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‘EAR PULLING’ IN THE TURKMEN DESERT

It was April 18, 1986. In the district recruiting office we were ranked, roll call was taken, we were then put on a bus and it was off to the regional centre. The road was through my village. Our yard was visible from the highway. Through the window I could see the kids in the yard, sisters who were washing dishes under a large cherry tree, and my six year old nephew – he waved to the convoy. Apparently, the relatives and neighbours, who had come to see me off, had not left for home.

We arrived at the train station. There were many people; everyone had come to accompany the conscripts. Many of them had arrived by truck. They stood in groups, here and there on the ground dastarkhans were spread; some people had even brought large cooking pots with pilaf. Those who had arrived early in the morning had made beds and lay on their kurpachas. Everywhere there was food, a veritable abundance. Someone, almost violently, shoved another bowl of pilaf into a recruits hand; another one forced him to taste some grilled meat. The poor kid tried to make an excuse – ‘Enough, please! No more, – but his relatives replied, – Eat, eat, you do not know when you’ll next be able to enjoy some delicious home-cooked food. Everyone, as much as possible, tried to take care of the departing men, who knew where those kids were going to be sent: maybe to freezing Siberia, or even Afghanistan. Everyone had these thoughts but nobody voiced them. All this was already familiar to me, as three times we came here to see my brother off a year ago. Each time he came back home in the evening. It was the fourth time when we finally managed to send him away. In truth, the relatives were not that bothered about saying goodbye to another recruit, but they certainly didn’t reveal this, as they didn’t want to offend. According to our traditions, everything must be seen to be done properly. This was what I was afraid of most, therefore, I forbade my relatives to come to the station. But even so, three or four relatives had made the journey.

Finally, we were ticked off the list one more time and got on the train. It started with noise and a whistle. We were followed by the waving well-wishers, who were struggling with belching. They had been there since early morning, sitting around a rich dastarkhan and were already quite sick and tired of everything.

My heart pounded with excitement.

The train, collecting conscripts along the way, passed through Tashkent, Termez, and finally headed towards Turkmenistan. Throughout the journey we ate, chatted and imagined what awaited us in the army. Each conscript had a backpack stuffed to the gunnels with food, baked bread wrapped in hot ashes and fatty mutton to kurut and sultanas. Pockets, full of money, bulged. In those days, seeing the army was a big event, each well-wisher or relative presented a future soldier with money. Teens, who had just graduated from school, had never held so much money in their hands.

We sat and listened to the sound of the wheels, but it felt like rodents gnawing the bottom of our hearts. What awaited us during these two long years? The fearlessness and curiosity of an eighteen-year-old boy helped drive away this anxiety.

Two days later, the train arrived in Ashgabat. We disembarked from the carriages and were loaded onto military trucks. Two hours later we were in a military formation.

It was on the empty steppe. The military camp, surrounded by barbed wire, had an infinite number of tents. We were ranged and warned that we must unquestioningly obey the orders of officers and sergeants and not to go beyond the fence. It was unclear how long anyone would spend there, it depended on their assignment.

Around us there was only sand, no settlements could be seen. In the mornings there was a strong wind that covered everything with huge sand clouds. It was hot in the afternoon and cold at night.

It turned out that half an hour from camp the main military formation was situated. Pretty soon we realized what bad luck this was for us. Those of recruits who had already lived in the camp for several weeks warned us to keep our eyes peeled,

especially at night. Older soldiers of the military formation would visit our camp every night to rob the newcomers. They stole money, clothes, if they were new, everything of value they could find. It was daylight robbery.

The old-timers advised us to work together to resist the robbers. Night was expected with increasing anxiety.

There were neither mattresses nor pillows on hastily made wooden beds in our tents. Instead of pillows we rolled our sacks under our heads. Besides, the woods were not finished, with every movement of your body, thorns thrust into skin and clothes; it was better to lie still, without any move.

After midnight we heard the tramp of boots. I heard voices and noise. Then all was quiet. After some time there were some steps, the same as before. Then silence, again noise, but nobody came into our tent. In the morning we learned that several neighbouring tents had been rushed.

These robberies involving the beating of 'fresh meat' occurred every night. One day, after a night raid, a post car came to the camp. We were gathered on the parade ground, and the officer spoke into the mouthpiece, – Comrade future soldiers! Send the money you have back home! Here is the postal truck, you will be given a receipt. This money is more useful to your parents, and you will have nothing but trouble if you keep it, so, spare us from unnecessary hassle and send the money back home, immediately!

Many did so, and indeed, after that night the raids stopped.

Then another problem emerged: hunger!

Our backpacks that had been stuffed with food from home had already been drained; the last of the bread had been eaten. Besides, now we could not buy food from the Turkmen women trading near the camp, as nobody had any money. Up to this point, many of the guys had not even tried the food that was brought in large cans from the military formation. Maybe that's we felt that this food was not up to standard. Then the real hunger began. The boys lined up for breakfast, but the food had run out somewhere in the middle of the queue. For some reason, people from our tent were almost always at the tail, and, a couple of times, we had no food at

all. The same situation happened with lunch; half of the soldiers did not get fed. On the second day, outrage and unrest started during breakfast. No one stayed in line. The sergeants could not cope, and for some reason the officers were absent. The next day the same thing happened to a greater extent, those who were stronger snatched and carried food with utensils. A samovar of tea was upended into the sand. Everyone tried to seize a bag of bread and it was torn to pieces. Those who managed to grab a loaf were attacked by others.

The scene of carnage looked like the 'ear pulling' game we played at weddings in childhood, although this game is now almost forgotten. In those days winter weddings were quite popular and lasted for three or four days. One of the adults collected the kids, pulled out a handkerchief with a banknote tied in its corner, and threw it to the crowd. Those who managed to grab the handkerchief rushed to escape. They were chased, caught, pinned to the ground and his ears were mercilessly tweaked. If the boy could not stand the pain, he could throw the handkerchief away in sign of surrender. Then it was the turn of another 'lucky' one, now his ears were pulled. Notably, some boys, before they started pulling their opponent's ears, twisted them into a tube. Sometimes, someone could lose control and burst into tears. After these games some ears bled. The game ended when the hardest boy, after running in a circle around the wedding party, came to the owner of the handkerchief and gave him his prey. It had to be seen to be believed, how the winner's ears were burning, his ears had just been tweaked mercilessly!

The current scene reminded me of this particular game. Such humiliation, to tell the truth, could completely destroy one's appetite.

But as the old saying goes, 'an empty bag was not meant to stand.' Perhaps it was a struggle for survival. Anyhow, after spending two days without food, I was seriously wondering how to get a piece of bread in this greedy crowd. Together with the guys from our tent, we developed a plan. Once the food was unloaded and everyone pounced on it, we shouldn't wait in vain. We decided to divide into groups and work together, each performing their own task. Three of us would run

to the bowls of food, another three could break through to the bag of bread, and the third trio made sure that they got tea. Then we could gather together and have lunch in peace.

Our plan proved itself on the first day. However, we only managed half a loaf of bread, which we divided equally. That way we learned to win what rightfully belonged to us. I cannot say it was easy. Sometimes we left with empty stomachs after a fight in the crowd, but it was a life lesson.

With the passing of time other difficulties arose. In the morning the chairmen of the nearby collective farms came to the officers to hire soldiers to be used as labour in the fields. Those who worked for the Turkmen farmers or built something were considered lucky because they were fed. The remaining soldiers were brought to the military formation, where they had to squat on a huge parade ground and wait to see if someone needed a free worker. Sometimes, if there were no buyers, they were stuck in the square all day. More often than not we were taken and forced to plough like mules. Some sergeants forced soldiers to clean their rooms. Moreover, if you wore decent clothes, they were taken and old rags were given in exchange. However, two weeks into our stay at camp, our clothes were soaked with sweat and covered in dust, we hadn't bathed and looked like monkeys. We dreamt about putting on our soldier's uniform as soon as possible.

One day, when we were once again brought to work in the military formation, we, as usual, passed the Officer's Palace. It was Sunday. The wives and children of officers were waiting at the entrance for the start of a new film. Led by our sergeant, we looked like prisoners. I say 'like prisoners', as, to a certain extent, it was true. The clothes we were wearing were shabby; our shoes were torn, and some people looked like scarecrows, their own clothes having been stolen. The officers, wearing expensive and clean clothes, pointed at us and scoffed. We had to admit that our appearance deserved to be ridiculed. I heard one of the officers saying, – What an awful thing to happen! These un-people are fortunate to be going to Germany soon.

Roaming in Germany

After what we experienced in the Turkmen desert, many of us recoiled from labour. Therefore, some recruits used devious tricks. For instance, after morning roll call, they hid from the sergeants in a hayloft. I learned about it when, one day, by chance, I stayed at camp. That day four guys from our tent, including me, had been sold to a Turkmen farmer. I was pleased, they said that the work on a collective farm was easier than at the military formation. The Turkmen for some reason had not come, so we stayed at camp. Then I saw the tricks some of my comrades used to hide from the sergeants and hard work. After the morning registration, they hid in some dark corner, eating whatever chance threw their way; they could be there for several days.

That day when I stayed at the camp we shared everything we could find to eat, and had long conversations. We discussed how the Soviet army was the biggest and strongest in the world, that all our present difficulties were temporary, and that when we finally put on our soldier's uniform, everything would be quite different. In short, we tried to cheer each other up. I firmly believed in all this, because since school we had been taught that the invincible military power of the Soviet Union was only aimed at one goal: world peace. If the Union weakened, even slightly, aggressive imperialist nations like America would immediately take advantage and attack, turning our people into slaves. However, I could not understand how the army of a state like this, which supports justice throughout the world, could be the one I saw here on the Turkmen steppe. It must have been a misunderstanding. At about lunch time, one of the sergeants walked through the tents shouting and gathering the people who had stayed at the camp. In the middle of the parade ground there was a military car painted dark blue with a large antenna. A major used to sleep all day long inside the car, if was not sleeping snorting like a wild boar, he was certainly drinking vodka. Now he got out of the car but was extremely drunk; his bloodshot eyes and swollen eyelids gave him away. At that moment he seemed very worried. He announced the news to us, fussing like a chicken over an

egg. It turned out that a request from Germany had been received and fifteen soldiers were to be sent immediately. At the camp there were about thirty recruits. We were formed into a column, and the sergeant selected fifteen people at random. I was among them.

We were taken immediately to the military formation and sent straight to the bathroom. It was our first bath since arriving. We left the bathroom, dressed in yellow and blue summer uniforms. There were shiny new canvas boots on our feet and forage-caps on our heads. We were so happy! On top we had a soldier's bag on each shoulder with a dry ration: black bread, canned meat, sugar lumps!

We were now under the command of a young lieutenant, who had just graduated from the officers' academy. He said that the dry ration had to be saved, they needed to last for at least three days.

We arrived at Ashgabat airport without delay. As there were only sixteen of us, plus the officer, no military transport was provided, we had to use public transport. We made it to Simferopol by plane; boarded the plane to Minsk; from Minsk a train took us to the border with Poland. The officer had to run around a lot. He went into a building and disappeared for hours, then into another building. We waited. Our job was to get warm in the sun and watch the passing girls.

We had to spend the night at the station, and got on our train in the morning.

It arrived at the border and stood there for a long time. They took us to the nearest commandant's office, where officers going to Eastern Europe or returning back to Soviet Union stayed shortly. We stopped there for the day. A soldier, who was returning from a leave warrant, showed us how to wrap a banknote in a cigarette. He said that the only banknote of value was the Soviet ten rouble.

By evening we had crossed the border of the Soviet Union. We travelled all night long. When we woke up the next morning, we were driving through Warsaw. I looked at this city, its unusual buildings, sharply differing from the designs of Soviet architecture, and it felt like I was in an Andersen fairy tale. Then came more beautiful cities and then the forest, stretching right to Germany. We could not stop looking out of the train window, fascinated by the beauty.

By evening, we had crossed the East German border. At midnight, the train arrived at our destination and all the passengers disembarked.

We sat at the station, awaiting further orders, but our officer seemed to be confused. It looked like he did not know where to go or what to do next. So we sat there until the next morning.

It was the beginning of May but the nights were still quite cold. We were frozen by morning. There was a pointsman's wooden hut nearby. Someone suggested to pull out some woods from its roof to set up a fire in order to keep ourselves warm, which we did immediately. The officer was a bit worried at first, but then gave up and joined us.

It was the start of our roaming in Germany.

From the station we finally boarded a bus and then got on a train to the city of Halle. It was the first time I had seen such a huge city, I was delighted. Curious Germans looked at us - soldiers which were wearing heavy boots, charred in the Turkmen desert, but they did not allow themselves to mock us – Soviet soldiers are not to be trifled with!

We strayed for a long time in unfamiliar streets, travelling more than a dozen miles. Finally we reached the Air Force base, which was situated somewhere on the outskirts of town. There we were temporarily placed in barracks, and the lieutenant, with a folder of papers under his arm, went somewhere.

Our happiness knew no bounds, we were going to be made paratroopers! We jumped and shouted with joy, even the difficulties of the road seemed like a piece of cake now.

This joy was short-lived. In the morning we were given dry rations and escorted from the base out. It turned out that we had not been directed here. We were sent to an artillery formation instead.

By evening, we had reached our destination, but we were not allowed to take one step into the base. As it turned out, they had requested 150 soldiers, and those in Turkmenistan who received the telegram had missed a zero in the text: instead of '150' they had written '15.' Immediately I imagined that drunk Major in the

communications vehicle. We cursed him in unison, but what was the point?

We were advised to go to Dresden.

The packed lunches had been finished a long time ago, so our lieutenant had to go to military units on the way and to commandants' offices in the cities to ask for provisions for us. We moved without problems, because public transport was free for servicemen.

To feed fifteen troops of the great Soviet army was not difficult. Once we went to a small military unit. The lieutenant left us near the officers' dining-room, and went to headquarters to beg for lunch. While we were waiting, an Uzbek soldier came out of the dining-room. We were glad to meet a fellow countryman and started asking how his service was. He said, – Why are you waiting for your lieutenant? I'll feed you myself. – It turned out that he was a chef. He invited us to the canteen and fed us heartily. It was the first time since we had left home that we ate silently at a table. After lunch, he even showed up some respect, sharing his cigarettes. It was great to meet a fellow countryman in difficult times – especially since he was a chef!

Thereafter we went to Dresden. We arrived after midnight and slept in a corridor at the city commandant's headquarters. The morning started with hop scotch about the city. No military formation accepted us. Wherever our lieutenant tried, he came back sullen. He was very tired and seemed started hating us as he had stopped talking to us as well.

In the evening we returned to the commandant's office again. Here the lieutenant was advised to contact the distribution centre for soldiers in Erfurt, where we would have to be re-registered.

The next day, we were sitting in the park near the railway station and waiting for departure. We joked: 'We are going to take Berlin with our lieutenant!'

Finally we arrived at the distribution centre in Erfurt. The base looked like a whole city. There was no end of coming and going. Young soldiers like us were marching through the gate into the base, the end of their column could not be seen. Other recruits, on the other hand, were leaving the base and going into town, they knew

for sure where to go. The end of this column was barely visible as well! Only the sound of their boots was heard here and there.

The town seemed like an anthill to me, countless numbers of soldiers, but order prevailed. My head started spinning around from the great number of people. I wanted to shout, – Look at the power of the greatest army in the world!

The lieutenant, who had brought us from Turkmenistan to Germany, finally handed over our papers and disappeared.

We spent the night at this large distribution place. The next day we, around 400 new soldiers, went in a long column to the railway station. We were loaded onto a train, and went in a north-westerly direction. I saw a double-decker coach for the first time. Soldiers ran through the cars and frolicked like children.

We came to Ohrdruf town in the evening. Again in a column, knocking our boots, we passed through this strange, fabulous, very beautiful and clean town. It was quite surprising that each door or window had a unique pattern of its own, each more beautiful than the last, with painted colourful flowers. The breath of spring made the city even more enjoyable. The calm was disturbed only by our stamping boots. We were accompanied by silent glances of old Germans who were looking through from behind slightly raised curtains.

And so, on May 8, 1986, we reached the gate of our new base, the entrance to the hell where we were to spend the next two years of our lives.

‘Welcome to Hell!’

We arrived at Motor Infantry Guards Division No. 201. In case war broke out, the strength of the division and its ammunition could delay the enemy for twenty minutes, whilst the other Soviet troops were placed in operational readiness. That was why this formation was informally called the ‘Twenty Minuters.’ The potential enemy was on the other side of the border – divisions of U.S. Marines stationed in West Germany.

Although there had been fifteen of us who came from Turkmenistan, I was now alone. Among the new soldiers there were lots of Uzbeks but I did not know anyone. We were led to the gym for officers and allocated into different company

commands. I was sent to the second company command of the Guards Infantry Division.

On Victory Day, May 9, our month-long quarantine started. On the first day it was clear that here, as in the Turkmen desert, you needed to fight for food. But there was a difference, the wrangles now being concerned by which nationality was worthy of white bread and which deserved only black, who was supposed to eat good food, and who was supposed to get leftovers. I now think a lack of food, warm clothes and other essentials had always been a problem for the Soviet army, but it was never mentioned, it was never written, it was not shown in movies. In the film *Battleship Potemkin*, which was the masterpiece of the ‘father of montage’, Sergei Eisenstein, it was not for nothing that the sailors revolt over wormy meat.

If hell exists, the first six months in the army can be compared to it. Unlike the thousands of stories about life in the army which I had heard, there was no bullying in our formation. However, even more brutal laws of the jungle existed. And then there was the nationalism.

