

## FRAGMENT

KONSTANTIN ILIEV

# THE DEFEAT

A CHRONICLE FROM THE SHORT CENTURY

This book is autobiographical. For understandable reasons, I have changed all but a few names as well as the description of some minor circumstances. Memoir literature is the last stronghold of realism, according to Joseph Brodsky. That this worthy man doesn't mention that literary term with particular sympathy couldn't make me embark on pointless stylistic exercises. I understand realistic writing only as an effort to write the truth. On the other hand, when Pontius Pilate asked the arrested Jesus *what is truth* the Son of God didn't give an answer. Still, the fact that nobody can give an adequate definition of truth doesn't mean that nobody knows what it is.

THE AUTHOR

### 1.

Triangulation signals. Triangulation signals are those high wooden pyramids you may have seen on the hills. They are erected by topographers or surveyors who use them to measure distance with their instruments and then go away, leaving the pyramidally crossed beams to grow old, bleach out and rot on the hilltops.

Several kilometres southeast of the town of Lovech there is a rocky hill called Hissarya. On the hilltop stands precisely such a triangulation signal. If you draw a straight line through it, linking the road from Lovech to Troyan and the road from Lovech to Veliko Turnovo, you might get an equilateral triangle. Lovech itself would be at the vertex of the triangle, whose sides would be five kilometres long each. This not particularly large geometrical figure would encompass, among other things, the following:

1. Part of the River Ossum, completely coloured in inky blue by the questionably profitable chemical industry in Troyan.

2. Another three such hills with rocks and trees, mainly hornbeam and scrub with the vivid and smelly name 'smoke-trees'.

3. Part of the Lovech – Troyan railway line, built in two years by young volunteers, and the railway station near the village of Kazachevo where in 1948, during the inauguration ceremony of the line, the first train stopped and Vassil Kolarov and the not yet hanged by him Traicho Kostov<sup>1</sup> leaned out of one of the windows to wave at the singing and slogan-chanting crowds.

4. The monument with a five-pointed star in the fields around the village of Slivek, where the anti-Nazi resistance fighter Hristo Kurpachev was killed in May 1943.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior communist party functionaries from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Falsely accused of treason and found guilty in a purge trial, Traicho Kostov was executed in 1949.

5. An iron cross commemorating the Lovech forced labour camp inmates who were clubbed to death, erected in 1989 by the local community on the rock near the site of, from 1959 to 1962, the stone quarry and huts that the selfsame community called 'the hooligans' camp'.

6. The ruins of Yastreb Monastery.

7. The place where the district police chief Tihchev was killed in 1925 when the anarchist Tinko Simov ripped his belly open with a knife.

8. The place where wrestler Stefan the Peach was gunned down in 1992, sparking off a series of gangland wars in a newly democratic Bulgaria.

9. The monastery tap.

10. Pazi Most (Guard Bridge) where the fatal meeting between the Turkish policeman Hasan Ali Çauş and the Apostle of Bulgarian Freedom Vassil Levski, who was on his way to the Kukrina Inn where the Turks would catch him just a few hours later, occurred on 26 December 1872.

11. A pine forest one hundred metres away from Guard Bridge, planted in the shape of a Roman number and characters, 'X Congress', in honour of the tenth congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

12. The ruins of a Roman road.

13. The area known as Bloody Rocks, where the fleeing in panic residents of Lovech were massacred during the 1878 Russo-Turkish War.

14. An excavated burial mound.

15. Stones from the ruins of the estate of the Turk Sali Bey.

16. A lime-pit.

17. A top-secret military site.

18. Two old water-mills.

19. A vineyard with a cherry tree, from which in the late thirties swung the cradle of one Konstantin Iliev.

## 12.

My first memory is blue in colour. *Kalonki*. That's what Grandma Dimitra calls them. Tiny, sweet-smelling flowers. I would learn later that they have another name too: *temenougi*.<sup>2</sup> And something else that's blue too, but has no smell. The sky above.

I'm lying under a cool quilt in the middle of the yard. Our yard is overgrown with grass. We slept outdoors last night because it's summer. The risen sun still hasn't taken away the soft coolness of the quilt, I'm pressing my cheek against it and it feels really nice.

There's something in front of me that looks like a white buffalo cow lying on her stomach. That's because its flanks are jutting out like those of buffaloes lying with their legs tucked beneath their body. But it isn't black like a buffalo but sugar-white. Then, or perhaps later, I learn that this thing is called the Balkan Range. The name of the highest flank is Yumroukchal.

We have a dog. A yellow one. His name is Jackal.

The sound I hear most often is the croak of ravens. They are moving along the blue tinny surface of the sky much slower than the small birds but much faster than the clumsy little white aeroplane that can move forward only.

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<sup>2</sup> Violets.

The ravens live behind our house, high up in their holes in the long, white rock towering over the walnut trees. They are noisiest in the evening, when they squeeze into the cracks in the rock. There are so many of them that they can't all squeeze in.

I'm afraid of the ravens. Once, the ravens pecked and tore a baby to pieces in the neighbours' yard. I got to hear this story when I was much older, but I might have seen it from the window of our house. In my mind's eye I can see something kicking, red, blue, horrible like a pig's belly ripped open, and people screaming all around.

Our house is roofed with big, mossy slabs. Sometimes Grandma Dimitra climbs up and spreads out cornel-cherries, sliced pears, apples and plums on them, leaving the fruit to dry for the winter.

In addition to the ravens, there's this fox who lives in the holes in the rock too. She is a spry little old lady with a tattered coat and a knife hanging from a long string tied to the side of her gold belt clasps. This is the knife with which the fox cuts the throats of hens. Once, our yellow dog Jackal chased her away from the gate. The fox stays away from our house, but I've seen white feathers scattered around the neighbours' henhouse.

We have a well with a crank handle and a bluish tin roof. I love it because that's where we chill watermelons. My father lowers them in the bucket, smiling broadly, and takes them out with an even broader smile. We cut them at night on the wooden table by the fig tree.

I love it when the wind is blowing. Every time the wind blows, the tin roof of the well rattles and clatters, thunders and roars. Grandma Dimitra tells Dad, 'Nikola, now why don't you just fix it!' But he never does and it goes on rattling and clattering.

The sky is made from the same kind of tin. But when it thunders it's not because of the wind but because of the wheels of Saint Iliya's<sup>3</sup> cart. Saint Iliya is my grandpa, meaning that he's Grandma Dimitra's husband. I'm very pleased that he is a cart driver because I love horses and carts. But I'm also a little bit annoyed with him. Because he never comes down from the sky. Here comes Gorancho's grandpa. With a knife tucked in his belt. He herds the sheep with a long crook along the road, gets to Gorancho's gate and yells at them, 'In you go, you bastards!' Now he'll go into their yard, reach under his cloak and produce a bag full of mushrooms wet from the rain. Or a brand new pipe, carved today with his big knife. But my grandpa is nowhere around. I have to wait for rain and wind to hear him drive his cart along the tinny sky above.

Grandpa Iliya has a good reason to live there. Up in the sky live the dead, and he died when he went to war to fight against the Turks. In the old days his photograph had hung in front of the icon but my dad and my two aunts would constantly take it down, using it to threaten the other children whose dads were alive. In every fight their photograph got broken, torn and crushed until, finally, not even a single scrap was left of it. I learned those details much later, when I was thirty and my father was fifty-five. A very old woman, who was a widow from the First Balkan War too, brought us a copy of this photograph. My father studied the seven soldiers lined up in the photograph for quite a while but still couldn't make out which one of them was Grandpa Iliya. But although I had never seen him either, I pointed him out straight away and the old woman said, 'Yes, that's him alright.' A grinning twenty-year-old boy with a sheepskin cap, a sword and genuine military boots, not the wretched shoes with gaiters I wore when I was in the army.

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<sup>3</sup> St. Elijah.

That my grey-haired father couldn't recognise the twenty-year-old Grandpa Iliya stands to reason. At the time the photograph was torn to shreds he would have hardly been older than four or five, having been born three months after the grinning soldier headed with his Lovech–Trojan regiment for the border to meet his death by a Turkish bullet. But that my father, especially when he was younger, had that same slightly sheepish look on his face as the twenty-year-old soldier he himself couldn't know. Actually, people most rarely see their own face. Men, by and large, do so only when they are shaving, but then their face could hardly be expected to show anything but intense concentration to avoid cutting themselves with the razor.

Before he went to war, my grandpa Saint Iliya carved out and put together a wooden iconostasis. As a child I imagined that Jesus and his mother lived in this iconostasis. They peered, as if from a window, from behind a black, wooden, candle-dripped cross. The dark and mysterious house that Grandpa Iliya had made them smelled always of wax, old paper and basil. It contained things that were beyond my reach: an old striped pouch from which every once in a while Grandma Dimitra would take out a card wrapped in cloth (I associated this set of objects and movements with the term 'pentsion'), old, crooked coins strung on a red thread, gilded boxwood, a posy of dried basil. On his head Baby Jesus had an upturned cauldron like the ones women hang on yokes to bring water from the village tap. The cauldron must have obviously been very heavy because his mouth was half-gaping in horror, his pupils rolled up so he looked at you with the whites of the eye, his mother the Holy Virgin inclining her head towards him in compassion. I later understood that it wasn't a cauldron but a crown that the icon-painter had wanted to depict.

Right behind our house, under the branches of a giant walnut tree, at the foot of the high white rock, there once was a well. All women from the upper part of the village used to gather here to fill their pails. It was a long wait before your turn came, both in the sizzling heat of summer and in the freezing cold of winter. Sometimes a quarrel about whose turn it was or an insult would lead to a fight with yokes. This walnut tree must have definitely seen more than its fair share of women with cracked heads and screaming children. As the place gradually became less wild, people began digging wells in their own yards, and built a tap with a long cement tub and two iron spouts on the site of the village well.

I think I remember the well at the foot of the rock, but I'm not quite sure. In any case, Grandma Dimitra and I used to come here around Epiphany to wash the icon under the giant walnut tree that towered over the rocks.

We didn't wash the icon simply because we wanted to clean it but because this was a ritual. We would dip a posy of basil in a clean, tin-plated copper bowl and sweep it across the faces of the saints. (Our icon had the shape of a triptych.) As the ice-cold water revealed the vibrant, royal red and blue colours of their garments, lighting up their haloes, the bathed Holy Virgin glanced at me and Grandma Dimitra in satisfaction, and only Jesus in his long shirt, who looked neither like a boy nor like a young man, remained white-eyed and staring in horror, with the upturned cauldron on his head.

### 13.

It seems that the experience from my earliest childhood which is most deeply imprinted on my mind is a murder with shepherd's crooks.

My sister and I were standing by the window, watching the snow fall.

There was next to nothing in our yard. A small shed attached to the neighbours' high brick barn. A pigsty and a henhouse nearby. A haystack. An outdoor toilet at the bottom of the yard. Now the snow was falling over all this.

We had once had a barn but it was old and rotten, and one day the wind blew it down. With her widow's pension and three young children, Grandma Dimitra couldn't even contemplate building a new one, so in the following cold winters the beams and other bits and pieces of wood from the old barn went into the fire. But that was a long time ago. On the day it was snowing my sister and I didn't even know that right there where two black magpies were hopping amidst the snowflakes there had once been a barn.

Carrying a bundle of hay, Grandma Dimitra had only just made her way through the snow from the haystack at the bottom of the yard to the cellar below us. But the snowflakes were already covering the fresh track. The hens huddled between the shed and the pigsty. On other days small crested birds would be hopping around there, hoping to find something to peck, but now the snow had driven them away too. Everything was quiet, peaceful, white and dull.

Then a dog appeared out of the blue. He didn't look like Jackal in the least. He was tall, thin, glossy brown and lop-eared. The dog started running around the yard, sinking up to his underbelly in the snow, while behind the windowpane my sister and I jumped up and down in delight. But Jackal, who was probably on his way back from a visit to the village bitch across the neighbour's orchard, had already sniffed out the trespasser and, beside himself with rage, was barking furiously and trying to squeeze his bristling yellow fur through the thorns.

From our window you couldn't see the street and the gate, that's why the people with shepherd's crooks appeared so unexpectedly below us. I saw grandpa Goran, grandpa Mityo, Gorancho's father and all the other men from the neighbourhood. Their faces were like half-bitten red tomatoes, their mouths letting out white steam. With the steam they let out screams and shouts but you couldn't understand what they wanted to say. It seems that the dog couldn't understand them either, because he was just scuttling around in confusion. From the bottom of the yard the yellow Jackal leapt at him, white fangs bared, but the men didn't let the two dogs fight. The brown one tried to escape, dashing towards the gate, but as his path was cut off by a whole dozen of shepherd's crooks he squeezed under the shed.

In my village, Paulician Kaminishte, such sheds are built by fixing thin poles to a wooden floor that rests on four stones. This allows the corn to dry properly at some distance from the moist ground. The brown dog squeezed precisely into this space between the floor of the shed and the ground, but the shepherd's crooks plunged in right after him, thrusting and jabbing at him from all sides. The dog wouldn't come out for quite a while, but at long last he showed his head. I saw his huge, terrified eyes, which were turned towards me. For an instant only, because a thicket of heavy crooks crashed down on them in such quick succession that the eyes disappeared, the head started spreading out more and more, crawling along the snow like an ever-growing flat red cake. The dog never managed to come out whole, the head had long stopped looking like a head, but still the men with the crooks went on striking.

