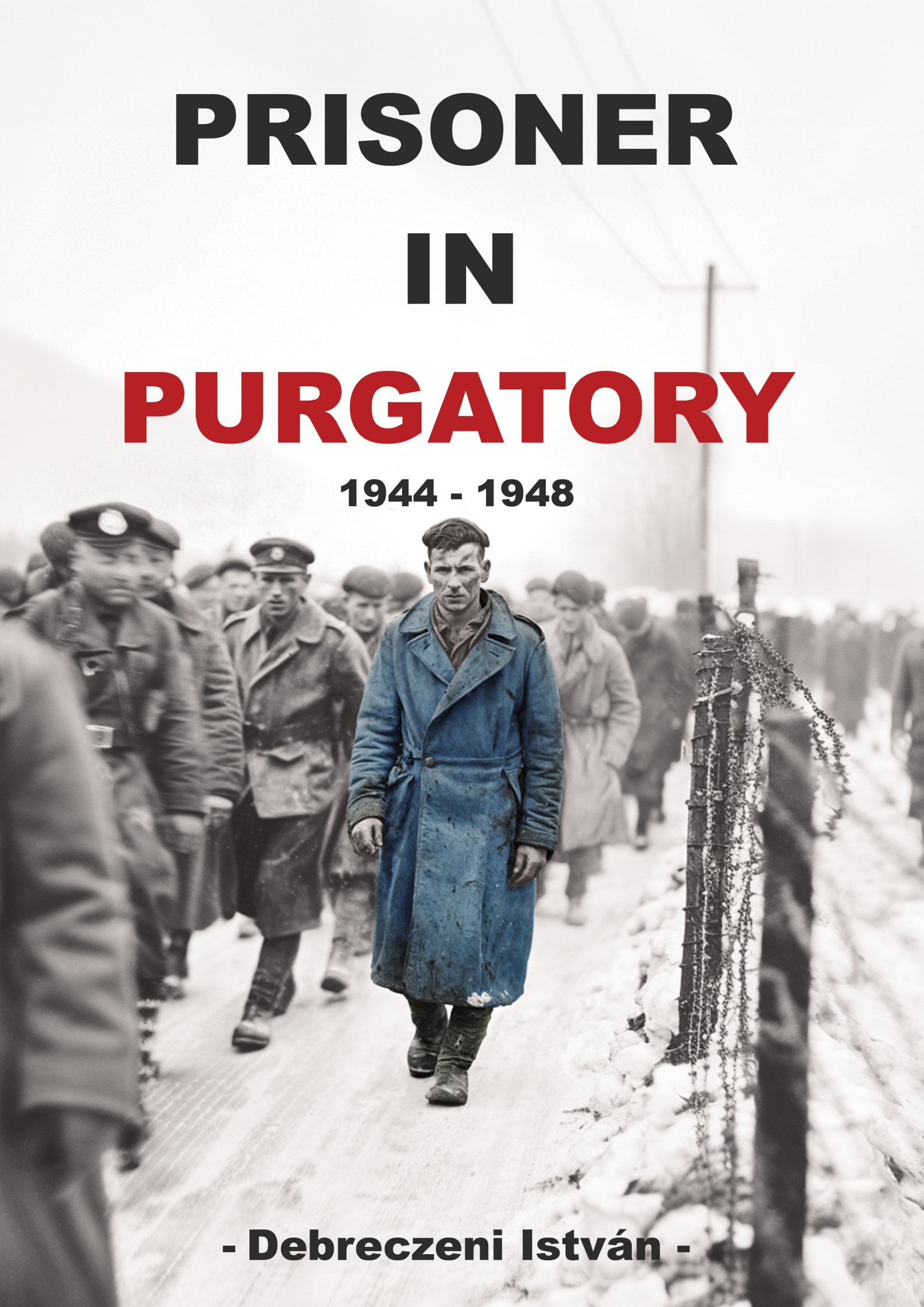
PRISONER IN PURGATORY

1944 - 1948



- Debreczeni István -

Short biography

I was born in Alba Iulia on February 8, 1922. I took part in the fighting on the Tisza River in the fall of 1944. There, I was taken prisoner of war on November 1, 1944, in the small town of Mezőcsát. I was held in the camps of Balmazújváros, the cavalry garrison in Debrecen, and Focșani. On December 6, 1944, we were put into train cars bound for the Soviet Union. In Iași, our train cars were placed on Russian rails. There we received our last hot meal, tea, and bread. By morning we were already beyond the Dniester River.

After that, our real suffering began. In unheated wagons, sleeping on the floor, we received half or two pieces of suharin every two or three days, and water even less frequently. In the bitter cold, the wells were frozen. By Christmas 1944, we had only reached Kharkov. There, the weak and sick prisoners were taken off the train. We arrived in Talienki in the evening of January 2, 1945, after a rapid march. But we were not taken off the train until the next day. They thought that one more night would not matter, as we had become accustomed to the cold.

In short, that's all there is to it. The rest is in Purgatory.

Ilva Mică, January 8, 2004

With

respect,

Debreczeni István

Foreword

This is a description of almost four years of captivity and a month-long journey on the bare floor of freight cars in the winter of 1944, on the frozen Russian ground. I must write it down, because what happened to us was a crime that cries out to heaven.

On December 6, 1944, we left Focșani. We were told we were going home, but we didn't believe it. The train was long, about 30-40 cars. I am writing about my car, although I am sure that each car had its own "life." I want to keep the introduction short.

There were 50 prisoners from different areas. In the middle of the car, there was a coal stove and a few pieces of wood. One of us lit the fire. The small stove gave off intense smoke. We gave up on the fire. Once we arrived in Iași, they began to put the cars on Russian rails. There we received hot food for the last time: tea and bread.

We set off in the evening and crossed the Dniester River near Tighina in the morning. We stood with our feet close together, trying to protect ourselves from the cold. At first, people endured, muttering to themselves. But after two days had passed and we had not received any food, we began to scream like wild animals. On the third day, they threw a sack of suharin—dry bread—into the car, but no water. It was like that the whole time. The huge Kandok locomotive raced along with us like a madman.

On Christmas night in 1944, we arrived in Kharkov. Until then, the route we had taken had been a mystery to us. The war was still raging, and we were devastated by chaos. People were no longer screaming. They no longer had the energy for that. The most surprising thing was that no one was urinating or defecating anymore. And yet we were still alive. What does medical science say about this? Were we living off our own fat?

I have already mentioned the "fate" of the cabbage soup in Kharkov. I had lost all hope of survival. My leg had swollen so badly and hurt so much that I no longer needed suharin; I would have drunk only water. When I received the suharin, I gave the larger piece to a young Romanian in exchange for a few sips of water. The human body is amazing! Its own fat... It uses the energy it saves to keep itself alive.

When we finally descended to Talienki, we could clearly see each other's faces again after a month of suffering, because we couldn't see anything in the fog inside the carriage. With month-old beards, black lips, and eyes sunken into their sockets, we were like ghosts from the afterlife, appearing on earth.

We had gone through the cleansing fire of Purgatory. Alive and condemned to death by starvation and freezing. After that, the side effects followed. Our bodies, frozen in the heat, began to thaw. Diarrhea, liver, kidney, and lung problems claimed victims every day. Few made it home from the clutches of death.

I had to write this in memory of my comrades in suffering. If I succeed, it will be published as a book. The son of man is nothing before the greatness of Destiny.

István Debreczeni

Ilva Mică

Purgatory

Weighed down by the burden of recognition and devoid of hope, he thought. The wheels of the freight car screeched incessantly: "You are a prisoner, you are a prisoner." Or perhaps, more accurately, "They tricked you, they tricked you." That's what they told prisoners of war, that they would take them home. Yet before them lay the Russian region of Ukraine, with its famous anthem ringing out everywhere. How much he wanted to go home now, when the war was coming to an end, right now, when he was supposed to end up in a prisoner of war camp, without knowing where, until he would be in this big, endless country.

He heard false rumors among the prisoners that the Russians were merciless, that they tortured prisoners and starved them. But he did not allow himself to be fooled by such stories. He knew from previous experience as a prisoner that the Russians were not evil or cruel, although there were a few like that among them. People like that can be found in any nation. In Focșani, they were told clearly to hurry home, that reconstruction work was waiting for them. Who likes being a prisoner? Is there anyone in the world who likes it? No, there isn't. So he went to register.

The huge crowd in the camp, around 25,000 people, was a terrifying sight. There were Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Russians, Croats, Italians, Poles, and French—a harrowing gathering of European peoples. Every day, a train carrying prisoners of war arrived and another left. Everyone believed they were going home, but they were all mistaken. He was very cold on his back and in the middle, because his place was at the end of the carriage. Only a thick board 30-40 mm thick separated him from the merciless wind outside. He had no choice – he was the last to board and sat where there was room. They pushed him into the carriage by force, so that he would be counted. Somewhere, he didn't feel sorry for himself.

He had no respite in the camp. There was no room in the barracks, so he slept with the others in so-called bunkers dug into the ground. They were either taken out to work or to roll call all the time. Morning, evening, day, they were constantly interrupted. They spent most of their time at roll call. He couldn't understand them. If so many prisoners of war came in and the same number came out, then there should be the same number of prisoners in the camp. They counted them once and that was it. But there, it seemed that this was bad practice. They could chase everyone out after midnight and keep them in the cold for up to three hours. The count was never right. Many hid; no one liked standing in the cold. He hid once, not caring that the count would be wrong. But then he saw a prisoner who

He had also hidden, and after they caught him, the guards and wardens beat him so badly that he lost the will to try again. Here and there, dysentery or typhoid fever broke out.

He was afraid of getting sick. If someone in the camp got sick with something like that, they had to be very lucky to recover. Without medicine, recovery was impossible. The fear of illness urged him to leave, to run away before it was too late. He didn't want to die. Not yet. He was not yet 25 years old. Although the brigade received daily rations of cornbread, which he found tasty, there was very little of it. He began to lose weight and the wound on his knee was starting to cause him problems. He felt he had to get out of there. His comrades knew this too. They had discussed that the next day they would report to the "etab." That was what they called the authority that registered prisoners for transport.

In Tinae, it was fine—if you can call it that—when you went somewhere without knowing where you were going. Because, even though you were a prisoner, the land belonged to your ancestors, and you didn't feel trapped, even if you weren't free. When he was taken far from home and longing gnawed at him, only then did he truly feel what it meant to be a prisoner. They were already at the camp gates, ready to leave for the station, when word came that the "etabul" was receiving bread and that the chief brigadier had to send two men to fetch it.

The brigadier told him to take a man and go get some bread, but to be careful not to be tricked. Anka Sanyi was next to him, so he chose him to accompany him.

But it was just a false alarm—the starving prisoner's dream of daily bread. They ran back to the gate, but the brigade had already left, and the gate was closed. They begged the guards in vain to let them in, because their comrades were there, but in the end the guards violently dispersed them. What business did the guards have with such a thing? The count had been done and that was that. What was there to complain about? "Tomorrow will be another day, come back then," they told them. So they wandered around, like lambs separated from their flock. The flock, however, is that force that provides confidence in its midst. Now they had lost that confidence. In the end, they decided that the next day they would be the first at the gate, to catch up with their comrades in suffering. They were still young and naive. They never saw any of them again.

In the morning, they were among the first to arrive at the work site. Sanyi, however, did not show up. After breakfast, he said he would run to the kitchen to see if he could get something—an acquaintance of his would give him something from time to time. His friend was a butcher, short and stocky, recognizable by his red hair and known for his strength. He practiced Greco-Roman wrestling and had had the opportunity to demonstrate his strength. If he got his hands on someone, that person suffered.

Sanyi simply did not arrive. Time passed. He had run to the kitchen, but did not see him anywhere. He ran back to the gate, thinking he might have arrived in the meantime. He was not there. What should he do? Should he go alone with strangers? Going alone was terrifying. No acquaintances, no friends. While he was thinking, one of the guards pushed him between the others. "We have fifty men, the team can go," and he didn't even try to resist—it was pointless. If he hadn't kept quiet, he would have been beaten. He wanted to go, so now he was going.

After a short march, they reached the train cars. There, they were counted again. How many times did they have to count these people? Maybe it was an obsession of theirs. "Count them if you like!" The last one jumped into the car. Immediately, they closed the door and locked it. He couldn't see anything. Dust, darkness, noise, and curses filled the car. Everyone was looking for a place. Acquaintances and friends called out to each other. He ended up in a car with prisoners who, in the camp, walked around in groups of two or three. He had been forced to get on. Many of them were dangerous. They were not part of the brigades, so they were not registered. They slept in whatever barracks they could find, and if you walked alone in the evening or at night and had better clothes or were suspected of having something valuable on you, they shot you without hesitation. The camp society had already designated its "slackers." No one had their soul or character written on their forehead. The fifty days spent in the wagon convinced him that he was right. And among them were wolves, capable of killing for a larger portion of bread or a sip of water.

He couldn't choose a seat because there weren't any left. A 15-ton freight car was too cramped for 50 people. The only place he could find was next to the urinal. Luckily for him, he was at the front, so he didn't feel the bitter cold coming in through the hole. The urinal wasn't used often because of the tiny portions of food and water. When the train started moving, they traveled day and night without food. Perhaps they were in a hurry to escape the cold. The prisoners did not use the urinal for days on end. The constant dust tormented them terribly. The cold helped reduce the body's hydration, which was rapidly decreasing. They were very poorly dressed, and their thin clothes did not protect their bodies from temperatures much lower than at home. He had exchanged his cloak in the camp for a loaf of bread and a blanket, which was his only protection against the cold.

Among strangers, in the midst of arguments, he tried to summarize his life over the past few weeks. Not long ago, as a free man, he enjoyed his life, did his job, and visited his great love—the sports field.

One day, there were loud cannon blasts. Another day, fighter planes bombed a city. The front was approaching.

One day in late September, while walking through the city, he was stopped and, along with others, taken to the barracks. The next day, they took an oath. All men between the ages of 16 and 50 were recruited. They believed they would be sent immediately to the front to defend the city. But that was not the case. On October 2, they left the barracks, hiding and retreating far from the front. During the day, whenever possible, they trained and learned how to use their weapons. They passed through Baia Mare, Satu Mare, Mateszalka, always ready to enter the fray if the enemy approached. But it wasn't necessary. The army protected them. They were lucky. What would have happened if the enemy had attacked them? It would have been a senseless slaughter, as there were many recruits and old men among them.

They had already passed Tisa and the village of Tisaeszla. He had read something about this place. That's how they arrived in Mezőcsát, a pleasant little town near Mezőkövesd. There he had the opportunity to see the world-famous Hungarian national port. They were given two days' rest. After that, they were thrown into the front line. The enemy had crossed the Tisza and surrounded the town. Some of them managed to escape the encirclement, but some were taken prisoner. He was among those captured. So, for him, the war was over. He should have been happy, but he had no reason to be. Fate had decided that he would be a prisoner. Perhaps this way he had escaped with his life and would not have to go to the front. He would no longer have to shoot at anyone or fear that someone else would shoot at him. This thought brought him some peace.

November 1944 could have been the beginning of a new life for him. He never imagined that he would be forced to go to the front, to shoot at strangers who had done him no harm and who, in turn, would shoot at him just because that was the order. He never dreamed that he would be taken prisoner, that he would no longer be the master of his own life, and that he would have no rights.

He always thought that he would rather die than be taken prisoner. But the moment they came face to face with the Russians in the center of Mezőcsát, that thought vanished, and the will to live rang in his ears. There were only six of them, and the Russians had machine guns. They stopped, frightened. What could they do? If they resisted, they would be mowed down in seconds. At that moment, a Russian, probably their leader, shouted to them: "Hey, dole puşki!" ("Drop your weapons!"). He was a tall man, dressed in leather from head to toe.

After throwing down their weapons, the Russians asked them which unit they belonged to, how many there were, and where the others were. One of the soldiers, probably from Bessarabia, spoke Romanian well. Finally, one

of the Russians led them to the outskirts of the city, where a crowd of prisoners was waiting for them. The next day, they set off and, after two days, arrived in Debrecen. The cavalry garrison had been turned into a camp; they stayed there for six days. Prisoners from all possible units were gathered there, and during the day they were taken to work at the tobacco factory. He was not forced to go, but that way the hours, days, and nights passed more quickly.

He didn't want to escape. Many of the prisoners had tried. One day, after they had finished work and gathered for roll call, the guards began running around frantically. They returned to their workplaces, searching for something. They gathered them again for roll call and, cursing, found that there were only 114 prisoners—six were missing. The commander of the guards, an older man with gypsy features from the Caucasus, threw his cap on the ground and cursed so furiously that he seemed about to explode. They counted them again, but to no avail. The guards discussed among themselves, not knowing what to do. They couldn't enter the camp with six men missing. The court martial awaited them. The commander of the guards was the most frightened, because he had signed the report for 120 prisoners. The six missing men could mean their ruin.

As darkness fell, a band of gypsy musicians appeared from a narrow alley. The guards waited for them to reach them, stopped the prisoners, surrounded the gypsies, and pushed them between the prisoners. Ironically, there were exactly six musicians. A fatal coincidence. Poor people, born under an unlucky star! Three violinists, a cimbalom player, a bass player, and a flute player. The guards laughed, relieved. For them, the problem was solved. The poor gypsies cried desperately, begging them. It was useless. The laws of war were stronger. "Oh, God, oh! We are not soldiers, we are not prisoners! We are gypsy musicians, Russian gentlemen! Leave us alone!" But it was useless—they were marched at a run to the camp. These musicians were to play
"Internationale" on December 6, 1944, when they were loaded onto trains bound for Russia.

II

Prisoners arrived in large numbers at the garrison. They were sent on just as quickly. Where? No one knew. All kinds of rumors were circulating: that they were being taken home, that they were being taken to a larger camp, that they were being taken to Siberia. No one knew anything. Everyone was pretending to be smart. Everyone wanted to get home. This little man, this unfortunate soldier, was thrown from one place to another and used at the whim of others. He was tired of war, of torment, and just wanted to go home.

After six days spent in the cavalry garrison in Debrecen, his troop was loaded into wagons and, looking out of the windows, the prisoners watched the names of the towns they were leaving behind: Püspökladány, Oradea, Salonta, Arad, Deva, Alba Iulia... Here, in his hometown, the train stopped for almost an hour. He saw familiar faces and places: the fortress, St. Michael's Cathedral, the monument from 1938, the tower of the Reformed Church. All this brought back memories of the 18 years he had spent at home – his childhood, his youth, those memories that nothing in the world could erase. After Alba Iulia came Vinţul de Jos, Sibiu, Braşov, and finally they got off at Focşani.

III

They had already crossed the Dniester and were approaching the Bug. It was the second day since the train had been racing desperately, for the cold was bitter. Their stomachs growled like a hungry dog, for they had not eaten for two days. There was surely an urgent reason for this lack, but at a time when laws had completely disappeared, human life depended on the will, common sense, and whims of other people.

That was when the weak, the malicious, and the sadistic came out. After the train doors closed, it was like they entered another world—a strange, unseen, unheard world. Something rattled and rolled, taking them to an unknown world, toward a goal they had never dreamed of. They were forced to think and live differently than they had before. They were about to live by new rules and go through things they couldn't even imagine. They just felt like they were being pushed by some invisible force.

In one carriage, 50 men of all ages were crammed together, representing all the ethnic groups of the Hungarian army. The laws they had known until then were no longer valid here. A new law had been born: the law of the strongest. And the strong immediately emerged. The law of the carriage was now dictated by six prisoners who spoke the same language and had fought in the same platoon. The fighting at the front and the hardships they had endured had bound them together like brothers. The six occupied a quarter of the car. Although most spoke the same language, they were not as united as these six, because they came from different units and companies and did not know each other. So they submitted to the greater power.

Some tried to ally themselves with the six, but they were not accepted. From then on, what the six wanted became the law of the wagon. Their leader became the one who distributed bread, water, and food, and, of course, they took their share. The leader, a tall, dark-haired man with a mustache and a strong voice, was from Deda.

The improvised wagon was home to prisoners of different ethnicities: 36 Hungarians from their homeland, 6 Romanians from Transylvania, 2 Russians, 2 Slovaks, 2 Swabians from their homeland, and 5 Hungarians from Transylvania. Later, they all agreed that the man from Deda would be their commander. The people were tired of war and all its hardships. They stood next to each other, dejected. Somewhere deep down, they were glad that there was someone taking care of things. They thought about the future and what it would bring.

The leader understood the language of the six Romanians from Transylvania and became their translator, as none of them spoke Hungarian well; they only knew basic words related to

the army and war. Perhaps it was because of the language that he had become close to them. Although they had not completely accepted him among them, he was still there. Among the Romanians were a man from Deva, three from Baia Mare, and two from Secuime.

The situation in the carriage was interesting. Fifty people were forced to stand in such a small space that they touched each other even when they didn't want to. If one of them wanted to stretch their legs, they had to ask their neighbor for permission, and if their neighbor wanted to stand differently, they had to ask them in turn. Fifty tired, hungry, and nervous men in a space where civilization was gradually disappearing and being replaced by prehistoric instinct, the law of the strongest. Each had personal memories and habits deeply ingrained in their souls. They had nothing in common. When the fifty were locked up together, no one thought about what would become of them. Perhaps they would have killed each other, but nothing happened.

In the darkness of the wagon, they calmed down. Instinctively, they felt that they depended on each other and that without unity they would not survive in this "coffin on wheels." Their instincts whispered that the lack of heat was the greatest danger. There was a small stove in the carriage, but those who had installed it had forgotten to put a basket in it. When one of them managed with great difficulty to light the fire, they were all on the verge of suffocation. They overturned the stove and extinguished the fire. They felt the cold biting their bodies, but there was nothing they could do.

Since there was no room to lie down, they sat between each other's legs to keep warm. When their legs or backs went numb, the whole row changed position. Each had his place, and no one was allowed to take another's place. The prisoner standing with his back to the wall of the car had the hardest time. But this problem was solved because they agreed to change the person standing in the coldest place every day.

Poor souls, what protection did that thin cloak offer them against the bitter cold! Another huge enemy was the lack of water. They did not receive water daily, even though the locomotive stopped frequently to refuel. However, they could not drink that water, as it had been chemically treated to soften it, preventing limescale deposits from forming on the boiler pipes. Often, days would pass before they reached a place with drinking water. When you consider that water had to be brought in for 3,000 people, you realize that it was not easy—it depended on the conscience of those responsible. Those in charge of the water supply were not particularly concerned about the prisoners' thirst.

The human body needed water more than food. The dry, dusty air in the wagon and their empty stomachs put pressure on them. Their bodies began to

consume its own resources. Because of this, the hole in the corner of the wagon used for urination was rarely used. In a few days, it was completely blocked.

IV

Although he had boarded the carriage alone and found a place only next to the urinal, he was lucky. He was sitting right next to the six Romanians. Day after day, sitting next to each other, talking and depending on each other, little by little, people grow closer, especially when they need help. That's what happened with them. The two young men next to him let him sleep between their legs, so the night became more bearable. He wrapped his legs in a blanket, and the legs of the six men warmed him from the sides. When the others put their legs over him, he felt even better.

Little by little, they became friends. They were about the same age. Gheorghe was from near Baia Mare, and Ștefan was from Mureș County. Having a common language was important, especially here in the train car. They knew he was from Transylvania, and in a foreign land, in captivity, this meant they were compatriots. Gheorghe, the one from Deda, began to talk about how he had been oppressed in the army because he was Romanian, but the others said that what was done was done and that he was not to blame for what had happened. Now they had to stick together because the danger was huge.

