books for background material and footnotes, and Eduard Danielyan, who read through an early draft and explained many questions in the text.

Pauline Hallam Mason

¹⁸ The memoir was first published in Russian in Литературная Армения (Literary Armenia) 1990, N 11 (p. 60-80) and 12 (86-100).

A Biographic Essay:

Marina Spendaryan and Her “A Cluster of Bird Cherries”

The daughter of the great Armenian composer, Alexander Afanasyevich Spendaryan (Spendiarov) (1871-1928), Marina Alexandrovna (1903-1982) was sentenced in 1940 according to the 58th article of the Criminal Code of the USSR for an attempted assassination of Stalin. In 1926 she taught English to Stalin's son, Vasili, for two weeks. For the people who do not know the orders of the Beria NKVD it will be strange to learn that she was not shot, while people who had committed lesser 'crimes' were executed. Trying to surmise from logical reasoning the absurdity of the whole thing is obvious. It seems to me that all attempts to find the reasons for such decisions and any other decisions of the NKVD organisation is as

senseless as the search for a logical explanation of the imprisonment of millions of innocent people. Perhaps Marina Spendaryan is lucky in that her arrest coincided in time with the victorious ending of the war and perhaps at that time there was no particular campaign against Soviet enemies.

This woman had a heavy life full of events, her destiny. She was born into a family of great musicians in Yalta in 1903.

The Spendaryans survived the Russian civil war (1918 to 20) in the Crimea. In those uncertain times the political fortunes of the Crimea shifted back and forth and either a Red army man or White officers would find shelter and hide in the Spendaryan's house.



Marina in a Russian national costume.
Yalta 1915.

Photo taken by S. Kogan.



The Spendiaryans' house in Yalta

The Spendiaryan's house in Yalta
The Spendiaryan family

This is not only an example of their true kindness towards fellow human beings, but also shows their courage because in two cases Alexander Afanasyevich risked his life. As far as I know up to now no one has written about the fact of the hiding of officers in the composer's house, but I remember quite well the anxiety and sympathy with which Marina Alexandrovna told about people hiding in their family.

Alexander Spendiaryan and
Alexander GlasunovTatiana, Marina and Elena
Spendiaryan. Sudak, the 1920s

When she was a young girl Marina Alexandrovna often performed the works of her father. She was the first performer of many arias from the opera, 'Almast'. This experience enabled her to enter the Moscow Conservatoire and she graduated in 1934 from the Vocal Performance faculty and then in 1936 she received a High Mastership. According to a specialist's testimony she had a marvellous voice and wonderful musicality.



Poster of M. Spendiarova's solo concert,
Moscow 1939



M.Spendiarova, self-portrait.
in the Armenian House of
Culture in Moscow, 1938

But Marina Spendaryan was not destined to have the career of a singer, though the talent and skilfulness of a singer and actress served her greatly in the camps and surely saved her life more than once.

It is impossible to assess the value of the enormous contribution which Marina Spendaryan made to immortalise her father's memory. And we Armenians, the heirs of the cultural traditions of our people, are obliged to her for preserving the archive of the composer which was evacuated from the Crimea on the eve of the fascist occupation. She was also responsible for establishing the Museum of Alexander Spendarian which is still open in his house. She also produced the books about Spendaryan in the series of the lives of outstanding, wonderful people, for example *The Chronicle of the Life* (1964) and *The Creative Art of A.A Spendiarov* (Yerevan 1975), and we are indebted to her for many other things. She was a member of the Union of Composers of the USSR and a Deserved Figure of Culture of Armenia.



Spendiarova Marina. Yerevan 1970

For the last several years, being seriously ill, Marina Spendiaryan lived completely alone in Yerevan, though she was greatly helped by friends. She died on August 1 1982.