Precisely this intoxication with blood, this urge to strike over and over again without stopping is one of the things that can fill you with chilling fear in the face of the unknown. Because those were entirely normal and apparently good people. They had killed the dog with the best of intentions. They thought it was rabid. To prevent him from infecting people or other animals. They just stood there in the snow around the red pulp with their blood-stained crooks – they may have been smoking, I can't remember exactly, but they definitely looked very pleased with themselves, the way you look after a job well done.

In the seventies we staged a play that ended with several people clubbing a man to death. After dropping their clubs, tired and panting, one of them offered the others a packet of cigarettes. I hadn't written it in the play and I don't remember suggesting it to the director, but this detail was very accurate and powerful.

Back in that winter, the owner of the dog came looking for him in Kaminishte. He turned out to be a hunter from Lovech, and he was dressed in fine leather clothes. Chasing a hare, his brown dog had got lost, gone into the village, someone had given chase, and what happened next is a graphic illustration of the proverb, 'Give a dog an ill name and hang him.' And then, he might not have been just an ordinary dog but a pedigree and expensive animal. Nor do I know what happened after and whether the hunter tried to sue anybody, but I think I remember him going from door to door while the culprits either pretended they weren't at home or responded with shrugs and a guilty silence.

#### 14.

My father didn't take part in the murder of the dog. He might not have been home when the tomato-faced men burst in, but even if he was I could hardly imagine him beating the red pulp with a crook. I remember that around Christmas, when the men would pounce on the pig to fell it to the ground, he never rushed to hold the pig in front, where the knife plunged in the fat under the ear. He tried to catch one of the hind legs, to help hold the pig but not to look at the red-black death spurting under the sharp steel edge.

I don't know of his ever winning in the lottery, finding a lost coin on the ground or being what may be called lucky in any other way. Except one. That in the autumn of 1944 he happened to be away from Paulician Kaminishte. In the second half of September the village, just as the rest of Bulgaria, received a directive from Moscow by way of Sofia – Pleven – Lovech, requiring that part of the supporters of the former regime be killed without trial. The directive was implemented. Three of those killed, a uniformed policeman and two paramilitaries, were known to have likewise fired at people several months earlier, but the fourth would never have been given such a harsh sentence by any reasonably impartial court. In September my father was mobilised as a reservist in the army, and in October he was sent to the front to fight against the Germans in Yugoslavia. If the bullet autumn had found him in Kaminishte, he would have had either to take part in the killings or to object to them. Either way, the conflict that led to his untimely death would have occurred much earlier.

I am trying to judge impartially whether he was capable of violence.

The teachers at school used to hit their students. He was no exception. And that wasn't all. He was notoriously heavy-handed. Perhaps that's why when I was old enough

to read Karl May's novels I inevitably associated Old Shatterhand with my father. Decades after his death, my schoolmates were still fondly recalling episodes in which he had slapped somebody in the face and sent them flying across the room. The occasions must have varied, but there was one occasion that instantly and unfailingly set his hand in motion, like a piston of an internal combustion engine after a spark and explosion. He couldn't stand obscenities. I must have been five, it was harvest time and my father was sitting next to some sort of sheaves lined up in a row, God knows why in a good mood even though he wasn't particularly fond of farming. I ran up to him and asked him what a word I'd just heard meant. The next instant my feet lifted from the ground, the world turned upside down, my nose crashed into the fat girdled belly of a sheaf, it fell and so did I, and the other sheaves in its company pounced on me, piling on top of me and sticking the prickly awns of their ears in my smarting cheek. I didn't hear anything in response to my question but for a ring in one ear and in the other the constant, deafening buzz of those invisible creatures from the stubble-fields that we call harvesters<sup>4</sup> too. For many years after, the harvesters would start screaming threateningly in my ears whenever I saw that word written on a toilet wall, and I simply couldn't utter it. Once, when I was in my first year at junior high school, a classmate who was a repeater two years older than me hurled a string of graphic threats of a sexual nature at one of the girls in our class and, more precisely, against her mother and female relatives. While uttering them (the string was quite long) he failed to notice Old Shatterhand standing in the doorway, register and pointer in hand. I think that on this particular occasion my father went too far with the pointer. I felt something that verged on hatred against him and true pity for the repeater who, now that I think about it, was simply behind us in academic achievement but was far ahead of us in puberty.

Why, I wonder, did my father react so furiously against this kind of words and phrases? Most probably because when he was a child he must have been the target of countless sexual threats against his mother and two elder sisters.

The peasant Madonna in Hristo Stanchev's eponymous painting who is sitting barefoot and utterly exhausted amidst the lumps of earth in the field and nursing her baby, differs from the way I picture Grandma Dimitra in 1913 only in that Aunt Yana and Aunt Velika are nowhere to be seen. (In 1913 Aunt Yana was six and Aunt Velika was four.) Oblivious to everything that is going on around him except for his infant rights, my father is drinking milk from his mother's breast. A pair of harnessed cows are standing by the shallowly ploughed up furrow, waiting for the pair of female hands to clasp the wooden plough once again. The cows are gentle but stupid, so somebody must lead them by the halters. This somebody is Aunt Yana. But she soon gets tired of stumbling on the lumps of earth, and the instant Nikolcho starts wailing in the cradle and her mother rushes to nurse him she clambers up the nearest tree. From there she can see Guard Bridge and the white, hot and dusty road. If it is market day in Lovech, brightly painted carts will be rattling along the road. Once the king himself drove by. He was in a car, on his way to Veliko Turnovo. That was God knows when but now, too, there's a good chance that a car might drive by even if it might not exactly be the royal one. A girl from the village boasts that last summer she saw two cars: a green and a red one. 'Come down, Yana!' I won't! 'I told you to look after the cows, didn't I? You can't just leave them on their own!' I sure can! 'But they might try to draw the plough and it will cut off their legs,

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<sup>4</sup> Cicadas.

what are we going to do then?' Let it cut them off. We won't plough. 'Come down! It's getting late but we haven't done even half the field yet, we have to finish the field in Popinets too, I haven't cooked for tonight, I can't see how we'll ever get to go to Popinets and be home on time, please come down!' I don't want to!

Grandma Dimitra, who is standing in front of the cows to stop them from moving forward, attaches the halters and grabs a lump of earth, crying, 'Now why don't I simply kill you! Why don't I wipe you from the face of the earth!' She throws the lump at the tree. Aunt Yana roars with laughter. 'Climb down, you rascal!' I won't! 'May you climb down and sink straight into the ground! And stay there forever! May worms eat you! And burst your eyes!' Aunt Yana's laughter rises to a shriek. But that's not because of her mother's fierce curses but because a raven has grabbed the bag of bread hanging on the shorter pear tree and is carrying it across the field. Grandma Dimitra rushes off, throwing lumps at him now. The lumps of earth can't scare him away but the bag is too heavy for him and the raven drops it in the furrows. But he swoops on it once again, his black greedy head pops inside, bobs up and down and, using his wings to prop himself on the ground, he draws out the crumbling piece of bread, pierces it with one last ferocious strike with the beak, and rises up with the bread. Now it turns out that the person who's to blame for everything is Grandpa Iliya, who has been lying buried in the Turkish land near Chataldja for almost a year. 'Why don't you come back, Ilyia, why don't you come back! It's not as if you have no plough to plough with and no fields! It's not as if you have no wife and children! The others finished ploughing their fields ages ago but we're not even half-done, Iliya! What will I give them to eat and drink in winter. If nothing else, you could have at least protected me from this black beast that stole my bread. Little good did that gun do you, Iliya, leaving me all alone and hungry, it's hard to plough when you're hungry, Iliya, may the devil take your gun and your army service!'

While my thirty-year-old Grandma Dimitra is lamenting her fate, the six-year-old Yana has climbed down from the tree and approached her mum, and is now standing several feet away, hovering between laughter and tears. Because the words coming out of her mother's mouth as she lies curled up on the ground are very funny, but it's a bit frightening that she's beating her head in the lumps, her face getting blacker and blacker and muddier and muddier as her tears mix with the earth. Then the woman rises, takes the gourd full of water down from the pear tree, washes her eyes, gives the child water to drink, the child grips the halters, she grips the plough, and together with their slightly rested cows, the two set off again through the hateful lumps of earth.

I am trying to recall a word but others come to mind while this particular word escapes me like the name of somebody who died a long time ago and can no longer remind people of himself. A word for something that looks like a beam or like the shafts of carts but is even longer. When sheaves are loaded onto a cart they may be stacked up to a full metre higher than the cart rails and need to be fastened tightly to make sure that they won't fall off. Ropes are used for the purpose, but also a long, smooth and heavy log that is longer than the cart, which is placed on top of the pile and the ropes are crossed over it. *Purzhina*. That's it. The word is *purzhina*. You may also describe someone as being 'as tall as a *purzhina*'. I wonder how Grandma Dimitra tied her sheaves? Because as far as I remember it always took two people to load a cart. One climbed on top of the pile and the other passed him the log, the one on top dragged it up while the other supported it, one tied the ropes at the front while the other fixed the log in position at the

back, and at some point they usually quarrelled. You can't do this job with the help of a child. It requires physical strength.

On one occasion, a group of Turks drove by along the road near Guard Bridge on their way back from the market. When they saw Grandma Dimitra struggling to lift the heavy log onto the clumsily loaded cart, they pulled up, unloaded the sheaves, rearranged them expertly, placed the log on top, fastened everything properly, climbed back onto their Turkish carts and drove off towards the Turkish village.

Grandma Dimitra was fond of citing this episode as an example of how wickedness and compassion are simply part of human nature and have nothing to do with being ugly or beautiful, Bulgarian or Turkish. We lived next door to grandpa Vulko on one side and grandpa Goran on the other. At the time the wind blew down our barn the two were strong young men and they had an ample supply of firewood in their yards. But every other day grandpa Vulko would jump over the fence, pull a piece of wood from the ruins and toss it onto his own pile. Thus, he eventually moved almost our entire barn over the fence and into his own yard. Grandma Dimitra couldn't outmatch him with the axe because she could only cut up the thinner poles for firewood. Moreover, grandpa Vulko justified his aggression theoretically. He often told the widow and her three children, 'The State suffers heavy losses on your account.' His reasoning went like this: He pays taxes to the local tax-collector. The tax-collector sends them to the king. But instead of using the money for some kingly undertaking, the king gives it to the government ministers who are foolish enough to believe they are righting wrongs by wasting it on pensions for people like Dimitra. By the act of taking logs from our barn, he was presumably correcting some of the stupid things in government and even though he couldn't save the State from incurring losses, he was partly restoring his own losses. Conversely, the brain of our other neighbour, grandpa Goran, was totally incapable of such statesmanly reasoning. In the freezing winter days, when there was no longer a single piece of firewood in our yard, he would wade through the snow to his wood-shed and doing his best, just like grandpa Vulko, to avoid being seen, toss one of his own logs over the fence. He made sure that the log wasn't too thick for Grandma Dimitra to cut on her own.

It seems that my father must have suffered an incredible amount of bullying back in those days. All the older boys as well as his stronger peers could test out their strength on him if they wished to. They reasoned as follows: 'You don't have a father so what could you possibly do to us?' He was frail and underfed. His two elder sisters needed protection too, but had nobody to protect them. When Aunt Yana was barely old enough to marry, a widower with three children (who was rumoured to have killed his wife) snatched her from the working-bee and dragged her to his house. Grandma Dimitra's protests and curses didn't change anything. A few years later more or less the same thing happened to Aunt Velika too. The difference was that although the man who snatched her was just as undesired as a son-in-law and husband, he at least wasn't a widower and had no children that needed to be cared for.

When one reads this one might assume that there were no laws or justice in the country, but that's not true. There *were* laws and by virtue of one of them Grandma Dimitra won a lawsuit once. She filed the lawsuit after Hristo Chakrukovski, a big, blue-eyed and good-looking thirty-year-old fellow, gave her then ten-year-old Nikolcho a terrible beating. The reason was that our two cows had gone into the family's freshly

hoed up cornfield and bitten off several stalks. The witnesses described what had happened, the court ordered Hristo to pay damages, and Grandma Dimitra was very proud of her victory. Ultimately, a sense of pride was all she got out of the whole affair because Hristo didn't pay her anything – not even a penny. It seems that he didn't have the will to pay her because he definitely had the money. As well as the time to do as ordered by the court. He outlived both Grandma Dimitra and my father by several decades. I ran into him when he was ninety, tall, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked. I knew that he went to bed early, that he traded in small farm animals, that his diet was mostly milk and fruit. He expounded his views of life to me calmly and in detail. According to him, the most important thing wasn't to live long but to live well. What he said suggested that he wasn't happy with his life. He told me that when I eat eggs I should always throw away the yolk because it was bad for your health. I cannot calculate the value of this piece of advice, but then the damages he owes our family (I believe he may still be alive) after the many monetary reforms conducted since 1924 (the year of the lawsuit) are just as difficult to calculate.

## 15.

A frozen white waterfall and, standing in front of it, figures of high-school students in black uniforms. Sixteen- or seventeen-year-old boys with tall collars, caps tilted slightly, belts fastened in military-style over the jackets. There is only one female figure in this photograph. The teacher. Standing exactly in the middle, she has a strict, intelligent young face, her hair being completely white – just like the frozen waterfall. My father is on her right, holding a book. In another photograph, probably taken on the same day, there is another student between him and her. As a child I always felt jealous when I leafed through the photo album. I was unhappy that there was someone between my father and the teacher. I wonder who she was? Mrs. Sirkova, perhaps? There used to be a teacher of that name at the Lovech high school. The name is redolent of history, of the invariably mentioned in old travel accounts Altın<sup>5</sup> Lovech, of the dank Varosh,<sup>6</sup> of the encircled by the River Ossum Drustené, which hid in its rickety houses the always cheerful poor man with blue eyes.<sup>7</sup> Nikolcho and Mariyka Sirkov, the married couple whom Levski trusted completely, lived precisely in this part of Lovech. Mrs. Sirkova the teacher is from the same family.