He became the translator between the six and the rest of the people in the wagon. He spoke perfect Romanian. He was the one who told the others that when they received food and water, no one should rush, because they had to share everything equally. He (Urs) would divide it up so that everyone got their share. Everyone agreed, as long as they brought what they needed. They were ravenous.

But even that day they had no luck. The train continued to race along, as if the Tatars were chasing it. It was already getting dark, and they had no hope of getting any food. The huge locomotive raced nervously across the vast plains of Ukraine, as if the prisoners were to blame for it having to flee like that. From time to time, the locomotive let out a mournful whistle, which sounded frightening to the prisoners. Some began to complain that perhaps the Russians wanted to let them starve to death.

A slightly sarcastic voice said that man does not die so easily and that they must be patient, because it is not easy to feed 3,000 people, especially while walking. No one knew who had spoken, but he was probably right. The prisoners said nothing more. They were exhausted from hunger. What were they thinking about? Their homes or something tasty to eat? Who could say? Fifty people in an isolated world with no hope for the future. In

In the darkness of the carriage, no one was sleeping. Who could sleep in such conditions? Cold, hungry, and without hope.

The train raced through the night. A deathly silence settled over their souls. Had they consoled themselves? "Whatever will be, will be," they thought. There was nothing they could do. What was written for them had to happen. A hopeless apathy overwhelmed them.

Towards morning, around 8 o'clock, the train slowed down and stopped. They had arrived at a small station. Perhaps they were waiting for another train coming from the opposite direction. There was no sound from outside.

From somewhere in the direction of the locomotive, there was a hissing sound. Perhaps it was the locomotive's labored breathing. Suddenly, there was the sound of snow crunching under boots and several voices. Perhaps there were two guards. The two Russians in the car began to shout: "Tovariš! Dajte kusaj, dajte vodi, tovariš!" ("Comrade! Give us water, give us food!").

Then the others began to bang on the walls of the car with their mess tins. As if they had agreed, the same thing happened in the other carriages. Some begged, but most banged on the walls of the carriages, cursing those who were so heartless as to keep prisoners without food for three days.

No matter how cold you are, don't torment your neighbor, who is human, just like you! But here, the notion of

"neighbor" does not exist. Who knows what kind of ruthless creatures these guards were, the prisoners thought. The guards, angry that they were shouting in vain at the prisoners to calm down, fired several bursts of machine gun fire into the air.

As if the infernal noise in the carriages had been hanging by a thread and the bursts had broken it, silence fell instantly. The next moment, all that could be heard was the beating of thousands of hearts, which seemed to be beating fearfully, lest they disturb the guards.

The guards didn't seem interested in their hearts. They wanted quiet, and quiet they got. A few short commands wereheard from the front, and in the next few minutes the guards told them that if they ever made such a fuss again, they would simply shoot into the carriages and then they would see what it was like when a bullet hit one of them. When they stopped again in the afternoon, they would be given food and water.

The two Russians translated the guards' message to the others. No one said anything. What was there to say? It was clear that the guards were capable of anything. People whispered among themselves. Fear had become stronger than hunger. With a deafening noise, another train passed by, probably fleeing to the front. The next moment, their train started moving again.

As the train started moving, people began to talk louder. The guards could no longer hear them. They wondered if the Russians would really keep their word and give them food, or if they had only promised to appease them.

Trust in the guards was low. If they wanted to keep their word, they had to hurry, because winter gets dark quickly. After a while, they calmed down, but a feverish impatience took hold of them. Time passed, and every thought returned to food: "What will they give us? How much will they give us? How much bread will we get?"

For the Russians, porridge was the second course, but it didn't matter, anything was welcome. Everyone dreamed of food. A dog, if it dreams of a bone with meat on it, salivates in its sleep, making sounds of satisfaction. The difference between the dog and them was that they no longer had saliva. One of the prisoners had kept his watch—he had been very clever, considering how many checks they had gone through. He told them that it was almost 3 p.m. So the winter afternoon was coming to an end, and there was no food anywhere. They were extremely nervous, thirsty, and hungry. Locked in that iron "cage," their behavior resembled that of a wild animal that would tear apart, if it could, to get its share of food.

Suddenly, the train slowed down and stopped. They had arrived at a small station. At one point, someone knocked on the outside of the carriage and told them they would receive a bag of dry bread, a bucket of porridge, and two buckets of water, which they had to share equally. They were asked to hand in the empty buckets at the next station, as the train would be leaving immediately. The carriage, which had been silent until then, came to life, like a beehive that had been struck. All eyes were fixed on the door, and all their senses were on alert. The lines, which had been kept more or less in order, began to break up, as everyone wanted to be first at the door. There was swearing, arguing, and the clattering of dishes. Urs warned them to remain disciplined and orderly, as everyone would receive their share. No one protested, but no one really seemed to agree either.

Many voices could be heard approaching, and at one point, the door of the carriage opened. A cook appeared in the doorway and asked them with a laugh, "What's the matter? Do you want something to eat?" and threw them abag of bread. They left them a bucket of porridge and two buckets of water, and with that, they closed the carriage door.

In front of them now was the long-awaited meal, the very hope of life.

V

As soon as the train door closed, all hell broke loose. The humanity, good manners, and civility that the harsh life in the train car had forced them to maintain disappeared. The instinctual desire to survive drove them to grab food and water with their teeth, their nails, whatever they could. Everyone trusted only in their own strength, and no one wanted to wait for Urs to distribute the food. The idea of solidarity had disappeared. The wolves threw themselves on their exhausted prey just as they had thrown themselves on the food that had been brought to them. Some howled like jackals, others just gnashed their teeth as they fought for a piece of food.

There wasn't enough room for everyone where the food had been placed, but everyone wanted to get there. Bear and his comrades were defeated by the human wave. Quantity triumphed. Stupidity defeated order and clear-sightedness. They were just creatures devoid of any trace of humanity. The long-awaited food was in front of them, they just had to get to it. But they couldn't get there because they all thought the same and all wanted to be the first to get the food that meant life. Selfishness prevented them from sharing. Precisely because they all wanted the same thing, a general brawl broke out.

The two buckets of water and the porridge were overturned in a matter of seconds, the water drained away, and the porridge mixed with the boards of the wagon and their clothes. The buckets were crushed, and the bag of dry bread was torn and trampled, mixing with the porridge spilled on the floor. However, some who had managed to grab a piece of bread were nibbling on it like dogs chewing on a bone. In the middle of the car, a few were still fighting for food when suddenly the door opened and the two cooks who had brought the food jumped in with thick clubs, beating them mercilessly.

They beat them like animals until they woke up the dehumanized prisoners. He had once seen them beating animals at the slaughterhouse, and now each blow sounded different depending on where it landed. Those who were hit woke up and tried to get out of the chaos, away from those who were still fighting for food. In a few moments, the center of the car was empty and silent.

The two cooks, sweating and breathing heavily, looked around.

– "Is there a translator?" one of them asked.

– Does anyone know how to translate? he asked again.

– I know Russian, replied one of the Russians.

– "So," said the cook, "take note that you are animals. Oxen, pigs, anything but humans.

– Now that you have received your food, instead of sharing it like human beings, so that everyone gets some, even if it is little, you have destroyed the precious food.

– Do you think that while you are traveling, here where you are the enemy, here where you have destroyed everything, food can be found easily?

– No one wanted to give you anything. Pay attention, in the next two days you will not receive any food!

– This is punishment. Those who endure will survive, and those who don't, won't.

– You are not at home here, you are prisoners of war. You destroyed our country, and now we have to feed you?

– I'll be back in two days. Until then, choose a commander. If you don't have one, you won't get any food.

– The one you choose as commander must be respected and obeyed. Be careful, I'm not joking!

All of this was translated from Russian into Hungarian. The two cooks jumped out of the wagon and closed the door. He hadn't joined in the fight for food, hadn't even tried. However, one of the thugs had stepped on his injured knee, and now he was busy enduring the pain. Urs cursed as if he had been a cab driver in Budapest his entire life. He almost wanted to cry out in helplessness. But what could he do?

Urs had asked him to translate what he thought of them to the others, but why would he do that? They were already miserable enough. They realized what they had done, what it meant to not stick together, what anarchy was. Some were still complaining about the blows they had received. He could imagine their pain; they weren't to blame, they had simply been in the way. It could have been anyone in their place.

If they had left them at home and a powerful force had not pushed them to the front, they would not have been here, they would not have been starving, and they would not have been beaten with clubs. But in war, anything goes, and fate

depends on the powerful. The law is far away, and here only the law of the individual decides life or death. They were at the mercy of a few people. The hard years at the front, the breakdown of families, the death of loved ones, and many other sufferings make you hate, make you become inhuman. And then you find satisfaction in tormenting the defeated.

Does anyone willingly go to the front? Does anyone go to die or be taken prisoner with joy? Laws compel ordinary people to go and fight other ordinary people who have done them no harm, people they do not even know.

One worker destroys what another has built. This only happens when workers are dressed in military uniforms and pitted against each other. For what territories or ideals? There are times when it is not the perpetrator who is to blame for his actions, but the context that drove him to commit them. Are they to blame for being here and still wanting to live? The will to live has caused many of them to behave like animals.

VI

The convoy had been rushing along with them for 17 days. From time to time, they stopped for a few hours or for a night, then set off again. 17 days is a very long time. All they knew was that they were on Ukrainian soil. Through the cracks in the walls of the carriage, they could see the names of the stations they were passing through, and otherwise only destruction and death.

His heart ached with shame when he thought that his own people had also been responsible for the destruction. Yes, the Hungarians had also taken part in the devastation. Only now did he understand why that officer had whipped him on the very first day he was taken prisoner.

The prisoners marched toward Debrecen. There were about 600 of them. All had been captured that day. From the opposite direction, Cossack soldiers were heading toward the front line. Their commander, a Cossack with a beard and a chest full of decorations, stopped suddenly beside him and shouted:

– "You, come here!"

He was frightened. The Cossack's face did not bode well. He stepped out of line and stopped next to the horseman.

– Come closer! the officer said.

He remained silent. What was there to say? Perhaps the man wanted to kill him, even though it was the first time he had ever seen him in his life.

– "What kind of nation are you?" shouted the Cossack.

– "Hungarian," he replied.

– "Shut up, you're nothing. You donkey, you pig!" And with that, he struck him across the face with his whip, then continued on his way.

He felt a terrible pain in his face and could no longer see anything with his left eye. A strong blow to the ribs sent him back into the line, where he was hit by a Russian guard.

He felt like a beaten dog. Why had the Cossack picked him out? Maybe because he was on the edge or because he had a blue coat?

He had received that blue coat when he was captured at Mezőcsát. One of the guards had taken his coat and given him this one in exchange. Perhaps the Cossack thought he was German when he saw him in the blue coat.

– Comrade, throw away that blue coat, you're the only one who has one like that. If the Russians think you're German, you might not be as lucky as the next Cossack.

He still didn't know who had said those words to him, but he threw off his coat immediately; he'd rather endure the cold. Later, he managed to get hold of a Hungarian military coat.

This incident came back to him when he saw the terrible destruction. It was no wonder that some people could no longer control their anger and gave free rein to their grief and rage. Perhaps that Cossack had lost his home in a bombing raid, perhaps someone dear to him had died. Perhaps he had a brother who had fallen at the front and he believed that they were to blame for all this. In such situations, people no longer think clearly. They don't have time for that. If they could think logically, they would realize that those soldiers had been sent to their land and that if they had said "No," they would have been shot or hanged or, at best, rounded up in a camp until the end of the war, branded for life as cowards and traitors to their country. What man would have done that? Only the weak, perhaps. He was not weak.

Supernatural powers forced many to do terrible things, including participating in wars. Could there be anything worse than war? Then he realized that the Cossack could have killed him on the spot without anyone holding him accountable. When millions of people die, what does one more matter? Would anyone have noticed? No one.

Life goes on.

VII

They had been traveling in the wagon for 17 days, receiving food and water only once every two days. From that moment on, they had a "designated" commander. There were no more fights over food. The distribution of food took place quietly. Hungry eyes clung to the hands that distributed the food, like anti-tank mines clinging to the armor of tanks. There was no more precise balance in the world. Many of the prisoners no longer wanted food, including him. They exchanged their food for water.

The people were extremely cold, having spent so long in the wagon, scantily clad and with no way of warming themselves. It was a death sentence. Many had fever, diarrhea, and were coughing. They no longer argued with each other or even spoke. They were resigned to their fate. When their food was brought, they no longer jumped up as they had in the early days. The lack of hygiene had also brought lice.

For him, lice were a novelty, but now he had so many that he was surprised he didn't feel nauseous when he saw them or killed them. Man gets used to anything, even lice. That's how they lived in the wagon, like pigs. Filth and lice were like twin brothers. They were black with dirt. Water was life, but no one would have wasted it to wash themselves. A caravan crossing the Sahara would not have taken more care of water than they did. On the day they arrived in Kharkov, they stayed there for two days. They thought they would get out of the wagon, but that didn't happen. Their wagons were checked and the seriously ill were taken out. In their wagon, they found seven seriously ill prisoners. Perhaps that was when he made the mistake of his life, because he did not report that he was ill, even though his knee was hurting more and more. He would have been spared a lot of suffering. All this happened a week ago.

Within a week, the prisoners' health had deteriorated significantly. Three had died—at least that's what they were told. They had more space, but no one was happy.

The group of Romanians remained intact, and the others considered him Romanian too. He had no objection. They had become good friends. The fact that they were the same age, or perhaps something deeper, had brought them closer together. They were already sleeping next to each other and keeping each other warm. They were a close-knit group, separate from the rest. Because of his injured leg, he couldn't move very well and preferred not to stand among the others, so as not to be accidentally hit, so two friends from the group brought him food where he was sitting. He couldn't eat the porridge. He simply couldn't stand it. He gave his portion of porridge to his friends and received half a portion of water in return. Thirst

His torment could not be appeased in any way. He was probably ill or had a fever, and his two friends were helping him as best they could.

Miholca was a short, stocky man with warm brown eyes that radiated kindness and a deep voice. He had left his wife and two small children at home. He had married young, as people do in the countryside. He hadn't seen his family for several months and now, as a prisoner, who knew when he would ever see them again. Grama was his exact opposite. Blond, tall, with blue eyes and a face with firm features, a straight nose that betrayed strength of character. He was probably suffering, as he was pale and coughed from time to time.

Urs had no more business with him. He had no business with anyone. He was suffering, like everyone else. He was older than them and aware of the tragedy they were experiencing. His mustache no longer stood proudly, as it had on the day he boarded the train. With a beard that had grown for almost three weeks, he looked like a very dejected old man.

December 24, **1944**. Christmas Eve. It was bitterly cold outside. Those in the car huddled together, trying to keep warm. The train raced on without stopping. They were taking them so far away that even after 18 days they had not arrived. But they knew they had not even crossed the Volga. They probably would not receive any food today either. Usually, their food was brought in the evening, in the dark. Who was responsible for this mockery?

Memories overwhelmed him. Christmas Eve, with the warmth of the family atmosphere, the carefully chosen dishes, the perfect taste of the stuffed cabbage rolls, the extraordinary smell of homemade sausages... They did not salivate at these thoughts, because their bodies, deprived of water, were careful not to waste a single drop of moisture. But fantasy and imagination carried them to a table full of delicacies, alongside their loved ones, free.

December 27. Yesterday they received a little water and some dry bread. The train stopped just long enough to give them food, then started again. More and more people began to die. At each stop, when they were given food, the dead were taken out. There were only 30 left in the car. Who would be next? This question was in their eyes and minds. One of the Slovaks had died, and the other was very ill. Lately, the lack of water was tormenting them the most. Their throats were dry from dust and thirst. They had pulled a plank out of the floor of the car and tied a bowl to it with a rope, trying to gather a little snow from between the rails, but after losing a few bowls, they gave up. They had resorted to licking the metal parts of the wagon, rust included. Nothing mattered anymore, as long as they could feel a trace of moisture.

He remembered reading somewhere that when the body does not receive water, the cells begin to break down and the person dies. He had also read about Gandhi, the saint of the Indians, who had been buried two meters underground and lived there for 42 days without food, but was given water daily through a thin tube. So for him, too, water was the secret to survival!

One night, he had a strange moment. An inner voice told him to get up from his seat and punch the door of the train car. He hit the door so hard that he finally collapsed, exhausted, on top of the other prisoners sleeping nearby. The others woke up scared and started beating him, and one of them hit him directly on his injured knee, causing him to pass out. If it hadn't been for his two friends who pulled him away, they probably would have beaten him to death. The next day, when he came to, he felt as if he had been struck by a fatal illness. Was this the end? So soon? He was only 24 years old. He hadn't had a chance to live his life. Day by day, he felt weaker and weaker. His knee hurt so much that he mostly lay down, careful not to let anyone touch him. He didn't even need dry bread anymore, just water. Nothing interested him anymore. If this was his destiny, so be it. You can't change what's written for you anyway.

Finally, they had crossed the Volga. "Volga, Volga, old Volga!" He loved this song very much. He peered curiously through the cracks in the carriage, hoping to see the river, but all he could see was thick fog. The Volga meant a lot to Russians; every Russian pronounced the word with admiration, but to him it meant nothing. The torments had stripped his soul of all deep feelings.

On New Year's Eve, they arrived in Kirov, a city the size of Cluj. There was no sign of war here. The buildings around the station were intact. As soon as the train stopped, there was commotion around the carriages. Civilians, soldiers, and railway workers gathered, pointing toward the carriages. Inside, it was deathly quiet. It was as if the carriages were empty. Only the presence of armed guards indicated that they were not empty. Armed guards do not guard empty carriages. They were probably there just to prevent anyone from escaping. And who could have escaped, now that they could barely move?

The ghost train moved silently, without a sound in the night. They no longer knew how long they had been in the carriages. Their souls were already dying. The hundreds of lives that the train was carrying did not want to die yet. They clung to life desperately, hoping that after so much unimaginable torment, they would arrive at a warm place where they would receive hot food, hot water, and where they could take a bath.

They longed for warmth, for a warm room, for a bathtub filled with hot water. They hoped to finally escape the shadow of the Grim Reaper, who had already taken millions of lives and was still not satisfied. Present among them at all times, she watches for the one who, for a split second, would let his guard down so she could take him with her. It was not enough that these prisoners had endured all the torments of Hell, that they had passed through Purgatory and were finally clean, worthy of being allowed to live. They had suffered for the sins of their parents, but she stood there, laughing and waiting. She knew that no one could take what belonged to her.

January 2, 1945. At dawn, the train arrived at a small station, lost in the Russian plains covered with blinding white snow. The red sunrise foreshadowed a very cold day. The train stopped on a secondary track, and from time to time a train passed by at breakneck speed. It was already noon and nothing had happened yet. They were not given any food and were not allowed to continue their journey. Not far from the railway line, they could see several tall, multi-storey buildings with friendly smoke coming out of their chimneys. There was warmth there! Just looking at that smoke brought them a little comfort. When would they have the chance to sit and sleep in a warm room? Or was that just a dream?

Suddenly, strange, incomprehensible sounds could be heard approaching, and at one point someone knocked on the carriage door.

"Everyone get ready! You're getting off!" shouted the guard.

The prisoners, exhausted, seemed to come back to life when they heard these words. They began to gather their few belongings—that small treasure they could cling to and that made them feel that something "belonged" to them. Meanwhile, they wondered if they would take them to the buildings they had seen. Perhaps it was a hospital or a school? In a few minutes, they were ready and eagerly awaiting the happy moment of descent, which they had been waiting for so long.

They had been together for almost a month. They say that if you go through a life-threatening situation with someone, the bond between you will be unbreakable. But that wasn't true. They had faced death together for so long, and yet, given the chance, they would have fought to the death for an extra piece of food or a drop of water. No friendship had developed between them.

The bond with his two compatriots was a different kind of friendship, born only from the time spent together in the wagon. They had helped each other, and he had been the most helpless of them all. The two had cared for him out of a sense of brotherhood, but that feeling disappeared with the darkness of the wagon. In the car, they were simple people, not even knowing if they were still human or animals. And when a person reaches the stage where they are capable of killing themselves

If someone would give their life for a simple piece of bread, they can no longer be called a rational being. After a month of torment, many had reached this point. Could he too? At this thought, he shuddered.

He remembered that one of the dead men was missing his little finger. One of them had crossed the line between man and animal. They didn't know who it was. But the guards had brought the body back and shown it to them, provoking a reaction of nausea and anger. Who was to blame? How could they know? Should they hate him, detest him, or feel sorry for the man who had ended up there? Did they have the right to condemn him? Was he to blame for having fallen so low?

The door of the carriage opened and a guard appeared:

– Come on, hurry up!

One by one, slowly or quickly, each as best they could, they jumped out of the car. Some needed help. The car was empty. He was alone. His two friends were no longer helping him. They had gotten out and forgotten about him. This hurt him. Had they abandoned him now, at the last moment? He crawled to the door of the car and simply threw himself into the snow. He knew they were capable of closing the door, and then it would be the end. He couldn't get up, so he tried to crawl, but the meter-deep snow prevented him. At that moment, a woman dressed in white called two stronger prisoners and ordered them to carry him on a stretcher, following the others.

– There's a hospital there, with heat and food, the woman in white told him.

He didn't quite understand what she had said, but her warm voice gave him hope. He saw many stretchers around him, and curious civilians were staying out of their way. People stared in horror at the half-dead "ghosts" with sunken eyes, smelling of filth and torment. Such visions seemed possible only in dreams. Only two words crossed his mind: warmth and food.

They arrived at a courtyard surrounded by a high wire fence. From there, they took him to the main building. The eaves of the building were covered with large icicles. A warm breeze touched his face, carrying the inviting smell of fresh food. Inside, a crowd of young women dressed in white were caring for the sick and feeding them steaming dishes. He had made it. He had escaped death. He had been stronger. His young body had saved him. How good it was here! Warm, clean, and dry. With his body tingling, he waited quietly for a young woman with blue eyes, dressed in white, to bring him his portion of the delicious-smelling food.

Debreczeni István, Ilva Mică

The daily life of imprisonment

In the magazine Magyar szó, I read several articles written by former prisoners. I read them all with great interest. Having spent almost four years as a prisoner of war in Russia, I understood the suffering and the justice of each of them.

In the fall of 1948, when I returned home, I began to write down the most important moments of my captivity. Little by little, dozens of pages accumulated. First, I wrote about my memories of the 30 days spent in the train car. I wrote only the truth. I sent the manuscript to the magazine Igaz szó, but I received a strange reply: "Such events were experienced by hundreds of thousands of people, it is not appropriate to publish such things; write about something else."

I stopped writing. The original manuscript has been lying in a drawer ever since. Lately, however, more and more writings and diaries have begun to appear about those times, about the torments and sufferings of that period, exactly as they happened.