On the first day of quarantine, when our classes had ended and the officers left, in a huge hall, where nearly two hundred young soldiers lived, a true end of the world began. It seemed the walls were shaken from the violent sounds of belts whistling, cracking, broken benches and the groaning of battered soldiers.

Mostly, the fights were between Caucasians and Uzbeks. Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were considered ‘Caucasians’; it was a single concept, as back then the relationship between them was quite friendly. They saw a serious threat in the Uzbeks who recently had increased in numbers in the army’s ranks. Breaking the Uzbeks and establishing their authority in the base was the goal that united them. It seemed to me that they had been prepared for it before they came into the army, and if there was a ‘wimp’ among their newcomers, he was given lessons in cruelty: a special whipping boy was found for him and used for exercises.

The huge hall was divided into several parts by iron bars. Due to the fact that my place was next to a walkway and was lit by the lantern of a night attendant, my

first few nights were calm. But not even I could avoid the ‘kindergarten combat.’ One of Georgians whose bed was next to mine set sights on my boots and belt. During quarantine, senior soldiers could not touch younger ones, so they delegated the taking of belts and boots to their newcomer countrymen. As early as the first day of quarantine one of our compatriots came to us and advised that we cherish our boots, belts and caps as we did the apple of our eye. To be without a belt and cap, to appear before the line without them, was shameful: it was recognition of one’s impotence and insignificance. So, he asked us not to shame our nation. When quarantine ends, young soldiers take an oath, then they are distributed to their companies, and those who have managed to save all their clothing are held in respect by older soldiers. I remembered the words of my countryman, and all day long had been thinking how to protect my property from possible attack.

As soon as there was an incident, Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis joined forces and turned into a ruthless mob. A soldier who had not yet taken his oath could not be taken to military court, so ‘quarantine’ fights knew no mercy. Uzbeks at the quarantine period, still did not know each other well, so they could unite well.

One of these days after the last training, when the bed time signal was given and the light was off, my Georgian neighbour began to threaten me, – Hey, Uzbek! Give me your belt, or you’ll regret it!

– You’ve got one of your own. Why do you need mine?

– Look! You can speak!

He obviously did not expect that I could answer in Russian. Exasperated, he wanted to stand up, but lingered for some reason. I sensed that he did not really want to scuffle.

– Are you so smart? Well, we’ll see in the morning what you have to say for yourself.

If they fought me in the morning, my life would not be worth living, for when they begin to bait someone, they do not rest until they break him. I needed to come up with an idea or I would be humiliated until the end of my service. But what to do?

Maybe I could get up in the middle of the night and beat his head with a stool? Or sneak up quietly and smother him with a pillow.

I felt ashamed by these thoughts. Was I able to kill a man? To become a criminal? How could I go home then? How could I look my parents in the eye? I had had so many plans, ideas, such dreams! From all these painful thoughts my eyes filled with tears. I cursed the army and my destiny. No, I must do something right now to protect myself and continue living in peace.

I went to my neighbour's bed and shook his shoulder. He opened his eyes and stared at me.

– Hey, you, listen! – I started in a whisper. – In a few days we will be taken to the range to shoot. So, as soon as I am given a gun, I'll shoot you. Got that? If you're still pestering me, I swear by God, I'll shoot you!

– Are you mad! – he yelled. – Lay off me!

At this time, from the other end of the bedroom, noise and cries struck our ears: another fight had begun in the dark. Fortunately, it was far from us.

No more would this Georgian disturb me.

However, violence could be waiting anywhere at any time. Leaving the premises in the evening for us 'quarantine guys' was like putting your head into a bag full of snakes. One day I went to have a smoke outside. When I had finished, I saw several Azerbaijani soldiers huddled together on the stairs. One of them was young, like me, obviously a beginner; the others were older. The young one pinned someone to a wall and beat him as the others watched. I realized that the young soldier was being given a lesson in cruelty. The poor guy who had been beaten, crouched in a heap in the corner, covering his head with his hands. The seniors became bored because he did not try to defend himself, and congratulated their young countryman.

Upon seeing me, the young Azerbaijani threw his victim away and blocked my way. He wanted to set upon me, but I decided not to give up. There was no time to think. I had to hold my own and drop him by any means necessary.

My opponent, seeing that I had taken a threatening stance, hesitated. The others

quickly took him away from my way: – Let's get out of here and find another one. They began to climb the stairs, they need a weaker soldier to train their countryman.

Fights usually started with a 'game', a way to measure strength. To refuse meant to bow down. Two or three 'fun' punches and the superiority or weakness of your opponent became clear. If he was weaker, the joke was turned into a real fight, otherwise, the 'fun' stopped.

Quarantine came to an end. I was sent to the second company, where I learned that there was a much more serious problem than the 'dismantling' of soldiers: it was the relationship between soldiers and officers. The regulations had no authority there. Some of the officers beat soldiers mercilessly for any fault; some of them, if something had caused their displeasure, could wake the company in the middle of the night and make them crawl round a huge stadium. Sometimes they ordered us to move iron beds from the barracks on the second floor to the parade ground, tidy them up according to the rules, and then pick them up and deliver them to their original location with no wrinkles on the sheets.

It was quite hard for the Central Asians to sing the national anthem or war songs in Russian. Those who could not perform well were forced to sing until they got it right, all the way through until morning right there in the stadium, even when it was raining or snowing.

Uzbeks, who did not know the Russian language, had a hard time. In the first months, many of our countrymen could say a word in Russian. Was it possible to blame them for that? From first year at school until graduation they spent the most part of their time in the fields weeding in spring and picking cotton in autumn instead of studying. How could they learn Russian? In the army, however, there was not compensation for that. Lack of Russian language skills was the main reason for mockery and humiliation.

It seems to me that those years were a time of decline for our army, both in terms of discipline and in general conditions and atmosphere. Newborn trends in society had not yet matured and ameliorated military life. A kind of emptiness had

appeared and, like a quagmire, it absorbed the soldiers, mutilating them morally, and sometimes even physically maiming them for life. I saw some soldiers' albums with titles on the covers or first page like, 'From the bottom of Hell.' Humiliation, cruelty, abuse and hunger were the constant companions of a soldier.

Once there was a weekly break in delivering flour and a large three-story bakery was closed because its warehouses were empty. We had not eaten bread for a week. How bad life was without it! We were sick of borscht for starter and cabbage for our main course. On an empty stomach, hungry through lack of bread, the tea made us nauseous. On the third day without bread, everybody got wound up and became evil. Cases of theft increased. There was nothing left in the shops which provided catering for the division. Ever more violent fights broke out, and then a reign of terror had begun, as to maintain some kind of order, the officers spent days drilling soldiers on the parade ground.

During a drill, a revoltingly gross expletive went buzzing over the soldiers' heads. The officers shouted: 'The Soviet Union educated and trained all of you! At home you did not know what it meant to sleep on a clean sheet! The Soviet Union gave you sheets, uniforms, meals three times a day, and you are not ready to protect properly your sacred homeland! Parasites!'

It was rammed into us that the Soviet Union stood against world imperialism; that internal and external enemies were just waiting for the Soviet army to weaken it; and that these enemies were ready to start a war immediately.

– Your parents do not want to be worthy citizens of our country either. If they had supported its interests, you would not be standing here like this today!

At that moment an officer addressed this to one of the soldiers, who was standing barefoot in the ranks because his boots had been stolen. But the company commander did not care about the real situation of the poor fellow; he certainly did not come up with any ideas to help him get, at least, some shoes (boots were given to soldiers only once a year). Instead, he was cussing at the poor guy something awful: 'If your parents had not been such utterly useless idlers, you would not have gone without shoes!'

In the second month of service, I went to the infirmary. I had a swelling on my calf and it had begun to grow. I had got it in a fight or, perhaps, while jumping from a APC during training exercises. I did not know where it had come from. I had surgery and the lump was removed. I screamed in pain because the operation was done without anaesthesia.

The next day, as I recovered in the ward and saw the whole world in a dark light, a senior lieutenant came to see me. I learned that he was a deputy commander for political affairs in the company. He had been on vacation, so we had not seen him. – Well, how are you? I've heard you know drawing and painting. Can you write an inscription with a banner pen?

I nodded, wincing in pain.

– Good. When you are back in your company, life is going to be better. – He smiled.

These were the first warm words I had heard in the army.

Lenin and Rambo

When I was back in the ranks, thanks to my ability to draw, I was put in charge of the political education and propaganda room, or the 'Lenin's room'; soldiers called it the 'lenroom' for short. Basically, I was busy rewriting slogans and quotations from the communist party congresses, hemming newspapers and magazines, and decorating wall newspaper. This kept me away from chaos and violence at some level.

The lieutenant was a welcoming and friendly person, and we immediately hit it off. One day as I was drawing cartoons for the wall newspaper and he was writing an article, he suddenly said, – I'm so tired of writing all these texts... Would you like to do it?

I said that before the army I had worked for our local newspaper as a proofreader. Sometimes I wrote some articles, but I could not write in Russian.

– Don't worry, I'll teach you, – he encouraged. – You'll see soon, you'll express

thoughts in Russian as though it was your native language. You might be even be published in 'Red Banner' someday.

To tell the truth, it was not difficult for me to write newspaper articles, I had already had some experience and was decent at it. There was little difference between a local newspaper where I had to write, – The collective farm under the chairmanship of Comrade X has, this year, given so much harvest to the state, making a great contribution to the national economy, – and our divisional newspaper, – Soldier X gives all his power to service. He diligently studies all military affairs to selflessly guard peace in his native land. During yesterday's training he had excellent results on the shooting range. He is an example to his friends in his loyalty to service and his abidance to military discipline.

Sadly, only one article of mine appeared in our regimental newspaper, 'The Guardsman.' After that, my political officer was sent back to the Union. Lieutenant Zaitsev came and replaced him. He was a tall, smiling and good-natured guy, but he lacked the most important feature for military people: decisiveness. The idea to make me a military journalist never crossed Zaitsev's mind. Instead, he told me to write a dozen new posters for the lenroom and re-issue them. He loved one of my posterized portraits of Lenin. He trusted me so much that used to leave the key of Lenin room with me.

By that time, I had become quite accustomed to the pace of service, and even became considered a 'needed man.' The most valuable thing in the army life is a soldier's photo-album. At the end of the service everyone wants to leave for home with decent album. It needs to be decorated in the most beautiful way possible. Old hands and newcomers alike realized that they needed me and tried to make friends with me. I quickly figured out how to create drawings and design internal covers and pages of the album quicker and better. On the front page it should have the picture of medieval fortress, the town's main attraction, and inscription 'Ohrdruf' written using Gothic letters . On the last page, a Tupelov aircraft was drawn as a symbol of coming home. They asked me to draw tanks, missiles, and cannons. I did not have brushes, so I had to paint with a needle by leaking paint drops on the

drawing. The pictures turned out to be rather good; the bricks on the walls of the fortress were lifelike. German paint was very good. It did not spread out, and it was quite easy to draw with my needle. After the paint dried, I laid on some varnish.

The internal pages of albums had a thin white sheets inbetween. Graffity pictures were drawn on this white papers using black ink. One of these traditional drawings always gave me a sense of anxiety. It was graffity of an American soldier, a huge, broad-shouldered and muscular, overgrown with long, shoulder-length hair, his face was covered with blood mixed with sweat. In his hands he had a machine-gun, breathing fire. The giant in the picture was an evocation of an American soldier (their troops were stationed not far from ours). Every time I drew it, I involuntarily shuddered and thought, if there is a war with America – how can we stand against such menacing soldiers?

Later I learned that this fearsome warrior whose image graced Soviet soldier's discharge albums was in fact a Hollywood action hero named Rambo. I discovered this thanks to Lenin's room.

After Zaitsev had trusted me with the key of the lenroom one night I felt my shoulders being shaken. When I opened my eyes, I saw two sergeants and a few Caucasian 'old-timers' leaning over me. I was frightened, but they very politely explained the purpose of their visit. It turned out that they had come to watch TV. According to army regulations, the TV in the lenroom was only to be used for watching 'I Serve the Soviet Union' on Sunday mornings and the program 'Time' in the evenings after political classes. Watching western channels were strictly forbidden. Well, the 'cool' guys from our company, as well as some signallers and mortar gunners from the nearest units, wanted to watch West German TV that night. So, whether I liked it or not, they had come to me. It was a secret amongst a small coterie of soldiers. During one of the "western movie nights" I realized that I was drawing Rambo's pictures all this time.

Now, with the key in my possession, even the most avid scrappers of the company had to think about having good relation with me. However, unfortunately, after a

little while, the privileges which came with this special status ended. It felt as if someone had put the evil eye on me.

Senior lieutenant Zaripov, an exasperated and mean-spirited man, commanded the third platoon, where I served as a sniper. All the officers of his age had already been promoted to higher ranks and positions, at least to company commander, but Zaripov had remained a senior lieutenant for many years and considered himself to have been unfairly passed over. The ones who truly suffered from his fate, though, were his soldiers; he even treated his own Tatar countrymen cruelly.

One day we went to the field for tactical maneuvers when the snow was up to our knees. One of the soldiers complained that his boots were chaffing his feet. He failed to keep up with the formation, and dragged himself along limping behind the troop. Zaripov urged him on a couple of times, but the guy could barely move and could not hasten his steps. Zaripov ordered everyone to stop, went up to the soldier and started heaping unprintable words upon him. Then the soldier took his boot off and showed his swollen foot with bloody corns. Suddenly, the officer struck him with a swinging blow to the face. Blood gushed from the soldier's nose and he collapsed onto the snow. Zaripov, however, was unable to stop and kept kicking him with all his might.

The soldiers remained silent as the beating went on for ten minutes. Zaripov was dripping with sweat. He wiped his forehead and got his breath back, and only then saw that all eyes were on him. Lying at his feet was the bleeding soldier. He could not stand their stares and looked away, but afterwards.., all day long he wreaked his revenge, making us crawl through the snow. Our clothes were wet through to the underwear. The next day we dug trenches all day as he ordered.

Yet, it was not enough for Zaripov. It was obvious that he could not forget those eyes. He started taking his vengeance out on everyone, but I received most of it. I think it was because he was irritated that I spent most of my time in the lenroom. One morning, during Political Training, Zaripov came to me and suddenly tore away the white collar which I had just sewn.

– It was not sewn according to the rules. It is half millimetre higher than

prescribed! Have it altered immediately! – He threw it in my face.

We always carried a needle and thread. In silence, I took my tunic off and started sewing the collar. Zaripov swung round and turned purple, – Have you lost your mind? What are you doing? How you dare to undress during the class?

– You ordered me to alter it immediately.

Zaripov could not articulate anything, he was beside himself with rage. He seized my belt and almost dragged me to the officers' room.

– If he beats you, don't stand like you're rooted to the spot! – whispered an Uzbek sergeant from our platoon as I passed him. How I can fight back, how should I lift my hand against an officer, a commander even?

When we entered the room Zaripov jerked my hair, it felt like he had torn the whole tuft. He lowered my head and hit me with his knee. I managed to turn my head in time, and he hit my cheekbone rather than my nose. I saw stars, he punched my flank. I bounced back into the wall. Zaripov, white with rage, left the room without saying a word.

Tears gushed from my eyes from the incredible pain. At school, if students had not fulfilled their quota of cotton picking, they were taken to the staff room and punished, not seriously, just three or four slaps on the face or a pinch around the back of the head. But this...

Even despite this brutality, Zaripov did not calm down. When they gave a training drill we had to run for three or four kilometres to the woods, carrying weapons and heavy iron boxes full of ammunition weighing over fifty kilograms. Fortunately, I only had to carry a light box, so called 'field lenroom.' It was just a tent with canvas sheets. But Zaripov transferred me from sniper duty to gunner, which meant I then had to carry iron boxes full of ammunition with another fellow gunner. These drills were given three or four times a week. So, every other day we ran with this iron box for five-six kilometres. Zaitsev could do nothing to help me because I was subordinate to Zaripov, and according to the regulations there was no a position of caretaker of the Lenroom.

At that time the duties of the company commander were temporarily executed by

the commander of the second platoon, Lieutenant Osipov. He was Ossetian. One day he came to me and said, – I see what's going on. Zaripov will work you to death. Try to be patient for a little bit, I'll do what I can.

Indeed, a week later I got the order to transfer from third platoon to company administration.

There were only three soldiers in the administration: a paramedic, a driver of armoured vehicle - APC, and a machine gunner. The APC was equipped with two guns: anti-tank and anti-personnel. I had to deal with them. Now I was out of Zaripov's control.

'It was yours, became mine!'

I had been involved in sports since childhood and performed well at school and in basic military training exercises, I was always held up as an example to others.

That was why I thought I would have no problems in the army.

I was deeply mistaken, to put it mildly. There were many other problems to deal with. From the first day it became clear that the concept of 'mine' did not exist. Anything that belonged to you could not be considered 'yours.' It may be yours now, but it could be taken away or stolen at any moment. The most frequently used phrase was: 'It was yours, now it's mine.' It covered everything, from a white shirt collar to shoe polish that you had bought. You had to learn how to fight for your property if you wanted to keep it. If you could not fight, you had to give precious belongings to someone stronger. If you were strong, you took it from the weak. If there was not enough to go round, steal. Stealing was the most standard action there; anybody could do it at any moment. However, to be caught was an inexcusable shame.