After the Turks departed eastwards, the children of the Lovech notables and artisans headed West. The closest West was Sofia with its new schools, the more distant West being Prague, Berlin, Geneva, Paris. When doctors, teachers and lawyers eventually started returning from the West, the piles of shit under the Covered Bridge and the mountains of dirt along the primitive quays of the Ossum started disappearing. The town began to smell of freshly washed pavement, of European goods, of pharmacies full of whiteness, cleanness and awe-inspiring Latin. Educated musicians appeared too. In the public garden, under the roof of a large wooden pavilion painted in the colours of the national flag, the garrison brass band played every Sunday.

The huge building of the high school is between the public garden and Sur Bazaar. I think the Turkish bullet that sent my grandfather to the grave partly contributed

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<sup>5</sup> 'Golden' in Turkish.

<sup>6</sup> Central quarter of the old town.

<sup>7</sup> Vassil Levski (1837–1873), the leader of the national liberation movement in Bulgaria.

to my father's entry into this building. Because no matter what she went through, the soldier's widow could rely on receiving some money once every month. Living on this pension only was inconceivable anyway, she had somehow managed to make it through the hardest years of her life and now her two daughters were old enough to toil away in the lumpy field as her equals. Under these circumstances, Grandma Dimitra heeded the village teachers' persistent advice and sent her boy to the Lovech high school. He was so timid and weakly that she had long since given up hope of seeing a true man worker in the house.

For decades, in countless CVs for the insatiable files of the state and communist party bureaucracy, my father unfailingly wrote one and the same sentence: 'With hard work and great effort, I succeeded in finishing high school in 1932.' Here the phrase 'hard work and great effort' doesn't mean poring over textbooks and struggling to learn. It wasn't learning that was hard for him. It was the winter days in the chilly lodgings in Varosh, from which not even the icy wind that comes from the Ossum and cuts through everything in its path could blow away the smell of rot and damp. The tiring and tedious weekly trips by foot to the village for a bag of bread and a pot of food. The embarrassment and humiliation of wearing the same old clothes and shabby shoes, long outgrown and outworn, for years. Still, this wasn't what the invariably present sentence was meant to imply. Actually, this sentence was always preceded by another one: 'I come from an extremely poor peasant family.' It was this conversion from a member of the peasantry, the potential ally of the progressive working class, to a member of the rotten intelligentsia that needed to be justified to the vigilant authorities. Because after the high school certificate came another one, from the Institute for Junior High School Teachers in the town of Doupnitsa. As regards this second step towards class treason, my father didn't even try to point out the mitigating circumstance 'with hard work and great effort'. In the two years of the course, he didn't have to carry the pot of food from Kaminishte across the Balkan Range and Sofia to the Rila Mountains, where the teachers' institute was located. In Doupnitsa, he received not only the bulk of the widow's pension but also, although quite rarely, other money too. The money was sent by postal order by Docho Michev, my maternal grandfather, who carefully collected and kept the receipts. The condition was that my father must pay it back eventually.

My father's marriage took place in a period of his life that he tried to avoid mentioning in his CVs at all if possible. The said period between high school and the teachers' institute lasted two years, during which he worked as a clerk at the Kaminishte village council. Back then, in the early nineteen-thirties, he would have seen himself as a proletarian selling the only thing he had, his literacy, but in the early fifties he knew that any reasonably shrewd informer would omit the details concerning official duties and time, mentioning only the dirty words 'council official'. This would have been enough to trigger a string of associations in the mind of the person reading or hearing the informer's report: nineteen-forty-one – forty-four, mayor, tax-collector, council clerk, policeman, resistance, severed heads of resistance fighters.

When the twenty-three-year-old clerk announced that he was getting married, his fellow workers organised a collection and bought him a small double spring bed. The village bull-keeper, grandpa Toshko Gadjev, who was also on the council staff, claimed until his death that the mayor had stolen part of the collected money. Whether or not this is true remains a mystery to this day, but the spring bed with polished brass balls at the

four corners, with castles and white swans on golden-brown boards, provided a stunning contrast in the dark room where they had previously slept on the earthen floor, on two goat's hair and several hempen rugs spread out at night and rolled up in the morning. Grandma Dimitra lost her peace of mind completely when my father decided to buy another bed. It was me who had incited him to act so unwisely. I was six months old then, and on this particular day my cradle hung from the pear tree in the farthest of our fields, the one that was closer to the neighbouring village of Dubrava than to Kaminishte. Throughout the day I had let out such unbearable screams that my mother and my aunt were forced to drop the hoe and come running to comfort me in turns. By the time they finally managed to hoe the field, the moon had risen in the sky. My father met them in the path through the forest, breathless and trembling with fear. While he was running towards the distant field he swore that he would sell it. And sell it he did, several days later. What the correlation between the prices of industrial goods and of land was at the time is suggested by the fact that all the money from the sale went for an iron spring bed. It was dull green, without castles, lakes or swans, but with melancholic autumn trees and birds flying above them that none but the painter could tell if they were ravens or cranes. And there was a yellow lion on one of the boards, rearing in profile, long red tongue lolling out like a dog's on a hot day. It was there, around this lion, that I had held onto the metal board when I was two or three – still without pants and, as later in life, without a particular ear for music – jump up and down imagining that I was dancing, and sing over and over again with inspiration my favourite song at the time:

Scarlet peony in a garden,  
Yana my love!

## 16.

White snow and the pungent smell of horse droppings. They are dropping one after another under the cocked tail. The cart driver waits for the smacking red hole to spit out the last one, and slaps with his whip one haunch, then the other. The horses leap forward, hoping to free themselves from the weight attached to their bodies.

My sister and I are on the sledge, covered with a warm woolen rug. Snow is piling up on the rug. My father is sitting next to the cart driver in front, my mother behind them. She doesn't clear the snow over us. Either because she knows that it will pile up very quickly again or because she thinks that the thick pile on the rug will stop the wind, keeping us warm.

We are on our way to the village of Dragana. Or it might have been Vassilyovo, because at the time of my father's brief spell as a teacher in Dragana I was two and the only thing I know was there for certain is a big, angry, brown, fast running under my feet, expanse of water and a willow tree floating on the surface, its roots pointing at the sky. The willow tree is coming towards me fast, but instead of stopping and taking me it instantly floats past and away. For all I know, I may have been surprised or offended, but I definitely don't remember wanting to jump in the brown water to chase the tree, so the terror that my mother felt at that moment and that would make her start from her sleep for years to come was obviously in vain. After it had rained heavily one day, our landlady Kapcha<sup>8</sup> (her name is sort of rainy too) saw her tenants' child squatting on the bank, leaning over the swollen river and beating it with a stick. Creeping up behind me, my

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<sup>8</sup> From *kapka*, 'drop' (as in raindrop) in Bulgarian.

mother snatched me up. The river in which my two-year life might have ended had the unlovely name Kalnik,<sup>9</sup> but in the photograph you see beyond the willow trees on the river bank a nice two-storey house with an ironwork balcony. There, or perhaps in one of the houses with rooms to let in the village of Vassilyovo, my father would often take an afternoon nap after school. It seems that my sister and I must have had to keep quiet while he slept, so I suppose it was out of pure spite that we once tore out the hairs of his watercolour brushes. I remember very well that he was in bed while we were furiously pulling out the hairs of the brushes, giggling until we had torn them out clean.

In addition to mathematics and natural sciences at the teachers' institute, my father had specialised in drawing. When I grew up I realised that he wasn't particularly talented as a painter, but back in those days my pulse would quicken in anticipation and delight as I watched an eye, a nose, a mouth, a head, a man, a raven appearing on the white sheet under the pencil or stick of charcoal in his hand. The colours that emerged under the little wet tongue of the watercolour brush filled me with an inspiring feeling that there was something vast and incredibly interesting that I didn't know yet. Later, the mice from the decades of real socialism and more recent times were allowed to piss on what remained in our deserted house of those drawings, buried meanwhile in mountains of brochures, instructions, communist party reports, manuals, forms, minutes of proceedings, accounts, analyses and assorted other cancerous products of brains that had lost their way.

In Vassilyovo my father found himself in the company of people who enjoyed the good life. The head teacher was Stoyan Popov, son-in-law of Miho Karavassilev from the rich family that gave the village its name. His wife, the daughter of the selfsame rich man and former MP, was a teacher at the same school. It turned out, however, that the head teacher Popov's main occupation wasn't teaching but hunting. Between classes, on the few occasions that the teachers actually were in school, they talked of nothing but gunpowder and dogs, and the crack of gunfire in the nearby forests and hills could be heard in the village virtually every day. Local hares simmered in the pots of the tireless, ever smiling tavern-keeper Ivan Subchev, filling the air with a smell of wine and bay-leaves, at night gramophones played and songs resounded across the tavern, while the village schoolchildren were more than happy to live a life of leisure. But they had completely forgotten the multiplication table. This particular case might not have been typical of the generally strict educational system back in those days. Anyway, my father, who was twenty-seven at the time, had two options. To become a hunter and spend most of his time with the boss in the tavern, or to set about cleansing the first of the Augean stables that came his way.

Admittedly, he did buy a rifle and probably went hunting with the others several times, but he was utterly unfit for fellowship at the table. The problem was that while still in Kaminishte my father and a schoolmate had founded a youth temperance society, which grew very quickly and by 1937 had around two hundred members – schoolgirls and schoolboys, young men and women. The population of the village at the time was around two thousand, and smokers and drinkers had a choice of as many as fifteen taverns. Not so long ago, you could still find in our old house yellowing, rat-gnawed newspapers and calendars published by the erstwhile temperance society. Mixed with other papers, they littered the floor and the floor-to-ceiling shelves of a whole room. But

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<sup>9</sup> Muddy.

there was also a huge amount of bottles of excellent grape and plum brandy. My father made this brandy himself in the last decade of his life, but couldn't drink it all up because of his untimely death. Every cover of the longest published series of brochures showed a young, brawny fellow with a profile like Michelangelo's David firmly gripping the neck of a giant curled dragon whose tongue stuck out in agony. The dragon, of course, was the hateful King Alcohol, with the sun of sobriety rising behind him and the brawny fellow.

Although my sleeping habits make me more of a lark than an owl, the number of real sunrises I've seen in my life is negligible compared with that of pictures of sunrises. A sun behind a Sezession-style pattern of letters, leaves and twigs on the covers of a women's magazine from the turn of the century. A sun behind a hammer and anvil. A sun behind an open book. A sun behind a factory chimney, behind a swastika, behind a torch, behind a hammer and sickle, behind a raised fist, behind ploughed-up furrows, behind an industrial plant. I even remember a wooden ruler with an ink drawing of pine trees, a mountain ridge and the sun rising above them. My father must have been doodling in class while waiting for the end of a written test or the mumbling of someone in front of the blackboard.

I myself have drawn a vast number of sunrises on all sorts of wall newspapers, slogans and posters in school. 'For to me it's as sure as the dawn – with our heads we shall break up the ice. From the low dark horizon the sun – yes, our own bright sun shall rise.'<sup>10</sup> There is no irony in those verses. The ultimate irony is that decades after their author broke his head in 1942, sincerely believing that he was breaking up the ice, people in his country were still enjoying brief and false thaws like mammoths from a far-off ice age suddenly stirring into life.

Whoever wants to understand the metamorphosis that turned the dragon symbolising King Alcohol into a dragon symbolising world imperialism and replaced the word 'sobriety' by the word 'communism' written on the rising sun, must trace the infiltration of the socialist, cooperative, educational and temperance movement in Bulgaria by the ideas of Stalinist bolshevism. I myself have olfactory sensations of this metamorphosis. In our house the scent of freshly cut books, of printer's ink, of tempera and stage make-up was gradually replaced by smells of hunter's gunpowder, of gun lubricant, of leather cartridge-belts, of grape and plum brandy.

## 17.

My mother often told me how on his way down the mountain path from the village of Vassilyovo to Paulician Kaminishte my father would 'do military exercises'. He ran, ducking, took cover in the ditches by the path, then leapt up and ran on, the way soldiers do. She described this with a touch of irony that was typical of her later in life. The point of the whole exercise was that he was preparing to join the underground resistance. 'You'll get yourself killed on the very first day, clumsy as you are,' she would tell him, refusing even to contemplate the idea of his joining the *shoumkari*.<sup>11</sup> The word 'Partisan' hadn't entered common usage yet. I myself heard it for the first time in the autumn of 1944, but I was first introduced to the concept of anti-Nazi resistance through

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<sup>10</sup> From the poem 'A Letter' by Nikola Vaptsarov (1909–1942), executed as a member of the anti-Nazi resistance. Translated by Peter Tempest.