I had arrived in a world I had never even dreamed of. I, a man who had lived in Central Europe, could not understand the way of life of the people here. They were descendants of political prisoners from the Tsarist era. Most of the settlements were considered large communes. In these communes, cement factories and three three-story wooden barracks were built. In the middle of winter, in the bitter cold, the fir trees used to build the walls cracked and sounded like bombs. That's where we were all housed. Almost the entire group perished on the way there. If we had travelled for another week, there would have been no one left to save. This is what three prisoners – German doctors – who were with us told us. In the summer of 1946, when the Germans were sent home, a Russian doctor told us that the head of our convoy guards had been executed because more than half of the prisoners had died of hunger and thirst on the way. It had been discovered that he had sold more than half of the prisoners' food. The guards who led the convoy were also sent to labor camps, where they had a terrible life.

Throughout my imprisonment, only one Russian couldn't stand me. But I'll tell you about that later.

I stayed in the hospital until the end of May and had already started walking without crutches. The three barracks had been converted into a hospital. Russian, German, and Hungarian wounded were being treated here. The builders filled the spaces between the beams with moss and then plastered over them. During heavy snowstorms, the barracks creaked at every joint, but they held. From the outside, the buildings with their white-painted window frames looked quite nice. The roof was made of 50 cm long shingles.

At the end of May, a delegation of doctors arrived from Kirov, the capital of the Kaysk district. This district was about the size of Romania, with approximately 150,000 inhabitants. It was full of factories that had been moved from the front. The doctors came to assess our health and our ability to work. If they had treated us all winter, now it was time to pay for the treatment. There were ten people in total, including three German prisoner doctors and two female doctors. We had to pass in front of them one by one, stripped naked. We were as thin as greyhounds. Some of us were groped to see how much flesh was left on our bones. They examined us exactly like animals, assessing our labor value, because the two camps exploited wood for the nearby paper factory. Only a few of us were considered fit for work. It was useless that we had rested all winter; the very poor diet did not allow us to recover. They barely managed to gather two brigades from among us, and those were chosen only so that they could say they had done something.

I was still useless. I was limping quite badly and wondering what would happen to me if I stayed that way. Fortunately, I didn't remain lame. Over time, my leg recovered, and I was able to work in the brigade that maintained the hospital. I worked at the train station, unloading food, cutting wood, and towards the end of the summer, picking potatoes.

On September 20, the first snow fell. We picked potatoes from the snow-covered ground and transported them by sleigh to the silo. In winter, two brigades selected potatoes for food every day. Potatoes were the main vegetable in the area; we planted them in mid-June and harvested them in September.

After this brief introduction, let's meet the four soldiers—the guards who looked after the prisoners. They were more concerned with protecting us from civilians than with preventing us from escaping. Any contact with civilians was forbidden.

PAVEL

I'll start with him, because he was the oldest – a genuine Russian, massive and imposing. He wore a pair of huge leather boots, regardless of the season. He told us that in Belarus, in the Pskov region, the ground was very marshy and he could only walk there with such footwear. He addressed us, the prisoners, as "Sir," a custom adopted during the centuries of Polish rule, which had become deeply ingrained in their culture.

You could tell he was a good man. When we went out to dig up tree stumps, we worked in groups of five to pull out a single stump, but he managed to pull one out by himself. He would put his gun aside and help us. He always told us to fill the four wheelbarrows and, once we were done, we were allowed to rest until 3 o'clock, when we had to start back. This work was impossible in winter, when the snow was a metre and a half deep, so we only did it in summer.

The nurses told us that at the beginning of summer, the three barracks were built, and during the summer, all the staff gathered logs for the winter. By the time the cold weather arrived, the hospital was ready to receive wounded soldiers. This was the duty of the hospital staff every summer until the prisoners of war began to arrive. However, they did not want to work in the forest, so they were sent to factories, where the work was much harder.

Pavel told us about his family. He had a lot of land and was considered a kulak. He had inherited farm equipment and a tractor from his father, but he had to hand all of it over to the collective farm, which almost drove him mad. At that time, his father was still alive. Pavel had two sons and two daughters, who, together with his wife, worked on the collective farm. He also had an older brother, a fisherman, but he liked to drink. One day he went fishing and never came back. They never found him. He had no children, so only his wife and brother mourned him.

He asked us not to tell anyone that he had spoken to us, the prisoners, because he hoped to be discharged now that the war was over.

ANDREJ

He was a short, bow-legged Georgian with a tanned face. I can still see his smile and hear him whistling. He was a true bohemian. On the first day, he asked us if any of us spoke Russian. I told him I knew a little Russian, so he asked me to sit next to him and we started talking as best we could. I told him how I had been captured and brought here as a prisoner. He had no profession—he danced and sang all day. He had been a member of an amateur dance troupe and later became a professional dancer.

One day, after a performance, he got drunk and fell asleep among the props. At the same time, the German army was counterattacking, but he was not found, and thus escaped captivity. He was enlisted in the riflemen and remained with them until the end of the war, reaching Berlin. Soon, he would be discharged, and then he would see what he would do next. He had an overwhelming optimism that made me forget my problems, at least for a while. He chewed barley like a goat chews grass. He loved to drink and whistled all the time.

I should also mention where the food was stored: in the church. It was a huge Orthodox church with five towers, painted yellow, just like the one in Cluj, opposite the National Theater. That's where the wheat, rye, barley, and oats were stored. It was the first and last time I saw such an "exhibition" in a church. I never heard the church bell ring. Communism is atheistic, but not all its followers were the same. On the outskirts of the village, I saw people gathering in a house, probably for services—they seemed to be Pentecostals. But Andrej wasn't interested in religion or who was or wasn't religious. In fact, he himself had become a Muslim.

The Azeris, in turn, are fanatical Muslims. We prisoners were very surprised when we saw them, even though we had been to a synagogue before, without really understanding what was going on inside. Communism seemed to be debasing itself. To this day, I still cannot understand their doctrine. They preach equality, but suppress any other faith or belief.

Andrej, every time he entered that shabby church, shook his head and muttered:
"God, God... There is no God here!" And he was right.

IVANOV

He was from Siberia, near the city of Chita. He had been a forester all his life and, because of this, being a lonely man, he had become very quiet. A confirmed bachelor, he rarely said anything, and only occasionally did we learn a little detail about him. He had a long, freckled face, reddish-blond hair, and eyes of an indefinable color. His appearance was not at all pleasant. He was probably a repentant man, because whenever he could, he would withdraw and read from a prayer book. But he prayed in vain, for his face reflected a deep wickedness.

He didn't get involved in our work either, just watched us from a distance, seeing that we were managing on our own. Once the snow melted, we started digging the stumps out of the ground. Around the middle of May, when the snow receded, a suffocating heat set in. We had to strip to the waist and breathe heavily because of the humidity. Many prisoners fainted because they were weak and forced to do extremely hard work. However, the heat did not prevent dark clouds from suddenly appearing, and at one point in the middle of summer, it began to snow in July. We were about to freeze. After half an hour, the sun came out again, as if nothing had happened. Being so close to the Arctic Circle, the climate was extreme.

It was miraculous that you couldn't find a single stone in those places—not a rock, not even gravel. The main street, which led to the train station, was paved with wooden blocks.

Ivanov, unlike Andrej and Pavel, spoke very little and usually kept his distance from the others. In winter, when we went out to clear the snow from the tracks or unload the wagons, he refused to warm himself, preferring to endure the cold. One hot summer day, while we were removing logs, I sat down in the shade of the logs that had already been removed. Ivanov also sat down in the shade and fell asleep. After a short while, he woke up frightened, gathered us together, and counted us. Seeing that some were missing, he asked the others where they were. I stood quietly, because I had already loaded the wheelbarrows. When he found me, he scolded me for "hiding."

"You're wrong, Ivanov, I'm not hiding," I told him.

Because of Ivanov, I was sent to solitary confinement three times, each time for three days. Twice because I refused to continue working and once because I spoke to a woman. I had offered her some soap in exchange for a drink. Each time, Ivanov reported me to the Militia, so I

spent a total of nine days in solitary confinement, with a daily ration of 200 grams of bread and a little water. I will tell you more about these experiences later.

These three guards accompanied us to work every day until August 1946. Every day was difficult for me, hungry and subjected to hard labor, but I cannot forget any of them, nor the gentle face and quiet voice of Pavel, the optimism and cheerfulness of Andrej, or the snake-like gaze of Ivanov.

In August 1946, in addition to the three guards, our chief doctor and a colonel named Egonovici were also discharged, and then the German prisoners were sent home. They made a hellish noise, shouting at the top of their voices the slogan "Germany, Germany... above all!" But I will talk about that later.

MIHAILOV

The fourth guard, Mihailov, was born in 1922, like me, and had a special charm. He was a handsome man with brown hair, blue eyes, and an oval face, typical of Slavs. He came from the Lake Baikal area and was an intelligent and kind-hearted man. He had a balalaika that he carried with him everywhere. While we worked, he played his favorite instrument. I love music, especially Russian music, and Mikhailov, tormented by homesickness, seemed to find release through song. When he played, I had the impression that both he and his instrument were crying. Watching him, I felt that I was experiencing a rare moment. His melody expressed his longing and feelings so clearly that, in those moments, it seemed as if he was back home, among his loved ones, and happy.

I signaled to the others to be quiet. When he stopped singing, he noticed that we had all been listening to him. He smiled at us, and I said to him:

– That was extraordinarily beautiful, Mihailov. I think you were truly at home; I saw the happiness on your face while you were singing.

He said nothing, just nodded in agreement.

– I really like your music. It's unique; I could listen to it day and night. You're a happy man, Mihailov, because those who love music will find joy throughout their lives.

He told us many stories about hunting and ice fishing on Lake Baikal. The ice on the lake was sometimes two meters thick, but tragedies also occurred. With the arrival of spring, the ice thinned in certain places and sometimes the lake swallowed extractors full of people. Baikal is a very deep lake; experts say that in some places it reaches up to 1,800 meters. Mikhailov had worked as a forester and patrolled the Russian taiga all day long. In winter, you could only get around on skis. I asked him if he had ever seen a Siberian tiger, and he said he had only seen its tracks, but hoped to be lucky enough to encounter one. The Siberian tiger is a protected animal, so it cannot be hunted.

We shared a passion for nature, so we quickly found topics to discuss. The taiga is extraordinarily beautiful, but also dangerous. Anyone who gets lost there will certainly not survive.

Some souls connect instantly, and that's how it was between us. Fate made me a prisoner so that I could meet Mihailov and preserve the memory of those moments. Don't think that all

These are just words, because I saved this man's life. He made it to Berlin with the front and escaped with only a minor injury, only to be threatened with death by a madman here, at home. But fate wanted me to be his savior.

I emphasize that I am telling a true story, not a novel.

One Saturday afternoon, Jano, the Slovak, came into the barracks. He was the prisoners' translator and had somehow provoked me. At the time, I was working in the hospital maintenance brigade, with no strict schedule, just doing what I could.

– Hey, Debreczeni! You have to choose ten people for Monday to go to the collective farm to dig potatoes. You know some Russian, so choose nine people who know how to dig. Make sure you don't take any of the potato cutters!

– You'll be fine out there, you'll have more food. Be ready on Monday.

There was an indescribable commotion, because when everyone heard the news about more food, they all wanted to go.

– "Don't bother, they're only taking boys from the countryside who know how to dig," I told them.

I started picking them one by one: Tanko Balint, Tanko Aron, Anghi Sandor, the two Tatars, Kovacs Pista, Bojt Jani, and the other Kovacs Pista.

– Corporal, I'll go too, I'm from the countryside, said Putnoki.

Putnoki was the most outspoken individual I had ever encountered. It was challenging to comprehend what he was saying, even for those who had heard him before. He had a rival in our room, Csonka Istvan. The two couldn't stand each other, even though they had only met here in prison. Csonka had been a cart driver in Budapest, bringing barrels of beer from Kobanya. He boasted that he could drink a bucket of beer without getting drunk. Putnoki immediately jumped on him:

– "You lying pig! If you drink a bucket of horse urine, that won't get you drunk!"

That's how they talked. Putnoki was a very ugly man, with a head as big as a bucket, a huge mouth revealing terrible teeth, and black eyes that radiated hatred. I didn't like him at all and didn't want to take him with me, knowing he was a troublemaker. If I had known what was going to happen... but who could have known? I didn't promise him anything, I just said we'd see on Monday.

I don't know who started the rumor that I was a "corporal," but no matter how much I denied it, no one believed me. On Sunday evening, Jano came to me:

– Take Putnoki with you. Can't you see how thin he is? Let him eat his fill for once.

– All right, fine.

A few words about the two Tatars: they were grandfather and grandson. They had been fishing on Lake Balaton, and on their way home, they were caught by the Russians and ended up here. The grandfather was 62 years old and his grandson was only 16. The old Tatar was a retired sergeant major in the gendarmerie and you could see he was still in good shape.

– Let's see what a kolkhoz looks like and what kind of food they'll give us,

he said. But his grandson was very weak, you could count his ribs.

On Monday morning, Jano came and asked us:

– Are all ten of you here?

– Yes, we replied briefly.

– Then, after breakfast, line up at the gate.

To my delight, Mihailov was our guard. It was the middle of summer, and, as I said, the climate was extreme. For weeks on end, it didn't get completely dark at night, but remained dimly lit. If we couldn't sleep, we played cards or chess without needing a lamp. We didn't have electricity anyway, just a lamp that burned all night by the door in winter. Maybe that's why the plants grew so fast.

It was the fourth day we had been working on the potatoes, and the heat was exhausting us. In the open field, with no trees in sight, we could see the horizon shimmering in the distance. We dug with our last ounce of strength, but after lunch, with our bellies full, we needed a little rest. At one point, I saw Putnoki tiptoeing towards Mihailov with his hoe raised. I watched, wondering what he was going to do. When he got close to Mihailov and raised his hoe, I shouted in fear:

– "Watch out, Mihailov!"

Mihailov jumped, but Putnoki had already hit him. He had intended to hit him on the head, but only managed to touch his shoulder. The next moment, I was already holding the handle of the hoe to his throat.

Putnoki. When I saw that he was starting to suffocate and his eyes were almost rolling out of their sockets, I took the shovel away from his neck. At that moment, Mihailov jumped next to Putnoki, ready to fire a burst of machine gun fire at him. He could have done so without any problem; no one would have held him accountable. After all, a prisoner of war had tried to kill him, and he would have been justified in shooting him in self-defense.

– No, Mikhailov, you can't do that. Maybe later! Right now, we have to hurry to the collective farm. Look at your nasty wound, it's bleeding!

– Guys, we're done for today, hurry to the collective farm and take good care of Putnoki, watch him like a hawk!

When we arrived at the collective farm, Putnoki was treated at the first aid station, but the wound was deep, the blow had even hit a bone, so he had to be taken to the hospital. The gendarmes from the collective farm were already there and were writing a report about the incident. Putnoki was handcuffed and isolated from us. On the same day, a car came to take us back to the camp.

Mihailov was rushed to Kirov. Putnoki disappeared. No one knew what had happened to him. Popov, the gendarmerie sergeant, began to question us about the incident.

– We were all feeling sluggish because of the heat, I told him. However, I noticed Putnoki's plan in time. If I had been leaning on the hoe or sitting on the ground like the others, dozing, I might not have noticed Putnoki. In any case, the wound inflicted on Mihailov by the blow with the hoe was deep, but I think he will survive, being young. If he had hit him on the head, it would have been fatal. Putnoki acted in a moment of recklessness.

– You may be right, said Popov, but a prisoner of war tried to kill a Russian soldier. Do you know what that means? I don't know what will happen to him. He's already in Kirov. He won't be coming back here to the camp.

I thought I would never see Mihailov again. But after two months, I saw him again. I was with a brigadier in a remote area of the forest, on the middle reaches of the Kama River, when he came to meet me. He was waiting for me. He had been discharged from the army and was returning home. He just wanted to see me one last time and say goodbye. I asked him how his wound was, and he showed me the ugly scar on his shoulder where he had been hit with the hoe.

– As long as I live, I will never forget you, Stefan (Istvan in Romanian). I owe you my life. It's a pity we live in such different worlds. We would get along wonderfully. But that's life. Goodbye, Stefan.

We hugged each other. I watched him walk away for a long time. It was a kilometer from the camp gate to the train station. When he reached the station, he turned around and waved his cap, a farewell I will never forget. After that, Mihailov disappeared from my life forever.

POPOV

He was the head of the gendarmerie there. A military man, a man who didn't like to talk much. When he investigated Mihailov's case, he told me:

– I know it's no use asking your comrades what they saw. They didn't see anything because they were all asleep. But you, on the other hand, weren't asleep, and you saved Mihailov's life. Tell me everything you know, but keep it short.

It was the first time I had spoken to him. I had only seen him a few times, either when he entered the camp or at the gate, supervising the guards. His harsh face softened a little when a smile appeared at the corner of his mouth. I noticed that he was flirting with a nurse.

I mention this man because our paths would cross several times. I considered him a man of character. However, he had one peculiarity: the color of his skin. It was a strong shade, almost reddish, and his eyes were dark blue. I thought that the constant cold wind had made his skin rough and red.

But once I saw him coming out of the bathroom naked, and I realized that his entire body was the same beautiful color.

I will tell you more about him later, because, unwittingly, we had many dealings with each other. I once told him that his name did not seem to be from this area. In fact, it didn't at all, because his ancestors had been moved from the banks of the Dniester River in Bessarabia back in the 18th century. He may still have had relatives somewhere, but after so long, who would have had the patience to look for them?

LIKE A TOILET CLEANER

During my imprisonment, I did all kinds of work with one goal in mind: to survive. This became my motto in the camp—not to die of hunger, boredom, or stress. Every time I passed through the camp gates to go to the cement factory or to unload wagons at the station, I felt a glimmer of freedom. At the cement factory, we received 200 grams of bread and a few drops of oil. We dripped them over the bread and added a pinch of salt. And when it came to unloading wagons of barley, I was happy—I discreetly filled my sleeves with barley, which made life a little easier, because we exchanged barley for tobacco, sugar, or porridge.

While I was with the German prisoners, we did various jobs. Day after day, they chewed barley as if they were horses. The weakest among them poured soapy water or tobacco juice into their mouths, just so they wouldn't get fat and be exempted from work. Unfortunately, most of them were buried in Russian soil. My compatriots, on the other hand, did not make any exchanges. They devoured whatever food they received. Those of us who could work did so. The older ones, however, those over 50, were so weak that they could not even make it to the toilet. At the end of March, warmer winds began to blow, and the thick layer of snow began to melt visibly. In April, sleet accelerated the melting of the snow.

One day, Jano, a good translator, appeared in the barracks and made me an offer:

– Debreczeni, I have a job for you. We need to clean the toilets. It's not hard work, but it will take about three weeks. You'll get double rations. You're known as a flag bearer in the army, but here, food is essential if we want to get home. Besides, you know a little Russian and can communicate with the guard, Turzu. Choose yourself an assistant.

I accepted Jano's offer and got to work. In no time, the 400-liter barrel was full, and the white horse happily pulled the light load. At the edge of the village, we headed for the hospital's vegetable garden, where we emptied the barrel. On the way back, we stopped at the house of a woman who lived on the outskirts of the village with her widowed sister and three children. In that house, we warmed ourselves a little and were given some boiled potatoes, milk, or tea. We usually made three trips a day; on rainy or windy days, only two.

Towards the end of the work, when the ground thawed, we saw the first shoots of onions sprouting. We were careful not to damage them, because they brought a little freshness and were like little treasures for the prisoners.

treasures for prisoners. Summer passed quickly. We continued to harvest potatoes, take oats to the silo, and untie the sheaves. In the vegetable garden, we planted onions, cucumbers, and carrots. It wasn't hard work, but ironically, it seemed to bring back a bit of normality in those impossible conditions.

THOSE IN MEMMEL

In the summer of 1946, the camp received a large transport of German prisoners – SS officers, approximately 700 in number. They had maintained an elegant and well-groomed appearance, with radios, razors, bicycles, rings, each wearing a watch and smoking perfumed cigarettes. Everything about their behavior showed the discipline typical of German officers, speaking to each other in hushed tones. I asked one of them where they came from and he told me that they were from Memel, a Lithuanian city. The German prisoners there had enjoyed good conditions, living in a building intended for officers, without having to work.

Unfortunately, our conversations did not last long. The camp's chief doctor, a Jewish colonel, ordered the SS officers to strip completely naked for a bath, and the rest of us were sent to the barracks. After a while, a 4.5-ton Molotov truck arrived at the camp, throwing military clothes, shirts, pants, and boots in all directions. We watched from the barracks windows as all the Germans' belongings and personal items were loaded onto the truck.

German officers began to emerge from the bathroom, completely shaven. Popov, one of the gendarmes, showed them their clothes and urged them to get dressed. On a night that was almost as bright as day—a phenomenon to which the locals were accustomed—the Germans gathered in rows of five and set off on foot for the train station, about a kilometer away. We watched them until they disappeared among the station buildings, wondering what fate awaited them.

The commission in Kirov returned for a new assessment, setting our quota at 75%—which meant that I had to produce 2.25 cubic meters of wood in just eight hours. In November, I fell ill with diarrhea and ended up in the hospital again. In the camp, even simple diarrhea could be fatal without treatment and without a doctor around. So I was labeled "weak" again, but I was somewhat happy because I had escaped the work in the forest just as the severe cold weather was setting in.

On December 1, another transport arrived, this time bringing only a few people from Memel, about 40, none of whom could walk. Some of them were brought to the hospital on stretchers, their health being deplorable. Around the same time, the infirmary caught fire and burned almost completely. In the meantime, the head doctor retired, and a young female doctor arrived to replace him, bringing with her a change in the atmosphere of the hospital.

After the arrival of the 38 sick Germans, the doctor assigned me to care for them. When I saw them, they looked like shadows of the people they once were. They had lung problems, rheumatism, frostbite, diarrhea—they were human wrecks who refused all food, asking only for hot tea. They were dying one by one.

One of them, an SS officer who had only worked in accounting and had never held a weapon, told me in the German he had learned in Bistrița about his experience in Kotlas, a camp located only 100 km from the Arctic Circle. It was a place of extermination, where winter was hell. The SS officers, although protected by the Geneva Conventions, were forced to work in inhumane conditions, with food reduced to a minimum amount of bread and thin soup. The work was almost impossible because of the cold, and many of them died of hunger, disease, and exhaustion.

One evening, that officer called me over, placed a photograph of his family in my hand—his wife and two children in front of their house, surrounded by a flower garden. He knew the end was near and gave me a small ring, asking me to keep it rather than let it fall into Russian hands. The next morning, I found him dead, just as he had predicted.

I didn't keep that ring for long. In the end, I traded it for a kilo of sugar and a loaf of bread, with Jano's help, fearing that I would lose it or that it would be confiscated. His photo was also destroyed along with my papers, ruined by the spring rains, so I was unable to honor the promise I had made to him to preserve the memory of his family.

The story of the detachment of 700 SS officers from Memel ended with a cruel sense of justice in the form of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

THE GOLDEN TEETH

I met the old Saxon wheelwright in Bistrița. His workshop was on a street almost 100 meters long. I took the slaughterhouse's single-horse cart there to have it repaired. He was a strong man with a well-developed sense of humor. I was back in the camp hospital as a representative of the maintenance brigade. One day, new patients arrived. After work, I went up to them, hoping to see someone I knew. As I was walking among the beds, a familiar face stared at me. I had seen this face somewhere before. He was around 50 years old, with brown, unshaven skin.

– Where are you from, are you from Bistrița? I know you, what's your name?

– My name is Thunn.