I remember Marina Alexandrovna perhaps as much as I remember myself. She and her husband lived with us in the summer of 1961 and then again from December 1961 until May

1962. Her husband Elizar Davidovich Suzan was a specialist biographer of Lenin. Once I had a booklet about the school years of Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin) published in Armenian, which Elizar Davidovich - the author – presented to me. Marina Alexandrovna called him *Suzan* according to his family name. The time during which they lived on the first floor of my family's two-storied house seemed to me a never ending holiday. I always had an attentive, kind and willing friend with whom I performed endless theatrical plays. I was Chipolino, Marina Alexandrovna, Aunt Marina, the Countess Cherry. She acted with visible enjoyment and always remembered it with pleasure. It is difficult to understand how five years after her liberation from Stalin's horrible jails she could act as a hostess of a castle with dark and thrilling underground cellars where 'good' heroes suffered.

At that time Marina Alexandrovna worked on her father's biography, *The Chronicle of the Life* and a book on his creative work, *The Creative Art of A.A Spendiarov*. Sometimes she worked together on both books. Then she concentrated on the first one which was published in 1964 and at that time she 'pushed' forward the creation of the house as a museum of her father. Some years passed. Every time when she visited us, at my

grandfather's – architect Mark Vladimirovich Gregoryan- she would tell us the latest news... what she had managed to do for the museum, what was planned and why it was impossible to stage 'Almast' at Yerevan Opera.

It was possible to speak with Marina Alexandrovna about everything; she was always attentive to my childish and adolescent problems and cares. She was always ready to listen and give advice. Only on one thing were we at odds and opposed to each other and that was in our views about rock music, which she simply couldn't bear. I remember how in the evenings, while drinking tea, she would sing old Russian romances. She had a very pleasant low voice and a very intelligent, elegant manner of performance. She sang 'Dark-Cherry Shawl', 'It is a long time since the chrysanthemums bloomed in the garden' and 'Little Gate'.

In the summer of 1973 Marina Spendaryan made a trip to Italy as a tourist and brought back several dozen slides. My grandfather agreed with great pleasure to look at them. He had never been in Italy because he was not allowed to go but as a professional he knew perfectly well the history of Italian architecture and art. Every Saturday Mark Grigoryan organised the slideshow with commentaries by Marina Alexandrovna, a person who had just returned from Italy, and Mark Vladimirovich, an architect and art specialist. Each new slideshow gathered a larger audience. The commentators said that they were delighted to take pleasure in the treasures of world culture and this delight passed to the audience, creating the effect of being present in Italy.

Soon I moved to live with my grandfather. Marina liked to visit him, she liked that house and our meetings became more frequent and the conversations became deeper. Once in the spring of 1976 Marina came to us at eleven in the morning. A student in my first year, I was in the kitchen preparing for a seminar on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This course was mandatory and taken seriously at the university and was essential alongside our specialties. When she saw what I was doing she asked me, 'And this mean person is there?' (she nodded in

the direction of the book). I did not understand who she meant. 'That moustache' she said. 'Stalin?' I asked. She answered 'Yes'. I said, 'He is'. 'And what is written about him there?' - she asked, nodding again at the book.

I, who was brought up at the beginning of the 1970s, what could I answer at that time? What did I know? Only an obscure formula that there was some strictness – but how much useful and good did Stalin do? He defeated fascism, won the war, carried out industrialization and communization brought the country to the complete victory of socialism which happened in 1937; this is declared in all the text books on the history of the CPSU, published at that time, over the past 10 to 15 years.

'You know' she said after listening to my arguments, 'I taught English to the son of this evil man'.

Then she sat in front of me and started to tell the story. She spoke for hours and I listened. Many of the things she told me then are in the book¹⁹, *A Cluster of Bird Cherries*, but there is much which did not get into the book.

Here are some episodes. Marina's husband (by the way I don't remember her having called him by name – simply husband) worked at a factory where grenades were produced and the interrogator showed her a grenade, more exactly the shell of a grenade, which was taken during the search of their apartment, that her husband had once brought home in order to show what it was like. "I didn't even know what had to be pressed in order for it to be blasted."