<sup>11</sup> A pejorative term for the anti-Nazi resistance fighters, also known as Partisans, from *shouma* or 'foliage' – referring to people who hide in the woods.

the dialect word ‘*sheiki*.’ The authorities had obviously been referring to ‘*shaiki*’ or ‘gangs’, but this form of the word somehow couldn’t roll off the tongue of people from our village. ‘*Sheiki!*’ my mother whispered to me in excitement and alarm one night when barking dogs woke me up, leaning over me as if to protect my warm bed from something very frightening. I pictured them as having fearsome, sprayed with a mixture of lime and blue vitriol, faces. For some unknown reason, that’s what the rebels against Turkish rule in a play staged by my father in the school looked like. The *sheiki* had killed the forest warden of the village of Vassilyovo. And had run up and down him, as I overheard too. Why did they need to run up and down the forest warden? Maybe because they couldn’t walk like normal people but could only run. Like dogs. During the festival of Dailada, when the rings were taken out of the copper pot, the girls of marriageable age used to sing the following refrain too: ‘Short bitch runs across the glen, ties her boot tighter.’ The girl whose ring was taken out of the water in the pot after this refrain would marry an outlaw. The very words ‘rebel’, *sheika*, outlaw sounded wild, fearsome, repulsive and attractive. Much later, as the figures of the *sheiki* running up and down the forest warden continued to haunt me (obviously because of the element of cruelty in the image), I gradually realised that this must have been an act of revenge. The underground resistance fighters had trampled the corpse of the council worker whom they had accused of betrayal and executed in the forest.

By the steep path from the village of Vassilyovo to Paulician Kaminishte birds sang in spring but now, in late autumn, the dry brown leaves of the oak trees were rustling in the wind. I’m hurrying along after my father and mother. They are in a hurry because a play is on at the village *chitalishte*<sup>12</sup> tonight. They have promised to take me along. Now and then I stumble on a lump of earth or stone because my attention is focused on the distant, very distant hills from which the sky starts. Somewhere in the hills there is a road, and a car may pass along the road. It is very exciting to be expecting to see what kind of car will appear: red, blue, yellow, green, or other. At the upper end of Paulician Kaminishte is grandpa Vulyo’s inn. Once, when it was raining heavily, lots of cars arrived at the inn, all of them blue-green, and yellow-haired soldiers jumped out of them. My mother, my sister and I had hidden in grandpa Vulyo’s tavern on our way back from the fields. A woman with yellow hair and yellow boots sat me on her lap. She offered me chocolate but I stubbornly refused to take it. I was known as a shy child and, besides, I couldn’t understand what the woman was saying. There’s no way I could have understood her because, as I realised later, she was German and the year was 1941. Now, as we are going down the steep path from Vassilyovo to Paulician Kaminishte, I don’t know that it is 1942 already and that if any of the blue-green trucks still hasn’t burned on the Russian roads and is continuing towards Stalingrad, the soldiers in it aren’t smiling. And have no chocolate. In the yellow-brown forests of Bulgaria in 1942, all you can hear is the wind checking how many leaves are still clinging to the branches. Every once in a while, you might hear a twig snap under the foot of an animal, or it might not be an animal, the chatter of a magpie upset that the peace has been disturbed, the occasional gunshot fired by a hunter, or it might not be a hunter – but the boom of cannon fire, the flames, the victorious roar and the death howl of millions of Russians, Germans, Japanese and many others are thousands of kilometres away.

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<sup>12</sup> A specific, traditional type of community centre in Bulgaria.

A deep gorge of blue earth and yellow stones divides the two mountain ridges between the two villages. It looks like the canyons in Colorado I saw later in American Westerns. The most fascinating and fearsome place is the Fall. In our dialect 'fall' means waterfall. All you can see now is a thin stream of water splashing down from the wide slab of stone that juts out above the deep, but this isn't always so. Once, the water came down in fierce, muddy torrents, raging and roaring. We were again on our way down from Vassilyovo to Paulician Kaminishte. We got caught in the open by torrential rain and we took shelter in a shepherd's hut. When it stopped raining and we slithered down the steep muddy path to the Fall, I saw something that would haunt my dreams for years. There was no trace of the calm green pool below. Now the whole giant cauldron formed by the two steep banks and the overhanging slab that connected them had filled with murky brown water and white foam. Coming from above, round the bend in the gorge, branches and thick trees appeared, froze for an instant over the foaming cauldron, and before they could do anything to save themselves, tumbled into the roaring and raging inferno.

We waited for the force of the torrents to subside, then my father stripped down to knee-length white underpants, lifted my mother and waded into the water. Every single one of his slow, cautious steps towards the bank across was accompanied by a desperate scream let out by my sister and me. I don't remember if I was carried over next or last, but the image of my father's white pants, my mother's plaits and my sister's frock rolling with the trees and branches and tumbling, amidst blood and mud, into the raging infinity lingered long around my pillow before the scriptwriter of my dreams, who has never lacked a taste for the nightmarish, took pains to diversify them with other motifs.

## 18.

The forest on stage was nicer than the real forest. Whether the leaves and branches were cut from paper or cloth I don't know, but it was truly fascinating to watch them fluttering ever so gently above the heads of the actors.

We, God knows why, entered by way of the stage. Whether we went home after coming back down the path from the village of Vassilyovo I don't remember. What I do remember is that I found myself amidst some people who looked a little frightened (they were actually the local actors), a sharp smell hit me (probably of stage make-up and clothes kept in mothballs), my father drew something I later learned was called 'curtain', and we found ourselves high above the theatre auditorium reached by a wooden ladder with four or five steps. Expecting the show to begin at any moment, a brass band was playing in the auditorium, which was buzzing with excitement and completely full. Fat, grinning and bald, our godfather Vassil the Tax-Collector sat in the front row, a huge white dog walking back and forth in the space between him and the stage.

Vassil is the most important person in the village council – more important even than the mayor because mayors come and go but he remains in office. Sitting in the front row in the *chitalishte*, fashionable plus-fours almost bursting at the seams, brand new tie shining on his thick neck, Vassil the Tax-Collector is watching his pedigree hunting dog walk back and forth before the audience, knowing that even if the dog were to climb up the wooden ladder and on the stage nobody would dare say anything. But what he doesn't know is that just two years later he would lie buried – without plus-fours, tie, watch or coffin – in the sands by the River Ossum. I am sitting in the front row too and I, too,

don't know what will happen to our godfather Vassil and his big white dog. What is happening on the stage holds my attention firmly and relentlessly. Two men, Naiden and Zhivko, are fighting over a pretty young woman called Milkana. Finally Naiden, instead of killing Zhivko, kills Milkana. He shoots her dead with a small silver pistol.

Next day, however, I see Milkana alive. In a black school uniform with a number on the sleeve. Milkana from last night's play is actually called Evdokiya but is better known as Dochka, she is a student at the Lovech high school and is a relative of ours. She is standing between the radio and the richly laden table in her family's house and arguing about something with the guests. I am the youngest of the guests. Me and one of Vassil the Tax-Collector's daughters. A glass jug of red wine stands right in front of me, at the level of my eyes, preventing me from getting a clear view of Evdokiya. She has a beautiful snow-white face and a slim body, and is maybe the loveliest thing born of my Grandma Donka's large and rich family. The guests won't believe something she is telling them, so she says, 'I'm serious!' And arches her thin eyebrows. This is the first time I hear the word 'serious', and I like it very much.

What's happening at this moment may be described as 'Visiting Rich Relatives'. My life experience and vocabulary, however, are still too poor to formulate such definitions. I am aware that the house we are in is very different from ours. All around me there are glass cabinets displaying sundry white and green and brown cups and saucers. There's a radio covered with white lace, and there's also white lace on the windowpanes. Some of the women are wearing lipstick, their curly hair cut short like teachers. The men are smoking some kind of finger-thick, brown cigarettes.

'Now dear little Mimi and Dora will sing us something,' says our godfather Vassil the Tax-Collector, gold tooth glittering in a happy father's smile above the green tie. Dear little Mimi and Dora are slightly older than me, with colourful ribbons in their hair, and something funny and impossible – they are dressed in pants like boys, knitted and floor-length. Dear little Mimi and Dora stand side by side and start singing:

Berlin and Tokyo and Rome –  
courageous fighters all.  
New Order, brave and whole,  
worldwide they'll soon install.<sup>13</sup>

They are applauded, patted, praised. Everybody starts singing. Red wine is poured from the yellowish glass jug. Bluish cigarette smoke floats above the lipstick, the ties, the sweating bare heads of the men, above the curled hair of the women.

We go out to have our pictures taken. The pictures are eventually placed on one of the first pages of our family album. I am gloomy and sulking. I was in a bad mood even while we were preparing for the visit. My mother was trying to button the earflaps of the leather cap under my chin. I hated this cap because it was way too small for me to wear any longer and it squeezed my head. Eager to cope with the situation, mum caught my skin in the buttonhole, I burst into tears, got slapped in the face, was urged to hurry on, told we'd make fools of ourselves. On our way through Magpie's Gully, I was curious to see if a puddle had frozen so I stepped in it, my rubber boot filled with cold mud, I got slapped in the face again, so of course I'd be gloomy in the picture even though everything was very unusual and interesting, especially the song 'Berlin and Tokyo and Rome'.

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by Lyubomir Gigov.

My Grandma Donka is also in this picture of us with our rich relatives. She is holding a big turkey in her arms. She thought that the turkey would make the picture more interesting, and she was right. What's more important for establishing the chronology of events, however, is that in this picture she is with a real left leg. (Otherwise she would have been leaning on a walking stick and couldn't have held the turkey in both her arms.) This means that the picture was taken before her leg was cut off.

## 19.

Grandma Donka's left leg played a fateful role in the life of every single member of our family.

It all started the day we left our old house that was at the foot of the long white rock, and moved to the lower end of the village. The iron spring bed, the black cupboard with books, Grandma Dimitra's chest, the rugs, cauldrons, pots, spoons were all loaded onto the wooden cart harnessed to our two cows, and rattled down the steep streets. In my sister's arms the yellow cat looked utterly bewildered, trying constantly to slip out and scamper back up the street. Our dog Jackal, yellow in colour too, dutifully accompanied the cart, but unlike other times he was now stumbling along at the rear as if someone had tied him to the tail of the cart. But being a dog, he immediately accepted his new home. The cat ran away that very night. A day or two later, Grandma Dimitra took a pan, bundled up some clothes and a rug, and likewise returned to the house under the rock she had only just left. The four of us, however, moved into the new building that Grandpa Docho and Grandma Donka had originally intended to be a tavern.

A malignant tumour had appeared on Grandma Donka's left leg, just below the knee. The near future looked bleak. My mother had to be around to look after Grandma. She looked after her for thirty-eight years. In nineteen-forty-two, when we moved out of our old house, my father was a young man. On the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall he had long since turned to dust in his grave, while Grandma Donka was hobbling around the beehives in our garden with her prosthesis and walking stick, looking thoughtful as she told me: 'This butterfly is flying without a partner for a second day now. The other day it had a partner.' God knows how she identified the butterflies, but her concerns at the time boiled down to reflections on, say, their love relationships.

Grandma Donka is one of the eight daughters of my maternal grandfather Stoyno Velchovski, who remained the wealthiest man in Paulician Kaminishte for several decades. It might seem that being the wealthiest person in such a poor highland village doesn't necessarily mean you are rich, but this isn't exactly true. Stoyno Velchovski inherited all the property of the Turkish bey Mehmed Gendjoolu, the last non-Christian ruler to live here in the nineteenth century. The word 'appropriated' is more accurate than 'inherited', but I couldn't possibly place it after the name of my own great-grandfather even though I've never seen him except in several old sepia photographs. On the other hand, the ancestors of Mehmed Bey had also appropriated other people's land when they came here wielding their yataghans centuries ago. Whether it was this selfsame bey or some other influential Turk I don't know, but I do know that in the last years before the Russo-Turkish War someone had advised Grandfather Stoyno's father to send his son away from the country if he didn't want to see him swing. Stoyno Velchovski had only just finished the Aprilov High School in Gabrovo – the best education one could receive on Bulgarian territory at the time. He was hired as a teacher in Paulician Kaminishte, but

his behaviour smacked strongly of rebellion. He went to Romania and returned with General Skobelev's army. Although he wasn't known to have performed any heroic deed during the war, he had come with the victors so his words carried weight as the words of a victor – that's why when he declared that the bey's land was his the illiterate peasants might have wondered how that could possibly be, but nobody dared ask him. If there had been anybody who was more literate and rich, he would have preferred to say nothing too, because he would have already been branded a collaborator and supporter of Turkish rule. The priest kept silent too. Years ago an underground envoy, perhaps Levski himself, had come to the village to found a revolutionary committee. But the priest had objected. 'We're surrounded by Turkish villages on all sides, my boy,' he'd told the apostle. 'Any sign of revolt and they'll kill us all.' The emissary of the revolution was sent off with a blessing, and the committee failed to materialise. But now that deep, five-century-old strata were shifting and that, amidst the general patriotic upsurge, services to the country were being feverishly claimed, recalled and cashed in on, the priest had to suffer the consequences of his cowardice. Even so, a piece of the bey's huge property in the village centre was cut off for the purpose of building a church, but all the rest became the property of Stoyno Velchovski. By the time I was born nobody knew any longer exactly where the bey's tower had stood before it was burned down during the Turkish counter-attack against Colonel Zherebkov's Cossack detachment, but there was still a long, facing the Balkan Range to the south, building with many rooms, staircases and balconies. Following the rule that one must cut one's coat according to one's cloth, Stoyno Velchovski set about filling this particular yard and building with numerous offspring.