– Mr. Thunn, I recognized you immediately, but I couldn't remember where I knew you from. I visited your workshop in Bistrița. I was a warehouse worker at the slaughterhouse.

– You repaired our car.

– That may be so, young man, but I don't remember, I'm an old man now.

– Which camp did you come from?

– From camp 8. In the summer we cleared the forest, in the winter we carried trees with horse-drawn sleds near the railroad tracks, and then we loaded the wood into 60-ton wagons. Hard work.

– I believe you, Uncle Thunn, where is there easy work in prison?

– Now that you're in the hospital, you'll get stronger.

– I don't believe that. I'm sick, I'll never recover from this. You can recover at home, but not here.

– You have to have faith, Uncle Thunn, because faith gives you strength. I'll come back again sometime.

He didn't live much longer; by afternoon he was already dying. His belly and face were swollen, his legs were as thick as pillars, and he was wheezing and breathing heavily. His fellow sufferers did not even look at him.

look at him. Surely, each of them thought that they would suffer the same fate. After a while, they took him to the barracks, next to the other dead bodies. A few days later, Jano came looking for me.

– I saw you talking to the old man who died a few days ago.

– Yes, I knew him from Bistrița.

– Didn't you notice he had three gold teeth?

– No, I didn't notice.

– It would be a shame to leave them there for someone else to take.

– Then go and get them!

– I don't want to go. You go, you're braver than me.

– I'll never be a corpse robber.

– That's a shame, you could get good money for that gold.

It was terribly cold. Not even the forestry brigades went to work. At a temperature of
At minus 30 degrees Celsius, not even the prisoners were made to work. I simply couldn't get the old man's gold teeth out of my mind. The next day, after lunch, I dressed warmly, put on my boots, and ran downstairs. As soon as I stepped outside, I couldn't breathe. The cold air hit me in the face. There was no one outside. The barracks were about 50–60 meters away. I ran to the barracks, and the door was open. Uncle Thunn was sitting on one side, frozen stiff, his mouth wide open. It wasn't a pleasant sight. Jano was right about the gold teeth. They were at the bottom.

After a few days, I went back to the shack. Half of the old man's upper teeth were gone. I didn't ask Jano anything. It's not worth befriending such despicable people.

When I got home in the fall of 1948, I looked for Uncle Thunn's house. No one was there, and there was a huge padlock on the door. His neighbors said that his family had left for the West in 1945. Since then, none of them had been back.

JANO'S STORY

As I already mentioned, Jano was a handsome boy with dark blond hair and a long face typical of Slavs. They came with our transport, that is, seven Russians and Jano, the Slovak. From the very first day, the seven Russians and Jano were allowed to move freely outside the hospital, but not for long. The seven Russians were taken to a labor camp and from there they disappeared. As long as we were with the Germans, we knew everything that was going on. Alek, a German sergeant from Koningsberg, knew Russian and, as a boy, he knew what had happened and how it had happened. For a while he worked at the stumps, which is where he got his nickname.

He always offered to hold the handle of the wheelbarrow, just to be told, he said. The elderly gladly gave up their place. The payment was a piece of bread, a spoonful of porridge, a cigarette, a little sugar, whatever each person had.

We pushed the wheelbarrow over potholes and branches. It wasn't easy to hold the handle of the wheelbarrow; sometimes you even had to lean on it to keep the logs from rolling out. I never gave the wheelbarrow handle to anyone, my goal being to work so I could eat, because without food you would die. My two hips were blue from the wheelbarrow handle, because my body was skin and bones, but I never gave up the wheelbarrow handle to anyone.

After a while, we became closer, not as friends, but simply close. I was told that he was from Slovakia, but had come to Pest when he was young. He had been trained as a police officer.

– We had many problems with the "nyilasi" (the SS equivalent of the Hungarian authorities), he said. It was difficult to get along with them. Young punks would gather in gangs with machine guns. They were ruthless, without fear of God. They wouldn't listen to reason. We had to shoot at them. How many Jews escaped from their hands? When the Russians came in, I was working in the public order division.

– One night, just as I was walking home, I came across a group of Hungarian prisoners. The Russians who were leading the group of prisoners, upon seeing me, simply grabbed me and pushed me into the group of prisoners. When I tried to explain to them, to no avail, who I was and where I worked, one of them hit me. That is why I am here as a prisoner, even though I am innocent. My family does not even know that I am a prisoner.

And finally, the time came to go home. After almost four years. For years, the Russians kept telling us, "Szoko, domoj" (soon, go home). We no longer believed these lies, and even now we don't believe these stories. But one evening, the head nurse came in with the guard commander and called roll. We were all on the list. I asked the head nurse what the roll call was for.

– "You're going home," she told us.

I kissed the messenger of this good news and cheered.

– Guys, we're going home!

In Kirov, we were quartered for two weeks. Kirov is the capital of the Kajski district. The train cars weren't ready for the camp yet. Jano was still hanging around me. He was walking around dejected, with his head down.

I said to him:

– What's the matter, comrade in suffering, aren't you happy we're going home? Home, to freedom.

– Who knows what's at home? he said, with a glimmer of fear in his faded blue eyes.

After two weeks, they took us to the train station and put us in train cars, each car holding thirty people and thirty beds, attached to the walls of the car. At the beginning of summer, the carriages were open, and we were very happy that we were finally going home. When they brought us into the bitter cold, they made us work in the December snow. We slept on the floor of the unheated carriages with the doors bolted shut. We lost another three days at the station.

On the third day in the afternoon, two soldiers came and were looking for someone. The unfortunate man they were looking for was from our carriage. When he heard that they were looking for him, he hid in the corner of the carriage, while we remained silent. Once again, we got out of the cars for a head count, each person having to stand in front of his car. There were only 29 of us. The two men entered our car and pulled the unfortunate man out of the train. His face was white as a ghost and he was completely broken. He disappeared from among us.

– What was his crime? everyone murmured. For something like this to happen at the last moment, after so many years! He must have done something at home! They were looking for people like him.

THE TWO SALT BARGES

Kirov. The port city on the Vyatka River. Before the Soviets, the city bore the name of the river. But after they shot Kirov, Stalin's close friend, the city was renamed Kirov in his memory. At that time, it had about 150,000 inhabitants. Kirov was also the capital of the Kaysky District. The Russian district is as large as Romania. On the wide waters of the Vyatka River, ships sailed as if they were on the Danube. Can the Vyatka be compared to the Danube?

Before the etabul set off, we spent 17 days in Kirov. As usual with the Russians, nothing was ready for departure. After that, they began to prepare the ship. So that we would not sit around waiting for the ship to be ready, they chose about 30 people who looked stronger and sent them to work in the port. From the very first day, I was chosen to be one of them. They did not choose well with me.

When we arrived at the port, we were put on a boat and sailed about 5-6 km up the Vjatka River. Two guards watched over us. They were no longer watching us so closely. Who would be crazy enough to escape on the day they were supposed to go home? After we got off the boat, I noticed two barges full of salt. Both were full of salt, and over time, perhaps even from the rain, the salt had become hard as concrete. We had to carry the salt to the warehouse 50 meters above. I didn't even try to carry it, as I could barely climb up there myself. I tried to break up the hardened salt with a pickaxe or an iron crowbar. This work completely exhausted me. Fortunately, I only had to work with the salt for five days.

The two barges were German. I still remember their names, even after all these years: Kiel and Bremen. The names of two German ports on the Baltic Sea. How did they get here? Across the Baltic Sea, across rivers, across canals on the Volga to Kazan, from there up the Kama to Vyatka, and from Vyatka to the port city of Kirov.

– That wasn't enough, though; the supervisor wasn't satisfied with the pace of work. He swore constantly. He saw our emaciated bodies and understood everything. With us, he wouldn't have been able to empty the two barges in a year.

The next morning, we had barely started work when a group of noisy young people arrived in a truck. The supervisor called for the Komsomol. The boys and girls who had arrived began to unload

the other barge. They unloaded very easily, climbing up and down the barge steps at a brisk pace. They received the same food as us when lunch break came, that is, 20 kg of black bread and 100 grams of cooking oil. And we had plenty of salt.

During lunch, I was able to observe the young people closely. I had read a lot about the Komsomol, but it was all good and beautiful things. I don't want to change anyone's opinion, but these young people were serious, not full of typical youthful exuberance. They sat quietly and ate bread wbutter. However, there were young people who did not eat. All the girls were blonde, of medium height and rather robust. During my imprisonment, I saw that women did the hard work. I saw women working in the forest brigade, three women working in a small brigade. One worked with a chainsaw, the other with an axe, and the third stacked the wood. That was the first time I saw a chainsaw.

In the cement factory, the only man was the director, but only because he had lost his arm at the front. It was just office work. The women protected their faces from the dust with scarves, but to no avail.

I don't know what happened to the salt on the two barges. Did the Consomol members unload it? If so, they will surely remember it for the rest of their lives, because it was very hard work.

RELATIVES

Christmas 1945. A year ago, we were beyond Russian territory, facing freezing temperatures and starvation. Now we were warm, but hungry, thinking happily about what we would eat when we got home. Putnoki, the eternal loudmouth, remembered the traditional menu:

– In the morning – cooked ham and cold pâté; for lunch – chicken soup with dumplings, followed by schnitzel with potato salad. And walnut cakes and poppy seed cakes.

No one said anything. Next to the window was a small Christmas tree, on which we hung improvised decorations made of white paper and cotton wool. We sang carols. From time to time, a nurse would glance at our "fun." They knew it was a big holiday. When we finished "celebrating," Jano took me aside.

– You, Debreczeni, I need a good man. You will be the leader and translator. You have to cut 80 m^3 of wood from the collective farm forest that belongs to the hospital. You can manage Russian reasonably well. The collective farm is far away. Conditions will be better there. Ivanov is going with you, and I know you can't stand the old man, but Pavel and Andrei are on vacation. You choose nine men; you know them better. Set out on the second day of the new year.

After Jano left, I told the boys what was going on, specifying that we would have more freedom of movement.

There were 30 of us in the room, of whom only Uncle Tătar and Csonka Istvan were older. I told the boys to think about who wanted to go and told them that, in any case, I had to submit the list of names of those who would be going there by tomorrow, adding that, if they wanted, I would choose them myself.

After breakfast, I asked the boys what they had decided. They asked me to choose, because they would go anywhere. And so the little brigade was formed, consisting of Tanko Balint from Gujmeshozeplokt, Tanko Aron from Haromszek, Angi Sandor from Gyergyo, Sipos Bela from Bihor, Balog Sandor from Satu Mare, Peter Koloss from Mureș, Kovacs Istvan from Zala, Kovacs Istvan from Baja, and Csaszar Tibor from Ujvidek. We wrote the list of names on the sheet of paper Jano had brought. Before New Year's, we received good winter clothes and felt boots.

After New Year's, it was dark when we left. After 8 a.m., the sun came up. The little horse was waiting just like us to leave. These animals have amazing strength. Even though they feed intensively on grass for eight months, at the end of winter they become like walking skeletons. The same thing happens to cows, but they still survive and give milk.

Two horses were harnessed to each sleigh and they flew off into the unknown. I stood next to the driver. It was cold, with a leaden fog surrounding everything. To the east, the peaks of the Urals were still covered in fog. A light wind was blowing, making the Russian cold even colder. The Urals began to reveal their peaks as we drove through the forests on the Ural plateau. Forests full of black fir, red fir, poplars, and birches. It was amazing to see a group of white birch trees scattered among a crowd of black fir trees. From near the Urals, the huge reddish disc of the sun appeared. The wind seemed to pick up. Whenever the road entered a forest, we felt relieved because the wind wasn't blowing so hard. You could see the tracks of a plow, proof that the road was well maintained. In the distance there were several collective farms, and sometimes the good road meant safety.

I couldn't hear the boys talking; they were sitting with their backs to the sleigh to protect themselves from the wind. At one point, the driver stopped the sleigh, got out, pushed me out of the sleigh and into the snow, and started rubbing my face with snow. My face stung, especially my nose. He explained that if I didn't take care of my face in such weather, it would easily freeze. He also told me that the Russian winter is very dangerous and can even kill you if you're not careful.

We arrived in the afternoon at a hut, which could have been a forester's house or a cabin. We stopped for a while to let the horses rest and to eat slices of bread and drink a little water to hydrate ourselves. Our driver went into the hut, called me in, and the driver of the second sleigh stayed outside and ate. The hut had two tables and two long benches. The driver opened his bag, took out a bottle, drank from it, and urged me to drink too. I hadn't drunk for years, and not at all since I had been taken prisoner.

The drink was pinkish in color, sweet in taste, and weak. As it went down my throat, I could already feel its strength. But I didn't want to get drunk in front of my fellow sufferers. I didn't drink any more because my body was weak and couldn't handle another drink.

The forest was getting denser and denser, the branches of the fir trees were touching our heads, and the snow at the edge of the road had grown to half a meter. I almost fell asleep. I

I felt young and free. I dreamed and planned for the future. I wanted to live in Canada, dig for gold, catch silver foxes, clear forests, and travel by dog sled.

Silly dreams! But still, some of them came true: I am in the North, I clear forests, I travel by horse-drawn sleigh. But still, something in my heart feels that something important is going to happen to me, something that will be a turning point in my life.

We arrived late in the evening at the collective farm. The road was no longer visible, so the coachman let the horses go, which, he said, knew the way and were eager to get to the warm stable to rest and eat hay.

The people from the collective farm weren't expecting us because they didn't know what time we would arrive. They had prepared a small hut for us, which had iron beds; in the center of the hut was a long table with benches and a brick stove where you could cook or heat up food. As soon as we put down the tools from the sleigh, two young men from the collective farm appeared with a basket of dry wood. Both were locals, with yellow skin and almond-shaped eyes. After a while, the chairwoman of the collective farm, who was also a local, appeared. I knew that my ancestors, in their migrations, had settled for a time in the area between the Volga and Kama rivers and that their descendants who had remained here were related to us, the Hungarians. Perhaps they also know about this kinship.

They brought dinner late in the evening. We were all exhausted. The next day we woke up to windy weather. The chairwoman and the two locals went to show us the plot of land that was to be cleared, which was a kilometer away from the kolkhoz. The chairwoman explained to Ivanov and me that it wasn't really necessary to cut down the entire forest, but only to thin it out and cut down the trees we needed.

We formed three groups. I helped each group when needed. The work went smoothly, and by the end of the week we had large piles of wood. But how could the work not go well when we had full bellies? Still, the workday was short. The sun rose late and it got dark early, so we couldn't start work until after 9 a.m. and we finished at 3 p.m. We were already looking forward to the next day off, especially me, because I wanted to find out more about the people who lived on the collective farm.

The fire was burning, and dry pieces of fir crackled in the stove. It was still dark outside, and I was still dozing. I asked the president if we could have breakfast later. We were curious to see what we would get to eat. We were served cabbage soup with fresh pieces of fish. The soup was so thick that the spoon got stuck in it. We simply couldn't finish the two flatbreads.

After breakfast, there was great merriment. Ivanov did not sleep with us, which surprised us. Perhaps he was afraid that we would kill him, but we all felt much better without him.

After lunch, we went to the collective farm, but the chairwoman wasn't there; she had left in the morning, so we lazed around, teased each other, and sang. Ivanov told us that we had no business being at the collective farm after dark.

He didn't have to tell us twice that we had to work, that we had to obey orders. Ivanov was in pretty bad shape at the time; his face was drawn and yellowish. We didn't feel sorry for him at all, we just wondered why he was being so nice to us. But we were wrong.

One day, after we had finished our work, he ordered us to each carry a piece of wood to the collective farm and told us that he would show us which piece of wood to carry. The boys and I told him we wouldn't do it, because we weren't going to carry a green fir tree and our tools through all that snow. He suddenly became furious. He must have thought that I had stirred up the people in the brigade again. I tried to convince him that wasn't the case.

He shook his rifle, aimed it at me, and started yelling:

– I'll shoot you right now!

We quietly backed away back into the collective farm. In the end, it happened again. Ivanov is still the same. He'll rat me out again when we go back to the camp, and I'll spend another three days in solitary confinement.

– You see, guys, that's Ivanov. He'll lie again when we get back to the camp, and I'll get three days in solitary again, because they believe everything he says.

During the night, someone wanted to get out, but the door was locked from the outside. This was obviously Ivanov's doing. He had to do his business out of the window. In the morning, the door was open. When Ivanov appeared, I questioned him. He denied having anything to do with the door.

– Fine, then we won't work today!

– If you don't work, you don't eat! said Ivanov, and he sat down in the doorway, blocking it, and chased away those who brought us food.

After a while, the chairwoman came.

– What happened? she asked, surprised.

Ivanov told her our version, that we didn't want to work, so we weren't getting any food. The president looked at us questioningly. We told her our version, adding that if it happened again, we would set fire to the barracks. The president took Ivanov with her, and shortly afterwards breakfast appeared.

At lunchtime, the president reappeared and told us that if we hadn't gone to work, we should help them thresh. We went willingly. Instead of a threshing machine, we found a little horse walking aimlessly among the sheaves of oats lying on the ground. This was happening in a large silo. Some of the boys from the collective farm gathered the straw with rakes, leaving the oats clean.

The oats were cleaned, then aired. I had never seen anything like it, it was interesting. The machine used to air the oats made so much dust that we couldn't see each other. At one point, the president took me to her office. There was a girl writing at a table; the president said something to her, and then the girl left. She spoke to her in their language, not in Russian. In a few seconds, she returned with a plate on which there were three boiled eggs and two flatbreads, along with a cup of milk.

– Eat, the woman said to me.

I ate quietly, not gobbling.

– What nationality are you?

– We are all Hungarians! We have been prisoners of war since 1944.

– I suspected as much, she said. So we are kind of related.

– And I thought so too, because you are in a place where our ancestors stayed for a long time before they left for Europe. That was a long time ago. I know about the family connection. Many years ago, a group from Hungary was here and we got in touch with them. They explained our relationship to us. Look what they left here.

There were a bunch of magazines in the drawer.

– Before the war, there were others here with us. But now, because of the war, I don't know when the Hungarians will come back.

She showed me a photograph of herself with several others in a boat.

– We are on the Kama, when we went fishing. The name of the kolkhoz is Kama, just like the river that flows near us. We belong to the Vogul people. We have brothers on the other side of the Urals. The Urals are not far from us. When the weather is clear, you can see the peaks.

After finishing work, I went to Ivanov's place.

– "What's it going to be, are we going to work tomorrow?" I asked him.

– I don't know what will happen, he feels very ill.

– Go back to the camp and let someone else take your place. There's no doctor here, no medicine, and you'll surely die.

– You'd like that, I know you would! he said, and I saw a glint in his eyes.

– I don't want you to die, as you think I do.

– You are a bad man, do as you

think best. And I left.

When I brought breakfast, the boys told me that Ivanov had left for the camp last night in a sleigh.

Later, the president came and told us to go and help with the threshing. We went happily. Everyone felt good here. Although we were prisoners, because they treated us well, we forgot about it. We didn't even notice when it got dark. In the evening, we received two buckets of kvass. The next day, we worked at the kolkhoz again, but this time with potatoes. We sorted the good ones from the bad ones. It was quite difficult because the potatoes were not very mature. From mid-May to the end of September, there was not enough time for them to ripen, and so they ended up spoiling. They had to be sorted all the time. Towards evening, the others arrived. Ivanov was replaced by Pavel, the Belarusian. Pavel, who was descended from the old Polish serfs. And he called us by the nickname
"pan," as his ancestors used to say. No one "ruled" us; we were just prisoners. Only the gentle Pavel.

We shook his hands, patted him on the shoulder in a friendly manner, and rejoiced enormously. His eyes filled with tears at the welcome he received; he was particularly moved. He saw and felt the love with which we surrounded him. The noise we made attracted the kolkhoz workers. The chairwoman's face beamed with warmth. Now she too could see the difference between Pavel and Ivanov.

That's how it is. On the front lines, love for your country ignites you, the power of the law and fear push you toward the unknown next to you who is against you, just as you are against him. And we kill each other. Because that's the order. If the fight is over and you're still alive, then you can live on in understanding. Pavel's case is proof of that. While I was a prisoner, I felt nothing but hatred and disgust for Ivanov. Maybe that's how he was born; I felt sorry for him. His soul was sick.

Pavel came with the news that in two weeks we had to return to the camp. The evaluation commission was coming for a new consultation in Kirov. Camps 7 and 8 had a contract with the paper mill.

Every day, between 400 and 600 prisoners worked in the timber industry. Every three months, the workers were replaced. No prisoner could withstand the extremely hard work. The food was very poor and scarce, and within three months, the workers were unable to continue. In winter, due to snowdrifts as high as a man, it was almost impossible to work. In addition to an axe and a saw, each worker also had to have a shovel. The snow had to be cleared from around the tree trunk so that it could be cut. They had to produce 3 m^3 of wood in 8 hours of work, then cut it into one-meter lengths—that was the worker's 100% quota. The 75% quota was 2.25 m^3. The cut wood had to be stacked and arranged so that it would not fall. The thin branches had to be gathered into a pile. It was work beyond human strength. It was no wonder that after three months of work the workers were exhausted. Summer was easier. Then, with a rake, we gathered the branches into a pile.

The food was very poor. The number one priority was everything for the front. This priority cost us dearly. Civilians stood in line for bread. The prisoners were fed from Kirov and eastern Kotlas. The bread was bad and made from oat flour, weighing two kilograms, and was called "bubunka." There was also white bread, but that was for the sick and officers, i.e., prisoner officers. They only worked if they wanted to.

The white bread was mixed with soy flour. During my entire imprisonment, I was sick twice. I had diarrhea for three weeks and hepatitis for seven weeks. During this period, I was given white bread.

As I have already mentioned, I wanted to move the reader with these details about life there.

Our small brigade formed a close-knit team. Three of us were from the city, and the other seven were from the countryside, the sons of farmers. We knew each other well; we had time to tell about our life stories. Me, Kovacs Pista, and the other Kovacs Pista were city dwellers. The others were farmers. The first Kovacs was from Zala and the other from Baja, and he was a sailor. None of us had ever worked as lumberjacks before. We learned from the country boys, especially Angi Sandor and Tanko Balint. I can say that the Russians helped us as best they could, depending on the circumstances. Even in poverty, we could see their efforts.

While I had hepatitis, I was given 50 grams of sugar for seven weeks. The normal ration was 10 grams of sugar per day.

If we went out to work and, after a few hours, the camp commander received a radio message that a cold front was approaching, with temperatures of -33 degrees Celsius, and that everyone had to be cautious, a messenger would arrive on horseback with orders to return to the camp. The order was to march, but none of us could escape the weakness in our bodies.

The next two weeks I spent in the kolkhoz were the happiest of my entire imprisonment. I don't know how the others felt about it, but even after many years, I think back and remember those days with pleasure. The close ties that bound us together during this difficult period of imprisonment were special. Pavel was a man with a big heart.

– "Stay in the collective farm, don't tremble beside us!" I told him.

– "I can't, if the guards come, what will happen?" he replied.

He would soon be discharged from the army, and he did not want to be delayed. Every morning we left the collective farm for the beautiful forest singing military songs. Pavel was beaming. The food had improved—every evening, a large piece of fish awaited us in our soup. The red meat of the fish was divine, it seemed to melt in your mouth.

I told the boys that if we continued like this for another two weeks, we would get fat and end up being rated as 100% workers.

– We wouldn't mind, they replied.