Man, as is known, can adapt to anything. After exhausting exercises and training drills, if we were given a short break, everyone tried to take a nap. Even in those moments we had to squeeze caps and belts into our hands. If taken to the field, we had to lie on our guns. At night we pushed all our belongings into a boot which

served as a pillow. It was easy to understand why someone might need your worn-out puttee, but why were other people's letters and pictures from home stolen? Pretty soon I stopped asking that question, and accepted the situation. And yet, at the end of the service when my diary, where I had written all of my observations and experiences, was stolen, I was quite sad.

When I was the 'host' of the lenroom, my confidence increased. However, I relaxed and lost sight of reality. One morning I woke up and found that someone had stolen my belt. My first thought was: who would dare? And then I slapped my forehead: 'Have I forgotten where I am? It's the army! It was yours, now it's mine...'

I persuaded the sergeant to allow me to miss breakfast, and asked one of the soldiers to tell my fellow countryman, Avaz, from the third company, of the urgent need to find me a belt. I did not go for lunch either but still there was no news from Avaz. I had remained locked in the lenroom all day. Dinner time approached, and my stomach rumbled terribly, but leaving without a belt, appearing like that before the whole company would have been shameful. I sent a soldier to Avaz again and asked him to remind him not only about a belt but to bring something to eat as well. Nobody but a countryman would have agreed to bring me a meal from the regiment's dining hall. However, Avaz, as it turned out, had been on guard duty, he had only returned in the evening, and only then was he told about my situation. He came and brought two pieces of white bread with a knob of butter of the size of a walnut. He promised to try to help with a belt tomorrow, but advised me to try to steal someone's belt. I told him that I was not able to steal. – What does that mean, that you can't? If you need it, you must. Take someone's from your company, then I will alter it from another company.

It was quiet in the soldier's bedroom. I lay awake and wondered how I was going to organize a robbery. Today everything had been OK, I was able to sit in the lenroom. What if tomorrow an alarm was called or we went to the range? I would disgrace myself, my countrymen would stop talking to me; I would not be considered a man. No, I needed to find a belt come hell or high water. No guts, no

glory!

I got up and moved gently through the bedroom, looking at the sleeping soldiers. A mortar platoon slept at the end of the hall. A belt was sticking out of one of their pillows. I need only extract it carefully. I approached two or three times, but could not do it; how I hated myself at that moment! It felt like being covered with mud and stinking slime. But what could I do? What to do? To steal was shameful and disgusting. Not to steal meant shame and mockery.

– Stop! I know what you are going to do!

Even though it was a whisper I gave a start. It was a Georgian sergeant, one of the mortar men, was looking straight at me from his bed. His service was almost over and he had always behaved immaculately. He had approached me many times asking for the keys of the lenroom. It turned out to be he was watching me for a long time.

– Don't even think about stealing from my soldiers. Search for what you need elsewhere, – he said, before turning over and facing the wall. - But I am sure that you can't handle it anyway.

It felt like being in a cold shower. I returned to my bed and could not sleep, exhausted from all the shame and self-contempt. I sank into despair and began to tear the letters from home I had in my pocket into small pieces.

At school I was in love with a girl. At the beginning of my service I had raised the courage to write to her, but only once. I sent the letter to my school friend's address, and he passed it to her. Two days later I received an answer from her. I was ecstatic, yet here I was, tearing her letter to shreds. I did not want anything to remind me of home, of family or this girl. If only I could forget about everything and become a new person, perhaps my life in the army might have been easier.

Next morning I skipped breakfast but I had to be ready for roll call. I crept into the dormitory and considered a way out of this hell. There was only one thought in my head: 'I must steal, by any means, I need to steal!'

Finally, at around dinner time, Avaz appeared. He entered and handed over the belt that saved me, his eyes sparkled with joy. At that moment he was the most

wonderful man in the world!

There was a Latvian soldier in our company. When he had almost completed his service, all his possessions were stolen; from his suitcase to his dress uniform. The poor fellow went home, empty-handed, in the old uniform. We could not believe our eyes when, two days later, he returned to our formation. It turned out that he was sent back right from the plane. They could not allow a soviet soldier to go home in rags and in weared boots.

- It is a shame, - they apparently said: - Shame on your company, regiment, and division!

Some soldiers gave him support, some gave him money, others, through their countrymen, found new clothes. We also collected small gifts for his relatives and I designed a new album for him. This story had awakened a sense of solidarity among the soldiers. Well, amongst some of them only.

Theft continued to flourish. The immutable law was still the same: 'Protect or steal!' there could be no complaints.

A big wrangle in small Ohrdruf

Ibrahim, from Uzbek town of Kuvasay was one of my closest friends. A big, muscular, narrow-eyed guy reminded me of Alpamysh, an Uzbek folklore hero. In the first months of his service, he fought every day. He was the strongest newcomer among the Uzbeks, so the Caucasians provoked conflicts to break him both mentally and physically. Ibrahim's face was always covered in bruises, but he continued to bravely withstand the provocation.

On Sundays they showed movies in the theatre. We went there for the first time two months after our arrival. We were a little late. There were no seats left, so we had to watch standing, huddled at the end of the hall. During the performance, something happened with the filmstrip and the lights went on briefly. Then we saw that there were lots of empty seats in the front rows. One of the newcomers decided to take a chance and tried to take a seat, but someone punched him in the

face and he hurried back.

Soon we learned that according to unwritten law, all the places were allocated according to a certain hierarchy which existed between different nationalities. The first row belonged to Georgians who were considered the most 'cool', the second and the third were held by Armenians, the fourth and fifth belonged to Azerbaijanis. I heard that prior to our arrival Chechens had dominated the front. Now the Chechens were almost gone, so their places had been taken by Georgians. If a representative of another nationality tried to sit in the first row, it was considered a humiliation for the Georgians that required immediate action. So, we stood at the end of the hall, when Ibrahim suddenly and very firmly said, – You'll see, one day we'll be sitting in the front row. – A prophecy, if ever there was one.

It had been six months. Authority had passed to the Armenians. All nationalities except the Caucasians were oppressed. It was the Uzbeks who were especially despised.

On one occasion, when I was designing a new wall newspaper in the lenroom, Ibrahim came in, he seemed very cheerful. – Do you remember what I said that time in the theatre? Get ready, the day is coming!

Everyone knew that someday a serious collision was going to happen between the Armenians and Uzbeks, but no one knew when and where to expect it. Both sides had been carefully preparing for the day, when the balance of power would shift or remain as it was.

We heard that Armenians sent their people to other regiments to seek support. Uzbeks had also contacted the guys from the tank and artillery regiments. They were waiting for our signal.

There were nine companies in our regiment, more than a thousand soldiers. Our nearest neighbours were tankers, gunners, missile troops and a few others.

May 9, Victory Day, was coming. Typically, during the holidays there was no one on the base but duty officers; the long prepared collision now had a date. Nobody said it out loud, but you could feel it in the air.

A few days before the holiday, there was a rumour that Georgians and Azerbaijanis were going to join Armenians. Then Kyrgyzs decided that if this were so, they must help Uzbeks. Representatives of other nationalities were in no hurry to intervene in our conflict.

Meanwhile we heard a good news – the chief of the military prison, an Armenian, had punished arrested Georgian soldier for non-compliance with an order. He had hung empty tins round his neck and made him run around the yard. The news of this Georgian, who had had appeared in prison yard before the inmates like running scarecrow spread through the division like lightning. Thus, a black cat had crossed the line between Armenians and Georgians.

Spring in Germany feels very soft and beautiful. In those days the sun was particularly warm. A piece of sugar and boiled egg had been added to our usual breakfast. For soldiers who usually ate only potato and cabbage, this was a real feast. After breakfast, we watched the programs ‘I Serve the Soviet Union’ then ‘Morning Post.’ Thereafter we had free time; some washed clothes, others stitched their collars.

We were given a red apple each for lunch, the first fresh fruit of the year.

Asatiryan, an Armenian from our company, was sitting at the table across from me. He was short but strong and nimble, bouncy like a spring. During dinner we tried not to look at each other. This year we had almost become friends. And yet, according to the unwritten law of the army, now we had to be on opposite sides. After lunch, we went to the cinema. Near the cinema there was a big platform where the officers ordered us to march. In anticipation of that afternoons movie, some soldiers sprawled on the lawn, lazing in the sun. On that spring day, so gentle and pleasant, we were too lazy to think about any wrangles – Why do people fight on such a beautiful day?

Today, in a small German town, the ideology of universal brotherhood and the principles of soviet multinationalism, that were one the pillars of the Soviet Union, had to withstand a very severe test.

It was May 9, 1987.

Only ten minutes were left before the start of the session. As usual, the cinema was full, the first rows were empty, but no-one from the crowd at the end dared to approach them. An Armenian was sitting alone at the end of the front row with crossed legs.

Uzbeks crowded at the door. The air was hot.

Ibrahim whispered, – Wait until all of us are here.

The seats were filling up very quickly.

– Many are still outside, – my friend said, – Anyway, it's time, or the lights will go out!

We followed Ibrahim who marched bravely ahead. Armenians had not realized what was happening. One of them jumped up and wanted to shoot us down; Ibrahim knocked him out with a single blow. The riot began. Simultaneously, the crowd, who had previously been outside, rushed into the hall.

Now the hall was full, so it was impossible to either enter or leave. It was like the Day of Judgement. A soldier grabbed a bench and threw it into the scuffle, another lost his balance, fell to the floor and was trampled by dozens of feet. One trooper wrapped his belt round his hand and whipped it right and left, beating both opponents and friends alike.

I do not remember how long all this had been going on, but suddenly, outside, a shot rang out. It was the only thing that could have dispersed the rampaging crowd. Everyone rushed to the door; the hall emptied as fast as it had filled.

An hour later Uzbeks from our company returned to the barracks. None of our Uzbeks, who had been in the theatre, was seriously injured. As we later found out, the most violent scuffle had been outside, on the parade ground in front of the cinema.

Sirojiddin, who had seen the entire affair, told us, – There were hundreds of soldiers. Some people, who were carrying black straps, arrived from other units. The fighting was terrible. They fought with belts; some were beaten with buckles right to the eye. Duty Guards dispersed the crowd by firing into the air.

Ibrahim listened with glowing eyes. He was furious that, during this retribution for

one-year's worth of humiliation, he had been locked in the hall, not out in the real fight.

– Come with me! – He cried. – Let's find the remaining Armenians!, – but Sirojiddin warned that anyone caught outside would be sent to the prison: 'Wait until the Armenians from our company return, and then settle up with them.'

That was what we agreed to do.

After midnight Uzbeks gathered again. – Not all the Armenians have returned, let's deal with those who have, – Ibrahim began, – Guys, don't beat them in their sleep, wake them up first. If they don't get up, it means they give up!

A decisive skirmish started in a huge bedroom for two hundred soldiers. Belts whistled in the air, blows fell on the walls, the plaster cracked, the company guard shouted for urgent assistance.

Everyone rushed to their places. Five minutes later, the duty officers, with armed backing, inspected the barracks.

The duty guard who had given the alarm was an Azerbaijani guy born in Georgia. After calling for an armed guard, he did not know what to say to his superior. He could point on Uzbeks, but he didn't, instead he lied to the officer – I thought I saw some movements in the darkness, so I got frightened and raised the alarm, – he explained, rather sheepishly.

The head of the guards inspected the bedroom and left. After that, no one dared to get up for the rest of the night.

The next day was very difficult. Investigators from the military prosecutor's office arrived at our company. They searched for the instigators of this unprecedented brawl. Dozens of soldiers were injured, someone had lost an eye, many hands or legs had been broken, many had gone to hospital. Despite the efforts of investigators, the ringleaders were never found.

The next night I was awakened by Asatiryan. – Come on, we need to talk.

I woke Ibrahim and said that the Armenians had called for negotiations.

We woke all Uzbeks in the company. It was agreed that three of us had to go to negotiate – Ibrahim, Sirojiddin, and myself.

We went to where the Armenians usually gathered, the basement of the reinforced four-storey concrete barracks that were always flooded. Mosquitoes swarmed around us. In the corner of the room Armenians had organised their secret warehouse, here you could find everything: food, clothing, tobacco, all a soldier could desire. We realized that the stock had been stolen from warehouses across the division.

There were three other Armenians from other companies next to Asatiryan.

– Let's stop interfering with each other. We don't touch your people, and you don't touch ours. No more fights, no vengeance between us. In return, all Uzbeks of your call will have new dress uniforms for their demobee, and there won't be any problem with tobacco as well.

- The first row in the cinema belongs to Uzbeks now, – added Ibrahim.

They looked at each other, and silently agreed.

Since this peace accord, fighting, which had become a tradition, at last, stopped.

The next time we watched a film, we proudly took our place on the first row. Of course, this did not put an end to all conflict. Life in the Soviet army could not exist without some disagreement, even for a day, but for now it was small beer. In later times, when I had only six months left to the end of my service, neither Armenians nor Uzbeks had such comradeship, everyone stood there own ground. I made friends with the soldiers with whom we had clashed. My closest friends were two Armenians, a Ukrainian and an Azerbaijani guy who was born in Georgia. Moreover, there was a ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Nagorni Karabakh; thus concept of a 'United Caucasus' had sunk into oblivion.

'Sleeping Beauty' and deserters

Sleep is the sweetest and most unattainable of dreams for a soldier. 'A soldier sleeps, the service goes on', everyone knew that; if only it had been possible to have spent those two years sleeping in a soft bed! The officers knew it, their favourite method of punishment was keeping soldiers starved and sleep deprived.

There are different methods of testing the strength of various subjects. A day or even an hour of army life was enough to test any man's moral and physical endurance. One of the company commanders, Senior Lieutenant Sedlyuk, was a lover of such tests. He was small, but broad-shouldered. He had thick lips, and piercing eyes.

As a rule, before big exercises, drill inspections were held first at company level, then battalion, regiment and finally division, which sometimes lasted for several weeks. The officers behaved as if a war was about to start and America had already launched an offensive.

Prior to the army, I had known little about America. Sometimes scary rumours began to circulate in school, like Jimmy Carter, the U.S. president, was going to drop a bomb on the Union, not conventional but nuclear! We learned how to wear masks during school classes of basic military training.

The first time when I heard the word America I was seven. In the first grade, boys collected shiny chocolate wrappers and exchanged them, it was our 'money.' For elementary school children there was nothing better during breaks than exchanging with these wrappers. Once, the older kids, members of Komsomol confiscated the wrappers and told us that this game had been created by American spies to confuse Soviet schoolchildren. Comrade Kosygin decreed that in all the schools these candy wrappers should be taken from pupils. – Do not play this game, otherwise Comrade Kosygin will die from grief, and then the war will start!

Soon Kosygin died, but the war had not begun. We also learned that Carter had died too, the one who had wanted to throw a nuclear bomb on our heads. Later when we were in secondary school, we were told that Reagan was going to drop the hydrogen bomb. All Soviet people were to die, and damned Americans would get all of our possessions and wealth. Those evil Americans could only be stopped by the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. We had little understanding of the meaning of it all, yet fear settled in our children's hearts.

The scare tactics of Sedlyuk resembled those horror stories from school. He never tired of repeating that Soviet soldiers must selflessly confront capitalism,

remaining one step ahead of the insidious enemy who never slept. He would examine the soldiers uniforms meticulously and even measured them with his ruler. The white cloth around our necks had to be exactly two millimetres above the edge of our collar, and the bottom of ones overcoat must be exactly forty centimetres from the floor. He checked whether boots had been polished to a shine, he checked the buttons on our tunics and the buckles on our belts, he examined our faces, looking for the slightest hint of stubble.

When the regiment went on parade, we were on the drill square all day. We were not allowed to sit for a moment or even to step aside. In the evening, we had barely arrived back to base, when Sedlyuk, who probably was not satisfied with the results, made us stand in the hallway, bolt upright, until midnight.

There were about ten thousand soldiers participating in the divisional exercise on the big parade ground. For the preceding week we rehearsed a war song. When ten thousand soldiers were marching in unison, the tramping sound spread throughout the region; when you added the weight of the armour, what a cacophony. If Sedlyuk was dissatisfied with the song, the whole company would lose dinner. One day he brought us back from the threshold of the dining room seven times, someone had not been in time with the song or bent their legs while marching. On another day we were left without breakfast, then, during lunch, as we were being punished, we were made to stand next to the dining room and wait for everyone to finish. When it was finally our turn, there was no food, and we remained hungry. After these examples, the starving soldiers stretched every sinew on the parade ground, shouting the song and marching with their feet as high as possible. These efforts were rewarded; at dinner time, we managed to get into the hall. We had just sat down and lifted our spoons when Sedlyuk snapped: 'Company, on your feet!' We all jumped up at once. We stood, hands by our sides, eyes on our full plates, mouths full of hungry saliva. If anyone showed weakness at that moment, his remaining military service would be worthless.

Sedlyuk's inspection moved onto individual soldiers; he came to everyone. It seemed he was listening to how we breathed. If he noticed a pained, plaintive

expression on someone's face, he grinned with undisguised glee in the face of the soldier.

Finally, he looked at his watch, the fifteen minutes required for eating had elapsed. Sedlyuk gave the order, – Roll call, go out and line up! – The soldiers, who had not had a crumb all day, rushed to the exit.

An alarm was called almost every day. Once at four o'clock in the morning. We picked up our heavy combat gear and ran to a specified location, a forest, six kilometres away. But we did not have time to rest there, we were ordered to run further. We ran for an hour, then another, where we were going was unknown. A chain of running soldiers, who were wet through, stretched for more than a kilometre. Those at the rear, basically grenade launchers and machine gunners, who had the heaviest load, were constantly kicked in the ass by the officers. Running alongside me was Khomushku, a Tuvinian. His service was to end in six months.