Having some idea of his character, I think he was hardly born to be a teacher; still, it was precisely at the time he worked as a teacher, and more probably before rather than after his short emigration to Romania, that he watched through the window of the school a young girl with pails and a yoke on her shoulder climb up the hill towards the long white rock every day. Carrying water with a yoke requires less strength than skill. I have tried it myself. Upon the very first steps the pails start swinging back and forth, the water splashing down alternately in front and behind me, and by the time I've crossed the two or three hundred metres from Magpie's Gully to our house they are half-empty. If I happen to meet some older woman along the way, she'll hide her smile and always give me the same piece of advice: 'Swing your *peshtimal*.'<sup>14</sup> I don't wear a *peshtimal*, I dress in trousers, but the girl carrying the pails down the hill from the houses under the long white rock probably did. Let me remind you that this is the female garment that particularly upset the virtuous Father Baldini in the early seventeenth century because it fluttered like a flag around the legs of the Paulician women. When carrying water with a yoke, the *peshtimal* must not simply swing just anyhow – it must swing rhythmically, at every step, swaying to the left and to the right. And the larger the amplitude of the movement, the fewer drops of water splash down. To make the *peshtimal* sway to the left and to the right, what's under it must rotate in a circle: forwards, to the left, backwards, to the right; forwards, to the left, backwards, to the right. When you are carrying the yoke with water uphill, those movements must be even more skilful.

Had she known that forgetting his pupils, Stoyno Velchovski watched her from the school window every day, my great-grandmother Neda from the Buyuklii family might have chosen a more roundabout path to the tap. When he took her as his wife, she

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<sup>14</sup> A piece of fine, light cloth worn like a back apron.

was seventeen years old. She had thirteen children, three of which died. Maybe the numbers would have been smaller if a boy had been born sooner, but my Grandma Donka was the fifth daughter in succession. At the time she was born (in the autumn of 1885) my great-grandfather Stoyno was among the Bulgarian infantry counter-attacking the Serbian army at Slivnitsa. Before leaving, he had shown people in the village a heavy gold coin. This was the reward he'd give the person who told him that he at long last had a male heir. A soldier from Paulician Kaminishte who was late in catching up with his army company brought the news that the newborn baby had been named Donka, and pocketed a silver coin. Having failed to propitiate destiny or nature in any way, my great-grandfather sought a very desperate solution. (I'm telling this story with grave doubts, because he had many enemies and it is more likelier made up.) Assuming after the birth of his fifth daughter that the failure to produce a male heir was his fault, Stoyno Velchovski made his wife go to bed with one of the farmhands. If this is true at all, his desire to have an heir must have battled hard with his male jealousy, considering that of the many farmhands he chose the one that looked least like a man. He was ugly, small in build, faint-hearted and shrill-voiced like a woman. Whether the newborn baby boy was the result of this ugly idea or the idea that this is what really happened was the result of his ugliness nobody can say for certain, but his birth definitely became a punishment. Peter, my Grandma Donka's eldest brother (another two were born after him, but they looked like my great-grandfather Stoyno), was the black sheep of the huge Velchovski family. While his seven sisters and two brothers were tall, with a fair complexion, most of them with the rare combination of black hair and blue eyes, he was swarthy and hunched. In his childhood he was sick all the time and wetted his bed, and I remember him wetting himself as an old man too. Before he was old enough to go to school he fell ill from meningitis, he'd had something wrong with his head ever since, and he was almost illiterate. To unite the property of two rich families, they married him off to the prettiest girl in the village, the marriage proved disastrous but this is, so to speak, a different story.

Unlike her brother Peter's marriage, my Grandma Donka's was almost a love match. Docho Michev was good-looking and energetic, but his most remarkable asset as a twenty-year-old bachelor was his incredibly beautiful handwriting. Every single doctor, Grandma Donka used to say – and the number of doctors who had examined her since the time of 'Berlin and Tokyo and Rome' was countless – who saw a letter from Grandpa Docho would cry out in amazement, 'Who wrote this!' I remember him at the table by the potted lemon tree where he kept his papers. He would first clear everything around his elbows and knuckles because he needed space to write with a flourish. Then he dipped the pen in the inkpot, pushed something aside – for example, the clock, because it might get in his way – cocked his head to one side and licked his lips with pleasurable anticipation; the nib started circling over the sheet of paper, going faster and faster before plunging into its virgin whiteness, and once the tip touched the smooth surface the letters ran after it, all of them bent on catching up with it. After filling the sheet, he took ashes from the drawer of the tin stove and sprinkled them on the paper. He never used blotting paper because he was a miser. I could always tell if Grandpa Docho was writing to a doctor or to a merchant. He sealed the letters to merchants with red wax. This went on for

several years after the Ninth of September<sup>15</sup> until his vineyards were taken away and he could no longer make wine for sale, while the red wax became a challenging but naïve way of hiding something from the people's power that liked knowing everything about everybody.

Because of his beautiful handwriting, at some point early on in the century Docho Michev was appointed clerk at the village council. It was there that Stoyno Velchovski, who was probably mayor at the time, chose him as a son-in-law. My grandfather's family had some land of their own as it was, but now that his wife had brought him a solid dowry he readily gave up clerking to devote himself to farming with amazing passion and energy. He took courses in vine- and fruit-growing, then in bee-keeping. Later, when he had saved up a little money (he might have inherited some gold too), he started lending at interest, also leasing land on a sharecrop basis, but he never stopped working the land himself. His hands were rough to the touch, heavy and calloused by constant contact with hoes, axes and spades. His favourite expression was 'let's get down to action', so his nickname was Action. Peter Velkov, his assistant at the sawmill, was unable to stop himself from telling what had happened at the bank one day, and this started rumours that Docho Michev was literally rolling in money. The two had gone to the bank in Sevlievo, my grandfather needing to draw out money for a new machine. (The banks in Lovech were the nearest and most convenient for him, but he preferred spreading his savings around just in case. After he died, his heirs had to go as far as away as Troyan to close some by then worthless bank accounts.) Forgetting the principle of bank secrecy, one of the clerks in Sevlievo stepped out from behind the counter, drew Peter Velkov aside, and asked him, 'What is this guy?' As my grandfather's partner, a very skilled mechanic, shrugged in confusion, the clerk whispered, 'He's loaded with money!'

It seems he was more successful in making than in investing money – having failed to invest his savings in a larger project, he was badly hit by inflation during the Second World War. Among his papers I found a long series of letters. He'd wanted to open a wood-processing factory, but for some reason or other the district authorities kept delaying his permit. At the time, in addition to the many forests, fields and vineyards, he owned a sawmill and co-owned a tractor and two threshing machines. Saving up for the big coup he never pulled off, he had become so mean that at times he looked ridiculous. I can't imagine a more graphic illustration of the contrast between his fabled wealth and miserable way of life than one occasion, by then many years after the Ninth of September, when he handed Grandma Donka his shabby cap, insisting that she mend it. The cap flew out of the window, hurled by Grandma Donka's hand and accompanied by her shrill voice: 'The devil take your cap!' Although they had hired workers too, until she fell seriously ill in 1942 she toiled on the land as his equal. Once, while the two were pitching threshed hay into the barn she hurt her left leg with the pitchfork slightly above the ankle, and a lump the size of a bean formed on the sore spot. A few months later, they were racking wine in the cellar when she hurt the same part of her leg so badly that she almost fainted with pain, and the lump grew the size of a walnut. By the time we left our house by the long white rock and went to live at Grandpa Docho's at the lower end of the village, the swelling was egg-sized. The doctors from the Sofia hospital had given it a

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<sup>15</sup> 1944, the day marking the change of the political regime in Bulgaria after the Soviet Army entered the country.

name: tumour. I thought it sounded a bit like the word ‘motor’ (Grandpa Docho had just bought a shiny big one for the sawmill), only much nastier.

## 20.

They stood side by side in a rather unusual combination: tavern and sawmill. The sawmill was in the stone semi-basement of Grandpa Docho’s new barn. A shed connected the two new buildings with the old house, so whenever Peter Velkov switched on the electric motor and the sundry drives, flywheels and belts started spinning, slapping and shaking the foundations of the barn, the barn rocked the house. If you raised a full spoon to your lips and held it in mid-air for a moment, part of it would spill as the house shook to the rhythm of the chainsaw. Giant vines grown by Grandpa Docho’s expert hand rose by the stone steps of the barn, reaching right up to the tiled roof of the new house. This was the house he’d built with the intention of opening a tavern – maybe the fifteenth in the not particularly hostile to wine and spirits village of Paulician Kaminishte.

So, Grandpa Docho had let us use the upper floor of the new house before it had actually soaked up the smell of tobacco and lees that would have lingered for decades as a reminder of a life dutifully devoted to drinking. It turned out to be a terribly draughty place, this house of Grandpa Docho’s. The largest room was split into two smaller ones by a newly built brick wall, but even they could never get warm enough. The only sheltered place on the upper floor was a tiny room to the southeast, roughly three by three metres. There was barely room enough for a single bed and a very simple tin stove. The bed was extended at night by a makeshift device consisting of a wide plank and iron hooks, and we slept in it all four of us – my father, my mother, my sister and I. When it was very cold Grandma Dimitra spread her rugs on the floor right next to us, taking up all the space between the bed, the stove, the window and the door. If anyone wanted to go out at night they had to step over her. Below the rooms of the former tavern was the stone cellar where Grandpa Docho kept his casks. A cold draught came from it even in summer. There was another tiny room on the same floor, to the north. It was where the tavern entrance used to be, at street level. This was the quietest and darkest room in our new house. On the eastern wall Grandma Dimitra hung the icon of the Holy Virgin. With the upturned cauldron on his head, Jesus again started looking sadly at us in the half-darkness, and the air around the black, candle-smoked cross of the iconostasis again filled with the smell of incense and basil.

## 22.

Although the cat was the first to rebel against the new order and return to our old house, it eventually gave in and came back. Grandma Dimitra, however, wouldn’t give up without a fight. Every time they had a major row, she would take her bundle and head uphill towards the Wall. Her pride was badly hurt by the fact that she had to live in her in-laws’ yard and house. Torn between mother and wife, my father would go up to the old house and try to talk her into coming back. Her objections always had the same refrain, pronounced with a rather forced wail: ‘I can’t, Nikolcho, I just can’t!’ Meanwhile, the house by the rock was growing older and older. Water started leaking through the stone slabs on the roof, chunks of plaster fell off the walls, exposing the wattles underneath, the winds ripped the tin sheet off the roof of the well. The ground under the rock, right behind the house, was becoming increasingly overgrown. Gradually,

branches entwined the high, white stone slabs, and creeping plants sealed off the mouths of the caves. The sunny patches to which we had run so eagerly to pick violets and crocuses in the first days of spring were overgrown with an impenetrable jungle. The ravens disappeared eventually too – but that was much, much later, when a cooperative farm was set up in the village and planes took off and flew over the area, spraying it with toxic pesticides.

### 23.

There were soldiers in the school. By the high cement-topped wall their soup was boiling on big, rubber-wheeled stoves. Through one of the windows, where I'd sometimes seen the blonde female teacher and a white-haired male teacher ring the school bell, I now glimpsed the pointed top of a hut built of guns. There were other guns too – long, fat, riddled with big oblong holes, and with iron legs. None of us boys squatting on the wall, some old enough to wear pants and others still with a hempen shirt around the willy, wasn't quite so knowledgeable about weaponry to know that those big guns were called machine-guns.

It seems that the soldiers were having something like a lesson in the performing arts because a loudspeaker turned towards the lower end of the village was hanging on one of the elms, and a guy who had more sashes than the others and gold on the shoulders was speaking into something that must have been a microphone as ripples of soldiers' laughter ran across the schoolyard. Of all the funny things that the guy with the sashes was telling the village, I only remember the expression 'wind-stuffed peppers tied with barbed wire'. Whether any of the people returning with their cattle from the fields and forests at twilight listened to the funny things over the loudspeaker I don't know – us boys squatting on the wall were shooed away in the very first days after the soldiers arrived. What I still remember was observed from a distance, from the place where the path starts climbing up the steep hill before reaching the rock. A woman was singing or weeping by the wall of the school courtyard. Considering that several metres away from her two soldiers were rocking with laughter, the woman must have been singing, and she must have been singing something extremely funny; but then, she was also beating her sides and her head with her hands – which you don't do when you are singing. At some point the two soldiers started beating their heads and sides too, weeping or singing. For all I remember, I might have guessed that what the two soldiers were doing was what we called (in the language I spoke at the time) 'throwing a tantrum'. (I hadn't yet learned the loanword 'imitating'.) My visual and vocal memory of that day was supplemented by subsequent explanations. The woman was Rada Pangalieva, one of the soldiers was Kocho Vulkov from our Paulician Kaminishte, the other God knows from where. While the two were enacting the scene in question by the school building, in one of the rooms inside plainclothes agents from Lovech and Plevan were beating with clubs and rubber truncheons Rada's son Ivan, another five or six boys of the same age and grandma Maria Mitevska. The dance tunes coming from the loudspeaker on the elm were meant to drown out their screams. (Later every one of them claimed that they hadn't uttered a single sound.) Quartered at the school was a hunting company assigned to fight the armed resistance in the region. The company was commanded by First Lieutenant Stoyanov.

### 24.

In his rare moments of inactivity, my Grandpa Docho, nicknamed Action, liked watching the sawmill machines in action. He would stand by the foundations of the barn, where an electric motor, band-saw, frame-saw and planing-machine were mounted on a cemented platform, pits and enclosures, and, yelling at the top of his voice, exchange a few words with Peter Velkov every once in a while. Peter, wearing motorist's goggles to protect his eyes from the sawdust, carefully watched the saw cut through the clamped up log. There were huge logs all around the sawmill, even in the street. That's where the peasants unloaded them when they wanted them sawn into planks, and stood patiently waiting their turn. Waiting at the sawmill was like waiting at the water-mill, so the sawmill was a place where you could have a nice chat and exchange gossip with people – just like the water-mill, only you needed to speak even louder. Loud enough to be heard over the whine of the motor, the slap of belts and the screech of wood under sawteeth.