I agreed with the president that we would put together an artistic program for the two remaining afternoons. She agreed. We organized ourselves and decided that we would sing, dance, and have fun. In Hungarian, of course! I can say that it was magnificent. The cultural hall was full. And in front of

hall, as well. On the first and second Sundays, we presented Hungarian songs and dances. On the first Sunday, we sang haiducie songs, several oștenești songs, marches, and then dances. Angi Sandor danced traditional Szekler dances, Beres Joska and Hunyas Misi danced dances from Satu Mare – the fecioreasca from Satu Mare. The music and rhythm were provided by our clapping and voices. We sang "Ce bine îi merge călărețului soldat" (How well the soldier rider rides). Then we sang a few sadder songs. It was a complete success.

Nothing like this had ever been seen here before. We performed dances. The girls didn't want to dance with us. When we tried to invite one of them to dance, she ran away giggling. So we ended up dancing among ourselves, cheering wildly. We also included words with double meanings in the lyrics of the songs. The audience vibrated with us. There was not a single Russian face in the area. Their clothes were quite colorful. Red, black, and dark blue dominated their color palette. The women also wore pants. Their footwear was different. The younger women wore fur shoes, and the older ones wore boots or clogs. But what kind of clogs? Tree bark. Here in the north, where winter lasts seven months, these clogs last a whole winter. They can be made by hand, at home. Birch and poplar are abundant. Pieces one meter or one and a half meters long are held over the fire or steamed. They are cut to a thickness of 2-3 mm and a width of 3-4 mm. They were then covered with various pieces of animal skin, with fur. Some old women had their heads covered with a shawl. These were our spectators who, dressed like this and sweating, resisted heroically and applauded us frantically until the end.

Everything comes to an end eventually. The next day, we were leaving. We woke up early. Only after sunrise did we set off through the deep snow. We had a hearty breakfast. After lunch, the president called me to her:

– Come with me.

We went to her office. She took an oval birch ornament out of a drawer and gave it to me. It wasn't a regular birch, because the trunk wasn't round, but oval. It still had its bark on it. On the front was a burnt image of a shaman dancer. The shaman's mask was a bear's head, and she was holding a drum with ribbons in her hand. The artist had burned different symbols on the edges: a bear's head, a wolf's head, a whole fish, a mouse, and a small boat. It was a beautiful piece of work.

– Thank you very much, but I have nothing to give you.

– You don't have to, he said.

– I gave it to you so that when you get home, you'll remember us.

I thanked her and kissed her on the cheek. She burst into tears, she was so moved.

We set off, under the gaze of everyone in the collective farm. Until we reached the forest, we saw the people from the collective farm waving goodbye to us. We walked slowly. We spent two whole months in the collective farm, and during that time it snowed; the snow on the road was completely untrodden.

The two men from the collective farm told us that we should get out of the carts from time to time to let the horses rest. So we walked. It wasn't very cold. The wind was blowing, but the trees in the forest softened its force. At noon, a blizzard began. We were halfway there, and the foresters' hut was even further away. The two commanders consulted each other:

– What should we do?

It was the end of February, when the weather was unpredictable. Spring was showing its strength, the days were getting longer, and the sun was getting stronger. If the two commanders didn't know what to do, who did? However, they knew from experience that now, in spring, heavy snowstorms could come at a moment's notice and last for days.

We decided to turn back quickly. It was very difficult to turn the sleigh around, and we hurried as fast as we could to reach the walls of the collective farm. The return journey was even more difficult. Snow had covered everything. The horses could barely move. The snowstorm hit us mercilessly. We were blinded by the blowing snow. It had almost stopped snowing, but the wind was stirring up the snow that had settled on the ground. Dead tired, we reached the collective farm, much to the delight of those there, I believe.

Those on our land cannot even imagine what a snowstorm is like. Just like typhoons and tornadoes in warm countries, blizzards here can kill you, flatten you to the ground. They engulf you and suffocate you.

I've been through something like this before. We went to Kotlas for food, a town 800 km away, at the confluence of two rivers, where the Northern Dvina flows into the White Sea. Six of us went as prisoners to load wagons. The wagons were loaded when suddenly a blizzard started. We lazed around in the heat for ten days until we could set off. The storm was so strong that we could barely clear the snow from the tracks. Two weeks after our departure, we arrived at the camp. They only knew about the blizzard from the radio and from the lack of supplies: they had no butter, sugar, flour, salted fish, or medicine.

The blizzard lasted five days. It blew mercilessly. You couldn't see the forest because of the wind. Fortunately, we got firewood from the collective farm. They had plenty. The temperatures dropped, it was very cold. Blizzards always bring cold weather. How strange! The weather here was strange.

We set off again, much to the dismay of the collective farm workers. Many of them wanted us to stay there. It was a dream shattered for everyone.

There were no signs. The driver was deep in thought. In front of us were snowdrifts, and we couldn't use the horses at all. We had to make our way through the drifts, sweating like racehorses. In some places, the snow was shallower. Towards evening, we finally reached the forester's house. We tied the four horses in the corner designated for them, because even they cannot survive the bitter cold. These animals are amazing, because they can survive the terrible winters here for 7-8 months. No one is able to gather enough fodder for the winter during the so-called four months of "summer." Oats grow in these parts, but who has enough land to grow enough oats for animals? So the poor horses became omnivores. They ate potato peelings, cabbage, bread, bran—basically anything left over from the kitchen. And there wasn't much left. So, by the end of winter, they could barely stand up. You could count their ribs with the naked eye. The cows were as small as the horses. Probably because of the extreme climate and the proximity to the Arctic Circle, Russian researchers and scientists created these animal species. I felt very sorry for them.

The next day, we set off very early. Around noon, we reached the main road. Here, we could already see the tracks left by the plows, but they had not passed on the side roads. You could only travel on these roads by sleigh. When we reached the main road, we got into the sleighs and, before it got dark, we arrived at the camp. After two long months, we returned "home." Tanko Balint was right: the camp was our home. Upon entering the room, we received an incredible welcome from our fellow sufferers. Questions began flying from both sides.

A letter from my mother was waiting for me. It was a pleasant surprise. In every letter, she asked me when I was coming home. I replied exactly what the Russians told us: "soon." During my four years in captivity, my mother received about 11 letters from me, although I had written her many more. I often reread them, thinking about the years spent at home and all the familiar faces. Unforgettable memories.

The people from Kirov came and spent three days evaluating and consulting with us non-stop. We were evaluated by the blizzard and did not take part in the commission's evaluations. We escaped the forest brigade for three months

forest brigade. When the commission comes next time, it will already be spring, and the work in the forest will be much easier. There will be mushrooms, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, and sometimes birds' eggs. We felt sorry for the birds, but the forests were being cut down anyway, so there would have been nothing left. Not even bushes.

That's how our trip ended. The biggest gain for me was getting to know my distant relatives. I had read a lot about the Finno-Ugric peoples, about our relatives, but I never thought I would meet any of them. However, I had this chance. I feel privileged. I have to write this down because it was one of the most interesting experiences of my life.

GERMAN TEACHER

A person sees thousands of faces in their lifetime. Some remain forever, just like the face of that German. After we got off the train, they washed and dressed us, and then the Germans came to ask us who we were and where we came from. When they saw that we were Hungarians, they turned away; we weren't very interesting to them. Because of my leg injury, I spent a long time in bed, so I didn't get to know him until much later. I was already walking with crutches when I first met him in the hallway. Later, I found out that he got double portions of soup because he was a poet and, going from room to room, he cheered up the sick with poems and anecdotes.

– Not bad! – I thought to myself.

He first asked me, in Russian, what was wrong with me. At the time, I didn't know Russian very well. I had lived in Bistrița for three years and, since my boss was Saxon, I understood some German. He was delighted, and with a mixture of German, Russian, and gestures, we understood each other very well. He encouraged me to learn foreign languages together so that time would pass more quickly. He told me that he was from Königsberg and that he had been a professor at the university there.

– I worked in Bistrița at a sawmill, so I understand a little German; I am Hungarian, but I know Romanian.

– Don't even mention Romanians! They are a nation of thieves and liars.

He got hold of some paper and we set to work. I was interested, especially because I was taking a German course in Bistrița. We had to be careful what we wrote, because the Russians couldn't stand prisoners who wrote. We took notes. Once every three months, they let us write a postcard, and those who were punished, once every six months.

He told me he was Bavarian and that his parents had settled in Königsberg before the war. Prussians are blond with blue eyes, but he was quite dark. He was a heavy smoker, willing to give his bread for a little tobacco. It was a tragedy for him when he didn't have cigarettes. At that time, I was still smoking too. In the summer of 1945, I was already working in a brigade or going to a local's house to dig potatoes or chop wood. Wherever I worked, I got something, and most of the time, even tobacco. When I saw a cigarette butt thrown away by the locals, I would pick it up immediately. I would give it to the teacher, and he would say that the tobacco in the butts was very strong. There was tobacco for sale, but it was "worthless."

My German teacher, Pinneberg, as he was called and wrote his name, was an interesting character. He was skin and bones. His bald head shone like the full moon. In his brown cap, whenever he entered a room, he would say a loud "Good morning!" and immediately start speaking Hungarian. If he didn't know a word, he would look it up on a piece of paper in his pocket and read it. The nurses liked him because he joked with them. He was not yet 45 and worked in the military offices. He had four children at home and his wife was a teacher. He taught me, and he was more diligent than I was because he had more time. He had never been part of a brigade. Throughout his imprisonment, he was interned in the ward for the dystrophic. These patients have no disease, but because of starvation they are so destroyed that they are barely alive. Imprisonment is far from a masquerade ball!

In the summer, in the shade of the hospital, we would talk for hours. I don't remember if it was Sunday or not. We talked about Transylvania and its history. He knew that Transylvania had been colonized by the Saxons since the 11th-12th centuries. The Tatars wiped out the population of Transylvania, and the Hungarian kings called the Saxons and Swabians from Banat in the 17th-18th centuries. He began to list the German names of the fortresses and towns they had colonized. Then he turned to me:

– Surely you have heard of Mărășești, of the trap at Mărășești.

We approved it. We learned about it in school. It's history. Yes, history, but false history, because it's not true that the Germans were defeated there. Commander Kackengein asked to be allowed to pass, but the Romanians refused. Then the commander broke through the Romanian front at Mărășești and continued his march. Many German soldiers died there, but it was not a Romanian victory. Romanian history is full of lies and deceit. They built their history on legends and stories. And this history is taught in school.

Germans are precise and basic people; if they do something, no one has to fix it. There were always problems with the German brigades. Only occasionally did they meet their quotas. It was okay in the summer, but in the winter they didn't even do half.

When they arrived in the forest, the first thing they did was build a fire to warm themselves. The guard came to put them to work, but it was useless; they stalled for time. The snow was deep and crunchy. The guard was angry, but to no avail. At the end of each month, he was warned that because of "his Germans," he couldn't meet his quota. The Germans insisted: "We've never worked in the forest, take us to the factory and we'll show you what we know!" There was nothing they could do; the most

The powerful took them to Kirov to work in factories. Those who remained were dystrophic or disabled, like my teacher.

I still remember him and his face. We were often together, in communion. Although we couldn't understand each other very well, we still understood each other. Sons of two different nations, united in suffering.

NINE DAYS IN PRISON

Nine days in solitary confinement is no big deal. Solitary confinement in the army is a godsend. Soldiers can easily end up in solitary confinement if they make a mistake. And it's not that bad, but in prison, it's a different story—it's a real tragedy. A decent, quiet prisoner who eats his ration over the years can't get fat, he can never get full. He's always hungry, like a dog on a chain. And this prisoner who is never full loses his strength, he can barely walk. But to work? After all, if he is condemned to work, he must work! I was in the hospital camp when they took us to the cement factory with the brigade to work. It was towards the end of May and the weather was pleasant. The bulk cement, carried all winter in wagons, was abundant under the wagon, on the train tracks. This cement, which had fallen from the wagons until spring, had frozen. Tons of cement were wasted under the wagons. This enormous waste could not be covered up. We were there, and for this reason we had to make it disappear. And the camp had something to gain from it. We prisoners received 200 grams of bread and a teaspoon of oil at mealtimes. The work was very hard, a torment for our strength. The pickaxe, the iron bar, the frozen pieces of cement that had to be carried away to a pit. By noon we were exhausted. We waited impatiently for the factory bugle to announce noon. We collapsed in a heap, exhausted. The nurse immediately brought bread and oil. When the factory horn announced the end of the working day, we hurried to put down our tools. But Ivanov jumped up immediately and told us we had to keep working because we hadn't met our quota. We didn't want to work anymore. Ivanov, nervous, threatened us in vain that he would report us for stopping work. He couldn't intimidate us. We simply sat down next to our tools and waited. The man in charge of the tools arrived.

– Nah, see? The tools have to be handed in, the workday is over.

Ivanov could have killed me with his hateful eyes. He didn't say a word. After we handed in the tools, a short "davaj," "pasli" (let's go).

The next day, I didn't go to work. Nor did I go after that. A nurse took me to the command post because I had been summoned. Ivanov had reported me—that I didn't want to work anymore and that I had incited the other prisoners.

– Ivanov is lying, I said. We don't have a work quota.

– You have no rights, you are a prisoner, do you understand? If you go home, you can demand your rights.

– Three days in solitary confinement. You'll have plenty of time there to remember what it means to be a prisoner. They even put me in solitary confinement.

Every day, 200 grams of bread and 80 deciliters of water. In the morning and evening, I could go to the toilet. It wasn't always like that, because there was no point. But I went to work. I didn't volunteer. I didn't want to argue with the commander, because it was useless. I kept quiet. It was because of that pig Ivanov that I ended up in solitary confinement. No guard asked us to meet our quota. The only quota was for cutting wood. That's where we tried to meet our quota. As I said, it was better in the summer, but winter was harder.

The second time I ended up in solitary confinement was my fault. When I was cleaning the toilets and passing by the house of the guard's sister who was accompanying me, I had a habit of taking a break. The woman was in the yard with her children several times. I waved to her and she recognized me. The road was six meters away from the woman's house. Every Saturday we took a bath. There were always pieces of soap left over from the others and I collected them. Civilians didn't have soap. It was worth a lot. Because Andrei was supposed to be the guard coming with me the next day, I let the woman know that I would bring her the goods tomorrow. But the next day, I was devastated when Ivanov showed up instead of Andrei. The whole day was ruined. I knew he hated me and that I would have to deal with him again. But the woman's mahorca was good and tasty. When we finished work and loaded the wheelbarrows, I asked my comrades to stay behind while I waited for them at the corner of the house, so that Ivanov would also stay behind. That's how it happened: we, the first ones with the wheelbarrows, were already resting at the corner of the house. The woman was at the gate and threw me the mahorca. I threw her the soap. She caught it and disappeared under the gate. I tripped over something and fell on my stomach, but the tobacco was already hidden. Ivanov noticed something and immediately ran to me, gun in hand, shouting, "What do you want? Why are you going into the house? Don't you know you're not allowed?"

I told him I was doing my job, to which he replied that I was lying, that it wasn't true.

– You'll end up in solitary again, don't worry.

– You're locked up, pig!" he said in Hungarian.

"Sto, sto," he shouted at me. I let him yell, not afraid of him. As a guard, I knew he wasn't allowed to hit me because I was a prisoner. But I knew he would report me again.

And that's what he did. I got three days in solitary confinement. That's the punishment for being a smart prisoner. I served those days in solitary confinement. I was lucky that there was a guard that week who liked chess.

chess. Late at night, when everyone was asleep, he opened the hatch and asked me if I knew how to play chess.

– A little, not very well.

– Haro.

He brought the pieces and we played. All night long, until morning. I wasn't a keen player. I didn't like playing so much because it was tiring. The only advantage was that in the morning he gave me a piece of bread, a boiled egg, and a piece of bacon. They were delicacies for me. I ate everything, because a hungry prisoner doesn't put anything aside. I fell asleep immediately. I even ate the soup at noon instead of water, and saved the water for the evening. I hoped that my night partner would bring something else to eat, and he did. I think he couldn't wait to play chess. He wasn't a chess genius, but he won more times than I did. I didn't try as hard as he did.

In any case, those three days in solitary confinement were more pleasant than the others. Even in misfortune, there is luck. Those three days were the shortest days I spent in solitary confinement.

It was winter. I had camel hair boots, a quilted coat, and a suba, which I wore for those three days. It's a real test, being in solitary confinement when it's cold and your body is weak. We were given bread and breakfast, then they came for me. I went to the storeroom near the camp gate. It was full of iron beds and mattresses, some of them filled with straw. I knew the guard on duty because I had brought him firewood a few times.

– "How many days did you come for?" he asked me.

– For three days, I replied.

– Ivanov? asked the guard on duty.

– Yes, I replied.

I didn't think Ivanov would tell on me. But he wasn't the kind of man who wouldn't. He had a different view of what it meant to be a guard and a prisoner than the others. Probably, in his opinion, the prisoner was still the enemy. No one had ever seen him smile or laugh. With his long, freckled face, he looked at the world with suspicion. Everyone, including the other guards, hated him. Maybe he was a repentant sinner, because he always had a Bible or some other prayer book that he read. It was no use, he was my bad luck charm.

It was useless, everyone has their own fate. You need luck in everything. As we were returning to the camp, before Mátészalka, we were attacked by three Russian planes. One of the planes targeted me. I saw what it wanted. There was nothing I could do, so I lay down at the foot of a young acacia tree. The bullets whizzed past my head, but they didn't hit me. Then two German fighter planes appeared and shot down two of the three Russian planes, and the third Russian plane fled.

On the front line, I was carrying weapons. A grenade fell between the horses. One of the horses had its guts spilled out, and the other horse fell instantly. The man driving the horses fell without a sound. I was unharmed.

After we were taken prisoner, we walked from Bamaşujváros to Debrecen. We were spread out over a distance of 800 meters, in rows of five. I was on the edge. When we were taken prisoner, the Russians stripped us of our good clothes. The man who took my coat gave me a blue German coat in exchange. At the time, I didn't know that coat would almost get me killed. As we marched toward Debrecen, a detachment of Cossacks passed by us on their way to the front. The Cossack officer was riding alongside them. When he got to me, he called me over. I pointed to myself: Me? Yes, me.

— "Where are you from?" he asked me.

— Hungarian, I replied.

— No, you're a Nazi.

The Cossack officer started hitting me in the face with his whip. Then he reached for his gun.

— He's going to shoot me! He won't be held accountable, we're on the front line! I said to myself.

I froze! Someone would bury me, and no one would ever know. Then, out of nowhere, a grenade exploded next to the Cossack officer's horse. The horse bolted, and the Cossack officer couldn't rein it back to me. I lost myself among the other prisoners, pulling the cursed blue coat off me.

— Better to be cold than to go through that again!

An older prisoner threw a blanket over my shoulders, which came in handy in the wagon that was taking me to four years of captivity.

When we were taken prisoner in the center of the small town of Mezőcsát in 1944, our lives were hanging by a thread. The front line on the Tisza, which lasted two weeks, caused many losses among the Russians. When they broke through the front on the Tisza, they surrounded the town of Mezőcsát. Our defense crumbled. Only eight of us remained. We left two wounded at the mill at the edge of town. The eight of us wandered aimlessly through the town. We had barely reached the center when we came across some Russians. We stopped. We counted them in a second. There were eighteen of them and only eight of us. We had eight rifles, and they had seventeen machine guns and a pistol. The pistol was with the officer. They stopped too, but then they slowly advanced towards us. I told my men to slowly put their rifles on the ground. I did the same. Our lives, in that place, at that moment, were hanging by a thread. We were lucky. My boys were barely eighteen, just boys sent to the front. I was the oldest, twenty-two. The Russians, as far as I could tell, were our age. Only the officer and one other Russian soldier seemed to be older. Later I found out that the oldest of the Russians we met then was from Bessarabia and spoke Romanian. They disarmed us and we had to throw away our grenades. Then the looting began. I was left in my shirt, and they took my watch. He was delighted with the watch, as if he had found a purpose in life.

We were also lucky that the Russians weren't drunk. A sober man judges differently than a drunk man. On the front lines, people change, they become tough, they even become animals.

There and then, in those bitter moments, many thoughts went through my mind. In the early 1940s, I was in a shooting camp. One afternoon, a high-ranking officer arrived. In the evening, around the campfire, the conversation turned to bravery. Among other things, the officer asked us what a Hungarian soldier does on the front line if he is surrounded. For a long time, none of us sitting around the campfire said anything. Then one of us replied:

— He surrenders.

— "The devil will! " snapped the

officer. The officer continued:

— A Hungarian soldier never surrenders; he would rather die for his country! Never forget that!

— Hungarian soldiers always take enemy bullets in the face. Do you understand? The

rest of us replied in unison:

— We understand!

Then and there, when the Russians surrounded us in the city center, I remembered the words and orders of that high-ranking officer. We were in the same situation, but the instinct to survive is stronger than any order. I had no right to kill seven young men. If that was how it was meant to be, who was to blame?

I also met that high-ranking officer in camp 8. He was walking around. I could have asked him about the order he gave us: Don't surrender! But I kept quiet and didn't ask him anything. What was the point, anyway?

I told you these things so that you can feel what we went through. These are just a few, because there were many more.

I'm not a very religious person. I never pray. My mother and sister were practicing Catholics and there wasn't a day that they didn't go to church, sometimes even twice a day.

When I arrived at the prison for the third time, it was terribly cold. I relied on the guard's common sense. In winter, it gets dark quickly. People retreat to their warm homes, and only those who have something urgent to do walk the streets. I was well dressed. I had my coat on. There were plenty of blankets. I leaned my back against the stove and didn't care about the cold. It would pass somehow. Around midnight, the guard came and called me into their room. There, he gave me some baked potatoes to eat and a glass of kvass to drink. He showed me a corner where I could lie down and sleep. He turned off the lamp, closed the door, and we both fell asleep. During the day, I didn't move at all. I wasn't cold at all. I thought about my mother, my brothers, my sisters, my girlfriend. When would we go home?

And that's over now, I thought, climbing the stairs. The boys scared me when I entered the room.

— How come you're not working?

— We have a new doctor, a wonderful woman. She won't let us work when it's so cold outside. You'll see what a good woman she is.

That was the story of my nine days in prison, and Ivanov can go to hell, where he's rotting. With his soul and all.

DR. KOVES

From the mists of time, I want to describe Dr. Köves and my encounter with her. She was surrounded by a diaphanous light. She is the father, defender, and benefactor of Hungarian prisoners. Rumor had it that she would even intervene on our behalf with Stalin. It is said that she visits prison camps to see what is happening there.

I think she visited our camp in the summer of 1946. The news that she was in our camp spread like wildfire. Who is she, what kind of person could she be? She couldn't be just anyone, walking around Russian camps like that. She must know Russian well and be respected by the Russians.

I worked for a whole month on the collective farm. I dug up potatoes for the second time and gathered hay. I hadn't been assigned anywhere else yet, so in the summer I would retreat somewhere and read. In four years, I read all the books in Hungarian and Romanian in the library.

I was called and told that someone was looking for me.

— Who could be looking for me, here, in captivity? News from Uncle Laci? I thought.

My mother wrote to me that he was also a prisoner, but in the Caucasus. I looked for him in our newspaper, "Cuvântul Liber." But I hoped in vain to receive any news from him. He had arrived home a month earlier than me.