– Where are we running to? – I shouted.

– This is the longest march, we have them every three or four months. We still have a long way to go. No stops, no smoke breaks! – Suddenly he looked at me slyly. – Do you want a smoke?

I thought he was kidding, and was about to berate him, but he grabbed me by the shoulder, and dragged me with him. We overtook our company, then another. I went weak at the knees, but Khomushku would not let me stop. We broke into the first group of runners. As we overtook other companies, officers shouted after us, urging to hold in the ranks, but Khomushku gestured with his middle finger. When he noticed my fear, he said reassuringly, – Don't worry, they aren't our direct commanders!

Half an hour later we were far ahead of the pack, only then did Khomushku finally give the sign to slow down. We caught our breath, looked around, and collapsed on the lawn. As we puffed we looked at the sky, slowly blowing smoke rings. We waited calmly for our company. We even had enough time to rewind our puttees. By noon we had run thirty kilometres. We stopped near a small village. It was the

finish line. Soldiers literally collapsed at the camp. Everyone took their boots off, hung their foot-cloths in the sun and rubbed weary legs. Many soldiers had bloody feet. I then realized how important it was to wrap your feet well. If your foot-cloth was badly applied, it slipped into a ball and left your foot exposed, this meant your boots could 'eat' your flesh.

We did not have time to rest, not even for ten minutes. Sedlyuk fell upon us like snow from a dyke, and cried out: 'Second company, line up!'

He pointed to a grove behind the field and commanded, – Ahead, attack!

We lined up quickly to take combat position and run towards the grove crossing huge wheat field. During these tactical exercises we had to perform various tasks like crawling on our bellies and jumping over obstacles. For almost an hour we wandered through the green wheat fields. A German, apparently the owner of the field, had come out of his house to watch our manoeuvres; his face was contorted with hate, but he could not say anything. Soldiers from other companies, who were resting quietly, watched us with sympathy. Sedlyuk climbed the hill, to keep an eye on each soldier.

Exhausted, after running without rest, we turned back towards the regiment. It was better this time as there was no order to run, we strolled instead. Everyone was so tired, and many had bloodied feet, even though they could barely move, the officers often urged them on. In the evening, when we returned to barracks, Sedlyuk announced that he was going to inspect arms and clothes.

It was too much, but who could revolt against him? Falling from fatigue, we started cleaning our clothes and weapons. We stood at attention in the hallway until three in the morning. Sixty kilometres of running on an empty stomach and then standing without moving for hours was certainly not for wimps. Our eyes needed matchsticks, our legs trembled, but if you succumbed to weakness, if you closed your eyes just for one second, you would get the infamous nickname of 'Sleeping Beauty.' This was Sedlyuk's aim.

The next morning no one could walk, our feet were swollen. Some guys gritted their teeth in pain as they went for breakfast.

Summer was the season of desertion. With the arrival of spring, cases of escape by those who could no longer stand the army culture became more frequent. In autumn, in the slush and mud and in winter, in cold with snow up to your knees, it was harder to escape. In the summer you could easily find shelter in the gardens of farmers, and wild berries in the forest would stave off hunger. So, in summer, every ten or fifteen days, someone ran away. Until the fugitive was found, the remaining soldiers had no sleep and no rest. First, the division territory was scoured, then the whole town and surrounding villages. Some people even got as far as Erfurt.

The eighth company of our regiment was called the 'punishment battalion' because of the cruelty of their officers and sergeants. When we found out about the life these soldiers had, we realized that we lived in paradise. One soldier of this company, a Turkmen, thought the only way to salvation was a suicide. He jumped from the roof of a four-storey barracks. Fortunately, he survived. He spent a fortnight in hospital, and then had to return to his company.

This guy was often visited by a countryman, a nimble Turkmen of our company. He said that the poor unfortunate had been completely broken by the sergeants and Caucasians; all the beatings and humiliations heaped upon him had taken his dignity. At night he was locked in a toilet and in the afternoon forced to walk on all fours, like a dog. I remembered him from quarantine, tall, handsome, dark-eyed, black-browed. I'd met him a month ago on the base. It had been impossible to recognize him, his previous appearance had gone. His eyes were dead.

One of the sergeants of the eighth company was Georgian. Once, when we newly arrived and were in monthly quarantine, during a fight, he was hit with a belt buckle near his right eye and almost knocked out. He had a big scar on his temple. An officer came to solve the problem and gathered all the soldiers together. He said nothing to the Caucasians, who constantly provoked fights, but cursed us Central Asians, – Hey, you basmachi! Do you know what you really are? All of you were slaves! My grandfather and his comrades released you, and, instead of thanking us, the Soviet army, you try to impose your own rules!

We stood silently, without raising our heads. To reply, to object, would ensure a lot of trouble. Besides, none of us knew Russian well enough to answer adequately. We returned to barracks, whereupon there was an arranged confrontation with the Georgian with the bandaged eye. The officers tried to find out who had beaten him, but no one confessed, and the Georgian did not give anyone away. He knew the unwritten law of the army- if someone complained or gave someone away he would be treated like dirt.

But now this Georgian soldier was promoted to sergeant. It was likely that he was seeking revenge on the Central Asians. The poor Turkmen, after being treated for his failed suicide attempt had missed a good chance for some relief. It was hard to get into hospital, those who managed it did everything they could to stay for as long as possible; five or six months if they could. He left hospital far too quickly and a week later repeated his suicide attempt. As the eighth company was heading bathhouse, he threw himself under a military truck. However, the driver turned out to be experienced, and the Turkmen survived. After that he was in an even worse situation, he was humiliated, insulted, and subjected to unbearable beatings. When summer came, he fled.

As the fugitive was from our regiment, we were dispatched to look for him, and it meant looking both day and night. We lost our sleep, which for a soldier was the most precious gift from God. The search of the fugitive had lasted for five days, on the sixth he was found in the house of an elderly German woman in the town. As it turned out, the old lady had found him in her hen-house and sheltered him.

I know nothing about the fate of this poor man. They said that he was sent to a disciplinary battalion. However, normally these kind of soldiers were discharged from the army as mentally unbalanced.

Attempts to escape or even suicide in the first months of the service were quite common for beginners. To cope with the depression and despair was not easy. It depended on the environment and many other circumstances. Those who survived were the ones who could forget their humanity and protect themselves like wild animals.

Searching for a deserter was not a difficult task. In the autumn a guy, who had just arrived from Tajikistan, lost his gun. Most likely, it had been stolen and sold. The soldier understood that he was 'a dead man' and thought about running away but he did not dare. Meanwhile, the regiment was put on high alert, officers were angry, the troops were lined up in parade ground, a big tarmac. Furious commander of the regiment announced:

– From now on, until the weapon is found, I forbid anyone to enter barracks!

Anyone close to their bedroom will be arrested immediately! From now on I will allow you sleep standing up or while marching!

This had never happened before. It seemed that the officer wasn't kidding. I think there wasn't a soldier who didn't sleep standing in the post, but no one has experienced yet sleeping while walking. We were not allowed to sleep for two days in a row. We searched in the endless fields and the forests that stretched behind them. It was autumn so the rain was cold, our overcoats wet, the mud was up to our knees and our foot-cloths were soaked. On the third day the officers themselves were ready to drop. Only then could soldiers, hiding in the forest thickets, get some sleep. At night we tried to hide ourselves in ancillary buildings on the polygon, alternately carrying out watch duty.

On the sixth or seventh day it became clear that we were wandering in circles in vain. We were then sent to nearby villages and towns. We did not understand what we needed to do there. In the forest, at least we could sleep for a little bit, but there, on the road we had to walk without knowing where we were going. Obviously, we could not enter German houses and yards in search of weapon, so what we could do was only marching on the road.

Then we tried to sleep in the ranks on the go. – One, two, three! Left, left, left!

One, two, three! – Rhythmic counting sent your brain to sleep, only our feet moved. If someone stumbled, the entire structure would fall. When you step in the same rhythm, your feet carry you by themselves. We were slowly swimming off to sleep with half-closed eyes and a monotone lullaby in our ears, – One, two, three... Left, left, left... One, two, three...

We failed to find the gun. Fifteen days later the regiment returned to barracks.

'Devil' in a snowy forest

In a deep winter, our company was sent to a secret spying and communications centre next to the border for help. Of course, we were not sent to help to restore communications, but to clean the secret fortifications and trenches located in the dense forest.

We hit the road early one cold morning. It was snowing. It was very difficult to walk, soon we were damp. Our breath froze white on our eyebrows and eyelashes, everyone looked like Santa Claus! We had been walking all day, without lunch, and had stopped several times to have some rest. Towards evening we arrived at the edge of a forest. Now we awaited our food and tents. The soldiers, who had been marching hungry all day, came to a halt, completely exhausted.

Political officer Lieutenant Zaitsev, who led us, was a good man, but, as I said earlier, was irresolute. Either he hadn't liaised with the provision department, or something had messed up, however, the car that was supposed to bring the tents and provisions to the site of our future camp, had still not arrived.

The most unreliable thing in the army was our machinery. During an alarm only half of the ten APCs of our company arrived at their destination; the others were stuck on the road. During large-scale exercises it took no less than two days for military machinery to get to any given place over two hundred kilometres away. Not because they were bad, but because of the inexperienced soldier-drivers. For example, the APC had two engines of Russian heavy truck 'KAMAZ'. How could an 18 or 19 year-old soldier cope with them? Generally, drivers in the army are petrol-heads. The only advantage of their position was the ability to wash their uniforms in gasoline. When the fabric was immersed in gasoline, it cleaned all stains, in fifteen minutes you could wear your clothes again.

Anyway, back to our raid, upon halting, the soldiers squeezed their leg wrappings, trying to dry them, but in the cold it was impossible and we had to wrap our feet

with wet cloth. To warm up a little, we put prickly branches broken from bushes under our feet. And still, we were starving.

Two hours passed. It was dark, and the car was nowhere to be seen. Our officer did not know what to do. With every passing hour the situation got worse. Hoping to grab some food and lodging somewhere, he led us into the woods towards the secret military unit. We traipsed a mile in the dark, knee-deep in snow, trying not to lose sight of the white trail made by those ahead. Suddenly a voice shouted:

- 'Stop! Who goes there?'

Zaitsev stopped the company, stepped forward and began to explain.

– Stop! I'll shoot! – It sounded threatening in the darkness.

Zaitsev didn't move. He wanted to say something, but the voice repeated: 'Back! I'll shoot!'

After a third warning anyone could be shot. Not for nothing that is written in the regulation that the guard is the person inviolable.

We had nowhere to go, so we returned to our previous position. When we reached the edge of the forest, the lieutenant allowed us to light a fire. We were delighted and began to look for suitable wood. There were almost no dry branches around. We needed to find something for kindling. Each gave what he could, someone handed an empty box of cigarettes, someone even gave his letters from home. Finally we managed to light a fire. The snow was still falling, but the fire was not extinguished, we took turns finding new batches of firewood. Exhausted soldiers, wrapped in cloaks, started to fall asleep.

My feet were numb from the cold, because of the snowstorm the fire only heated my face. Watching the sparks fly, I dozed off.

I do not know how long I slept, but I was awakened by someone pulling me by the collar. I opened my eyes and saw Sedlyuk, the commander of our company, above me. He yelled at me to stand immediately!

I wanted to get up, but my legs would not obey, I could only crawl on all fours. Sedlyuk was no longer beside me, he was pushing the others. It turned out that the fire had extinguished long ago and the soldiers were sleeping a sleep of death in

the snowdrifts.

Sedlyuk was still screaming, sergeants joined him and looked for soldiers trying to find them in the snow.

Finally, shivering from cold, we lined up. A car loaded with tents and food, had, at last, appeared. However, the commander considered the soldiers incapable of putting up the tents and stoves. He took us back to the old road in the forest. He cursed the political officer for almost killing the whole company. The air was filled with swearing.

A voice ahead sounded again: 'Stop! Who's there?'

Sedlyuk shouted, but it did not help: 'Back! I'll shoot!'

– Shoot, if you want, by god! Call your commander to come and talk to me or I'll shoot myself!

Sedlyuk stepped forward.

– Stay where you are! Do not move!

– Listen, you donkey! – yelled Sedlyuk. – An entire company could be lost here!

Call the chief of the guard tell him to contact division commander, right now!

There was silence for a moment, then an order came out: 'Only the company commander can approach.'

After half an hour of negotiations we were finally were let in. Near the checkpoint which partitioned the pathway, a guard in fur coat and boots stood. As we were trudging past him, he looked at us with undisguised pity.

We came to the building which looked like a basement. It was a barrack for signallers, designed for ten people. When everyone had settled, it seemed that there were at least a hundred of us in there.

The next morning we went back to the car. We had to set up winter camp. Each soldier was given a thin slice of black bread, a translucent slice of bacon and an onion. It was all the food we would get that day.

We ate the bread and onions greedily, but who would start on the bacon? The commander began to mock us – Look at them! The Muslims are going to eat bacon! You are prohibited to eat pork! Do you want to give it away? Let's see how

you enjoy your bacon!

Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyzs, and Turkmens looked at him with hatred, and he stared at them intently, waiting for their answer with a grin. No man gave his bacon away. They just looked away. All of us from day one in the army ate pork, other meat was simply not available. Why Sedlyuk had decided mock us now, no one knew. Some, had perhaps thought about giving their bacon to a non-Muslim sitting beside them, but this would mean becoming a target for Sedlyuk's future attacks.

Well, Muslims, tasty bacon? – He continued to mock.

However, last night this man with 'devil's smile' had saved the soldiers from certain death.

Conquest of 'Crimson Paradise'

We started autumn drills in 1987 with the preparation to defend ourselves from chemical and nuclear attacks. After two weeks of trainings the frequent night alarms had started; we were allowed to sleep in uniforms and with our guns and equipment. This was because when an alarm was given it was difficult to get to the armoury, we would have lost a lot of time. It was clear that large-scale manoeuvres were on the approach.

During one of these alarms we were ordered to run towards Ordruf train station. Tanks and APCs were loaded onto special trains, and soldiers were placed in carriages which had been used to transport flour. Inside there were three-storey bunks made of boards. We were sent to a landfill site near the city of Halle, where the drill was to be held. Soldiers went on these trips full of joy as they were always associated with a lot of adventure.

The autumn rains and sleet had already started, but there were some days when the sun smiled, caressing us with its warm rays. The convoy was very slowly slithering through towns and villages, making frequent stops. German cities seemed to be as mature and unhurried as their inhabitants. During our time in Germany we had never seen busy streets filled with people, even groups of young people were not to

be seen.

Sometimes the train passed through wild-woods, where we once saw a deer.

Suddenly the soldiers became excited, – Oh, if we had a bullet! To shoot it with a single bullet! We could have had venison kebab!

We took turns to sit on the steps of the train, dangling our legs and facing the warm sun. Our commander, Sedlyuk, and all the troubles associated with him seemed far away.

Determined to achieve his promotion, Sedlyuk had struggled to make our company the best. We soldiers were ready to help him, as, if he were promoted it would be a chance to get rid of him. However, enduring humiliation and bullying every day became more and more difficult. Everyone hoped that somehow it would be over, and something positive would happen, but no one knew when.

Sedlyuk did not hesitate to encourage ethnic hatred and violence, he provoked dislike amongst the soldiers; he openly supported the strong and demonstrated limitless contempt for the weak.

During chemical attack trainings, we sometimes had to run several kilometres in a gas masks. During one such exercise a soldier of the third company, who apparently had asthma, suddenly fell to the ground and suffered respiratory failure. After the incident, many commanders changed their attitude to the soldiers and began to treat them more humanely. That was, at least, what was said in other companies. Sedlyuk, however, regarded what had happened differently, – A soldier is not allowed to die during the drill under any circumstances! If he died, it meant that from the very beginning he was useless to the service. We can only feel pity for the food and uniforms that were provided for nothing.

He doubled the hours of our training. Ever more frequently he gave the signal for a chemical attack. At such moments, we had to put on our gas masks with the speed of lightning, then pull the rope of the chemical suit wrapped on our shoulders. It came down slipping off over the body. One had to start putting it on with the right hand and finish with the left leg, finally fastening the buttons. If the rubber suit was wrapped improperly, it did not come down, and soldier, wearing gas mask, had a

hard time to find its sleeves, or someone had buttoned it incorrectly allowing air to come in. Then Sedlyuk used to start beating and kicking him, shouting: 'You are dead, soldier! You are damn dead!'

We often had to repeat this task several times at his behest. I remember with horror the times when, wearing airtight chemical suit and loaded with combat armour, we ran, gasping for air like a fish, as our bodies suffered in the stifling heat of the suit. The chemical suit was impermeable rubber-coated canvas. As a Soviet tradition, it would protect the wearer at higher chemical concentrations, but was less comfortable due to the build-up of moisture within it. It seemed as if you would melt in a moment from the heat coming out of your own body.

Some soldiers could not stand it and removed their masks - Sedlyuk loved that, he could then make us continue training all day. In addition, he punished us with hunger. He intentionally released us for lunch an hour late, while other companies, who had already returned from the regiment canteen, laughed at us: 'Attention, attention! The flying shift is going!' This meant you were going to be hungry until evening because there were not even bread crumbs left in the canteen, and if there had been, the soldiers on duty would have already eaten them.