Grandpa Docho must have farted quite a bit at the sawmill. But certainly not because he wanted to use the noise of the machines as a cover. He never sought a cover for this particular pleasure of life, and even claimed that in America and Europe there was no difference between farting and sneezing. 'You'll see this fine lady walking in the streets of Vienna – all dolled up, high heels, fancy bag, silk stockings, the lot,' Grandpa Docho told us. 'And as she struts by a shop window, high heels clacking, butt wiggling, she lets out a fart that sends her skirts fluttering but nobody even so much as gives her a glance.' I don't know why he always gave examples from Vienna or Berlin where he'd never set foot, and not from America. He had spent more than a year there. He even dressed in American style. Wide, well-worn cotton trousers in blue that I believe got their colour mainly from the mixture of blue vitriol with which he sprayed his vines, straw hat, cotton vest stained with blue vitriol too. At some point he even had this tiny hole in the seat of his trousers through which you could see his skin. I always thought that because he liked playing jokes he had deliberately made the hole so that the blue trousers wouldn't serve as a muffler. Because Grandpa Docho loved walking past customers sitting on a log by his sawmill or old women chatting perched on the white stones at the crossroads, and greeting them with three loud farts. The customers greeted him back with laughter and so did the old women, but if Grandma Donka happened to be there, after the second or third blast Grandpa Docho would quicken his step, almost breaking into a run. He was afraid, I guess, that Grandma Donka, who didn't particularly appreciate his sense of humour, would hurl her distaff at him or, even worse, the quite heavyish tool for twisting yarn that people in Paulician Kaminishte called *pryassouk*.<sup>16</sup> The reason underlying Grandpa Docho's extensive theories about the naturalness of his loud wind-breaking was, in fact, his upset stomach. He loved filling it generously with meat and very strong spices. But then, his certainly weren't the only theories in the world created for the sole purpose of justifying one flaw or another.

Once, as he stood farting happily outside the sawmill, Grandpa Docho saw Lishko Lishkovski pass by and go up the street, panting. A quarter of an hour later, from the opposite direction, soldiers came running down the street. The soldiers were followed by policemen, and the policemen by people in plain clothes. Bringing up the rear and panting as heavily as Lishko Lishkovski was a short while ago even though he had passed an incomparably shorter distance, tottered the bearded village priest Father Stoycho, nicknamed Skinflint.

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<sup>16</sup> Twister.

‘Come on, Docho!’ Skinflint cried. ‘Let’s go catch the bloody outlaws! Our guys have found them in Boukovets!’

‘Coming!’ said Grandpa Docho. ‘Just let me take my coat. I’ll take my coat and join you in a minute.’

Skinflint dashed off after the dust cloud raised by the boots from the hunting company platoon (the other platoons took other paths), while Grandpa Docho went into the living room of the old house. Nobody knows exactly what he did there of course, but he certainly didn’t look for his coat. But he couldn’t possibly have helped looking through the window to the south, where among the hills across the river, in the area of Boukovets, he had received a forest as part of Grandma Donka’s dowry. The forest isn’t that far away as the crow flies, so he might well have seen the wisp of smoke that had earlier been spotted closer up by Lishko Lishkovski before he waded across the half-dried by the summer heat river and ran over the hills and up towards the village.

Although Grandpa Docho must have realised that by refusing to join the search party he had taken sides in something that would have momentous consequences, he wasn’t the kind of highly educated person who would sit at the table, dip his pen in the ink and write down his thoughts in his beautiful handwriting. Once the danger of somebody else turning up after Skinflint and trying to get him to join the search party had passed, he went back to the sawmill. Peter Velkov used to switch the electric motor off from time to time, for example while waiting for the next log to be fastened to the frame-saw carriage with the help of levers, hammers and iron clamps. It may have been that during such a pause the people at the sawmill heard the burst of gunfire that echoed across the area of Boukovets, just as it may have been that children ran past and up the street, telling them what was coming. In any case, at some point everybody who was in the sawmill went out in the square strewn with shavings. Other people from the neighbourhood came out of their houses too, mostly old women because this was at the time of day when most people would have been working in the fields. The old women clustered together at their favourite place – the white stones by one of the walls at the crossroads, some fifty metres away from the sawmill in the direction of Magpie’s Gully, where they usually met to chat and gossip.

The soldiers appeared first. They were neither singing nor talking. They were sweating and tired from all the running, and moved in formation but couldn’t quite keep it up because it’s very difficult to march in formation along the steep and rutted streets of Paulician Kaminishte. After the soldiers came the uniformed policemen, and after them the plainclothes agents. Between the uniformed policemen and the plainclothes agents there was a cart. It was a box-like cart, not a cart with rails. Had it had rails maybe it wouldn’t have stopped at the crossroads by the white stones, because through the rails you can see what’s in the back of the cart but you can’t see anything if the cart is box-like. The cart stopped.

Anguel Palikroushata.<sup>17</sup> He was walking two steps behind the horses. Shirt sleeves pushed back, he was in jodhpurs and rubber boots. He walked with his arms draped behind him over the muzzle and butt of a German sub-machine gun across his back, the way shepherds sometimes carry their sticks. No sooner had the wheels stopped turning than Anguel stepped on one of the iron hubs, swung his leg over the side of the cart and into the back, bent down and straightened up, one hand holding the hair of a

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<sup>17</sup> Literally, ‘The Burnpear’.

human head. The head was of a young man. It was as if the man had been lying on his back and Anguel had urged him to sit up and look at the people who had gathered at the crossroads. The man had sat up but kept his eyes shut, only his mouth gaping open.

The old women at the crossroads did nothing but cross themselves. Even if it had occurred to anybody that the mouth needed to be closed (because although it was June the mouth would soon be stiff and impossible to close), nobody said anything because they must have realised that those guys with the irons across their shoulders didn't really care about the looks of the deceased. The men by the sawmill didn't even cross themselves. They just stood and watched from the square strewn with shavings.

Anguel must have been really annoyed that no young woman was watching him at the crossroads by the white stones. But elsewhere along the long road from Boukovets to the school some young woman was bound to have watched him. He might have also caught a glimpse of the orange shalwars of Aliytsa the Gypsy. Anguel's sexual energy was inexhaustible and when he couldn't find an outlet for it he would waylay Aliytsa who, being a Gypsy, had to travel frequently between Kazachevo and Paulician Kaminishte. She was usually accompanied by an older Gypsy woman or sometimes by a whole crowd of children, but this didn't stop Anguel from jerking his head in the direction of the bushes and saying, 'Aliytsa, come on,' wherever and whenever he met her (sometimes even twice a day). Aliytsa was swarthy and ugly, and Anguel's vanity suffered because he wasn't just anybody – he was a paramilitary. There were two paramilitaries in Paulician Kaminishte: Anguel Palikroushata and Georgi Gostinski. They, too, hid in the forests and spent the night there like the outlaws.

Later that day, on his way home grandpa Vassil Palikroushev, Anguel's father, cried out to grandpa Todor Gostinski, who was also returning from the fields with his cattle: 'Todor, our boys killed another one of them today.'

Catching outlaws was seen as a profitable occupation in those days. The government paid 50,000 leva (the equivalent of a teacher's 15 to 20 monthly salaries) to get rid of each of its enemies. Killing an outlaw, however, wasn't so easy. There weren't too many of them, they were armed too, even if poorly, and the population of Paulician Kaminishte – which was poor and mostly inclined to oppose the regime – didn't understand their ideas very well but nonetheless supported them.

## 25.

The big, surprisingly interesting world entered our tiny room by way of an elegantly woven golden thread. Hanging from the thread was a round tag with an inscription in unfamiliar, different from the Bulgarian, characters: SIEMENS. My father had bought a radio. He installed it on a specially made wooden shelf which, in its turn, was fixed to the window ledge. When Grandma Dimitra spread her rugs on the floor at night, the radio jutted out above her. My father had figured out that the tin stove, when hot, wouldn't damage the radio, and he had made sure that there was just enough room for the door to open without catching. I first heard the words 'orchestra' and 'concert' on the radio, but also other words that didn't sound like music: 'combat vehicles', 'enemy', 'captives'. I loved the children's shows, but sometimes a very distant, weak but shrill voice interfered in them too, as it did mostly in the newscasts. I later realised that this was the announcer of the emigrant communist radio station Hristo Botev, broadcasting from Moscow on the wavelength of Radio Sofia. I found the shrill voice very annoying as I

couldn't possibly know that my father had bought the radio mainly because he wanted to listen to it, but I can't remember if I was pleased when, complaining about the man who was preventing me from listening to the children's shows, Grandpa Docho hastened to reassure me: 'The Germans are looking for him and want to kill him.' I pictured the man amidst a large and frightening expanse of water like the one I had seen at the Fall, but even larger. Blue-faced like the rebels in dad's play, the man was screaming his shrill objections through a funnel, the sound fading and coming back as the wind carried it away or sent it along the wires of our radio.

The yellow wire ran out of the window, through the branches of the pear tree and across the tiles on the roof, reaching something that perched atop the chimney and looked like the outstretched arms of a scarecrow. It stood to reason that from the roof you could see and hear far away. But why was the red wire stuck into the ground by the thick trunk of the pear tree in front of Grandpa Docho's gloomy cellar? I had seen my father take one of Grandma Dimitra's old copper bowls, scour it with something until it became shiny and red, tie the end of the red wire to it and bury it in the ground. Considering that the voices came from the outside and into our room along the yellow and red wires, I believed that my voice could flow in the opposite direction too. Assuming that this was possible, I would stand by the radio and thank generously, with enthusiastic songs, those who stood somewhere in front of their own wires, singing, playing and telling children's stories.

My ignorance was nothing compared to the ignorance of the grown-ups in the neighbourhood. Towards the end of the hot summer the radio announced that the king was ill. Then the king died. By the wall with the mulberry tree, which had been knocked down years ago when the house we now lived in was built and hadn't been restored yet, a small crowd of curious old women, younger women and girls had gathered. Someone, definitely not my father, had moved the radio to our other window, the one that overlooked the street, so that the people could hear the live broadcast of the royal funeral. I was standing self-importantly by the window, my hands on the knobs, pretending that I was turning them. I was really just sliding my fingers along the round, intersected with rough little grooves, surface of the knobs, but I was too far from the curious crowd for them to realise that it wasn't me who was directing the change from speech to funeral music but somebody who wasn't here but in faraway Sofia. At one point the voice on the radio started talking about the king's white pony which, covered with black cloth, had likewise bowed its head to bid farewell to the deceased. Those words had a powerful effect on the crowd by the wall, but the really moving part came when the voice announced that the sound the listeners had just heard was that of Her Majesty weeping. She must have wept very quietly as I don't think my inexperienced in this respect ears actually caught the sound. In any case, it wasn't because I didn't grasp the importance and gravity of the moment that I failed to fulfil the insistent requests of one or two of the apparently younger women by the wall that I let the queen weep again.

## 26.

The summer the king died (it would have been 1943) lots of things happened. Grandma Donka's left leg was amputated. My father was arrested. I myself nearly died from scarlet fever.

I had no idea of the names of the months yet and I didn't know it was June. Through the window of the room, I watched a nurse by the high stone wall of the hospital pluck the yellow balls from under the green leaves of the apricot tree and stuff them in the pockets of her white lab coat.

The one-storey building where I was shut up, at first all alone in the room, housed the Lovech district hospital's department of infectious disease. Scarlet fever. As I was under six they would have probably allowed my mother to stay in hospital with me, but in those days she also had to look after Grandma Donka, who had recently been discharged from the Sofia hospital after her operation and taken to the village, and at the same time hang around the district police station where my father was locked up. How she made her way from Paulician Kaminishte to Lovech and back I don't know, I suppose she must have got a lift from one of the carts that people used to travel around the country back in those days. When no cart was available, she must have gone on foot. She would stand outside the window of my room, the green fly-net crisscrossing her face into tiny little boxes. We would remain standing face-to-face for a long time, me inside and she outside the room. The green net must have had another purpose too. To block contacts with the outside world in order to prevent the spread of children's infectious diseases. But my mother carelessly ignored this, touching my fingers through the holes along the edges where the net hung loose from the window-frame. She reminded me years later that whenever she was about to leave I'd ask her to stay a little longer. She didn't say anything about me crying. All this went on for forty days. Once, Uncle Neno, the husband of dad's sister Aunt Yana, showed up under the window. He slipped me through the net a matchbox-sized blue car with white wheels. It would have been made of plastic. The folds of my grey hospital blanket suddenly became roads and bridges, ravines and tunnels. The little car crept and squeezed through them, its aim always being one and the same – to make its way to the distant and wonderful Paulician Kaminishte.

At some point they placed in my room a town boy, who was approximately my age, and his grandmother. He had a toy train with assorted wagons, crooked and straight rails, and a striped ball. The townswoman with silver-streaked hair would patiently throw him the ball and catch it in her turn. Once, while the two were playing on the floor she sat with her legs spread out and I saw thick black-grey hair between them. The ball was rolling straight towards the hair. Later, they placed in my room a girl with closely cropped hair who was much older than me. The presence of those three did nothing to diminish my sense of loneliness.