When I entered the club, Hermann, who was the boss, was talking to an elegant gentleman. They both stood up when I entered. Dr. Köves wants to talk to you, Hermann said, then shook his hand and left the room. The doctor invited me to sit down and handed me a box of fine cigarettes. I lit a cigarette, even though it was very weak.

— Young man, aren't you curious why I called you here? Do you know who I am?

— Of course, there's so much talk about you in the camp, and I never thought we'd meet. Anyway, I'm glad we know each other. But I don't know why you're curious about me.

We didn't know each other.

— Okay, you'll understand what I mean in a moment. Do you know Klein Mihai? That will explain it. I saw him in the camp for the first time. I wanted to meet the communist who ardently defended Rákosi and who humiliated Hungarians in every way possible. He told Dr. Schonn that I was a "nyilasparti," like the turner Ujj István. We arrived in the same car. We spent a whole month together in the hell of that car. Everyone thought it was their last journey. It was not far from being so.

Hungry, thirsty, covered in lice. Sixty people locked up like animals. Turned into animals that had miraculously escaped the Russian winter. So both Ujj István and I were reported. You had already been warned that there were two fascists in the camp who hated Jews. Who knows what else he lied about?

Yes, Klein Mihai was talking in the wagon and mentioned Ujj István. How did they know each other?

I didn't know any of them. There were 60 of us in the wagon. To fit, we had to stand with our arms around each other. We didn't get food or water every day. It was dark, we couldn't move around in the carriage, so we ended up shouting to each other. In Focșani, I ran away from my comrades. They had gone to get water from the fountain when two soldiers caught me and shoved me into a carriage that was already full of prisoners. Later, I realized that there was probably one prisoner missing, and that's how I became a victim. Everyone was a stranger. They shouted at each other, each saying where they were from and which regiment they belonged to. As time passed, people lost patience with each other. They were hungry, thirsty, and covered in lice. They argued and even came to blows. They turned into animals. After that, a fight broke out between Ujj István and Klein. Klein cursed the Hungarians, Horthy, and the way they were being treated. "The world is changing. The time of the communists is coming."

And then Rákosi Mátyás will get out of prison, and then you'll see... Then Ujj István spoke:

— ... Your mother will see, you stinking communist!

That's how they talked to each other, but none of them dared to say more. The last time, I got involved too. Maybe because he was insulting me and my family. And I shouted that maybe István and I would pay him a visit, and then he wouldn't be so happy.

He calmed down immediately and, for the next two weeks, he didn't say a word.

I don't understand one thing. They argued in the train carriage without knowing each other's names. How did they meet in the camp?

With the help of Dr. Schonn. Klein reported us both, and the doctor looked up our names in the medical records. He called us in and asked us what we had against Klein in the train car. We had argued with someone, whether that someone was Klein or not. He spoke with hatred about Hungarians and couldn't wait for Rákosi to be released from the "Steluța" prison so he could get his revenge on the Hungarians. Klein hates Hungarians.

— I'm not a judge. I didn't come here to hunt down fascists. Until now, I only came for you two.

— Here, in captivity, those who don't behave properly may easily remain here. Forever.

— Rumor has it that you were a high-ranking officer in the army.

— That's a nasty rumor. I had 15 soldiers under my command whom I had to look after.

— When the front line at Tisa broke, the detachment split in two and those who were with me ended up in the camp. I can still see the others from the detachment running to the left.

At home, everyone is being checked. They are looking for those who did bad things at the front.

— That would be very good, because I hate nationalists, chauvinists, and heartless people. But I still have one question, doctor: doesn't anyone care what happened to our transport?

— For a whole month, we traveled across Russia in the harshest winter, without heat, in freight cars. Most of us were in summer uniforms.

— Sitting on the floor and sleeping there, people were getting sick. Many of us died. Especially the elderly, who couldn't stand the cold. And here, in the hospital, it's still the elderly who are dying first. Of the 3,000 people, almost half have died, their bones rotting here. And if you keep us here much longer, the whole transport will die. No one is responsible for this mess.

— Young man, you know a lot. You're not stupid, but here, in prison, it's not good to know too much. I'll tell you something, if you promise to keep it between us. Our secret.

— The man in charge of your transport was shot, and the guards who transported you ended up in labor camps. It won't be easy for them, that's for sure. Their mistake was selling your food, and that's why so many prisoners died. That's what happened.

— One more thing, doctor. I am young, only 25, but I think I know people. Look at the Jewish prisoners. Look at the differences between them, and yet how united they are. I know them all.

Salamon Béla is the prisoners' camp commander. He is a good-natured and friendly man.

Klein Rezső, anti-fascist activist. With his enormous boots, he walks around the camp. We call him
"Puss in Boots." He is always in a good mood. He comes among us and asks us how the work is going, if it is hard.

Hermann – the head of the club and the library. Friendly and well-mannered, I know him well, as I have read all his Romanian and Hungarian books.

Grünfeld – the baker, a man of middle age, cheerful and always joking. When he laughed, you could see his gold teeth. He ran after the nurses. He could afford to, he lived well in the camp. He also organized cabarets. I took part too.

Little Rado. He was cute. He worked alongside Hermann. He played the violin beautifully and also took part in the cabarets.

I left Klein Mihai for last, with his long face and black eyes full of hatred. The eyes are the mirror of the soul. The hatred in his soul prevents him from thinking clearly.

— Keep an eye on him, doctor, if you ever see Klein. Maybe I'm wrong.

— But I envy the camaraderie between the two of them. I also had two Jewish friends at home. Playing soccer with them brought us together. Weisz Andi and Braun Leo. These are memories that cannot be tarnished.

— Young man, I'm glad we met. I can see that you like justice and truth. I think you spoke the truth. I'll look for Klein and look him in the eyes, just as you told me. Take care of yourself.

He shook my hand.

I should mention something else about Dr. Köves. In the fall of 1948, when I got home, I decided to start a personal library with only good books. In the magazine
"Life and Science" magazine, I read about the doctor's personal life and his professional work

in the camps for which he was responsible. He had no power, but his requests were nevertheless taken into account.

I think the following lines are necessary here, by way of explanation. Andi and Leo were apprentices to Sergeant Slezinger. He was renowned in his trade. I was also an apprentice to a Jewish merchant, so I knew many Jewish families. Mr. Weisz had a small horse and cart, which he used to travel around the villages collecting hides, eggs, and pillows. His wife, Mrs. Rebi, was a very kind woman. They had four children. The eldest worked at the bank. During the communist era, he became the director of the brick factory in Szentimre. The two girls were Rebi and Hani, and the youngest child was named Andi. On a large table, where Mr. Weisz sorted the hides, we drew a soccer field. We played some fascinating games there. We were young, happy, and carefree.

Hani, the youngest girl, looked like her father: blonde, blue-eyed, plump. She was her father's helper. One day I arrived at their house early; the boys hadn't come yet, Aunt Rebi was busy in the house, and Hani was sorting the skins in the barn.

— Come on, help me before the boys get here.

— I looked at you. While you're playing, Andi and Leo are working hard, and you're just laughing all the time.

— Why should I bother when only one of them wins, the one who is more skilled or luckier?

She came so close to me that I could feel the warmth of her body.

— Have you been with a woman?

— I haven't been with anyone.

— Not like that, you idiot. Have you ever slept with a woman?

— No, never.

— So you're a virgin like me. Then come on, now's the time, let's see what it's like, I can't wait.

The first time it happened, it was an unparalleled delight, and in the weeks that followed, I experienced moments that I will never forget for the rest of my life.

THE DISABLED WAR VETERAN

In the fall of 1946, all reservists, regardless of rank, were discharged. A very young and beautiful female doctor arrived to replace the chief medical officer. Blonde, with blue eyes, she had kindness written all over her face. There were prisoners who had been captured five years earlier. I tried to explain to the doctor what was troubling the prisoners, the fact that for years they had been promised that they would be sent home. The doctor explained that they would leave, but there were millions of prisoners, and that was why it was taking so long. At the same time, they had to understand that feeding so many people was a very difficult task. During the war, half the country had been destroyed, and it could be years before the last prisoner got home. When the war ended, they began sending home the first prisoners: the wounded and disabled.

— Believe me, I'm not lying, and he smiled kindly.

The doctor who had been discharged from the army was hardly ever seen. He left all the work to the three German prisoner doctors. In contrast, the female doctor did her work alone every day, because the German doctors were no longer there. Thanks to my teacher in Königsberg, I knew German and Russian quite well, so I got along well with the female doctor. That's probably why she called me to her once to chop wood. I also socialized with her husband. The next day, a nurse came for me and led me to the doctor's nice wooden house, which was about a kilometer from the camp. There, in the north, the main entrance was covered to store firewood for a few days. The doctor was still at home. She sent the nurse back to the camp, and then we went into the yard, where she showed me what I had to do. After that, she served me breakfast: an omelet, a cup of milk, and white bread. It was a magnificent breakfast. Then the major appeared in his wheelchair. I was so surprised that he was missing his left leg and arm that I couldn't say a word.

— What's the matter, have you never seen a cripple like me before?

— Don't be surprised, there are tens of thousands of us, invalids like me, produced by this merciless war. Eat quietly.

While I was working in the yard, I could only think about him. What does he think of me? Of me, his former enemy. How does he feel about us?

When he knocked on the window and motioned for me to come inside, I was bothered by the thought that it would just be the two of us.

— Come and eat, you must be hungry. It's not easy to chop wood.

I told him that I liked chopping wood and that here in the camp I had also worked in the forest. When we finished eating, I thanked him.

I wanted to leave, but he asked me to stay with him because tomorrow is a work day.

— My wife told me she would bring a prisoner to chop wood, so I could talk to him. Tell me about yourself, your family, your country, I'm curious to know who and what you are.

I told him who I was, how I got there, and other things. He listened carefully. And I studied him while we talked. He was about 30 years old, with blue eyes, and he didn't seem Russian to me. I spoke with some difficulty and even broke into a sweat, because I hadn't spoken so much or so fluently since talking to my teacher in Königsberg.

We spent almost a week there, cutting wood every day. And now I think back fondly on those days, not only because of the food and treats we received, but also because of my conversations with the major.

One day, he said to me:

— "Let me tell you something, I'm not Russian, I'm German from the Volga.

Have you heard of them?" I nodded.

— Then you know a lot, and I think you've also heard of Orenburg.

— That's where I was born. We Germans founded the town many years ago. What made our ancestors settle here in the north is still a mystery to me today.

— Let's mix German with Russian, maybe we'll understand each other better.

That's what we did. I remembered that I used to talk to my German teacher in the same way.

— I wasn't on the western front, he continued, nor did I ask to be sent to the front with Japan. That's what both my parents advised me to do. They knew why. But no one expected what happened. I was buried by a shell explosion. I was lucky to have my arm left intact.

Straight ahead, so a comrade could see me. But maybe it was better that way. Right? Everyone has their own fate. That was my fate, and yours was to be taken prisoner.

When we finished with the wood, we went into the house and talked. The doctor arrived.

— "You've been hard at work," she said with a smile, "you must be hungry,

I've brought you something good." She brought some fish with reddish meat and

fried it. We ate.

After lunch, we drank kvass. I even forgot that I was a prisoner and felt at home among friends. It began to get dark, and the doctor put 20 rubles on the table. I blushed, got up from the table, and refused to take the money, even though they insisted.

— What was I supposed to do with it?

When I walked out the door, he came after me and gave me the money, shaking my

hand. When I arrived at the camp, the others asked me what I had been given to eat and

what I had been doing.

— Cabbage soup and potatoes, I told them, that's what they ate too.

They didn't really believe me, but that was their business. I kept thinking about the major. He was a German born in Russia, what was he doing there, just like the Saxons in Transylvania and the Swabians in Banat. Wouldn't they be better off at home, in their own country?

THE TWO JAPANESE

In the spring of 1945, news arrived that two Japanese prisoners had arrived in the other two-story barracks. They just nodded their heads at everything, without saying a word. They barely ate anything. They didn't even talk to each other. Maybe they did at night, because during the day they stood with their backs to each other. Maybe they were mute. A few of us went to see the two strange Asians. I was curious about them. In the summer of 1942, in Pest, I had already seen black people and Asians. It was only in the middle of May that I was able to go to the other barracks, because only then had my leg healed somewhat. I found them in the aviators' room, where there was also an Englishman and a Frenchman who had fought in the German army against the Russians. Somehow, they were there. They played cards and sang all day long. They had officers' food, and the cigarettes they received were cut and wrapped in cigarette paper. They weren't interested in the Japanese.

I approached Buddha's two sons. I didn't try to talk to them. Would it have been pointless? I tried to communicate with them through gestures. I brought my palms together, then opened them and asked them in Russian, "What are you doing?"

No sound. They put their palms together and bowed. I put one finger to my mouth and the other to my stomach: "Are you hungry?" No sound, just bows. I wasn't getting very far with them. What could I do to make them feel my friendship? What social class did they belong to: peasants, workers, intellectuals? Or maybe samurai? Then I remembered the samurai anthem. If they were someone, then they had to know it. I started singing. The two Japanese men joined their hands again and bowed. The pilots came over to us.

They looked at us questioningly:

— The samurai anthem?

— Japan, I said.

The two pilots shouted in amazement:

— Ah, ah, samurai...

I spoke to the two Japanese men in German, thinking that perhaps they knew German, since the Japanese had fought alongside the Germans:

— *Ich bin Ungar* (I am Hungarian).

They understood what I said. Somehow, I managed to make myself understood to them.

That was my encounter with the two "yellow guys." Special people, special habits; that's how we meet different people for a few minutes, hours, and then they remain in our memory. I can still see them now. I haven't forgotten the two Japanese guys, but I've completely forgotten the two pilots.

ANOTHER JOB

One spring day, Popov, the commander of the gendarmes, came looking for me.

— Stefan (*István*), you will go to another place to load wood onto wagons for the Omutin paper factory. You will be the team leader. The young guard who is going with you is a good guy and you will get along well.

— There are hundreds of cubic meters of wood there. All you have to do is load the wagons. It's 100-120 km from the camp. It's been three years since they cut the wood, but now it's being attacked by rot. There will be 12 of you, and if you work things out with the commander there, you won't have to work.

— Tell your team, you're leaving the day after tomorrow.

Everyone agreed. They found me two more fellow sufferers, but I forgot their names.

It was mid-April, and you could see the snow melting. But the unpredictable weather could bring cold and snow at any time. Here in the north, the weather was very changeable, and we were going even further north. The Urals were about 80 km away. I told the guys what we were going to do, and they agreed.

After breakfast, each of us received a brick-shaped loaf of bread, some fried fish, 200 g of margarine, and 20 g of sugar. That was cold food for two days. We really liked the "bubunka" bread, no matter how black it was, and we enjoyed it the most. When the train arrived, the conductor got on, and we took our seats. After we settled in, the armed guard called me over.

— "Stefan, you too?" asked Sergei, the guard. He also

told me:

— The boys should not go anywhere; the restroom is here, next to us.

I had already informed the boys about these things. The Russians looked at us curiously, knowing that we were prisoners.

Russian trains are built so that passengers can sleep in them. The luggage space was very wide, and many were resting up there, even a samovar was available. Tea was already flowing from some of the samovars. Malicious tongues say that this is a lazy people.

The huge Kondor locomotive swallowed up the frozen world. Outside, you couldn't see anything but forests and more forests. Because of the high speed, the carriages swayed like drunken people. It was getting dark when we pulled into a station. They put us on another train. In fact, it was a small halt. A small locomotive was pulling the train made up of freight cars. When we arrived, it was late at night. Before going to bed, Sergei called me over.

— Be smart, do your job, don't go outside, and then go to bed.

I told the boys this, even though everyone knew what they had to do. In a discussion among ourselves, we even talked about the possibility of escaping, but it would have been pure suicide: we didn't know Russian, we had no food, it was cold, the distances were great, and the locals hated us. All these things together would have made an escape impossible.

Once, when I was working with the forest brigade, 4 km away, we marched back to the camp after finishing work. It was only when we reached the camp gate that we were counted, because the guard was in a hurry, as it was Saturday. When they counted us, one man was missing. The Russians never knew how many people left for work, and one thing is certain about Russians: they are not good at math. They counted us dozens of times, but they could never get the numbers right. Sometimes there were ten people, sometimes eight, sometimes nine... Finally, the other guard said that the missing man had shown up at his place.

We, the woodcutters, suffered the most because, after exhausting hours of work, we had to stand cold and hungry while the Russians counted us. After things calmed down, we entered the camp. The prisoner who had strayed from his comrades was beaten to death – a real lesson for us!

The older prisoners said that three German prisoners had managed to escape, but they didn't get far. They were caught and sent to a punishment camp for three years. You'd be crazy to try to escape. The next day, we saw where we had ended up: in an area surrounded by forests, near the Urals. The same familiar barracks, but not a piece of wood to be seen. The man who had greeted us the night before arrived. He was a typical Russian boy, just like the others I had worked with in Kama. Maybe we were related.

Horse-drawn sleighs appeared – perhaps there was a collective farm nearby. The boss explained what we had to do: eight of us would load the wood, and the other four would unload it. Before work, we ate. A sleigh arrived with food, which was watery cabbage soup, still boiling hot. After that, we all went to load, and then the four remained to unload. He explained that we had to

transport the wood urgently because it had already been attacked by rot and was to be sent to the factory.

It was almost noon when we started work. The wood had to be dug out from under the snow, and the frozen pieces were difficult to separate. The work was progressing slowly, and at the rate we were going, we wouldn't be finished by summer. The weather was starting to warm up, and from time to time we could hear birds chirping. Near the Urals, 800 km from the Arctic Circle, spring was slow to arrive, and the snow was beginning to melt. We were waiting for spring. Where we were working, the ground was muddy and waterlogged. By mid-May, the snow had melted and water began to collect behind the sleds. Because of the water, our camel hair boots were always wet and we couldn't dry them enough at night, and our blankets were almost always damp.

This period of my captivity would not be complete without mentioning the devoted and hard-working horses that helped us in our work. They were just skin and bones, but they behaved admirably. I love animals, especially horses and dogs. I felt pain in my heart for the torment of these tortured animals. During my captivity, I never saw a well-cared-for horse. Here in the north, winter lasts seven to eight months. There is not enough hay for them to graze, because 90% of the territory is covered by forests. Under the trees, there is no good hay for these horses, which are descended from the old Siberian ponies. That's why they eat anything—scraps, potato peelings, all kinds of seeds, chopped birch bark with bran, anything. It's hard to keep them going. In the spring, they looked emaciated. If they reached ten years of age, it was a miracle.

The end of May. The weather was beautiful and, since we had been there, there had been no snowstorms, only rain. The sun had melted the snow, and the pile of wood was slowly decreasing. Judging by the condition of the wood, it could only be used for cardboard at best. May passed, and it was not until mid-June that we finished carrying the wood. Even the rotten pieces had to be taken away. The work papers were only signed if the land was empty, at least that's what the locals said.

A new stage in our lives had begun. We had escaped the muddy ground and were now loading the wood onto wagons, which was easier. The short wagons were a great help, as they could make three trips. The weather was pleasant, and it took us about two weeks to load all the wood. When we were done, we said goodbye to the locals, who were nice, simple people. We didn't have any problems with anyone. The food was more than good, even though we didn't get butter or sugar, but we did get 600 grams of bread and three good soups. Sometimes the soup had pieces of meat or fish in it. Every week a barber came to the kolkhoz to shave us

shave us, and every two weeks we washed our dirty clothes at the kolkhoz. Our guard wasn't very talkative, so we left him alone with his thoughts.

When the first set of large wagons arrived, our enthusiasm waned, because the wagons were tall and we had to lift a lot. Some pieces of wood required two people to lift. We were lucky that on June 1, there was a change: 12 other prisoners arrived, accompanied by a young Russian guard. We asked about the prisoners going home, but got no answer. We swallowed hard, and hope and patience were our only consolation.

In the camp, there was no change regarding the prisoners' departure home. "Szkovo domoi" – "You'll be going home soon," the Russians' eternal refrain. But when would that be?

WE PRODUCE SHINGLES

I should mention that I was diligently learning Russian. I wore a pouch around my neck in which I kept a pencil and paper. I knew the names of many things in Russian, the days of the week, and the names of everyday objects. In the evening, I couldn't study by lamplight. Everyone knew me because of Mikhailov. I wasn't sickly; when I could, I went to work. If I didn't have to work in the forest, I went to the work team at the hospital. As soon as I arrived at the camp, I reported for work. I told myself that rather than sitting around, it was better to work, where I could meet new people, learn new things that I wouldn't have learned in the camp, and, on top of that, time passed more quickly. Most of the prisoners spent years in the camp, seeing nothing but barbed wire, and when they got home, they boasted about having eaten the "bitter bread of imprisonment." They were pitiful people. The officers, on the other hand, lived a life of luxury. That's how I presented myself when I was assigned to shingle making.

The shingle-making was canceled because the summer was short and every moment had to be used. At that moment, the most urgent task was planting potatoes. The shingle-making could wait until the first snow. We spent the night where we planted the potatoes, even though the collective farm was nearby, to save time. We finished planting potatoes in two weeks and started mowing. Being the sons of farmers, we considered mowing an easy task. I had learned to mow before the war, on the factory fields. When we saw the 50-55 cm scythes, we started laughing, but the supervisor didn't understand why.

In the end, he understood that our scythes were longer and that, with such a small scythe, we couldn't mow efficiently. We, in turn, understood that the situation was completely different from what we were used to, because the grass at home grew up to a meter high. But here, in the north, in the 3-4 months of
"Summer," the grass barely grows a few centimeters. In summer, in that area, where it rains very little and temperatures are extreme, reaching 30-40 degrees, the mowed grass can be gathered the very next day and taken to the kolkhoz, where haystacks are made.

As soon as the first snow fell, we returned to the camp, but not for long, because we had to make shingles. They gave us thick clothes for about six people and we went to cut wood for shingles.

At midday, at the foot of the Ural Mountains, we stopped, and the craftsman, who had a chainsaw, began to cut poplar and birch, everything that was within reach. That was when I saw for the first time

a drujba, the word "drujba" meaning friendship in Russian. In three hours we filled the sleds with tree trunks; we made one trip every day, and for a week we transported trunks. The following week, we transported the branches cut from the logs we had already brought, to be used for firewood.

After that, we started making shingles. The craftsman cut each piece to 45 cm using a chainsaw. Then he split the pieces into three, after which we cut them lengthwise using hand-operated machines. It was a simple but useful machine. The work was going well, but problems arose. After four days of work, a snowstorm started. Towards morning, the wind howled like a hungry lion. Because of the storm, the craftsman didn't arrive until noon and told us that we couldn't work in such conditions. He also told us that if we wanted to eat during the blizzard, we would have to go to the canteen because it was too cold outside. It was difficult to go to the canteen every day, but if we wanted to eat, we had to make the effort, and there we were given cold food.

The blizzard lasted about ten days, during which time nature changed completely, as if we no longer recognized our surroundings. Huge snowdrifts formed; the workshop was buried under snow, and the collective farm was completely invisible. The craftsman said he hoped we would be smart enough not to try to escape, but that it would be impossible anyway, because we didn't know Russian, we could get lost, freeze or be eaten by wolves. And even if we escaped, the civilians would kill us. So it never crossed our minds to escape while we were there. When the blizzard subsided, we started digging the workshop out from under the snow.