Another story not told by her in *A Cluster of Bird Cherries* was about being a 'prisoner in freedom'. Marina performed at a concert where she was brought behind the curtain by two guards and when the curtain rose one of them stood in the wings on the left, another on the right and she sang, 'I don't know another country where a person breathes so freely'.

¹⁹ For the first time it was published in Russian in the magazine Литературная Армения (Literary Armenia) in 1990, N 11 (pp. 60-80) and 12 (pp. 86-100).

It happened sometimes that coming to us and feeling very tired Marina expressed a wish to lie and rest and every time we had to beseech her to lie in bed and be covered with a blanket with her head on a pillow. "If only you knew how we slept there, even now I can sleep in any position. I can just put my small bag under my head, take off my shoes and that's all" she said.

The memoirs of those who passed through the horrors of the Stalin prisons are especially important. Each new publication is the next brick in the wall which helps us to prevent a re-occurrence of these terrible events. The moral value of the publication of this book, *A Cluster of Bird Cherries*, is that it fulfils one more duty of the heirs of those people who were doomed to a living death.

Marina's book is not at all an ethnographic description of the camps. The author avoids showing brutality and her aim is not to show how the camps were organised. All this exists as a background. The value of the memoir, as I see it, is that it is written about the kindness and humanity of the inmates which consistently undermined the camp law of 'you die today and I die tomorrow', where what it is to be a human being seemed to be turned upside down.

I don't want to retell even a little piece of the content of the book in this introduction, but I have to say that the most memorable passages are those which describe exalted human feelings, love, nobility, humanity and the wish to create kindness. That is why it is difficult to forget the chapters, 'Cocoa with Cake', 'F – 185' and 'The Island of Salvation' where an exact and critical condemnation of the Stalin regime is described; the emotional effect is greatly enhanced by the character of the author making that assessment. The main content of the book is in the description of the inner world of people in that deprived spiritual life which could not be destroyed or stopped by prohibitions, limitations, starvation, special cells and beatings.

A Cluster of Bird Cherries is one of the rare works about the camps written by a woman. In addition I would mention *Steep Road* by Eugene Ginzburg, and *The Life of Ephrosemia Kersnovskaya*. Anna Akhmatova and a little later Marina Cvetaeva considered the word 'poetess' to be insulting: both preferred their profession to be called by the male word 'poet'. But it does not concern books about camps. And the matter here is not in the differences which existed between the male and female 'zones' (about which A. Solzenitsyn wrote). The particularity is in perception, the pure female perception of the camp prison world. The book ends with Stalin's death and the coming freedom which was seen in the letters from home, between the lines of the newspapers, spoken in infinite whispers and news coming out of the zone. "Freedom waited for everybody but the blessed time of beginning did not have individual features yet and we dreamed of it together – old and young, those with family and those alone, the healthy and the dying".

I see here on one side the opposition of the inner world to the outside world as a means to survive, to preserve oneself, to pass through a crushing extermination of human dignity in life and on the other side the unification of the inner world with the free external world, where it is possible to be happy. And this book ends in that way – with an inner re-birth.

A Cluster of Bird Cherries also has an informative value. Here I should underline first of all Marina's observations regarding the everyday life of Stalin's family, the principles of bringing up Vasili, his son and the spiritual state of Nadezhda Alilueva, his wife. Marina was in the terrible camps in Taishet (Ozerlag) and Ukhtizhemplage. There are many names mentioned in the book who passed by on that road and perhaps this publication will help their relatives and friends to learn something about their fate – this is the general, humanistic value of such publications.

Mark V. Grigorian



Spendiarova Marina with friends. /M. Spendiarova is in the center, from the right to her is V.N. Rimsky-Korsakov/. Leningrad, 17.04.1957



Spendiarova Marina with the musicians of Armenian state symphony orchestra. Yerevan, early 60s.



Marina Spendiarova on board the steamship “Spendiarov”. Crimea, 1960s.



Spendiarova Marina with her husband – Suzan Lazar, with Mark Grigoryan and Susanna/sister Tatiana’s adopted daughter. Photo taken by Tatiana Spendiarova. Ashtarak, 1963.



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