I was bathed in the bathroom by a man called Petko. He and mum knew each other because he was from the neighbouring village of Kazachevo. Once or twice I was bathed by the nurses. One day a nurse hurried into the room to look at the thermometer. But I hadn't held it properly and it must have slipped somewhere in my pyjamas, the mercury freezing at a division according to which I should have been dead. 'Little shithead!' the nurse said crossly, sticking the cold, annoying piece of glass in my armpit once again. This was a sharp, strange and hostile-sounding town word. I had never heard it before. And I never forgot the insult. Doctor Freud knows these matters best, but it occurred to me only many years later that perhaps this experience explains my rapacious desire for women in white lab coats.

Freedom was accompanied by the sound of rattling carts. They were filing out of the square in front of the Deep Well in the Lovech neighbourhood of Varosh near the Covered Bridge. In each cart there is a horizontal board for sitting on, the boards being fastened with iron hooks to the box and covered with rugs to make them hurt less when the whip lashes and the horses break into a gallop, rocking and shaking the wood and iron behind them along the white gravel road. When the cart drivers decide to race each other, the hateful Lovech recedes into the distance faster and faster.

On the day I was supposed to be discharged from hospital, the cart hired by my father to take me home left for Paulician Kaminishte without me. An angry doctor started shouting at another about something, I think Old Petko from the village of Kazachevo tried to say something about my promised discharge but I guess they told him to mind his own business because he started explaining something to my parents, grim-faced.

Although I don't remember it myself, I must have definitely cried that day. All of us were absolutely furious, especially my father. When they came to Lovech again a few days later, it was no longer market day and there were no carts. But this time I was promptly discharged. My father, still highly strung up following his very recent ordeal at the district police station, said he would carry me home to the village. And indeed, shortly after the rocky crossing and the big bend in the river I started staggering and he lifted me up on his shoulders. But he had overestimated his strength and he soon lifted me down. Fortunately, around Guard Bridge a cart with rails caught up with us. The cart driver was from Paulician Kaminishte, between the rails of the cart there was hay, so the three of us somehow managed to get ourselves seated. It was nice. We drove past our fields in the area of Popinets. Low down near the tap sheep were resting at midday, and on the upper slopes shadows of clouds were racing across the meadows and sparse oak-trees of Mount Shatrovets.

Back home, however, I caught the familiar smell of hospital once again. On a spacious but sheltered spot in the yard, tucked between Grandpa Docho's newer house that we'd lived in for the past year, the stone wall with the mulberry trees and the fence, there was something that looked like a tent made of rugs. The roof of this enclosure could be thrown back to let the sunshine in. There lay Grandma Donka, sunning the stump of her leg which had been amputated high above the knee. The rugs were meant to shield her from the prying eyes of busybodies who couldn't help peeping over the wall when they passed by our house. One of them, however, simply couldn't be stopped. His name was Mihal Tsarigradski, he was a neighbour of ours, a barber by occupation, a gossip and know-all. He would simply climb one of the mulberry trees, claiming that its black berries were the juiciest and the sweetest he had ever seen in his life, and stay there eating and watching for hours.

Once – I can't remember the occasion exactly but it was most likely St. George's Day – we were sitting at the table and eating roasted lamb on the very spot where Grandma Donka's tent now stood. All seven of us were there: my father, my mother, Grandma Dimitra, my sister, me, Grandpa Docho and Grandma Donka. As we sat there eating and chatting, our conversation was unexpectedly joined by somebody up in the branches of the mulberry tree – Mihal Tsarigradski. The street is at a level quite higher than Grandpa Docho's yard so the wall on our side was about three metres high, the mulberry tree was on the other side and it was very tall as it was, so if anybody wanted to

reply to Mihal's comments they had to tilt their head back as if they were talking with Our Lord.

I don't know why the doctors had ordered Grandma Donka to sun her stump. Once her tumour was past the stages of a bean and a walnut and had grown as big as an egg, people started talking about what I thought was a 'crab'. Then a man from the upper part of the village knocked on our door. The man had had a dream and the dream had shown him how Grandma Donka could be cured. So he had gone to his field in the area of Popinets and there, in the forge that starts from the tap, had caught crabs. He brought them in a tin-plated white pail. The pail was half-full of water, and the crabs – black, wet, with long whiskers and tails – were clambering all over one another. I don't know what happened to them, I have no idea if anybody ate them or threw them away, but I think the self-appointed healer advised Grandma Donka to let them crawl up and down her leg – in any case, I believe that's why the creatures have always inspired an odd mixture of fear and revulsion in me.

Prescriptions about what she must and mustn't eat were indeed part of Grandma Donka's further treatment. One of them, which I think came from the true doctors, concerned fish. They were sitting at the table by the potted lemon tree near the large window facing south towards Boukovets, Grandpa Docho and Grandma Donka, and eating fish from a big yellow can. In those years of war this was the only kind of fish available, and Grandpa Docho had bought the can in Lovech. Although I wasn't ill and hadn't been told by the doctors to eat fish, every once in a while I went up to the table and Grandpa Docho (precisely he and not Grandma Donka – maybe because she was the more generous of the two, yet the fish had to be eaten sparingly) dipped a piece of bread in the can and held it out to my mouth. It was nice. Later, this can was washed with hot water and used for years as a tar can. Grandpa Docho used to tar the hubs of his buffalo-drawn cart.

I remember blood, gauze and tears. The doctors had removed the egg from Grandma Donka's leg but it had reappeared several centimetres to the side. The recently operated on part of her leg started bleeding and my mother tried to stop the bleeding with some kind of dried fungus that looked like tinder. The first time Grandma Donka was admitted to hospital the doctors had suggested amputating her leg slightly below the knee. She had refused. But the second time, when it became clear that unless her leg was amputated she would die, she had agreed to have it cut off high above the knee. Now Grandpa Docho would crouch with his back to her, grip her arms, sling them over his shoulders and carry her. Past the cellar of the former tavern, past the barn that housed the sawmill, up the stone steps of the old house. Later they made her crutches. At first she complained that the crutches hurt her armpits. Eventually, she got used to them but she often slipped and fell. Every time she fell she broke down and wept. Usually silently, but with many tears. I'd feel sorry for her, but not for long. After my forty days of captivity in hospital, I had some serious playing to catch up on in the streets of the neighbourhood teeming with children.

## 29.

They sealed the radio. Two men from the village council came along one day, produced a piece of red wax, a candle and a string of cord, tied the knobs with the cord, dripped some of the red drops melting under the flame and, while the wax was still soft,

pressed an iron seal in it. I think that my father still found a way to turn the radio on. But he couldn't turn the knobs and look for different stations. Whether we could still hear the shrill voice of the man who Grandpa Docho said the Germans wanted to find and kill, I don't remember.

### 30.

Mihal the barber hated physical work so he never got round to rebuilding the walls of his yard. Somewhere at the bottom of this long yard, barely visible like the hat of someone squatting in the bushes to relieve himself, was the roof of the house. We were in Mihal's yard, playing hide-and-seek I think, when someone cried out, 'The Russians are coming!' It was one of our neighbours, a young man with a white cap tilted on his head. He was hovering by the gate across the street, his face excited and somehow anxious, clutching a bundle and a bottle of wine or brandy. Several other men ran out of the houses, and they dashed off together. As I learned later, they were off to meet the Russians.

Back then, the image that I always associated with the word 'Russians' was of men sitting around a cauldron of hot soup and sipping the soup with iron spoons. Because among the wooden spoons on the shelf in our old house Grandma Dimitra had shown me several from tarnished metal: 'They were used by the Russians during the war,' she told me. I know that in 1877 General Skobelev's regiments had passed through our part of the country before attacking Lovech but how, exactly, this particular part of their field equipment had ended up among our cutlery was a question I never thought of asking at the time when somebody might have been able give me an answer.

That very same night the Russians were in Grandpa Docho's house. There were three of them. One old and two younger men. One of the younger men had sat me in his lap and was saying something in an unknown language. He held me with one hand and had a photo in the other. There were children in the photo, two or three of them. I think there was a woman too.

'He hasn't seen his kids for four years, that's what he's saying,' Grandpa Docho explained.

'Poor man!' said Grandma Dimitra.

Sitting around the three Russians were also Grandma Donka, my mother and my sister. My father wasn't there. He had been mobilised as a reservist back in mid-summer.

'You can understand everything they're saying,' said Grandpa Docho, proceeding to conduct some linguistic experiments. Having established that the words for bread and water were almost the same in Russian, he trotted to the corner of the veranda and brought a pumpkin.

He cried out in surprise when it turned out that the word for pumpkin was exactly the same in Russian. Then he dashed off to the interior of the house and came back clutching a musk-melon.

The Russians called it a watermelon.

'It's a melon alright,' Grandpa Docho agreed. 'Perhaps they call musk-melons watermelons and the other way round. Dona, do we have watermelons?'

'Now why don't you just sit back and shut up.' That, or something similar, was the reply he got from Grandma Donka.

She appeared to be the only person in the house who wasn't particularly friendly towards our unusual guests. Grandpa Docho had perhaps taught her something about politics. She must have learned a thing or two about the Bolsheviks who seized people's property. For his part, Grandpa Docho, curious and full of life, was taking advantage of this opportunity to enjoy himself. The strategic priorities of the Red Army and of the Wehrmacht must have been one of the issues discussed during this quite longish visit. I don't know. At some point the Russian who held me on his lap pulled out from somewhere something that looked very much like a phone receiver. It was made of light metal and something else, black. He said the word 'bomb', but I don't remember anybody in the room – not even Grandpa Docho, who had lived through two wars – indicating in any way that we were in danger. That the Russian was holding a real hand-grenade is quite unlikely – in any case, he was talking angrily about somebody as he held the thing in his hand while my mother, speaking as if cued by the director of the future weekly newsreels, said in a loud and enthusiastic voice: 'Keep it for Hitler!'

They weren't wearing boots like Bulgarian soldiers but shoes with some kind of puttees above them. It is quite interesting that this is what I remember of my first meeting with the Russians, and nothing that comes close to their amazing alcoholic exploits which were later recounted by other people they had visited. It is impossible that Grandpa Docho wouldn't have offered them his excellent grape or plum brandy which he made in large amounts to sell on the market. That he had indeed offered them brandy is suggested by something that happened on the following night.

Near the gate, on a tree trunk from Grandpa Docho's sawmill sat a Russian soldier with a gloomy expression on his face. I think he was somehow slumped forward, with his head in his hands. Somewhere close by stood Grandma Dimitra, looking very grim-faced too. Grandpa Docho and I were coming in from the street through the gate, and Grandpa Docho said hello or asked something.

*'Babushka rugayet,'*<sup>18</sup> the Russian said gloomily.

Grandpa Docho would repeat this phrase, laughing, for a long time to come. Why he was in such excessively high spirits these days nobody knows. It must have been some sort of nervous reaction to premonitions of big changes in his life. As regards Grandma Dimitra and the Russian, here is what had actually happened: He had turned up at our house, bringing along a couple of other Russians – he must have told them about the wonderful brandy he'd had at Grandpa Docho's last night. But before they came down to our house, somebody else had been more than generous to them with the bottle. How they had tried to have one for the road at our house I don't know, they might well have said something cheeky about my mother, who was thirty at the time and quite good-looking. Grandma Dimitra's reaction was instant and imperative. 'You were very good last night,' she told them, 'but just look at yourselves now.' And she showed them the door.

Their trucks were in the square. One of them had stepped with its front wheels on the platform of another. The way roosters mounted hens or bulls mounted cows. That autumn we went to our field near Guard Bridge to pick pumpkins. My sister and I were standing by the road, watching the endless column of green Russian trucks. Behind every truck a dusty cannon, its long barrel sheathed, bumped along the road. On the platform sat soldiers, but now and then we saw some who were lying on their backs, caps pulled

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<sup>18</sup> 'The old woman is scolding me' in Russian.

down over their eyes, their skin tanned dark by the sun. My sister and I were arguing about whether they were dead or were only sleeping.

After the first Russian soldiers who visited us, others were quartered at our house too. They left us lice. We couldn't get rid of the lice until the beginning of winter, although my mother was constantly stoking the fire under the cauldrons and steaming every single piece of clothing and every single rug in our house and at Grandpa Docho's. When it was finally over, we would recall with amusement how deeply ashamed we'd felt when we were visited by a merchant and by our relatives from the nearby village of Smochan. The merchant had come to buy a calf from Grandpa Docho and stayed overnight in his house. The women from Smochan, who were Grandpa Docho's sisters, stayed the night at our place during the village festival – the feast day of St. Archangel. I know that Grandpa's sisters couldn't bring themselves to tell us what had happened for a long time after that, what the merchant did I don't know, but it's certain that when they left Paulician Kaminishte all of them had Russian lice.

### 31.

In the school there were no longer soldiers, but people again got shut and beaten up there. And because it was impossible to combine teaching and beating, us pupils would be let off school every other day or so. I had started school exactly at the time when the Russians came to the village.

Once, the door of our classroom banged open and in came Bechkata. His name was actually Gencho Bechev, he must have been thirtyish at the time, bald, short-legged and quick – choleric, as I eventually learned from the high-school textbook of psychology, by temperament. He was the sort of person that people in Paulician Kaminishte would describe as 'peppery'. To the extent that sometimes, especially if someone dared to disagree with him, he'd start stuttering so badly that he couldn't go on. Normally, he never spoke with a stutter.