The monotony was all consuming. We tried not to think about what else Sedlyuk would think of to poison our lives with. Large scale exercises were his hour of triumph, where he could unburden himself, bully the soldiers and excel in front of his superiors.

At night I was woken by the whispering of soldiers and aluminium cookware jingling. It turned out that they had found some potted barley porridge and lump sugar in boxes under some wooden beds. They were eating it all and throwing the empty cans through the window. What to say, you can not stand against such a pleasure. We ate porridge and sugar for the night and by the morning became sick from overeating.

Finally we arrived at our site and set up tents on the edge of the forest. It was almost lunch time when it was announced that we had devoured a two-day ration last night. The soldiers from other carriages had eaten the entire stock of black

bread with raw onions as well. Sedlyuk, angered by the news, beat and punched anyone he could find. When at last he calmed down, he had been raging and spluttering in all directions for almost an hour. Everyone stood as if their mouths were full of water. He said that we had destroyed a two-day supply of food and henceforward we would not see a single morsel.

In the evening, when Sedlyuk had gone to field headquarters, Zaitsev brought a big can of sauerkraut and eight loaves of bread. By the time the company commander returned there was nothing left.

On the third morning the officers suddenly began to open the heaviest ammunition trunks. So far we had been told that they were to be opened only in case of war. We were given enormous live ammunitions and boarded to our APCs. We were squeezed inside, unaware of our destination. Guns were loaded and we looked at each other in dismay, it was as if time had stopped. Cats were scratching at our hearts when APCs moved on. Perhaps, instead of taking us to training they were taking us to a real fight? Those iron trunks had not been opened for nothing. I did not know about the others, but my knees were knocking. Before my eyes, there was the image of the American soldier, Rambo, which I had painted in albums. The anxious faces of my comrades and the overall silence intensified my fear even more.

After an half an hour driving there was sudden order: 'Attack!'

We jumped from the moving vehicle and lined up according to combat position. I had to run next to the APC. We ran a mile and stopped. They ordered us to lie down and a new order to prepare for firing was given. Everyone snapped the shutters of their gun and was ready to pull the trigger. Ten minutes passed, but no order came. Everyone was at a loss.

From the place where I was lying, I tried to look around.

Each soldier was separated, ten or fifteen meters apart, there was no end of lying soldiers. I was at the very edge of our company. Soldiers of the first company were located near me. Their political officer had everyone in his sight. He knew me because he was a frequent visitor to the lenroom. I decided to ask him why we had

been waiting so long. He joked, 'The commanders have probably fallen asleep.' Suddenly the hand of one of our soldiers involuntarily jerked, and a shot rang out. For a moment, everyone froze and then began firing. Our company started first, then others joined in. Officers were frantically waving their red flags, giving us the sign to stop firing. It became clear that it had started without orders. What was going to happen now?

After ten minutes of silence artillery shells whistled over our heads. Then tank tracks clanged behind us. The tanks caught up with us, and orders were given to start firing. The firing started simultaneously; APCs, tanks, countless mortars and guns let rip. There was such a rumble that the earth shook.

We felt dizzy after this cannonade. We charged ahead and shot without seeing our targets in front of us. From time to time missiles exploded, whistling from grenades filled the sky. We had been walking through this fire for about a kilometre. Finally, the order to stop and crawl was given. Our ammunition had to be used to the last, so we shot in all directions.

Eventually the firing subsided. We were still lying, awaiting new orders. Soon a helicopter circled above us in the sky. Somewhere, two or three kilometres away, rocket fire started, then again the gunners attacked.

Finally there was silence. The smell of gunpowder and blue smoke dissipated.

Everything was torn up, but it was not the end of training; the next order was to take the height, a hill, where there were only three or four dead trees.

The infantry attacked. With cries of 'Hurrah!' we rushed to the hill. We were met with dense berry bushes: raspberry, blueberry and blackberry. The branches were bursting with ripe berries! Could a soldier pass through? Our guns were thrown over our shoulders, and we rushed to collect the berries. Everyone put whole handfuls of them into his mouth, the taste was just marvellous.

Always hungry, because Sedlyuk's main punishment had been the withdrawal of food, we felt as if we were in heaven. Soldiers fanned out around the bushes, losing sight of each other and their officers, everyone was busy, all were in a hurry to eat as much as possible. Everyone smiled as they wiped their mouths with their

hands, which were smeared with red berry juice.

It was a long time later when we saw the officers waving their red flags frantically on the hill. A helicopter had been hovering above us for some time.

We never found out exactly how Sedlyuk had been punished. One thing was clear however, it was over for him. This had been an important exercise; generals had specially come from Moscow to observe the drills, and they were on the helicopter. Our company was left at the range for a week as a punishment. We did not see Sedlyuk again.

Our main occupation at the range was restoring what had survived the barrage. It rained for four days in a row. On the fifth day the rain became torrential. Nothing was dry, by noon the wind had risen, and the rain turned to hail. All our clothes were wet and frozen. We were chilled to the bone. Even our underwear was icy, we felt like we were wearing iron chain mail. It was impossible to remain at the range so we returned to camp.

It had been snowing all night. The next day we packed the tents as we had to return to Ohrdruf.

On the way back half of APCs were stuck because of the slush, snow, and mud-locked roads. Then there was a story that has remained in my memory for a lifetime.

An APC, that we had used, had been left behind by the rest of the convoy, one of the engines had stopped working. The driver had somehow managed to fix the problem. We set off again, but it soon became clear that we were lost. The heavy car was stuck in the mud, and no matter how hard the driver tried to navigate to flat land, he could not find a way out. We tried to push the armoured personnel carrier. We strained, as much as we could, in mud up to our knees, but nothing worked, and both engines soon were out of service.

The snow intensified, it was very cold. While the engine was working it was at least possible to get warm in the car, but now we just shivered. The platoon commander radioed brigade about the situation and asked for help.

An hour later, the deputy commander of the battalion on machinery, a fat major,

arrived. The first thing he did was to open the upper hatchway of APC and start brutally kicking on the driver's head. This was, as it turned out, his usual method of dealing with drivers. The driver, covered from head to toe with engine oil, managed to cover his head with his scratched hands. Finally, apparently tired, the major called a military bulldozer. The bulldozer approached... and got stuck in the mud as well. The engine roared. Black smoke was everywhere. Everything was useless, despite our efforts, it was impossible to pull out either car.

The major ordered senior sergeant Savlyak to instruct the soldiers to cut down a tree in the forest. Savlyak told us to get out of the car. But all fifteen soldiers remained sat in the armoured vehicle, soaked to the skin and stiff from cold. We could neither move nor speak. We could only huddle like sparrows. When Savlyak ordered us to leave, one of the boys cried bitterly. That made Savlyak mad with rage. He rushed at us and began to rain blows upon us; he even swung a rifle butt. Seven of us reluctantly crawled into the cold, but the rest did not even react to the beatings, they did not even feel alive.

A bulldozer driver gave us a saw and went to the woods. It was half a kilometre away and already dark. Everything was covered with snow, and it was hard to tell where the solid earth was. We reached the forest wet to the waist. With great difficulty we cut down two trees and tried to drag them out, but we couldn't take more than two steps. It was clear that to drag such a weight was simply impossible. Savlyak yelled and struck us with his gun, but I did not care whether Savlyak was there or not, not even Sedlyuk with an axe would make a difference now. I was not afraid of being killed, I was almost dead already. The world consisted of cold. The blizzard swept through me as if blowing all thoughts and feelings from me. I just wanted this infernal pain, which was piercing my body with a thousand needles, to disappear. I could not feel my toes. My body was shaking from the cold, it burned like fire. The screams and noise around me seemed like a dream.

I was standing, dumbly numb, when I noticed that the Tuvinian, Khomushku, had taken a bullet from his pocket and put it into his gun. Why did he do that? What if I snatched the gun and shot Savlyak? Then, maybe, the pain would subside. Could I

shoot if my hands were completely numb?

Savllak finally shut up, apparently realizing that screaming and cursing were useless. He approached the fallen trunk of the tree and tried to lift it himself. Of course, he did not succeed. He spent some time fussing around the fallen trees as we silently watched. By that time, everyone knew that if we wanted to get out of the swamp and be warm, then, whether we liked it or not, we had to drag those logs to the cars. Again we tried to lift the trees. Savlyak joined us. Eight of us raised a log and somehow dragged it to the car. The second log was left, we did not have enough strength to carry it. An hour later, the bulldozer pulled our APC out of the swamp and dragged it to the main road where we got to another armoured vehicle. Anguished, groaning and cursing, but finally warm! I began to regain my thoughts. In my head there was a picture, Khomushku was inserting a bullet into his gun. Why did he do it? He always carried bullets and shells in his pockets. He made tie-pins with a picture of an aircraft and the inscription 'GSFG' ('Group of Soviet Forces in Germany') on them. I wonder what I would have done in his place if I had loaded my gun?

The next morning we returned to barracks. In the corridor there were deep puddles coming from the wet clothes of soldiers who had arrived before us. Everyone rushed to the radiators, but we were soon disappointed, they were cold.

Only one thing filled us with joy, we had got rid of Sedlyuk.

How does steel temper?

After what we had done in Halle, it seemed the divisional commander wanted to punish us; perhaps it was just coincidence, however we were sent to the tank range to lay rail sleepers. The main part of the company went to the station where the sleepers had to be unloaded from a train and shipped into trucks. They then had to be unloaded onto the site, this job was a little bit easier. I was in the group that went to the tank range.

The rail sleepers were concrete blocks that stacked crosswise in railroads, I must

admit that they were very heavy. Who thought laying the sleepers on the tank-training ground was a good idea?

I'm aware that I often mention swamps and mud. In Germany, rainfall is frequent, and my memories of that range are inextricably linked with pictures of thick mud. The tank range had become like a swamp and a tank which spent a day there needed a week of cleaning. Tanks often got caught in the mud, especially during shooting training.

When we arrived at the tank-training ground, there had already been some cars loaded with rail sleepers. It was an extremely cold November. It was sleeting, there was endless gloom. We armed ourselves with crowbars and began unloading the sleepers from the trucks. After two hours there were only two or three cars left in the queue.

– Come on, guys, chop chop! – Lieutenant Shcherbakov cheered us, – If you unload these cars before the arrival of the next ones, you will have time to relax. Shcherbakov, a command of the second platoon of our company, was a tall, kind man with an open face. Indeed, we did finish in an hour. We enjoyed five or ten minutes of rest. Meanwhile, the lieutenant collected firewood and lit a fire, so we were able to warm up a bit.

It was getting colder with every minute, and it was getting harder to hold the crow bars. By lunch time more cars and trucks had arrived, and, in order to get everything going faster, we had to increase the strain. The end of the column of cars could not be seen. It seemed that the soldiers at the station had found an alternative, faster way of loading the sleepers, or they had been allocated additional forces. Snow, cold, a biting wind, heavy sleepers... each time these iron pigs were disembarked, the truck jumped. Quite often, someone's leg or hand was injured, but we could not stop or slow down. No one could leave until we finished the job. It was an order, and we had to obey!

Darkness came. We hoped the soldiers at the station would stop loading, but when we heard that dinner, mashed potatoes and jelly, was being carried to us, we realized that there was much more work. As we dined, another three or four cars

came. To get a minutes rest, we had to work at an accelerated pace. The lieutenant tirelessly chopped wood for the fire and encouraged us by saying the faster we worked, the more time we would have to warm up.

At midnight there was only one unloaded car. However, a snowstorm and blizzard had made the work complicated. Our hands no longer obeyed our instructions, fingers were numb and iron scraps stuck to them.

Suddenly, a Caucasian soldier, who had been working with us, threw his crowbar away and, speaking in his own tongue, started shouting. He jumped from the truck and went to the fireplace.

Everyone watched him silently. The Caucasian sat by the fire and stretched out his frozen hands. For a while nothing happened. Then, other soldiers got out of the truck and went to the fire. Any other officer would have attacked us with his fists, but Shcherbakov, looking into the eyes of the Georgian, simply said, – Listen, I will not shout at you. I don't know how many more cars will come. The only thing I know for certain is no matter how many cars come, all the sleepers must be unloaded. Additional forces are not coming. The longer you sit, the more our work will be delayed.

Everyone looked at the Caucasian. When he realized that we are looking at him, he got even more mad and cried, – Strain if you want! Even if I have to be killed, I won't do it!

This soldier, tall, broad-shouldered, with a Roman nose and a hard, merciless gaze, had looked down upon everyone. When he was newcomer had a good support by his countrymen and gained reputation as a 'tough guy', no one dared argue with him. At that moment he was sitting huddled from the cold, hunching, stretching his shaking hands towards the fire.

At this time, as if swimming out of the mud and snow, panting and blinking with dim lights, another truck appeared. Now there were two trucks waiting for us.

Everyone looked at each other nervously. If the Caucasian did not stand up, no one would continue working... No one knew when everything would be over. The soldiers stood over the Caucasian and looked at him angrily without saying a word.

He could not resist their views and rose heavily, looking at the truck. He had made a move in that direction, but suddenly he became embittered and shouted, – I'm not going to work, okay? I cannot work! My hands are completely numb!

He cried, and tears rolled down his cheeks. For some reason, at this moment we felt a release. A Kazakh, who has always stood in the rear ranks because of his low height, came up to the Caucasian and scornfully said, – Oh, you're crying! You don't deserve to be called a man!

Nobody said anything. We silently took our crowbars and continued working.

When, at three in the morning the final sleepers were unloaded from the last car, everyone was ready to scream with joy. The Caucasian still sat motionless beside the fire.

About a month had passed since this incident. The Caucasian had changed completely. What had happened to his stance, his eagle eyes, his contemptuous shouting at the weak? Now anyone could laugh at him and hurt him.

There were other examples. A soldier from our company, Seleznev, was always dozing, he was given the nickname 'Sleeping Beauty.' Tall and very skinny, this soldier could not battle anyone, and was mocked by all, from officers to soldiers. He did not react to the humiliations and insults, he never contradicted anyone, he lived as though in a dream, but although his eyes were always half closed, he executed his orders in good faith.

– Do you know why he's always like this? – Pavlov, one of my firends asked me once. After combat shooting drill, we had a five-minute rest. We were lying in a meadow. Seleznev sat nearby with his eyes, as always, half-closed, he was staring at the forest behind the range. – He lives with his thoughts, memories of his life before the army. Seleznev grew up in a family of intellectuals. He had never heard a rude word from anyone. And now he's in the world of violence. The hardships of a soldier's life are like a dream, his body is here, but his mind is far away. It helps him suffer less.

I looked at Pavlov with surprise, I had not expected such deep insight and reasoning from him. We were yet to discover another amazing thing about

Seleznev.

I think I have already said that there was a three-storey bread factory not far from our regiment. Wagons of flour was brought there, and companies took turns to unload it. It was the turn of our company. A platoon was sent to the train station, the other to the factory.

We heard that six wagons of flour arrived. For the whole day, we, like mules, carried fifty-kilogram bags of flour to the third floor of the factory. It was especially hard to climb the stairs, our hands cramped and our knees gave way. When it became unbearable, we leaned against the wall with a bag on our shoulder, trying to catch our breath. We were so tired we had even stopped talking to each other, it seemed that every word would reduce our strength. We avoided looking at each other in order to hide how exhausted we truly were. Finally, in the evening, we just fell, one after another, on the stairs and in the corridors.

The only soldier who kept going, up and down those stairs with calm and measured steps, carrying sacks of flour from morning till night was the thin and weak Seleznev. Our 'Sleeping Beauty.' He passed through his prostrate comrades silently, as if there were no weight on his shoulders.

This made all of us completely change our attitude towards him. No one tried to mock or humiliate him any more, on the contrary, we displayed a sincere respect for him.

Luckily, at this time, those who loved to mock and humiliate others found new targets. Unexpectedly, five new soldiers arrived right from Moscow, the capital of our great country. Everyone, both soldiers and officers seemed to be so rejoiced, they shouted at each other: 'Look! Truly Muscovites.'

I wondered why everyone was so glad. Later I learned that no one in the army, whether soldier or officer, liked Muscovites and tried to humiliate them by any chance. I guess, the reason was simple, although Soviet citizens were told that we lived in a time full of abundance, this was only a reality in the capital. The farther from Moscow, the harder and poorer people lived. Everything was for Moscow, it was as if everyone worked to make life in the capital a paradise.

I remember my father took me to see distant relatives who lived in the foothills of the Chatkal mountain. Not far away from them there was a settlement that differed sharply from the old adobe houses of Uzbek village. There were beautiful houses made of brick with whitewashed walls and slate roofs. Russian engineers and miners lived there with their families. These people worked for a uranium mining organization in the Chatkal mountains. They said that prisoners worked in the mine. Then I heard those famous words for the first time, from our relatives; 'Moscow supplied.' It sounded proud and dignified. In this settlement the shop counters were not empty, unlike other shops in nearby. The goods were abundant and of great quality, the counters burst with various clothes and food. My relatives, I thought, were very lucky to live somewhere close to a place with a Moscow supply. His son played with a beautiful toy which could not be found in regular shops, it must have been a gift from one of Russian miners.

Seeing the newly arrived Muscovites, I remembered that beautiful toy. The tough guys from our company would not be babysitting these toy-like guys from the capital.

Good nutrition and regular physical activity certainly contribute to manhood and strengthen the body. It seemed to me that making a man immune to beatings was impossible. One of the Muscovites was obscenely thin and short. If I was 162 centimetres then, he was half a head shorter than me. The poor guy was beaten so much that his eyes, face, hands and feet were always bruised black and blue.