On the third day, the camp guards came for us because the forest brigade evaluation committee had arrived. We still hadn't managed to finish the shingles.

We were lucky, we got rid of the forestry brigade and remained in the maintenance brigades in the camp.

THE FOREST FIRE

I don't remember what year it was, 1946 or 1947, but one night, around two o'clock, the alarm sounded in the camp that the forest was on fire and that we had to go help the civilians. We went, because prisoners don't argue.

The forest was burning north of our tree plots, which was a good thing because our forest areas weren't burning. If our forests had burned, there would have been a lot of checks, and it would have been assumed that it was sabotage, etc. When we got close to the fire, the area was lit up, and the crowd that had gathered from around the collective farm was already working hard. There was a sparse forest in front of us, and people were cutting down trees, bushes, and even grass to stop the fire.

It wasn't a big deal, because after the Germans left, no one ever saw Klava again. People said she was living with Alex in Germany. About this love, I just want to add that I only mentioned it one day when I was cutting wood at the doctor's house. After lunch, while we were smoking a cigarette, he told me that he had received a letter from them. Klava had married Alex, they had settled in Königsberg, and they were very happy. Alex knows nothing about her family, but their love has endured, and now they are very happy.

(n.e. from what I can tell, in this last paragraph there is either a translation problem or some material has been lost in the manuscript)

THE STAKHANOVITE

As I write these lines, I am reminded of the stahanovist of the camp.

We know well that Stahanov was a miner in the Don region who worked with such passion that he surpassed all his colleagues' norms. Klein Rezső, our anti-fascist secretary, told us that we too could have our own Stahanovite. And he quickly found a dimwit named Balogh Mihály.

Who was he? He wasn't exactly a catch. Short, bow-legged, with reddish-blond hair, almond-shaped black eyes, and a small, flat nose, he was a truly ugly man. And after he became the camp's workaholic, he seemed even uglier to me. I told him so to his face. He was from Bakony. His grandfather and father had been coal miners, so he hadn't had much schooling either and had taken up the trade of previous generations. He was illiterate, but it was said that he could shoot like no other. So far, so good, and coal mining is an honest trade like any other. But my respect for him ended when he got it into his head that he was a Stakhanovite, as Comrade Klein said.

One summer afternoon, when the forest brigades gathered and we wanted to enter the barracks, we were ordered to stay where we were. We thought they wanted to count us again, even though they had already done so when we entered the camp, but it was something else. A group was approaching from the kitchen, led by the cook, who was holding something in front of him, the Russian camp commander, and Klein Rezső, the anti-fascist activist among the prisoners.

Klein began talking about the Communist Party, the Stakhanovite movement, etc. He told us that, among the prisoners, Balogh Mihály was the first to stand out as a Stakhanovite and that they could only reward him with an omelet and a bottle of kvass. The cook handed him the tray with the "goodies," and the four began to applaud him—only them. Klein signaled to the other prisoners to applaud, but he could have waited a long time. Balogh did not know how to react, as Klein had not instructed him on this. The celebration ended without any joy, perhaps not even for Balogh. He knew he had made a mistake. Klein had told him that if a work camp was set up near his home in the summer, he would be among the first to go. But the work camp was not set up until the summer of 1948, when we all left together.

Balogh worked with two others in the brigade; he cut wood, and the other two did the rest. That way, he managed to produce 12-14 m^3, and that was only in the summer.

Winter was much harder even for the most dedicated workers. Trees had to be cut down to 5 cm above the ground, which required clearing the snow from around the trunk with a wooden shovel. You cut the tree, and if you're lucky, you see the trunk mark in the snow. If not, you had to rely on touch, cutting the branches and, in the meantime, the snow either got down your throat, under your clothes, or covered the marks, and time was against you. You got so hot that you had to take off your underwear in temperatures of -25, -30 degrees Celsius.

The Russian who came to pick up the wood at the end of the month swore like a coachman, non-stop. In winter, you couldn't measure the length of the pieces of wood accurately, and there were always problems, not only because of the quantity, but also because of the quality of the wood.

I was in the forestry brigade six times: twice in the summer and four times in the winter. Once, only 75% was usable. In winter, I never met my quota; it was impossible. No one could work non-stop. I lost so much weight that I was no longer able to do even maintenance work in the camp.

There are people who believe in stories about Stakhanovites. But I don't believe them, because there is no such thing as superhuman work done by humans. Work ennobles you only when you do it willingly, easily, and feel satisfaction afterwards. Forced labor stupefies you, kills you physically and mentally.

CONFLICT

We were working at the station, on the platform. Two wagons loaded with rye and oats had arrived. It was a pleasant late April day. The locomotive was at the cement factory. The Ural Mountains were visible in the clear sky. Beyond them lay Siberia. We were far from home. Suddenly, we heard women screaming, men swearing, and doors slamming. From the neighboring house, a short woman ran out, followed by an angry man. He caught up with her and hit her hard on the back. The woman screamed and quickened her pace, trying to get away from her attacker. She ran screaming, but she was losing ground. The man had almost caught up with her. I could see her terrified as she approached us. When she passed by me, I involuntarily took a step forward. The man bumped into me and we both fell to the ground. The Russian, furious, got up immediately, clutching a rock in his hand. I got up more slowly. I wasn't in good shape. The guard appeared immediately and chased the bully away. The woman had disappeared. I was glad about that. When she passed me, I saw her frightened eyes full of tears. The man also disappeared, and the fight was over.

Meanwhile, the two wagons arrived at the unloading site and we got to work. We were always happy when there was grain in the wagons. We had to make sure the kitchen had enough firewood until the following spring, so we filled our pockets with grain, and if we went woodcutting in the following days, we would roast it and eat it.

I didn't even think that the incident with the angry man would have any consequences. The bruise on my right arm reminded me of the incident.

The next evening, when we returned from cutting wood, Popov was waiting for me.

— My friend from yesterday had complained that a prisoner had hit him and thrown him between the rails, so I would be called to the command post.

I had a lot to think about. I tossed and turned all night. What would happen? The Russian was lying, that was certain. He would definitely be proven right. I, an enemy, a prisoner of war, without a voice. The punishment would be harsh, that was certain. I agonized for days because there were no signs that I would be called to headquarters. I didn't see Popov at all. It was only at the end of the week, after I got out of the bathroom, that the guard at the gate came after me, saying that Popov was waiting for me in the guardroom.

"Finally," I said to myself, "let it be over."

— Stefan, on Monday we're going to headquarters. Don't tell anyone, but I'm on your side. However, I have to tell you that you have no chance of getting out of the mess you've gotten yourself into. It was completely stupid!

— Your colleagues can't testify about what really happened. The command has also heard about your three prison sentences. Be careful what you say and how you answer questions. It's very important!

— I didn't know the guy was disabled, I only found out from you.

— I believe you. I have more good news. The woman you defended doesn't want to go back to that guy. Out of spite, he reported you.

— Don't be surprised. Above the desk, on the wall behind the commander, there's a picture of Stalin. The boss imitates him, you'll see.

— There will also be a translator, a Russian from Bessarabia who knows Romanian well, just like you. My father knew Romanian, but unfortunately, I don't. Maybe the woman will be there too.

— I hope so. Now go. It'll be fine.

I didn't panic and slept peacefully. I spent Sunday in the barracks. I watched the others play cards and checkers, listened to their stories, or just sat and stared out the window, lost in my thoughts.

But Monday morning arrived. It was cloudy and a cold wind was blowing. It might snow. For that day, I received a quilted jacket and some better pants. My spring boots were still good.

— No one says you're a prisoner, said Popov.

The command post was 2 km away. We weren't in a hurry, as we didn't have to be there at a specific time. On the way, Popov kept telling me to stay calm and not lose my temper. When we entered the meeting room, I saw the woman I had saved from being beaten. But I also saw the man I had bumped into. They were in two groups. The woman was accompanied by two men and two women, and my enemy was surrounded by several people. Before we entered, there was a buzz, but when we went in, it fell silent. I had become the center of attention. They looked at me as if I had committed atrocities. Then, after a while, they started talking among themselves again, commenting on me.

The commander was nowhere to be seen. Popov continued to talk to me, instructing me. I didn't understand everything he was saying, but he insisted: "Be careful what you say!"

I looked at Stalin's portrait on the wall. The famous painting of Stalin. A long table, a podium from which those there could look down on us, and we, in the hall, looked up. And that was politics. But then the commander appeared, accompanied by a scribe.

I had read somewhere that Stalin was short. And this guy was short. His military jacket was tight on him, and he had a thick moustache under his nose. I couldn't see if he had a pipe, but maybe he had one in his pocket, maybe he was going to take it out and light it, if he smoked. But if he was imitating Stalin, then he had to have one. His skin was quite dark, and his eyes were just two lines. He was 100% Russian. He seemed to suffer from megalomania, a dangerous man, but if you put his megalomania aside, maybe you could get along with him. The clerk next to the commander was also short in stature. He probably didn't want anyone taller than him around him. I immediately realized that he was also my translator, because he addressed the two camps in the room, then said to me:

— Prisoner, stand up. Do you know what you are accused of?

— I don't know, tell me.

— You struck a Russian citizen, which is a capital offense.

— I didn't hit anyone. Whoever says that is lying.

— It's no use, he insists that you hit him.

— I saw the woman run out of the yard, followed by the man, and he hit her hard on the back. She screamed and ran toward us, and the man came after her. Probably to hit her again.

— Just then, I was crossing the tracks to see if the locomotive was coming with the carriages when the guy bumped into me. I fell between the tracks, and he fell on top of me.

— Please be fair and take my side. I understand a little Russian, but I can't hold a conversation, so I can't defend myself.

The translator turned to the commander and began to tell him what I had said and what I was claiming. The commander took his pipe out of his pocket, and I felt like laughing. I understood exactly who I was dealing with.

The commander listened attentively to what the translator was saying. Meanwhile, he studied me, the man, and the woman carefully.

During this time, I was able to get a better look at the woman. She was short, stocky, with typical Russian eyes. Her thick, reddish-blonde hair complemented her figure. Her red cheeks matched her braided hair. Later, I learned that this "sign of health" hid terrible diseases.

The man was thin, of medium height, with blond, curly hair. He was surrounded by his parents and relatives, who were offering their opinions. He looked very much like an older woman. Only now did I notice that he was missing an arm—his left arm.

The commander rose from his chair and spoke to them both:

— Why did you lie and why did you hit the woman you want to marry? And if you want to get married, why do you talk so much?

I didn't understand the man's answer very well because he was mumbling to himself, but the woman shouted, saying she didn't need such a fool who believed everything he was told. If he beats her now, what will happen later, when they have children? The next day she left home. She would look for another husband. She had only come to meet the man who had saved her from another beating.

— Everyone leave, the trial is over. Popov and the prisoner remain here.

When the woman passed by me, she whispered, "Spasibo tibea" – thank you. I just nodded.

When the room emptied, the translator said to me:

— Prisoner, you have been in solitary confinement three times, for a total of nine days. Twice you refused to work, and the third time you tried to trade soap for tobacco. Why did you refuse to work?

— The first time was because they wanted us to work more than the eight hours; they said we weren't working enough. We were an "OK" brigade. In fact, we shouldn't have been working at all, and if we did, then only for four hours. That's what it says in the United Nations Charter in Geneva. The second time, when we had to take tree trunks to the city collective farm, Ivanov asked us, after work, to carry two trunks at a time, one on each shoulder, in knee-deep snow. It was not work we could do.

— As for the soap, we didn't steal it. After each bath, we gathered the soap scraps and kneaded them together; we wanted to trade them for tobacco. I don't see anything illegal in that—it was just bartering. In ancient times, that's how trade worked.

The commander was watching me while the translator translated my answer. And I was watching him. Sometimes his face would light up, other times it would darken.

— How do you know about the Geneva agreements?

— I read all the Romanian and Hungarian books in the camp. I found out about it in a notebook. I also read that a country that has prisoners of war is obliged, after 14 months of captivity, to send them home. But no country respects this.

— I would like to read that notebook too, said the commander.

— I found the notebook under the stove in the library, and I think someone burned it after I read it.

— You may be a smart guy, but don't forget one thing: you're a prisoner of war. You have no rights, except the right to work. You destroyed this country, and as long as you're here, you have to work.

— When the time comes, you'll go home—the lucky ones, that is. I believe you didn't hit that guy. But you got involved in other people's business without being asked. And yet you insulted a Russian citizen because you got in his way and he fell between the rails.

— I have heard about you and how you saved Mihailov's life. But be careful—acts of courage in captivity are punished. That is why I am sending you to a disciplinary camp for four months, to knock some sense into you. The conditions there are much harsher, especially in winter. Winter starts there in September. By then, you'll be back. I see you get along well with Popov; you're very lucky to have him.

I had read the commander well. A party member who did his job as he knew how. He wasn't much of a reader, so how could he know what the Geneva agreement stipulated? Looking at the translator, I noticed that he was trying to translate everything in my favor. Was he doing this just because I had called him "my comrade"?

As we left, Popov asked me:

— Who are you, who do you think you are, Stefan, talking about international law and rights? How would the commander know about such things? Have you really read all the books in the camp?

— Yes, I read all the books in the camp. In that notebook, I read about the Geneva Convention and our rights as prisoners.

— And who am I? Just a simple man with working-class parents, but I read a lot. I have a small library at home, which I hope didn't disappear during the war. I was taken prisoner in the fall of 1944, on the Tisza, and now I'm here.

— Now I'll take you home, to the camp, and then we'll see when you get to Kotlas. I'll take you there, because I haven't been there for a long time. The last time I was there, I was with the SS officers.

As soon as I entered the room, my comrades surrounded me.

— What happened? Did you get punished? How long

and where? We replied:

— Straff Brigade, Kotlas, four months.

Everyone had heard of that camp and encouraged me:

— The four months will pass quickly, and it will be summer soon. You'll be back in September.

I didn't mind having to go there. I was almost happy that I would see another world and meet other people. I went to work with the others and waited for the day when I would leave for a new, unknown place. I didn't see Popov again, but at the end of the week he was waiting for me at the gate.

— We're leaving on Sunday night, but we'll see each other again, he told me.

On Sunday evening, at 8 o'clock, I left for the station. On the way, I went to the command post. Popov told me:

— Let's see how you look. Your clothes are fine, your boots are good, your cap too. You'll get a jacket like mine and a holster with a pistol, but no bullets. That way we won't attract too much attention.

Thinking about this trip, I felt my heart warm. Popov, a stranger I would never see again, but toward whom I felt an attraction—just as I felt toward Mikhailov. During his imprisonment, Ivanov had been my bad luck charm. We couldn't stand each other, and our mutual hatred was clear to see. He hated me, and I hated him. And yet he was repentant and read the Bible all the time.

The train was late. The nights here in the Urals are cold. The waiting room was full. A colorful crowd of strangers. The smell of mahorka, tobacco, and samovar mingled in the air.

When the train arrived, the crowd surrounded it with a lot of noise. We found a less crowded car at the back of the train. Because of the cold, the seats near the door were the last to be taken. In these cars, it was possible to sleep.

— Come on, Stefan, let's sit down too. Morning is far away. Let's sleep.

We slept lightly, listening to the sounds of the train. At the same pace, it swallowed kilometer after kilometer. The huge locomotive pulled the cars behind it at a brisk pace. The compartment filled up, but we were well dressed and didn't feel cold. Popov had been asleep for a long time.

I wondered what would become of me in Kotlas. Once again among strangers. I had already gotten used to the camp; the nurses and some of the guards knew me. It would be all right somehow. Towards morning, I fell asleep. I woke up to the noise of passengers making a commotion, shouting at each other as they enjoyed their tea from the samovar. Popov was already awake.

— Mai, Stefan, we slept a lot. The others are already enjoying their tea. Let's eat something, then I'll ask them for two cups of tea. I also have a bottle of kvass, but we'll leave it for later.

The tea we were served was good, aromatic, and quite sweet. After breakfast, the compartment filled with the smell of mahorka tobacco. It left a great taste if it was prepared well. I wasn't a heavy smoker, but I smoked a whole cigarillo. Cigarillo are rolled in newspaper. Russians say that their newspaper is made of pure cellulose, without any additives, which is why the tobacco has such a good aroma. I don't necessarily believe that, but I do believe it's carcinogenic.

— Come on, Stefan, let's talk. I have to tell you something.

— After your trial, Sura, the woman you saved from being beaten, came to us and asked me what punishment you had received. I told her.

Sura was from Kotlas, and her uncle on her mother's side was the commander of the Kotlas camp.

— He will make sure that your time there is as easy as possible.

— Didn't I tell you you were lucky? The commander only gave you four months, when sentences are usually six months or more. He probably liked you and didn't want you to spend the autumn months there, because your life would have been hell.

— Be smart. Maybe the woman has fallen in love with you, maybe she sees you as her ideal man. She'll do everything she can to get you what you want.

— You know the love story between Jano and his girlfriend. Well, it should serve as an example to you if you want to get home.

Both Jano and his girlfriend had a rough time.

— I had to take Jano to Kirov, where he was sentenced. Although he was Slavic, he fought against the Russians, which was unforgivable in their eyes and in the eyes of Russian law. He was exiled far away, to the mines of Vorkuta. The woman, after giving birth to the child, was taken to a labor camp, and the child ended up in a state orphanage.

— I spoke to the woman's brother, but he knows nothing about her. Our laws are harsh and unforgiving.

— It'll work out somehow. Even though I'm only 25, I've decided to take everything as it comes. I've always said and will always say that fate guides our lives; you just have to accept it.

— If you don't know that, you end up unhappy and dissatisfied your whole life.

And he told me a story.

— After I was enlisted and arrived at the front, the captain's orderly fell ill. He was almost 50 years old and took over the duty without saying much. An officer needs an orderly, that's how it is in the army. Our commander, when he was a civilian, had been a teacher. He chose me from among all his subordinates. I don't know how he came to that decision, but then I remembered a conflict I had had with him. We were new recruits, waiting for orders to leave for the front, walking around the garrison courtyard, when I heard my name.

— Come on, go to the office, you'll find out there! I was ordered to go into town and requisition two typewriters for the army. I had the official paper with me. I requisitioned two typewriters, but that wasn't the end of it. Around noon, a recruit came with an order from headquarters to hand over one of them.

— I won't give you anything without my commander's permission, I told him.

The recruit returned with an order signed and initialed by the unit commander himself, forcing me to hand over the typewriter. He told me that, apart from the commander, no officer could refuse the order, let alone a simple soldier.

The next day, when my officer showed up and I told him what had happened, he made a huge scene. From then on, I couldn't stand him. You could see the disappointment on his face that he had been deprived of one of his typewriters.

Even now, I don't know how he found me. How did he know I existed? Or was it just chance? Is this the game of fate? I couldn't see myself as someone's orderly. Me, cleaning his boots, washing his shirt and underwear? I told him I wouldn't be anyone's orderly, because I didn't know how.

— You have to be good at it! You'll learn, son, he told me.

— I don't want to learn to be an orderly!

— I'll tell you what to do, do you understand? It's an order!

— The country didn't send me to the front to be an orderly, it sent me because it's in danger and I have to fight to defend it. I want to fight, if I get the chance!

He got really angry, I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

— I'll tie you up, I'll shoot you, you traitor, you good-for-nothing!

Even now, I don't know if he had the right to make me an orderly. The argument was interrupted by an alarm. We had been surrounded for a long time, but we fought relentlessly, fleeing from the Russian armies.

Meanwhile, another soldier made his way past him and finally found an orderly. I calmed down, but I knew I had made a formidable enemy of that officer. We fought for days until we managed to break out of the encirclement with the help of a detachment of German tanks, which appeared at the last moment and cleared the way for us. They moved very well and quickly.

— Popov, don't be angry, but that's how it was! I told you these things so that you would understand what kind of person I am and how I think. I never saw that commander again. I crossed the Tisza, where the Russians broke through the front, and was taken prisoner.

— In Sura's case, I acted of my own free will. I'm not sorry, I'm actually glad.

— Tell me about yourself, Popov. I'm sorry, but I don't know your first name.

— My first name is Kostja. We have plenty of time before we reach Kotlas, so I'll start at the beginning. My ancestors came from Bessarabia, but I don't know if they came willingly or were forced to. I'm from Omutinsk, a large city with a paper mill. Your camp sends raw materials there, namely wood. It's 600 km from here. I wasn't on the front; I was in the militia. When I enlisted, they sent me to the Kola Peninsula. Imagine the weather there! Strong blizzards, with bitter cold—between -40 and -60 degrees Celsius! And permanent night, which lasted for months. Even now, I can't understand how people there could endure that life: the loneliness, the houses so far apart from each other. During the war, we had big problems with smugglers. Submarines would approach the coast and transport goods by plane. Sometimes we even ended up shooting at each other. They brought everything, and it was all planned. There were people in Scandinavia who were involved in this and lived well.

Once we captured an entire gang of traffickers from Taiwan. How? The plane was loaded, but for some unknown reason the engine wouldn't start. It was a seaplane. We threw grenades under it until it fell on its belly. There was a lot of cargo on board. I kept this watch as a souvenir. I don't know exactly what they had on board, but two months later we were decorated. I went from sergeant to lieutenant. After the war, I was promoted to first lieutenant. If all goes well, in two years I'll be a major, and then I'll see what I'll do. I'm approaching 30 and thinking about starting a family. I'd like to settle down somewhere warm, because I've had enough of the cold. It's different where you are—three months of winter is enough.

Maybe next year you can go home. According to the Geneva Convention, you should have been home long ago. I wish this with all my heart.

— It would be great if we could go home. They keep promising us that, but many have lost hope, like a Romanian prisoner from Transylvania who was enlisted in the Hungarian army and was captured at the beginning of the war. He was in nine camps! He speaks Russian fluently. I only know a few words used in the kitchen, and I'm happy to know them. They help me understand them better, just like you do. If I get home, I promise I'll learn to speak Russian fluently. I'll tell you why: some faces will always remain in my mind. Like yours.

Over the course of two years, we had several guards: Ivanov, Pavel, Andrej, and Mihailov. I started with Ivanov because he was my nemesis. He was present at all the punishments and incidents. He was a bad man, even though he read the Bible while we worked. I will always think of him with hatred. Pavel was Belarusian, a massive man who respected us as foreigners. No matter how cold it was, he never changed his leather boots for camel hair ones.

Andrej was always cheerful, bohemian. He always talked to us and kept repeating "*szkovo domoj*" – you'll be going home soon. But our departure didn't depend on him. He really liked roasted rye. He was of medium height, with a gypsy face and a huge nose. He told us that he had never done any physical work, he had only danced, as part of a Georgian dance troupe. He had been to the front many times to entertain the soldiers. We loved him for his jokes. However, Mihailov was my favorite, perhaps because we were the same age. He came from Siberia, from Lake Baikal, and carried his balalaika everywhere. I loved Russian music—when I heard it, I could see the endless Russian landscape, the taiga, the huge rivers, and the mysterious silence of the forest.

Prison taught me many things: how to endure years of hunger without starving to death, that freedom is the most precious thing, and not to blame an entire people for the actions of a few individuals. I promised myself that if I ever got home and built a house, I would have a dog that I would never tie up or let go hungry. You don't know what starvation means. When I was captured in the autumn of 1944 and on December 6 they put us in wagons bound for Focșani, the starvation had already begun.