Bechkata made us stand in a circle. A dozen-odd boys from our First Grade. He then told us to hold each other by the ears. And ordered us to start pulling. We had, I suppose, misbehaved in some way. Since having your ears pulled was very painful, everyone tried to give the boys next to him as good as he got, the thought never occurring to him that this would make them pull harder too. We were pulling and crying. I wonder how we didn't tear each other's ears off. What was it that made Bechkata line us up and give us commands in those days in September or October 1944? Because he would show up during our PE classes too, take the place of our teacher Penko and start barking commands at us the way sergeant majors bark commands at recruits in the army: 'ATTEN-SHUN!... Left, face!... Right, face!... Forward, march!' A surplus, obviously, of revolutionary energy. Whereas the surplus of revolutionary energy in Bechkata's case obviously came from the fact that in the days, months and years before the arrival of the Russians he had expended it sparingly if at all. He had presumably studied for several semesters at an institution of higher learning in Varna, he'd had, as he himself claimed later, contacts with key communist functionaries in Lovech and Varna, but when in the summer of 1943 the underground groups around Paulician Kaminishte were crushed and the Young Communist League members from the village delivered a message urging the student who was on summer holiday there to join the armed resistance, he prudently refused. He went away to continue his higher education, which he never completed, came

back in the first days after the Ninth of September 1944, proclaimed himself commandant and started arresting people. Bechkata, however, was just a little bit late. The policeman Ivan Vulkov and the paramilitaries Anguel Palikrousha and Georgi Gostinski, who had recently received monetary rewards for liquidating outlaws in the area of Boukovets and around the village of Brestovo, had already been locked up at the Lovech district police station by the quickly formed after the Ninth of September militia. So Bechkata took it upon himself to deal with the village council officials.

The mayor wasn't from Paulician Kaminishte but from Lovech, and he had been appointed according to the laws at the time (and not elected) to govern the village. The events around the Ninth of September unfolded so quickly that he went into hiding in the town without even managing to take his fine boots that stood by the desk in his office. Later, the higher-ranking communists decided at one of their meetings that the mayor's boots would be given to the poorest person in the village. But there were quite a few poor people in the village, and the meeting couldn't agree on who would be the fairest choice. In the next few days, however, one of those attending the meeting – Peter Dyankov, until recently a political prisoner and the newly appointed mayor of the village – decided, without even bothering to consult anybody, that he'd look really nice in his predecessor's boots. The former mayor had been arrested in Lovech. In his turn, the village council clerk, Goshko the Dwarf, proved to be a progressive element. In those days of September 1944 he joined the communist party, from which he would be expelled some ten years later for committing theft. One of the people who became a true victim of the revolutionary upheavals was our godfather, Vassil Michkov the tax-collector. I don't think that the poor's hostility towards tax-collectors, deeply ingrained in the mentality of the Bulgarian peasant, was the only reason why he wasn't well-liked in the village. He probably found ways of benefiting from his position as a village council official. Because I remember that as late as the 70s a cooperative farm member, justly indignant about the local farm managers' thefts and abuse of office, had cried out at a meeting in the village: 'You're Vassil Michkovs, all of you!' How the name 'Vassil Michkov' became a byword I can't say – I was too young to have first-hand impressions. But I do remember his splendid new house, which would have undoubtedly been an object of envy. It is difficult to imagine how someone – who was accustomed since his earliest childhood to drinking water with a gourd from a copper pot hanging on a wooden peg in the half-dark, built of wattles and daubed with cattle dung, room (aluminium mugs, let alone glasses, were an unaffordable luxury for the majority of people) – must have felt if he ever found himself in, say, the kitchen in Michkov's house. Through the lace on the display cabinets in-built in the thick brick walls he would have seen sparkling glass and china sets, and on a shelf above the modern cooking stove, shining, brightly coloured rows of labelled boxes carrying names of strange, exotic-sounding spices. On the coat rack in the entrance hall, there would have been highly polished, brand new hunting equipment, and the white hunting dog would have sized up disapprovingly the tongue-tied poor fellow in rags summoned to do some job.

When one is in power one seems to be particularly inclined to accept the desirable as fact. The green Russian cannons were already bumping along the Romanian roads, nearing the Danube, while Vassil Michkov stood in front of the stone steps of the village hall, saying with a smile: 'This country will never fall to the Russians, not in a million years!' That's what he told everybody at the time.

Then a fortnight or so later – it would have been October by then, because my mother was helping get the successive tub full of grapes through Grandpa Docho's gate – someone came along and told her that Bechkata wanted to see her in the school. Wasting no time, she hurried up the street. With fear in her heart, because by then my father had already been fighting on the front in Yugoslavia for several weeks. I remember that in those days I could hear a dull roar coming from the direction of the sunset. They said it was the roar of cannon. But whether the cannon were German or Russian, nobody knew.

In the village hall, as in the school, there was no news of my father – neither good news nor bad news. As my mother walked in, Bechkata came up and told her: 'Tsvyata, if you have a grudge against Vassil Michkov, just go in and beat him.'

And he pointed at the door of one of the rooms.

'Is that why you wanted to see me?' she asked, stupefied.

'Yes,' said he.

'Why don't you just leave me alone! How could I possibly beat my godfather!' she retorted.

And left. It seems that's all she dared tell Bechkata.

Somewhere around the school entrance, Ivan Panev broke away from a noisy group of young people and came over.

'Tsvyata,' said Ivan, 'Come, I want to show you something.' And he took my mother to the corridor where a large map hung on the wall. 'Nikola's right here now,' he said, excited, poking a finger at a point on the rubber-coated map that most probably showed the Serb towns of Pirot, Bela Palanka and Niš because that's where the Second Bulgarian Army was advancing in those days. 'I, too, am leaving tomorrow.'

And he indeed left for the front as a volunteer, this Ivan Panev whom I've never seen alive. His portrait was brought out during all parades, along with the portraits of the two Partisans from the village who got killed before the Ninth of September. Big eyes, cheeks sunken like those of a human skull buried in the ground for quite a while, second lieutenant's shoulder straps. 'Ivan Panev took cover behind a crate full of bombs and didn't give up until he'd thrown them all.' Thus spoke a classmate of mine, breathless with enthusiasm, in the room of our First Grade. In those years we called hand-grenades 'bombs'. That the Germans would let anybody hurl hand-grenades at them for such a long time seems quite unlikely to me now, but back in those days the first thing I did after coming home from school was to fill my father's canvas rucksack with naked corncocks and take cover among the box trees in the garden, never giving up until I'd thrown them all at Grandpa Docho's beehives. Just like Second Lieutenant Ivan Panev.

The offer Bechkata made my mother applied to all residents of the village. Whoever had a grudge against Vassil Michkov could go and beat him. Exactly how many people availed themselves of the offer there's nobody left to say, but some definitely did. Including several women. 'I slapped him in the face once,' I was told – admittedly no longer proudly – in the seventies by one of the local communist party activists. Back in those days he'd been in his early teens.

Still, the person who did most of the beating was, apparently, Bechkata. I've heard that in those days in September or October he went to the neighbouring village of Kazachevo to offer his services. But he was told there that they were perfectly capable of beating their people themselves if they deemed it necessary. And I later heard of another eager beater too. Roussko Radin. I can only imagine how much this Roussko hated the

tax-collector, what an uncontrollable urge drove his fists in one of those autumn nights. And how Vassil Michkov looked next morning when they let his wife, our godmother Nikolina, into the office of the village council (that's where he was locked up at the time) to see him. 'Last night Roussko Radin killed me,' Vassil Michkov told her.

He was killed in the literal sense of the word several days later, by whom and where there's nobody left to say. We heard, many years later, after 1989, that a car had arrived in the village from Lovech one night. The tax-collector was tied with a rope to the car and dragged along the road. If I sometimes doubt that this is exactly what happened, that's not because of the excessive cruelty of the execution but because of its excessive banality. It sounds to me like a recounted episode, a cliché from the vast number of films about the war we saw in the following years. In it those who got dragged were usually Soviet Partisans or intelligence agents, and those who did the dragging were Gestapo officers. But in the autumn of 1944 Vassil Michkov's executors wouldn't have seen such films yet – on the other hand, they would have just started riding around in cars, so this particular way of using this achievement of civilisation might have seemed quite original to them. What is known for certain is that the corpse of my godfather was buried in the sandy bank at the big bend of the River Ossum near Lovech. He was dug up by the river which flooded its banks when the snow melted in 1945. He was recognized by a woman from Varosh.

### 32.

The pleasure of executing your enemies without trial during a coup d'état obviously involves an annoying detail – digging a grave for them. Practice has shown that the simplest solution is to make the victims do this unpleasant job themselves before they are shot. This is what happened in 1923 to Mihail Velchovski, my Grandma Donka's youngest brother. Mihail was a member of the left-wing Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, a teacher by occupation. By becoming an Agrarian, he had followed his father, my great-grandfather Stoyno Velchovski. Grandpa Stoyno was one of the founders of this big peasant party in the Lovech–Pleven area. You can see him in a photograph in Volume Seven of the large multi-volume academic history of Bulgaria, which was published in the mid-1980s. He is sitting at a small round table together with the other four members of the Agrarian Union's first ever parliamentary group. Grandpa Stoyno, tall and white-haired, is holding an umbrella. Although I suspect he thought this was very chic, the expression on his face is, thankfully, strict rather than smug. He actually served as a member of parliament for one year only. In November 1900, the Petko Karavelov government resigned and new parliamentary elections were scheduled.

Mihail or Mihal, as they used to call him, is the bright, noble figure in the generally dark-grey gallery of tavern-keepers, village council officials and farmers thirsting for money, power and land that the huge Velchovski family's sons and sons-in-law were. Grandma Donka told me how every morning he'd stand at the gate, checking the bundles of the farmhands one by one to make sure that his mother, Grandma Neda, hadn't been tempted to give the servants less bread and cheese than she was supposed to.

He must have been a good teacher, but considering what I've heard from my parents whom he taught in junior high school, he definitely lacked one of the essential qualities any good teacher must have. Patience. He was very short-tempered. At the wedding of one of his younger sisters the bridegroom's parents, who were wealthy people

from an old family of priests, decided to be clever. Instead of giving the bride new shoes, according to the custom of the times, they presented her with a pair which the women from the house easily recognised as the pair that their girl had been strutting around in recently, now painstakingly cleaned, blacked and polished. To one of Mihal's little nieces, the sunniest and best loved one, they gave a pair of old shoes done up to look new too – which, moreover, were too small for her. When they tried to slip them on her feet but couldn't, the child burst into uncontrollable tears. The moment the bride – Mihal's sister, who God knows how had been persuaded to take part in the deception – started crying too, he found himself on the long veranda in two leaps. Seconds later they saw him come out of one of the rooms, his face red with fury, loading his carbine. How the bridegroom (who was a village council official like his wife's sister's husband, Vassil the Tax-Collector – it was in his house that I'd heard 'Berlin and Tokyo and Rome' in 1942) got away I don't remember, even though Grandma Donka told me this story many times.

Many years later, in the 70s, a by then very old lady from Lovech told me how back in the days of her youth a young man from Paulician Kaminishte would always tie his horse outside her father's hotel when he came to Lovech. 'He was tall, blue-eyed, very handsome. His name was Mihal.'

When in June 1923 Alexander Tsankov's Democratic Alliance staged a military coup, overthrowing the Agrarian government and beheading the prime minister Stamboliyski, Mihal immediately formed a resistance group in Paulician Kaminishte. In addition to Agrarians, the group was joined by Neyko Baev, who was a reserve first lieutenant, and several other communists – all of them veterans from the recently ended World War I, which had proved disastrous for Bulgaria. Somewhere between the areas of Popinets and Guard Bridge, probably on the hill that rises above the big crossroads, the helmets of soldiers from the local garrison coming from the direction of Lovech flashed briefly, and seconds later the silence was shattered by the rattle of machine-gun fire. After firing some of their precious cartridges, the rebels slipped away through the cornfields and headed back to Kaminishte. Mihal went into hiding. In the forests of Boukovets, he was brought food by one of the farmhands. Why Grandpa Stoyno was barefoot I don't know, but he was barefoot when the mounted gendarmes found him in his bee garden and herded him along the jagged gravel on the twelve-kilometre-long road to Lovech. How the former member of parliament hurried along ahead of the gendarmes' horses, what his feet were like after, one can only imagine. On the other hand, there are several versions about how he was released from custody. How his son Mihal ended up in his place. Anyway, one night the young Agrarian rebel was led to a field near Lovech. They gave him a hoe to dig his own grave but didn't shoot him. Making him dig his own grave must have been a psychological trick designed to raise the price of his release. Exactly how many of Grandpa Stoyno's gold coins it took to secure his release and which local politician, officer or policeman pocketed them, nobody's ever admitted. But back in those days of June 1923 Mihal had had so many rifle butts rammed into his back and chest that soon after he was released he fell ill from tuberculosis and nothing could save him from death. Grandpa Stoyno died an untimely death too. When Grandma Donka's leg was amputated, I remember that people at home started talking about whether cancer was a hereditary disease. Someone mentioned even at the time that Grandpa Stoyno had had something similar on the foot. Later, someone from the family told us that he'd actually died of a gangrene infection. He'd had a sore, I don't know exactly where, and

had followed the advice of a healer to soak his foot in a can of gas. He was well-educated enough not to take medical advice from just anybody, but who knows. His illness might have reached the stage where one's ready to try just about anything. Whether the disease had anything to do with his barefoot march ahead of the gendarmes' horses I don't know.

So, to come back to the subject of graves: When in 1945 Vassil the Tax-Collector had to be reburied, there was again nobody to dig a grave for him. He was thrown into the only just emptied grave of a Partisan who'd been executed a year ago.

Translated by Katerina Popova