However, six months later, this little soldier had grown so large that once, during a line up, I noticed that he was half a head taller than me! Miracles can happen.

The officers did not try to hide their hatred of the Muscovites. Maybe that's why all and sundry tried to hurt and humiliate them. Later Muscovites got smart, they found patrons and made life easier for themselves.

Elusive Diplomats

We enjoyed warm spring days. We lay, with Grishko, a Ukrainian, in the dense shade of a tree in the meadow. Our guns lay under our heads as we looked dreamily into the sky. What would happen if some western diplomat, let's say the

military attaché of the USA, Britain or France, were to appear right in front of us? In and out, jumping like a deer through the meadow? Catch him, and as a reward you would get a vacation back home for three weeks?

From time to time we looked hopefully towards the road, but no one was around. Occasionally old German men and women would pass in their chugging 'Trabants.' As ever, old men and women, I told you that young people did not appear in the streets here.

A large-scale tactical exercise for Soviet troops stationed in East Germany was due to begin. On the eve of the drills, a few of our battalion soldiers were chosen for special duties. I was among them. We were acquainted with the flags of the member states of NATO and the car signs of relevant embassies and councils accredited in East Germany. Our task was to seize western diplomats who tried to approach the East German settlements where the exercises were being held and hinder them until the arrival of appropriate officers. As was explained to us, the members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact had agreed not to send diplomats into any area where military exercises were being conducted.

We were to take a position invisible from the road and, in the case of an approaching vehicle flying the flag of an appropriate embassy, give a sign to the driver of our APC, which was hidden down the road, disguised with spruce and pine branches. The driver, a Tatar guy, would block their way. Soldiers, who executed this task were promised 21 days leave.

There was a German truck on the road. Our Tatar fellow ran onto the road, stopped it and said something to the driver. When the truck left, he waved his hand and shouted, – Civilian!

It turned out that he had asked the German to give him a cigarette. Well, if the officers didn't know about it, what was the problem?

Lighting the cigarette, which he had just begged, he came to us, handed it over and said, smiling, – Try it, it is civilian.

Everything characterized by the word 'civilian' had great respect and reverence in the army. Maybe it was only popular among Soviet soldiers in East Germany and

did not mean anything for the other Union troops. After the army, when I asked my Russian teacher about the meaning of this word 'sivilniy', he could not answer and said it was an incorrect variant of some Russian pronunciation. Later, when I started studying English, I realized that it came from English word 'civil.' During my army years, the word 'civilian' meant everything that was not army, it was associated with the free life of 'the civilian world.' Anything a soldier couldn't get, like socks, soap, German or Cuban cigars, even a toothpick was 'civilian.' If someone got 'civilian' tobacco, ten people queued to have a puff. The saying, – The first takes what he wants, the second takes as much as possible, and the third smokes what's left' probably came from this situation.

'Civilian' things quite often appeared in the company. As a rule, those who went to the city on patrol duty bought all sorts of things from the German stores. I first went out on duty three months after my service began. Patrolling the city was fantastic because it gave us the opportunity to go for a stroll.

We went to the city in full uniform, a tunic, white belt, tie and black shoes. We had to report to the city commandant, where the tasks of the patrol were explained, then we went to the city.

Usually a patrol consisted of an officer and two soldiers. It often transpired that the officers would not to join us, we could go into the city alone. Our officer was of this type. We walked along the streets, went into shops and bought what our company comrades had ordered. We could not speak German, we just pointed at each item and used our fingers. If we wanted to buy three things, we showed two fingers, because Germans counted our bent thumb too. The most popular things were Cuban cigars, chocolate flavoured tobacco, different souvenirs for home, like clocks and shiny stickers with portraits of German beauties.

The next day our patrol was over. When we gathered in the courtyard of the commandant's office an old German woman arrived on a bike with a basket full of apples. She stopped at the fence and called for the commandant. He talked to her about something, then came back to us with the basket and handed out apples to everyone.

– Someone from yesterday’s patrol, tried to swipe apples from the garden of that old woman, they broke a tree branch. She brought the apples herself. Thank her. But remember, it is shameful for a Soviet soldier to steal apples from Germans! My cheeks flushed as red as the apples as yesterday an apple branch dangling over a wall had been snapped by us.

I tasted ‘civilian’ tea a year after the start of my service. We had given jelly the most of the time, and everyone was pretty tired of it. A soldier who worked in the battalion secretariat and the secretary of our company were my closest friends. Once the battalion secretary came in and said the city patrol needed a smart, reliable soldier for a special task. Who could I recommend? I named a soldier. The next night I was awoken by our company secretary, a Russian speaking Kazakh guy. He had a large spherical bulb of light, taken from the cabinet of the company commander. He said that we had to open the lenroom. When we entered, he filled the bulb with water, pulled out a blade, attached it to electrical wiring and threw the blade into the water. He then connected the other end of the wire to the plug socket. In five minutes the water in the bulb had boiled. We made strong black tea, then the battalion secretary came with a large paper bag. Inside there was delicious butter cream.

– The guy we sent to patrol was sensible and did everything right, so I gave him half.

On the outskirts of Ohrdruf, near our divisional base, there was a wafer factory. I heard many times before that the waffle cream which soldiers used to steal from there was delicious, but now was tasting for the first time. The three of us drank strong ‘civilian’ tea and ate half the packet of cream. In addition, there was an interesting movie on one of the Western German TV channel, and, although we did not understand the language, we were happy to watch it. A few years later, when there was no longer the Soviet Union, this film was shown back at home, it was ‘King Kong.’ That night, we, though only for a few hours, had enjoyed the ‘civilian’ life and were happy.

I have already spoken about theft in the army. Now I understood why other

people's letters from home (as long as they had not been written on pieces of exercise book, but on good white paper) and photographs were stolen, these things were simply 'civilian.'

Once, our company went on duty in the regiment canteen and I remained in the lenroom. But at night I was called to the regiment headquarters, an angry ensign was waiting for me there.

– Come on, – he said without hiding his impatience and irritation.

There was a beautiful two-storey building near the canteen. We went there. As it turned out, it was a hotel for officers.

The ensign led me to the door of one of the rooms:

– There is a general inside. He cannot leave. The door is locked, but if he opens it somehow and wants to get out, you must stop him. If he gets out, on your head be it.

I did not understand anything and was extremely surprised. Then I heard mumbling behind the door, screams that turned into a roar. Only then did I realize that the general was drunk. If he really wanted to break down the door and get out, how could I stop him? With that thought I was overcome with panic. I stood at the door, shaking with fear. After a while there was snoring inside. I calmed down, looked around and walked down the corridor of the hotel, looking around curiously.

At the end of the corridor there was a bookcase. The first thing that caught my eye was the book, 'The Three Musketeers'. I sat on a bench in the hallway and started reading it. It was the first book I held in my hands since the beginning of my service (military regulations do not count!). Suddenly the door in front of me opened, and a colonel, carrying a suitcase, proceeded into the hall.

I jumped with fright and the book fell to the floor. The colonel picked up the book, looked at it, then looked at me:

– Do you like to read?

– When I am lucky enough to have a book, – I said.

He asked where I was from. When I told him 'Uzbekistan', he asked if I heard of Chingiz Aitmatov, who was also from Central Asia. Then he opened his suitcase,

took out a book, and handed it to me, – This is his new novel, which caused a sensation in the Soviet Union. I have read it, it's yours now.

It was 'Scaffold' by Chingiz Aitmatov, published in Russian. I barely had time to start before, two days later, the book was stolen. The book wasn't stolen for the pleasure of reading, of course, but because it was 'civilian', it was beautiful and new and there were gold letters on the cover.

It is already second day we are dreaming of civilian life and waiting for Western diplomats to appear. We spent the night in an armoured vehicle. In the morning we took up our secret position again. We enjoyed the birdsong, and the clean, fresh air. We were concerned with only one thing, that our duty would last and we would not be replaced. We had food for four days.

Sometimes, watching the low passing clouds, I gave rein to my imagination, I fell into philosophical reverie and compared civilian existence with life in the army. During all of our conscious life we were threatened with a war. Our study at school, our work in the cotton fields, our entry into the pioneers, then Komsomol, everything, everything was aimed at increasing the power of the Soviet Union, power, which had to prevent the war. At least that's what we had been taught. We wished long lives to our heads of state!

When we were in seventh grade at school, 14 years old boys, the autumn cotton season came very cold. It had already snowed by early November, but still, we had to pick the 'white gold'.

In those days a poem by an Uzbek-soviet poet Uigun, 'Anger of old man Nazir', was popular and it had been included in the curriculum:

A cloud crept through the sky,

An anger appeared in old man's eyes.

A droplet fell down,

Trouble for the white field...

...If memory serves me correctly, this was the beginning of this famous poem. Old man Nazir angrily clenched his fists:

Even if not water but hail

Falls from heaven to earth

We will pick up to the last cotton,

For the sake of our government!

The cotton field, which swarmed with schoolchildren, was covered with white snow, there were no open boxes of cotton left, but we had to try to collect at least a selection of debris and branches. We needed to have amassed three or four pounds by evening, otherwise at 'headquarters' (the teachers' room) we would be scolded. My hands were numb from the cold and would not obey when I try to collect buds from the bushes. In the next row, my classmate ripped everything that came his way.

– Are your hands not frozen? – I asked.

– If you smoke, you feel less cold, – he handed a cigarette to me. It was the first time I had smoked.

When it got dark, we packed our cotton aprons and returned to barrack. It was a large building in the centre of which there was big hall, and at the edge there were several smaller rooms: for the foreman and teachers, and another warehouse. Three rooms to the left were given to girls, and the boys slept in the hall.

For dinner, we had untasty pasta cooked by one of our classmates. Then we sat down to open the boxes. They were still covered with snow and quite wet. Our scratched fingers burned. In the corner there was a black and white TV. A concert for cotton pickers was on. The teachers were in the foreman's room, probably drinking vodka. A guard took them a snack.

On TV a singer was singing a song about some farmer, named Barata, who collected 'white gold', and suddenly the transmission was interrupted. Instead of the singer a speaker appeared in a black suit with a sad face and sad voice, he announced that Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, had died of a heart attack.

All the boys froze not believing their ears. After a few seconds someone wept bitterly, the girls wailed, – Oh, woe to us, how are we going to live now!

Concerned about the noise in the hall, the foreman came out of his room. All of us, in tears, shouted with one voice that Brezhnev had died.

His eyes nearly popped out.

– Who told you that? Where did you get it from? Who said it? He will be sent to prison together with his relatives! Brezhnev cannot die! If Brezhnev dies, the war will start!

He glowered, as if right at that moment an American bomb was going to drop on us. We even lowered our heads, terrified.

– Brezhnev keeps peace in the world. If he dies, Reagan will bomb us. He is prevented only by Brezhnev! Whoever says, ‘Brezhnev is dead’ will become an enemy of the state! Our enemies spread rumours, and you, the future Komsomols, why do you believe in such words?

He was flushed from all the shouting. Those terrified teens did not know whose words to believe, the foreman or the TV announcer?

Hearing that the foreman was shouting too loud, teachers also came out of the room wondering. Then Math teacher looked at the TV. The newflash was over, and the military orchestra had started to play funeral music. The teacher pulled the foreman’s sleeve quietly and led him into his room.

It was November 11, 1982. In the Union a mourning period of five days was declared. A worrying time had begun; everyone nervously awaited the start of war. Yet the war did not begin. Yuri Andropov became the head of the state. Would he be able to oppose President Reagan? This was the question that concerned everybody. A year and a half later Andropov died too! Konstantin Chernenko took over. All our hopes were now on him. He had not ruled for a year when he died. People were in dismay because our leaders had died, one after another. We continued to wait terrified of war.

So many years passed and it was as if nothing had changed, we still faced the threat of Western imperialists. Now we waited for our current leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to come up with an idea against America; just as we had waited during our childhood. In those days we had hoes in our hands, now we have guns.

The third day passed in preparation for an ambush, but the Western diplomats did not bother to appear. After lunch, our hopes began to fade.

– There is only confusion with these diplomats, – Grishko said, scratching his head. – If you say something wrong, God forbid, trouble is inevitable. It's better that we don't see them.

– You're right, – I said, – Do we need a vacation? Returning back to the army and getting used to the service again will be even more difficult. It is better to finish these two years altogether and leave forever.

– It's certainly better, – agreed Grishko, – Look, a car is coming. We should give our Tatar fellow a sign to stop it and ask for some civilian tobacco.

'Good' and 'bad' Germans

We were supposed to be friends with locals, so occasionally we met at various events. Eight members of our company, as representatives of the regiment, were sent to the city for a holiday. The holiday was probably connected with some sports event – we were told that we would be playing volleyball with the Germans. We went with Lieutenant Shcherbakov.

In Ohrdruf all the roads were paved with stones, laid out in patterns. Flowers seemed to sprout under your feet as you walk. Our boots wrapped on the paved roadways. The town was well decorated for the holiday, it had been made even more beautiful. Germans walked sedately along the streets, and when our glances met, they smiled at us.

– Comrade, comrade! – We said kindly.

As we walked through the beautiful clean streets, we visited the central park. It was crowded. It was the first time we had seen German youth. Here there are, where had they been hiding for so long?

We arrived at a volleyball court. Young Germans were bouncing and tossing a ball. Our lieutenant said something to them. They stopped their game and looked with wonder at our team. They were all tall, as if they had been specifically chosen for their height. It was an obvious we would lose, so we decided to 'let things be', and began to take off our footwear; we could not play volleyball in our heavy canvas

boots. We had nothing else, so we had to go barefoot. We didn't mind, our foot-cloths could be ventilated and dried out. We spread them on the green grass.

The German athletes were surprised, their eyes were glued to our puttees, but they tried to suppress their emotions. People, who had been strolling at a distance, were curious and came to see the action. They were interested, but could not come too close, their culture would not allow it - openly staring and observing a person was considered an insult.

I thought of our customs. In a village, if a stranger walked down the street, the villager would stick his fork in the hay and let his eyes follow the stranger until he was out of view. The Germans were different. They did not show that you were of interest to them.

We stripped down to our T-shirts.

At this point, one after the other, a few yellow and red mini-cars entered the park. Plump German chefs in white aprons got out and produced shiny aluminium cruets, plastic plates and cups and started handing out food, one gave pea porridge, another, roast vegetables, the third, sausages, the fourth, rye bread. Another had placed a variety of drinks on a table. On another table there was some cheese and jam. Delicious aromas drifted over the park.

Who could think about volleyball!?! Our soldiers quickly pulled on their boots and rushed to the tables. The food was tasty and free! We had not seen a feast like this since leaving home. We returned twice, ate and then lazily stretched out on the lawn, watching the Germans.

After resting, I decided to walk around the park and had a conversation with a German who knew some Russian. From the first day I had arrived in Germany I was interested in the question of why the streets were always empty, why there were no guys chasing girls and, in general, where the youth were. Our streets, from morning till evening, especially in the spring and summer, were full of people. Some even put mats in the ditches and ate there, in front of everybody.

Companions drinking vodka in the street was a most common scene. Our youths gathered in flocks, and hung out in the street all day and night, talking and

laughing loudly.

At first the German was surprised by my questions, but then, after some thought he said that they had no time to socialise in the street. They worked all day, and if you wanted to relax, you saw friends in local clubs and theatres or went to the movies. Those who wanted could sit and relax at home, read books or watch TV. The youth were busy with their studies; many of them worked after college or played sport. No one had time to wander the streets.

I did not believe him. Indeed, it was our understanding that the most hard-working and honest people were in the Union!

Some Germans, in turn, came to visit our regiment to see the life of the Soviet military. One day, two engineers came to our company to see the lenroom. The next day they brought two sixty-litre aquariums. There were fifteen small striped fish in the first one, the other had four, bigger angel-fish. I, being responsible for the lenroom, had to look after them. They even left fish food for two or three months. I think I excelled at caring for the fish as the striped species bred, but they soon ate each other. The four angel-fish were stolen. I later found out that a Georgian, who used to come to our company to visit his fellow countrymen, had stolen them as a present for the wife of his commander. That was the end of the fish story, a symbol of friendship that the Germans had given us.

In early summer, we went to help a German farmer collect cherries. Large, black cherries, almost the size of a plum; I had never seen them before, evidently they had not reached our territories yet. Looking at German gardens, the way they cared for and organized their crops, well, we could only be surprised. I remembered working in a collective garden in Turkmenistan. It was badly run, the workers were always drunk, under the withered trees empty bottles of alcohol lay. We Uzbeks had the same thing, if the irrigators were not poured a shot, they would not let the water go. They would also refuse to fertilize plants unless they were given vodka. Two days of collecting cherries was a real holiday for soldiers. In my opinion, we ate more than we collected. The farmer fed us for two days. When we had finished, he said goodbye and thanked us, but I did not feel or see joy in his voice or blue

eyes. In the autumn we were sent to the same farmer to help collect apples. Whether from joy, or maybe for some other reason, he greeted us with tears. We looked at each other in surprise, it turned out that Germans were sensitive after all! Generally, Germans are unfathomable, you never know if they are happy or angry. They are always discreet although they smile. A couple of times I did meet rude Germans.

During summer we returned to the forest, in which we had nearly frozen to death, for twenty days. This time we camped not on the edge of the forest, but in the centre, where the signallers had previously been based. They had left their barracks, and their basements had become warehouses. Our task was to clean the trenches for tanks and APCs. Was this a job for a soldier? All we did was sleep the whole day. I guess, since the end of World War II, nobody, except soviet soldiers like we, had come through the forest. The foliage was as soft as a carpet, it was as though we were sleeping on seven mattresses, they were so warm. In summer the fallen leaves are heated from the bottom up, so what could be better for a sweet sleep?

The tank and artillery units' firing ranges were nearby, so from time to time shells swept over our heads whizzing and cutting the branches of trees. Sleeping soldiers opened their eyes for a moment, cursed, then rolled over.

On one of those wonderful days an Armenina friend of mine, Asatiryan, called me in their tent.

– Come along, be our guest.

I gasped with surprise as I entered their tent. In the middle was a box stuffed with cans of beer, a bottle of schnapps, ham, sausages and sweets. When I asked where it was from, they laughed, – Drink first, – they said, – Then we'll tell you all.

As it turned out, the forest was bordered by a large grove that was littered with empty beer bottles - apparently Germans used to go there for picnics. The Armenians had the idea to collect these bottles and hand them to the nearest German grocery store; with the money they had bought all these victuals. They had already visited the store twice this week.

I left the Armenians a little bit drunk and tortured myself; how could I have been such a jerk! For days I had not noticed the neighbouring grove, the bottles, all that treasure! I told Uzbeks what I just had seen and heard. The unofficial leader of Uzbeks, Ibrahim, listened to my story, and was furious. He immediately began to insist that we go to the village the following day. I asked my Armenian friend for directions.

– The most important thing is to be aware of exit patrols. There is a flat, open area on a hill near the village. The store is visible from there. If one of you is on the hill and another is near the shop, you can signal. It is difficult to guess at what time a patrol car will pass.

The next morning, six of our men rushed away. We had to be back for roll-call at lunchtime.

After a mile, we came to a paved road and there, on the other side, was the grove. Looking out for a patrol car, we quickly crossed the road and in less than an hour had collected three bags of bottles.

Three men returned to camp. Ibrahim, another soldier and I went to the shop in the village. The village was close to the edge of the forest, but an open field stretched between them. The third guy was left on the hill to track the patrol car and give us a sign, Ibrahim and I, throwing our shoulder bags on our back, ran across the field, accompanied by the sound of jangling bottles.

The village was very small. We quickly found the shop. Ibrahim took the bags, went inside and I stood guard outside. I glanced impatiently at our companion on the hill and then inside the store. As I looked in the window, Ibrahim pointed his finger at the empty bottles and then to goods on the counter.

The grocer was much taller and fatter than Ibrahim. What was wrong? Was he alright? Instead of taking the bottles he was shouting and waving his hands in anger. Ibrahim exploded with fury. I then saw a load of empty bottles at the shop door, they were the same as we had brought. I realized that the other soldiers had brought these bottles and the grocer had insisted he was not going to accept them any more.

At this point, our lookout began to wave his hands nervously. I opened the door and shouted to Ibrahim: ‘Patrol! Run!’

But Ibrahim was not accustomed to retreat. He loomed over the grocer and angrily shouted: ‘Halt! Ich werde dich erschießen!’

The grocer, who had not expected this, began to rapidly throw beer and sausages into a bag. Ibrahim pointed to some beautiful rye bread. The grocer put it in the bag. Ibrahim grabbed the bag and stormed out of the store, we both ran toward the grove.

I could barely suppress my laughter as I ran. As we reached the first trees, I fell to the ground and began to roll on the floor, holding my stomach and continuously laughing. Ibrahim, with the bag over his shoulder, was standing, gasping, wondering what it all meant.

– You’ve gone bad! Our business turned into a robbery.

The soldiers were taught in German only three phases, ‘Stop, who goes there?’, ‘Stop! I’ll shoot you!’, or ‘Stop! Go back!’ Many soldiers could not learn them by heart. So, Ibrahim had shouted at the seller, – Stop, I’ll shoot you! And he made gesture as if he was holding a gun, it was no surprise that the poor German was so scared!

When I explained this to him, Ibrahim began to laugh as well:

– I wanted to tell him I was tired, hurry up, don’t waste time. What could I do if he did not understand? It was not a robbery! We left him with three bags of bottles. I have never seen such a brazen German!

Democracy, which came in socks

When only six months of my service left, the echoes of change occurring in the Union, the turn to openness and democracy, came to our division in East Germany. Regimental commanders were replaced. The new ones had a different attitude to the soldiers. The issue of military discipline was raised. The new commander of our company, senior lieutenant Gavrilov, was a warm and friendly man, the first

officer we had met who cared about the health of his soldiers.

– Why do you all run to Chepok as soon as you are paid? – He asked during his first week. The ‘Chepok’ was a soldier’s shop. – You seem to spend all your money on candy. Why don’t you buy dairy or fruit instead? A soldier’s diet consists solely of cabbage and potatoes, where will you get the vitamins your body needs?

It turned out that this was the first time some soldiers had heard the word ‘vitamins.’

A soldier’s salary consisted of 25 German marks. 10 marks usually spent on toothpaste, razors, shoe polish and the white calico that was used for our collars. Many soldiers gave 5 marks a month to a fellow countryman, a senior, whose service was ending. Those who do not give this tax were under pressure. Some paid the same amount to their patrons to buy a ‘roof’ for themselves. The rest, if not stolen, was, of course, spent on sweets. The favourite delicacy of the soldiers was chocolate nuts.

One day during morning political classes Gavrilov announced new orders:

– Dear soldiers! – these pleasantries were new to us, – I have heard a lot about your division, its glory stretches far beyond the borders of Germany. Now things are going to change. From now on, from this hour, soldiers who refuse to carry out chores, such as washing the floor and dining room duty, will not be beaten by their commanders. These soldiers will be dealt with according to our military charter. If someone is forced to do these jobs, legitimate punishment awaits the bully.

According to military regulations, any soldier who disobeyed orders could be punished with six months to a year in a disciplinary battalion. That time was not included in your service. Perhaps they were overcrowded, but as far as I can remember, our officers did not put soldiers to military tribunal. Currently, soldiers who refused to perform chores became contenders for the title of 'bully'. For several months officers could try different deprivations, without resorting to military tribunal. This seemed to give them the moral right to physically torture the pretenders. If a soldier did not work and managed to survive physically and

mentally, he was simply called 'bully' and left alone.

Gavrilov's statement caught the soldiers by surprise, especially those who had been on their way to attaining 'bully' status. One of them, who came from tajikistan's Badakhshan region, the six-foot Tagaev, stand up:

What is this, comrade Commander? You can break and beat me if you like, send me to the brig, I will endure everything, I won't complain. But why should this matter go to tribunal? I am a real man, I will bear any torment, but I ask you to be a real man as well!

Tagaev was right in his own way. After years of torment he was about to become 'bully', now he was deprived of his reward for all the suffering he had experienced. Last winter, which was fierce, he had been hung naked in a closet with ice floors. At night, he had somehow pulled the rope, jumped from the second floor window and run away. His fellow countryman, who worked at the cabbage patch found some old clothes for him and kept the fugitive in his hut. A day later, he returned to the company. His letters home were read by the officers. In these letters, he continually begged his parents to take him back and wrote that he would die here. At last his torments were being stopped.

Gavrilov listened to the claims of Tagaev, smiled, thought for a moment and then very seriously, even severely, replied:

– Comrade soldier, all these people sitting here in this audience are real men and they are no worse than you. Before the law and the charter of the military all soldiers are equal. If you violated the law, be prepared to respond to the law. It cannot be in any other way!

A year ago, the political officer of our battalion, a moustachioed major with a huge belly, had said something similar. He had even tried to break a daring soldier. By coincidence, the Azerbaijani soldier's surname was also Tagaev. The major lined up three companies of our battalion and ordered Tagaev to lift a cigarette butt from the ground. Tagaev didn't move.

– Soldier Tagaev! This is your last warning. If you do not obey orders, you will be sent to the military tribunal!

Tagaev stood.

The Major's face flushed:

- In the name of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics! I order you, soldier Tagaev, lift that butt from the ground!

It lasted for half an hour in front of three hundred soldiers, but the Azerbaijani was adamant. Finally the Major ordered us to disperse and promised that the issue of Tagaev's non-compliance would be considered separately. But nothing happened with Tagaev.

Tagaev thought he was the winner. He became ever more violent, he ruthlessly humiliated the weak in the full confidence.

Tagaev deserved a special mention. People with his kind of character were rare. He was two meters tall with narrow eyes that stared through you. He was known as a ruthless and cunning guy. He served in the third squad of the third platoon. When the conflict between the Uzbeks and Armenians had died down, and relationships improved, he began to violently mock the Uzbeks in his platoon. An Uzbek sergeant, who had come to us after six months of sergeant school, lost face because of this. Not only did Tagaev fulfil any of his orders, but, when the sergeant approached him, he beat him without provocation. Uzbek sergeant was deliberately attached by the officers to the unit where Tagaev served. For a whole month the unfortunate sergeant walked with a swollen and battered face, then, he was removed from his post of head of squad and demoted to the rank of soldier.

I must admit that our regiment was rightly called 'the destroyer of sergeants.' Every six months at least three sergeants came to us from NCO school. It was always the same, after two or three months they were deprived of their rank and position. To do this, all soldiers worked together, disobeyed the sergeant's orders, cursed him to his face, sometimes even beat him. Over the two years of my conscription only three managed to retain their title. One of them was an Uzbek, but all Uzbeks had tried to help him. When he gave orders, Caucasians did not obey, Uzbeks supported him as much as they could. Tagaev had tried to take him out, but his fellow Uzbeks stood by him.

Typically, company sergeants were selected from those soldiers who could bring others under control. Ibrahim, became a sergeant too, but because of his lack of Russian language he did not rise above squad head.

In our battalion there was an ensign, an ethnic Azerbaijani, he was taciturn, modest, kind and smiling. At that time, the leader of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, was accused of bribery and expelled from the Politburo.

This Azerbaijani ensign came into lenroom when I was removing the portrait of Aliyev from the stand of Politburo members by the order of the political officer of our company.

– Look! We had our only representative in the Politburo, now it is gone, – he said expecting a compassion from me.

– Not we, you had! – I said emphasizing the word ‘you’, so he knew that there was nothing in common between us.

He shrunk and muttered:

– Come on... come down, we’re Muslims, and our languages have common Turkic roots...

– Have you ever told this to your countryman Tagaev?

The ensign came up to me, picked up the portrait of Aliyev, and mused, staring at him:

– You say Tagaev? He is like an animal. Don't pay any attention to him. You know, for these two years everyone lives in a disguise. Only after the service, we go back to ourselves again.

He shook my hand and left, taking Aliyev’s portrait with him. After these words, Tagaev did not seem so scary to me. In fact he seemed rather pathetic.

By the time of the new commander’s appointment to our company, Tagaev had already finished his service and left, but Gavrilov’s message should have been taken into consideration by the those who remained. There had been other changes around us.

A month ago a quiet and modest Latvian guy had returned from leave two days late. Previously, he could have expected a few months of beatings and other

torture, these consequences were familiar to soldiers. I think we preferred it this way. Instead he was sent for a year to a disciplinary battalion. Soldiers were rarely given leave, but this guy was married and had two children, so, according to the rules, he had the right to go home for a leave. That was how his holiday ended up for him.

The officers started holding open meetings to discuss discipline with soldiers. More time was spent watching the news program 'Time'.

However, the first harbinger of all these changes were socks. They were among the items prohibited for soldiers. Winding foot-cloths was torture. If you wound them incorrectly and the day was spent running, your boots would 'eat' your feet. Now the soldiers could buy socks at the store. It was not allowed officially, nor was it prohibited. Then we started to wear suspenders as well.

Gavrilov even made changes in combat training. According to the army bible, four soldiers from each platoon formed a section with an ATGM (anti-tank guided missile). During an alarm they had to carry large green boxes, about 1.5 meters long. When we went to the range, Gavrilov placed these boxes in front of the line and asked:

– Has anyone seen what's inside?

None of the soldiers could answer. Even some of the officers have not seen it.

Gavrilov opened the box, pulled out a rocket and showed them how to shoot it. We could not actually fire one, as one missile cost more than a thousand dollars as he said. Who knew what a dollar was worth at that time?

One day we were taken to Dresden, for participation in a large-scale military exercises. Our division was to provide cover. Our company started digging a trench in an open area. As I was in company administration, during military training, I had to be near Gavrilov. We settled on a hill near the edge of the forest. He opened his aluminium briefcase and pulled out a monitor, similar to a TV screen, and then an antenna that looked like a plate.

I was curious:

– What is it?

He smiled:

– It is a monitor that can detect movements at night. It is obsolete, because it hasn't been used for the last twenty years, it has been lying in this trunk all that time.

Then we began testing other devices.

The soldiers of our company had been digging all day. Their cheerful voices could be heard from afar. I went down to them to find out the reason for such vigour after a hard days work. I was astonished. For the first time I saw deep trenches, where you could walk without stooping. Everyone was lively and working with their shovels. I took a spade and stabbed it into the ground, it immediately sank into the soft soil. It turned out that the earth was very soft. In Ohrdruf the ground was hard and rocky or like chewing gum. You could dig all day and only manage a knee deep hole. Now the soldiers were digging soft, forgiving ground with almost no effort, the nimble ones were even trying to make a sort of rat line from one trench to another. Watching all of them enjoying their labours I remembered other times of enthusiasm with the guys, I recalled the 'Raspberry Paradise' and when we rested in the forest for twenty days. Those days had felt like holidays.

My service was nearly finished, and all around me change was happening. The Armenian ensign, who was head of the regimental canteen was arrested. From that day on, sugar and butter were added to our evening rations, before they had been given only for breakfast. It turned out that the former head of canteen used to sell sugar and butter to Germans secretly. The canteen was designed for more than thousand soldiers and it was easy to imagine how much sugar and butter had disappeared over the weeks and months.

Soldiers were allowed to visit the Officers House and take pictures to send back home.

By the end of my service I used to spend most of my time in the lenroom decorating albums. I used to visit my countrymen in other regiments and collect everything needed for my discharge - dembel. I had enough time to think about my military life and civil life.

The first year of service was so physically and morally severe that I hadn't replied to the numerous letters from my girlfriend. Then, one day, my friend, through whom she had forwarded them, wrote to tell me that my girl had got married. 'You had never answered any of her letters,' he wrote indignantly.

I had heard and read about the suffering of lovers who were separated by service in the army, but for some reason these stories did not touch me. I read the news and felt as if it were not even about me. It seemed I would remain a soldier forever. Even in letters that were sent home, I could squeeze no more than four or five lines out of myself – I just did not know what to write.

After years of service, I was experienced, just by looking at a new recruit, I could determine what his body and spirit would turn into after two or three months.

When I saw someone humiliated or beaten, I had ceased to care, I stopped worrying as much as I had previously.

I remember when my service was over, and I went home. For a couple of months I acted as if I was in a daze, unable to adapt. I tried to hide from everyone. I spent hours in my hut or sat under an apricot tree or near a ditch, staring blankly at the stream, not thinking about anything. One evening my father came. He asked what was happening to me. He tried to ask how my service had gone and why I had changed so much. I said nothing. Suddenly I realized that if my father found out what happened to me in the army, he would stop respecting the government, he would be disappointed with the Communist Party, and it could bring a lot of trouble for our family. It was not only me who felt like this. No one wanted their parents to be worried. Even when we stuck in the Turkmen desert, we still managed to send exiting letters home:

'I hope this letter arrives as soon as possible to my beloved mother and all my family, living in our prosperous country, the best in the world. How are you? As for me, don't worry, everything is fine. Military service is not difficult. The officers are caring. There are lots of tasty food. We are paid and a soldier can buy anything he wants in the store. Give my regards to all who read and listen to this letter. Your loved son...'

Two years passed, and the content of letters remained the same.

Of course, our commander, Gavrilov, was powerless to change much. Not everything depended on him. General theft, even by seniors did not stop. I often went to the canteen not in general order, but by myself, as I was in administration, and could join any platoon. Once I went alone to the dining hall, sat at a table, and put my fur aside me. During lunch, to prevent your fur hat being stolen, we used tie it to our belts, but that did not concern the senior soldiers. Seniors and reputable soldiers had well-defined fur hats: quadrangular, with sharp corners and dark-blue colour. To achieve this look, the 'ears' of the hat were tightly sewn to the flaps so that they could not be bent down. To make the sides sharp, fur hat had to be put on four or five books, usually a military charter or the compendium of Congresses of the Communist Party was used. The hat was then coloured with black shoe polish cream and ironed through a wet rag. So dembels and bully soldiers fur hats vary greatly from the ones that young and weak soldiers wear.

After having had a nice dinner, as befits a senior, I got up from my table and could not believe my eyes, my fur hat was gone. Need I walk with a bare head? What a shame. A year ago, when my belt was stolen I remember how I felt, but now I am not a chicken!

Fortunately for me, the artillery battalion had come into the dining hall. Casually, I walked from corner to corner and finally noticed an elegant hat, the same as mine. The owner had carelessly put it on a chair, before sitting down to dine. Luckily, he was sitting near the aisle, and his hat was lying on the edge of a chair. While soldiers crowded in the aisle, I quickly slipped past, unnoticed, and grabbed the hat, put it under my arm, and got lost in the crowd. Nobody had noticed a thing. I returned to barracks glad that I had escaped disgrace, and proud that I deserved the title of soldier.

Soldier's dictionary

I was often asked to write down on dembels' albums some fragments of the so-called 'Soldier's dictionary.' This dictionary was created over the years, incorporating different ironic expressions that existed in the army life, depending

on which regiment the soldier had served in. I remember a few of the classics:

Military conscription: A jump in weightlessness.

Recruits: Expelled from paradise.

Army: A day that repeated 730 times.

The first year of service: Guilty without guilt.

Second year of service: Happiness.

Quarantine: A bald herd.

Oath: There's no way back.

Squad: A bloodthirsty wolf and seven rams.

Smoking room: An active volcano.

Cook: Who lives well in the army?

Storeroom: Treasure Island.

Storekeeper: The Thief of Baghdad.

Bath: How have you been, and will remain so.

Vacation: Twenty days that shook the world.

Canvas boots: The miracle of the twentieth century.

Foot-cloth: The eighth wonder of the world.

Order to sleep: I love you, life.

Order to get up: Oh, where am I?

Alarm: Oh, why was I born?

Messenger: A missing person.

Morning ablutions: Not in time, out of the line.

Morning gymnastics: Execution at dawn.

Running a mile: Nobody wanted to die.

Running five kilometres: Living and dead.

Running ten kilometres: They were known only by sight.

Road to the canteen: A life line.

Canteen: People and predators.

Entering to the dining hall: Capture of the Winter Palace.

Breakfast: The struggle for survival.

Lunch: The humiliated and insulted.

Dinner: Dashed hopes.

Soldiers in the dining hall: A battlefield.

A platoon on duty in the canteen: Ali Baba and the Forty Pirates.

Going to the canteen out of line: A scout's feat.

Bread slicer: Not caught, not a thief.

Butter: a piece of happiness.

Washing dishes: Figure skating.

Mopping: Swan Lake.

Parade ground: The valley of death.

Soldiers pay: Hello and goodbye.

Soldier: A man without a passport.

Attendant of a company: Trees die standing.

Attendant of a company in the toilet: A treasure hunter.

Attire: The Three Musketeers.

After duty: A living corpse.

Extra duty: Crime and punishment.

Soldier in the hospital: Believe me, people!

Hospital: A paradise in hell.

Patrol: Timur and his team.

The Guard's Song

(Restored story from a stolen diary)

There are many pleasant sounds in the world. Among the most enjoyable and special sound for a soldier, standing guard at freezing cold, is perhaps the sound coming out of slight movements of an army bayonet knife fixed on the barrel of AK-47.

At night, in the dark depths of a forest, a soldier walks along the side of the armoury, crunching snow underfoot. He was walking this narrow path, when he

heard a voice from afar. He rushed to where the dim light fell, but his heavy fur coat and boots made movement difficult. Furthermore, a well-trodden path in the snow is very slippery and he could easily fall. A lantern swung in the wind, scary shadows appeared under the thick forest canopy. The soldier tried to ignore the shadows, popping his fur collar, he listened to the distant sounds, trying to determine what lay ahead of him.

Was he mistaken? After all, he had been wrong many times before, mistaking various other sounds as his intuition misled him! He stopped and looked into the falling snowflakes, shining in the lamp's dull yellow lights. Only the sounds of the forest were around, but that's not what he wanted to hear.

"Chink, chink, chink" he heard. Yes, he wasn't mistaken. He was all ears, as he perceived every jingle. That sound meant warmth! It was the sound of sweet sleep and a food! At that moment, his soul became calmed, his bloodshot eyes opened wide and warmth ran down to his numb feet.

The jingling approached, it became clearer now. Yes, bayonets were chinking when their handles slightly crushed with guns barrels with each step of soldiers. The guard detachment is coming to replace him, this frozen, hungry, fatigued soldier!

The sixth sentry point was very far from the Guards building. This was the last position to be relieved, it took at least a half an hour. By statute, the soldier had to stand guard for two hours. By the time the detachment had replaced others and reached him, he was standing for four hours. Eventually, blessed moments for him had arrived. He gave his fur coat to the next guard, felt instantly engulfed by cold and yet, at the same time, had a sense of peace. He marched towards the heat and light and food. Jingling melody sounded in his ears, the sound for which he had been waiting for so long.

In the guardhouse he put his weapon on a special stand, with frozen hands pulled out the magazine from the gun and made a test shot to make sure that there is no bullet left in the barrel. As he opened the door he faced hovering familiar smells of delicious food mixed with stinking foot-cloths. Very appetizing smells, he would

have said.

Soldiers who returned from the guard duty tired and frozen, had another two sleepless hours as an alert detachment. They had to read by heart military codes, the duty of guards. After eating, it was difficult to focus on study, with sleepy eyes they peered at the meaningless lines in the books. Some tried to grasp what they were reading, this was the duty of everyone who returned from the sentry post. Rest was only given to the soldier who managed to recite his lines by heart. Even so, the rest period lasted only half an hour. If you could not rattle off at least three or four lines from any part of the statute, your dreams would have to be forgotten. The commander of the guard loomed menacingly, so you could not even close your eyes for a moment.

After half an hour of rest, the sleepy soldier were again sent to the same ill-fated sixth post. He had no more than three hours sleep for the whole day, but that post was still considered to be a peaceful place. No one yelled at you, you were left alone completely.

Alas, this happiness had its disadvantages. During the day, if he climbed the guard tower, wrapped in a warm coat, he could have a little nap as he stood. Night was much more difficult, especially if, like today, it was snowing. He had to be constantly on the move, he could not stop, as his path would fill up with snow. The worst things in winter were snow and cold. At other times of the year, the rain was acceptable, even if, in extreme cases, he was soaked to the skin. The struggle with sleep could knock him down and seal his eyes shut. To sleep on duty meant going straight to army prison. Once he did not notice how he had fallen asleep. He opened his eyes lying on his back, snowflakes were gently falling on his face and eyes. He could have been sleeping for a minute or maybe half an hour. Frightened, he jumped and brushed the snow away and rubbed his face with icy hands. He kept repeating to himself that he had not slept!

In the army, if a sleeping soldier was awoken by anyone and asked if he had been sleeping, he would certainly say "No!" To admit that one had slept was, for some reason, considered shameful. An Uzbek soldier, who hardly knew a few Russian,

fallen asleep while on guard sitting on the stair of a guard tower. As luck would have it, at this point the commander of the guard came to check the shift. Before sending the poor guy to the prison for being asleep on duty, a written explanation was demanded. He knew almost no Russian, however, he scrawled an explanatory note and afterwards it passed from soldier to soldier. This was what he wrote:

"Standing, standing, standing. Walking, walking, walking. Legs aching. Then sitting. When commander came, eyes were shut."

Though he knew a few words of Russian, however, he managed to avoid the the word 'sleep' which he knew for certain. This aroused universal admiration, so the head guard decided not to punish him.

A soldier standing guard had another 'dragon' – fear.

Fear came quietly, subtly. Sometimes he could be standing and dreaming about something sweet, when suddenly it came... Usually fear came after two or three in the morning. They say the most sinister and ghoulish stories occur late at night. Only a momentary change of his glance from a dark-lit snowy path to a dark forest needed to feel surrounded by evil spirits lurking behind the trees.

Fear is the kind of thing that the more you tried to get rid of it, the stronger it got, the deeper you became stuck in its web. Trying to get rid of thoughts was hard, they would come again and again. Most people's fears are associated with children's horror stories, of genies and beauties, of old tales of evil, which were told by elders, grandmothers. It felt as if they were all coming at you from every side, trying to smother you with arms outstretched. The deep wrinkles on an ugly face were clearly visible, then suddenly a devil with huge horns who came every night, as in the Hungarian fairy tale, to play chess with a soldier. Maybe not a devil, but perhaps a cannibal? Or the Minotaur? Then around the corner there could be people with six spider arms creeping straight towards him?

As he tried to drive out a scary thoughts he felt as if someone was following him behind. Some one was right on his back. Cold grew in his stomach, his heart beat faster. He wanted to look back, but high collars of his fur coat obstructed the view.

Then he made fast move to turn his body around, but his boots sank into the deep snow, and he stumbled falling directly into a snowdrift. Ouch! He got up in fear and run dragging the hem of his coat in the snow. There were trenches in every two hundred meters, he jumped into a trench, lied on his back looking upwards, keeping his AK-47 firmly and in readiness to shoot any demon which would come to him. After some time he starts laughing and laughing loudly, unclear, who he was laughing at...

He thought that being afraid of demons was too childish, no serious at all for an adult, yet with a gun. He took his finger from the trigger out, stood up, looked at dark forest, then yelled at it, started loudly and badly swearing using all his army slang. It helped. The fear faded down. But he could not swear all the time.

Then he began to sing a song loudly for the whole forest about about a guy who was ready to became a shephard and herd his beloved's sheep. It seemed bored to him and he knew only the refrain of tghe song. So he changed the tune.

There was another good song: "Sun, sun, tell me..." Uh, no, not that, that wasn't the beginning, he still don't know the beginning or the end.

You, my star, I see you again

And remember again, my love.

Once you were my star,

Whose star are you now?

If a song was familiar, he could sing, leaning on his gun, holding it like a stick. As soon as he was tired of repeating the same verses, he could change to another:

Let golden winged birds fly, they are flying,

Let the happiness hug us, only happiness forever...

There was yet another sing very famous and song in all weddings:

"On the road to Akhangaran there was a hemmed willow.

On the cheek of an Akhangaran girl there is birthmark so beautiful...

Let me your cute birthmark to gratify with my lips,

Let me your dipteral gates to polish in every night..."

There was something insane in these last two lines of this song which would

always made unmarried guys blush and adults roar. When he was a kid he used to climb a tall tree and from there watch the wedding with other boys. In those days, at weddings, they sang to the accompaniment of a tambourine and dutar, it was a real feast. Guys danced, kicking up a whole cloud of dust. In the trees kids used to shout each other: "Look at that guy with shoulder-length hair, what is he making with his hands, yes there he is, you see?" "And this one shakes her belly, look", "Hey, you all! That one, a chequered shirt, is he dancing or is he a scout?"

Those memories immediately elevated his mood. Another song, well, what a delight! He started to sing, slinging his gun over his shoulder like a guitar and dancing on the crispy snow. He sang songs after songs of his youth.

When he was teenager singers and musicians hired for weddings had new modern equipment, an 'Ionica'; and thanks to loud speakers, fantastic music blared through a loud-hailer to the whole neighborhood. Some were genuinely touched by the Ionica, as if all the romance of youth was embodied in its melody. If artists came without it, it could have stopped the wedding. The youths searched the words of the songs for a deeper meaning and suffering.

Here again ripe cherry...

I saw you under the tree.

I know you love cherries,

But also, do you love me?

After high school, when he and his classmates were about to become conscripts they hurried to enjoy their last days of freedom, they went out in the evenings and sat near the river with a portable mini cassette player listening to songs. Portable players were very popular, one of them, "Romantika" considered to be the coolest. The guys loved walking in the streets, carrying a portable player in their shoulders. They searched for the harmonies that reflected their own feelings.

He wanted to sing more and more songs, but his voice felt hoarse. To stop meant letting in the dark fears. Songs of a bright childhood and hot youth, the memories kept everything bad, unknown and fearsome far away. He remembered how they lay in the thick fragrant grass, nibbling a torn stalk, mindlessly staring at the new

moon in the sky, and the last line of a song was picked up by everyone:

Do not count any wrinkles or grey hair I have,

Do not disturb my wounds, they heal slowly.

The autumn life suddenly crawled to me,

So it is not necessary to make a fire in vain...

At the line which had words "suddenly crawled" his voice disappeared, he got alert. What if someone was crawling behind the trees, he was being watched from the woods? Maybe American and West German saboteurs had already crawled too close, intending to blow up the armoury. Maybe they were waiting for the right moment? And there he was, bawling songs, perhaps he was already in their gun-point.

Shaking with fear, he fumbled for his trigger showing no mind for all that had already been guessed and calculated by them. He discreetly glanced toward the woods. He was beneath the lantern, fully illuminated, what a convenient target for the saboteurs!

At this thought, he slowly moved towards the darkness, and when he was in full dark carefully inspected his surroundings. Maybe he should scramble into a trench? To reach the trench he had to pass the lantern. Scared to make a move and scared to stay put, his mind became numb with fear.

Suddenly a sound came from afar. It got louder. Oh, joy! This was the long-awaited and best sound in the world, "chink, chink, chink," a bayonet was chinking on the gun barrel. The guard detachment was coming to replace him.

The path of a senior

In the army, where theft had long traditions and deep roots, protecting property, from dress uniform to small personal items and gifts for loved ones, was a serious concern for senior soldiers. A company warehouse was considered at least reliable if the storekeeper was a "cool" soldier. But even than things disappeared from the store very often.

I kept my "dembel" suitcase in the house of lieutenant Zaitsev, our company's political officer. He and his wife lived in a small officer's town, which was located

within the division territory. Zaitsev's wife taught at the school for the children of officers. I knew her as once she had asked me to help with the design of the class. When we were out on patrol in the city, I bought some things in a gift shop, and immediately left them at their house. I was grateful to Zaitsev. I kept some small things in the lenroom as well. I had hidden my army badges, like "Guardsmen," "Honored soldier" and others, they were precious for dembels. A week before the end of my service, they were stolen. However, to recover them was easy, I was a "needed" soldier.

On May 14, 1988, as I sat decorating an album in the lenroom, the battalion secretary appeared, holding a paper with the list of soldiers.

– All lights out! You're going home tomorrow!

I grabbed the orders from him. My name was on the list! My fellow countryman, in the third company, Avaz, was there as well.

I rushed to the top floor, but the attendant said the third company had gone to the shooting range. I ran there, not even noticing the forest and the hills. For two years we had had to overcome these roads almost every day, in the rain and snow, with the heaviest combat gear, and now, winged with joy, I flew like a bird! The forest, hills, even small buildings in the shooting range seemed beautiful to me at that moment.

The third company had firing drill. Avaz, upon hearing the news, ran out of the line and the two of us, delighted, returned to the regiment.

In the evening I brought my suitcase from Zaitsev's house. All night instead of sleeping we sewed patches and badges onto our uniforms.

The next day, Zaitsev came to see me off and presented me a book with his signature. I later found out the value of this gift.

It was customary for dembels decorating their dress uniform, although, according to the statute this was not permitted. Some pasted cardboard under their epaulettes, to give volume, shirts and pants were tailored, and, of course, we tried to attach as many badges as possible.

Before reaching the final checkpoint and boarding the aircraft, soldiers had to pass

several thorough inspection. Officers would inspect their clothes and the belongings in their suitcase. Any pictures with the weapons or military equipment were not supposed to be carried, they were destroyed immediately. Narrow trousers seams were loosened, 'inflated' straps were torn, badges not approved in the military ID were taken away. This was a real disappointment for dembels. At the first inspection, the officer who opened my suitcase saw the book presented by Zaitsev. He picked it up and looked at the signature on the title page, then looked at me and returned the book, "That's it. You can go," he said without making any search.

The same thing happened at subsequent checks, they ended as soon as the inspection officer picked up the signed book. None of them fumbled in my bag, none found fault with my clothing or anything else.

On the way to Halle, we stopped at a train station in Weimar, where around two hundred dembels joined us. As they boarded the train, some officers, who were seeing them off, torn apart some dembels' epaulettes in an effort to make any possible harm to their uniforms. In return some dembels rushed to blow a fist on their officers. As I understood, it was a vengeance time for many.

We reached Halle and were located at the centre of a city park that turned into a temporary senior soldier's camp.

According to my orders, I was supposed to fly to the soviet city of Frunze, a capital of Kyrgyzstan Republic. A Kyrgyz soldier from the third company turned out to be in the group flying to Tashkent. I grabbed Kyrgyz soldier by the hand and ran to the officer and asked him to swap our destinations. He disagreed; orders were orders. At that moment I saw the commander of the second platoon of our company, Shcherbakov. He was going to the military airfield to collect new conscripts. I rushed to him and explained the situation. He said he would try to do something. An hour later he returned and gave me a new order with destination to Tashkent. I did not know how to thank him.

My case was settled. Avaz and I sprawled on the green grass. It was very warm, but as always in Germany, the sun was covered with low clouds from time to time.

Nevertheless, many seniors were undressed and taking sunbathe. Suddenly, there was a clap of thunder and then another, immediately someone close to us shouted, there was uproar and cries started. It turned out that two people had been struck by lightning, both were killed. How incredibly sad, to have survived the army grinder, only to die from a lightning strike before going home!

The next day we were placed in a camp at a military airfield. We spent the night in tents, and the next morning went to the tarmac. Just before us, a large batch of recruits, whose uniforms were clumsy fit, came out of a huge aircraft. We looked at them with sympathy and pity. Yet they were more fortunate than us, they had come at a time of change in the Army. Yes, much had changed. It was a pity that a man could not choose the time when to born. I thought about that, as I looked out of the window and said goodbye to Germany.

In our homeland grand changes awaited us.

* * *

For many years I forgot my drafts with army memories. During the the US lead colations war in Afghanistan I had to work with an American journalist. We remembered the Cold War, the arms race between the United States and the former Soviet Union, the two countries with the most powerful armies in the world and the most selfless soldiers. Today, with the Iron Curtain gone, the price of this dedication is more clearly understood.

After these discussions, which stirred up all the memories of my stay in the ranks of the multinational Soviet army, I decided to complete my drafts. This is the story of the tens and hundreds of people whom I met and their adaptation to a new, alien environment. The story of the decisions that make a person in difficult and extreme situations. The process of changing, or, finding oneself.

I am glad I was able to outline these memories. The memoirs of an ordinary soldier in the Soviet Army – the strongest and best in the world.