Until January 3, 1945, we traveled in freight cars without heat. Every two or three days we received a little dry bread and even less water. The winter was merciless, and the guards didn't bother to bring us water. I'll tell you something: on December 25, 1944, I was in Kharkov. For almost three weeks, we had been wandering around Ukraine. We arrived in the morning and didn't leave until the next day. What happened in the meantime? At noon, they opened the carriage door and gave us a bag of dry bread and a 30-liter aluminum can. They immediately closed the carriage doors. We were no longer human beings – we had turned into animals. Everyone rushed towards the bag of bread and the can of cabbage soup. The can was knocked over and the bread was trampled underfoot. No one was able to enjoy that meal. We were smearing each other with that paste, arguing, fighting, and blaming each other for the situation we were in.

The circus wasn't over yet. When they came to take the can and the bag and saw what had happened, the guards came back with clubs and crowbars and started beating us like animals. One guard was looking down at us, and the prisoners fought back. The guard fired a burst of machine gun fire into the air, and the others got out of the car and left us alone again. I had had a fever for a week, my knee was swollen, and I was covered in lice. I couldn't walk anymore. The Romanian boy next to me took my portion of bread and gave me his water in exchange. I hadn't eaten anything for days, and only the water kept me alive.

For three days, no one bothered us, but the train didn't stop either. We all thought it was over, that we would die of hunger. Six people had already died in our carriage, all of them elderly. Only in the morning did the others realize that they were no longer breathing. Of the 60, 55 were from the mother country, five from Transylvania, four Romanians, and me.

After three days, we arrived in Kirov, where we stopped for a day. If there were dead bodies, they took them out of the cars and gave us double rations of suharin and water. They told us that in a few days we would arrive at a hospital. When they took us out of the cars on January 5, 1945, in Falenki, the civilians ran away when they saw us, because we looked like walking corpses. They carried me to the hospital on a stretcher. I was lucky, my leg healed and they didn't have to amputate it.

— Many atrocities are committed during war. People change for the worse when they have a weapon in their hands. If they hadn't transported us for so long in the bitter cold, without food or water, more of us would have survived. During the winter, hundreds died, especially the elderly, from diarrhea, dysentery, pneumonia...

That's how Stefan started telling Kostya about the hardships of being a prisoner. Kostya listened carefully, sipping his kvass, as the train took them closer and closer to Kotlas, where Stefan would spend the next few months of his detention. As they talked, the sky darkened and silence fell in the compartment.

— "At that time, I was attending a course in Kirov, and there was a blizzard," said Kostya, letting his thoughts drift back to the past. "Although we are used to the climate here, we suffer great damage every time.

In the carriage, the samovar continued to bubble, warming them and providing them with a hot drink that seemed to alleviate, for a few moments, the harshness of the Russian winter. At midnight, the train arrived in Kotlas. They got out of the warmth of the carriage and felt the piercing cold of the night.

— Kotlas is an important railway junction, Kostya explained to Stefan, pointing with his hand. From here, via Kirov, you can reach Moscow to the south, Leningrad to the east, and Vorkuta to the north.

The station waiting room was packed with people. They could barely find a place to sit. When a train approached, everything became hectic, with passengers rushing either to catch a seat on the train or to get off and find a place to rest. In the morning, the two washed themselves at one of the washbasins in the corners of the waiting room.

— Our train arrives at around 9 o'clock, said Kostja. It's very cold outside, and there's about 80 cm of snow. The train will take us to the camp in about half an hour.

On the way, they spoke little, and before getting out, Kostya warned Stefan:

— "Let's not show our friendship to anyone. You are a prisoner, and I am a Russian officer; we can only have a cold, professional relationship."

Where they got off, there was nothing but wooden barracks and forests as far as the eye could see. A path beaten down by sleds led to the camp, about 4 km away. After a while, the familiar landscape of captivity appeared: barbed wire, two guard towers with armed guards, wooden barracks, and a few sheds.

— How many are there here? Kostya asked the guard.

— "183 prisoners," he replied. "I heard that they're going to stop peat production, and next year they might start sending the prisoners home. The peat isn't good quality anymore, but the commander knows more about that."

In that cold and harsh place, Stefan found his courage. He knew it would be difficult, but the thought of leaving and seeing familiar faces again calmed him, at least for the moment.

The next day, the commander appeared. He was a man of medium height, stocky, with a friendly face and Mongoloid eyes; he didn't look bad. Sura looked a lot like her uncle. I felt that he would not bother me.

– "Stefan, you stay here, the two of us are going over there, we have something to discuss," said Kostja.

It was warm in the room, and I was thinking about what the guard had said the day before. Would it be true? Would they really let us go home? I had been a prisoner for three years. I felt hot. Images of my mother, my brothers, my sister, my homeland, and a bunch of beautiful memories appeared before my eyes. Suddenly, dark thoughts flooded my mind: what if they forget about me here, what if those in the punishment camps are still being held for who knows how long? Suddenly, I felt cold. All my enthusiasm vanished. But finally, Kostya appeared.

– I thought you would never finish.

– Don't be upset, but important matters require thorough discussion. We also discussed you. Sura only talks about you; it appears she has fallen deeply in love. That would not be a problem, but

Sura has a lung disease and should go to Sochi for treatment, but she doesn't want to until she meets you.

– How old are you?

– I turned 25 in February, I said.

– You took care of yourself, but don't trust yourself because Sura loves you. You are at the mercy of her uncle. He is a confirmed bachelor and loves his niece madly. He knows that his niece's illness has reached an advanced stage, and the doctors have recommended that she go to Sochi for treatment. She does not believe her illness is serious and does not want to go. She will come here often, just to see you. The commander will talk to you about her; listen to him, because your life depends on him.

– Dear Kostja, my friend, I know you want what's best for me, believe me, what I did, I did without meaning to. Who would have thought we would end up here? Since I've been a prisoner, I've done anything for food, that's what keeps me alive, because I want to get home to my family. In the three years I've been a prisoner, I've never been full, I don't need or want women. You don't know what it's like to have your stomach growling with hunger. When I dream, I dream of food, not women. I feel sorry for Sura. I don't even know what she'll be like. I'm also worried that if I stay here forever, the people I came from will forget me.

– I'll come after you, Stefan, I promise, but don't forget to do as the commander says. And don't forget, we're still sleeping together tonight, but I'm going back to Kotlas on the morning train. The commander asked me to talk to Sura, maybe I can convince her to go for treatment. Her parents are desperate, she's their only girl. They have two more boys.

In the morning we said goodbye, briefly.

– Kostya, I'll be waiting for you.

We shook hands and hugged, almost crying. After breakfast, the

commander came to the barracks.

– "Let's talk," he said.

– I don't know who you are at home, what you do, but here, in prison, word has spread about you. You've been in solitary confinement three times for refusing to work. It's been nine days. You saved the life of the young guard Mihailov. Now you're here because you insulted a Russian citizen. As a prisoner. Your papers don't say

Kostja told me everything about you. I hope he's right. I want to know, to see what they do with you. What are you good at, besides physical labor?

– Anyone can do physical labor. Well or poorly, maybe. At home, I was an athlete, then I was an accountant for six months and a medic for six months. And in the camp, I was a medic in the pulmonology ward for eight months. Those patients were brought from this camp. They all died. They were in terrible condition.

– I've seen people who were emaciated, but never like those in that SS regiment. They were dropping like flies in autumn. There are prisoners here who have already served a year. It would be best to place you next to Dr. Wagner. He is also very emaciated. He arrived with the SS officers, although he was not one of them. It is true that he was not a peat worker. Now let us discuss Sura. Did Kostja tell you anything about that?

– Yes, I replied.

– That's good. If she comes here, because she'll be here soon, what will you do?

– You tell me, sir, what I should do.

– If Sura is so ill, you cannot be harsh with her. Later, we will go to Wagner, you will stay there, and we will see the rest, said the commander.

Doctor Wagner was a man who seemed prepared for anything. He didn't seem like a man who could heal others. He couldn't have been more than 40 or 45, but he looked like he was 60. His thinning hair was already gray, and his eyes were filled with overwhelming sadness. I was left alone with him, but he didn't say a word. So I tried to approach him.

– "Where were you born, doctor?" I asked him in Russian.

He looked at me, but didn't say a word. I asked him the same thing in German. He seemed to come back to life.

– "Do you speak German?" he asked me.

– I understand some German and Russian.

– I was born in Mediaș.

– Me too, in Alba Iulia, so we're fellow countrymen, Transylvanians. And if you were born in Mediaș, you must know Romanian and Hungarian too.

It was as if he had been struck by lightning; he suddenly came to life. He couldn't find his place. His face lit up and his eyes sparkled. He began to speak German mixed with Hungarian, Romanian, and Russian.

– I was born in 1906, in Mediaș. My father was a lawyer, and I have two sisters, whom I hope are still alive. I finished elementary school in German, but I also learned Hungarian. I learned Romanian on the street, from friends. In 1917, seeing the political situation, my father decided to move to Vienna permanently. That's how I finished high school in Vienna and university in Berlin. For valid reasons, I never married. I am very happy about that. I know nothing about my family. I was taken prisoner in Dresden. I ended up in Lithuania, in a camp on the outskirts of a town called Memmel. There were only SS officers there. I was not an SS officer, I had no tattoo on my arm. Word got out in the camp that SS officers were being sought. But they kept me there anyway. They didn't know what their plans were for us. We didn't work, they didn't tell us anything. They didn't treat us badly. They didn't confiscate anything from us; we had radios, bicycles, electric razors, watches, gold. A German and any officer lead a comfortable life in the army. The way we were treated was suspicious, because we knew that the Russians couldn't stand the SS. And I was already one of them. It was hard not to be one of them, but at least they respected me a little. In the camp, few officers fell ill. Headaches and diarrhea were our only ailments. But this life of luxury did not last long. One quiet summer evening, like a bolt from the blue, the following words were heard over the loudspeakers, in German:

"Everyone gather your belongings and be ready to depart!" That was all. Finally, we all thought, there would be a change. We were bored to death. Who would have thought what awaited us? What nightmare would we find ourselves in, in the middle of the night in trucks, surrounded by people armed with machine guns. There were 40 people in each truck, and the same in each wagon. They closed the wagon doors. Before dawn, we set off, and I felt that there was a pointless rush about it all. We traveled for six days without stopping. All we were given was dry bread and water. After six days, they took us to a small station. I don't even know the name of the station. I thought that from now on, this would be our new camp. I was wrong. By the time we had cleaned ourselves, washed, and been shaved, our clothes had disappeared. In their place, we found worn, stained clothes. We didn't say a word. At least, whatever will be, will be. The fear was written all over my comrades' faces. The train cars were waiting for us at the station. After a day, we arrived here.

– Don't be angry, doctor, you were in our camp. We saw you. We envied you for what you had. But when they saw that they had taken everything from you, they started cursing the Russians. After a few days, we found out where they had taken you, and I tell you honestly, we felt sorry for you. We saw the bodies...

officers coming out of the shower and I wondered what would become of these people where work, and for those accustomed to it, is very hard.

– So you saw us when we arrived, and now, a year later, I am the only one left alive. They sent us to various places, even to you, officers who were completely exhausted. I don't think any of them survived. You didn't tell us what happened to your patients. We had a well-thought-out plan. Winter lasts 10 months here, and what a winter! Their thin clothes didn't protect them from the bitter cold. It's a punishment camp, a slow extermination, without bullets or gas chambers. Medicines are almost non-existent. Luckily, the commander is a decent man. He encourages me, tells me to be patient, that next year the camp will be closed and you will go home. He knows from a reliable source. We will be the last of the Mohicans. But tell me, why are you here? You're a prisoner, aren't you? Although, from the way the commander spoke to you, I don't think you're a prisoner.

I briefly explained why I was there. The girl in question is the commander's granddaughter, but she has lung disease. She doesn't want to go to the sanatorium in Sochi. She's coming here to see me. I'm going to have a hard time with her. The commander expects me to convince her that the sanatorium is a miraculous place. And that everyone is cured there. I've seen the girl twice and haven't even spoken to her. It's going to be very difficult for me.

The girl arrived with her mother. Her mother was completely different from her. She was a representative of the Slavic race. Taller than her daughter, with blue eyes, quite attractive. She was no more than 45 years old. Probably half a day after Kostya left, the commander called me in immediately. With a heavy heart, I entered the commander's office. After closing the door behind me, I calmed down. I greeted him and sat down on the sofa next to the commander.

Honestly, I spoke Russian pretty badly, using gestures. Kitchen vocabulary. In the three years that have passed, I have learned so many things that I have to "break" my Russian a little to get by. I had nowhere to learn better. The guards didn't sit around teaching you their language. I first started learning from our doctor in the camp. I spoke German with her husband and mixed in a word or two of Russian. The second time was when I was cleaning the toilets. My guard's sister lived on the outskirts of town. I spoke to them as best I could. But now it will be much, much harder.

– Stefan, Sura has arrived with her mother, talk to her. You'll work something out. After all, as a prisoner, he speaks Russian quite well. I have something to do that can't be put off.

– Don't be angry with me, Stefan, for putting you in this difficult situation. When I heard you had arrived here, I was very happy. Because I couldn't go on living if I couldn't thank you for what you did for me. Everyone told me what a terrible thing you had done, you, a prisoner, insulting a Russian citizen. And you knew that, and yet you jumped to my defense. After the incident, I realized that I had no place with a jealous idiot. That was the day he beat me for the first time. He often hit me with his fists and my back would hurt for days. I'm done with him, for good. Maybe the two of us would get along. But it's impossible in our case. You have to go back home to your family. I came with my mother so she could meet you. My father is still at the front. I have two younger brothers. I'm glad that, thanks to my uncle, it won't be too hard for you here. He's a very good man. And maybe you'll be able to come back soon.

– Dear Sura, believe me, I am very happy to have met you. You will remain a dear and priceless memory for the rest of my life. And such memories make a person's life good. I will have many beautiful memories from my imprisonment, but the most beautiful memory will be of you. The life of a prisoner is bitter, you have no rights, you become an animal. You eat what you are given, you work until you drop, you rest when you can, and in the meantime your stomach growls with hunger. But even in these moments there are glimmers of hope. Like your presence. These moments must be cherished and guarded. In my case, they give me strength. But we must talk about you now. Kostja has found out that you are ill and that you do not believe how dangerous your illness is. That is the big problem.

– If a person falls ill, they must be cured; that's why doctors exist. Here in the north, winter can last up to 10 months. What a harsh winter! Not everyone can endure it. You need strong lungs. But you were born with weaker lungs. That's what you have to believe, Sura. You really need a change of air. In my opinion, the best thing would be for you to go to the Caucasus for a while. There, on the Black Sea coast or in Sochi. You'll get well there. But I recommend that you let Dr. Wagner examine you. He has been treating the prisoners' lungs here for a long time. Listen to your uncle's advice, he wants what's best for you.

– Nice to meet you, Stefan. I would never have believed it if I hadn't heard what you said to my daughter. She has to listen if she wants to live. We'll do everything we can to get her to Sochi as quickly as possible. We'll take your advice and take her to Dr. Wagner for a consultation next week. Thank you very much, Stefan.

– Last year, when I went to the doctor, he advised me to get some fresh air. He didn't mention Sochi, he just said my lungs were weak. There's no way I have serious lung problems.

– The most important thing now is to get well. The

commander arrived, his boots covered in mud.

– I've been out in the field. Work must be stopped as soon as possible. The peat is mixed with gravel. I've reported this many times, but so far I haven't received any response. It would be best to shut down this camp once and for all.

– Well, have you agreed with each other?

– Yes, uncle. Stefan is a smart and good boy. He recommended that I come see Dr. Wagner here for a consultation. Next week I'll come back with my mother for a checkup.

– Stefan, I brought you something to eat. Eat, don't go hungry.

Doctor Wagner was writing something at the table, he had a thick notebook in front of him.

– Come on, Stefi, that's what I'm going to call you from now on, so I can show you my bible. Although writing is forbidden in prison, I explained to the commander why I wanted to take notes. I write down all the lung diseases that occur here. That way I can learn. He told me that this isn't college, that I have to work here. But I have to hide the notebook, because you never know who might come in unannounced. They are medical notes and a diary, there are many things written here.

– And how do you intend to take this thick notebook home? If we manage to get home, they will search us again before we board the train. They will tie you up on the spot, especially since the notes are in German. Be careful, doctor! You are registered with them as an SS officer. The SS detachments have done a lot of dirty work over the years. Don't feel sorry about what's in this notebook. I also have a kind of notebook with notes, but it's just things for learning Russian: everyday words used in conversation. Even if they find it, they'll see that it's for learning Russian.

The doctor didn't say a word. He just stood there staring into space.

– I hadn't thought of that, and how right you are. And how I long to go home. I can't stand it anymore. I feel it. Now that you've come here like an angel, I thank God for that. There's a man next to me I can talk to.

– Keep your chin up, doctor! It won't be long before it's our turn. I think we've ended up very far from the center. This camp is special. The Arctic Circle is a few hundred kilometers away; we

We may be the last ones to go home. One never knows what lies ahead. I take things as they come. There is no need to despair. Never! If we manage to get home and integrate into civilian life, we will slowly get used to not being prisoners and will only remember for a few moments this hell in which we suffered enormously. We'll never forget, but then at home you'll have plenty of time to write down everything in this diary. At home you won't be afraid of the Russians. I'm already thinking about how to gather all my experiences and everything that happened. They're worthy of a novel. True stories. Now that we've met, tell me about your comrades. But what does the death of a few hundred people matter when millions are dying? You are the lucky one who will write about these things. You will remember every second. Those who have lived through these years in this hell and are lucky enough to make it home will have the strength to forgive these atrocities. The Frozen Purgatory will burn like the Fiery Purgatory.

– You speak Hungarian well, Stefi. At university, I lived with many Transylvanian Saxons. They all spoke Hungarian well. They were born in Hungarian towns and spoke Hungarian fluently. Whether you wanted to or not, you learned it. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially in Transylvania, the official language was Hungarian. I was always angry when they started speaking Hungarian among themselves. Although I knew it quite well, there were some words I didn't understand. In Transylvania, in Secuime, Banat, Satu Mare, and Maramureş, there were a total of almost one million German citizens. I lost my Hungarian, but when we speak, it's coming back to me. While we're together, it's very good to improve our language skills. Maybe I'll need it in a future life. The hell here is perhaps for my own good. I can safely say that almost 60-70% of the men in detachment 680 died of pneumonia, lung inflammation, and chronic viral infections. Any doctor can understand this. Without medicine, these diseases cannot be defeated and the patients cannot be cured. I tell you, they were falling like leaves in autumn. It was terrifying, believe me. Then a whole psychosis fell upon us, we no longer wanted to fight for our lives. "Why fight if this is your fate?" they said. The cold killed some. It was a time of horror around here. We had enough clothes, but not the right kind. What happened here cannot be forgotten. It's a nightmare I will never forget. I'll check on the girl, maybe it's nothing serious. If her body is strong and the disease is not advanced, maybe I can help her.

The weather warmed up. There was still a lot of snow. At the end of May, summer arrived, just as the doctor had said. He was my boss. We were looking after two patients who had frostbite on their feet. There was a stove in every barracks. Without it, there was no life. It didn't use much wood and kept the heat in. There are five women in the kitchen. Bread is brought from Kotlas. The food is the same everywhere in Russia: meager and poor. Its name: the starvation menu. Everywhere you looked, there was only forest. Fir trees.

black, red, birch, and black poplar. And it was useless wood. The order was very clear: be careful how much wood you use to heat people. A special brigade was in charge of wood for heating and cooking during the winter. Even branches were used; nothing was thrown away. When it was very cold, no work was done. A phone call would come saying that a cold front was approaching and everyone would stay in the barracks. You were actually glad about this. The prisoners could rest in the warmth and the guards didn't have to shiver with cold while on duty. Although they weren't cold at all. They wore thick camel hair boots, warm undergarments, and hats on their heads, and they just stamped their feet continuously. Thirty teams of guards guarded the camp. Apart from the small station, there were no other buildings. The doctor explained these things to me. Personal hygiene was the most difficult problem. Next to the kitchen was the sauna. It was very small, but it worked every day. In winter they had enough water from the snow, and in summer they had a very thin pipe through which water flowed. The sauna is for strong and healthy people, not for starving and emaciated people. When we came out of the sauna, most of us fell ill and caught cold.

I can't say anything bad about the changes that took place. The doctor and I had a better diet than the rest: 600 grams of bread, 10 grams of margarine, 10 grams of sugar. The commander didn't get very involved in the camp. Every second or third day he was in Kotlas. Sura came after two weeks, together with her mother, to see the doctor. According to him, Sura had to move elsewhere if she wanted to live. She could only come here in the summer. I was happy for her. She was a beautiful girl. She brought me food again in a backpack. I thanked her and told her not to bring any more, because there was enough food here. The commander laughed. As she was leaving, Sura whispered to me that before she left for Sochi, she would come back one more time, just for me.

The blizzard started. It's here too, but not like there. It's like everything's crackling and popping in the wind. The prisoners were sprawled out on their beds. When it's windy, they don't work. They just sit there. I went from room to room asking if anyone was sick. They weren't; I knew the storm could last for days, so they were resting. Someone called my name. A hand rose from a bed near the wall. I went over and couldn't believe my eyes: Jano, the Slovak.

– Mai, Debreczeni, I'm so glad to see you. My savior. Sit down and let's talk. What are you doing here? What have you done again?

– My friend, what a surprise! It's so good to see you. Have you been here long? How did you survive this hell?

– Only I know how I survived. It just goes to show that God wants me to go home. To see my two children, my wife, and my mother. God brought you here too, to this frozen hell. You

brought me hope that I would have the strength to hold out until the end, until these criminals let us go home. What great sin did I commit to end up here? Everyone here is a political prisoner. Politically convicted. Except for me and the doctor. Imagine that out of 600-700 SS officers, only the doctor is left. That's murder, my friend. Premeditated. I am the son of a peasant. I am used to physical labor. I cut my own wood for the winter. The cold and the temperatures here have weakened me too. I got along quite well with the political prisoners. That's how I managed to survive. When the camp opened, there was a lot of peat. But over the years, it disappeared. Now it's a mixture of peat and gravel. But even so, we have to keep digging.

The doctor appeared at the door.

– I'm going, he's calling me, I told Jano.

– I'll come back tomorrow, don't worry.

– The commander is looking for you. Someone you know?

– Yes, he was in the camp.

– Come on, come on, Sura is coming tomorrow to say goodbye. Her mother is bringing her. It's good that she woke up and is going for treatment. I don't know if you'll see each other again, because after your sentence is over, you'll go back to the camp.

– I heard some good news: next year, all labor camps will be abolished. I'm serious. This camp will also be abolished.

– Commander, I met a former camp colleague. He's here because he had a child with a local woman. What happened to him? He's not a political prisoner.

– I don't know. I'll find out. But there's still time. He has a year left in May. He was sentenced to four years.

The blizzard continued unabated. It brought with it only bitter cold. The doctor looked at me curiously:

– Why did he call you?

I told her. Sura is coming to say goodbye, she's leaving for Sochi. That woman loves you, otherwise she wouldn't come to see you. That's what I think. But it's a hopeless love. Sura should know that too. The guy she was with beat her out of jealousy. She got away from him. That's not how she imagined her life with him. I felt sorry for him, he had only one arm.

Sura came with her mother. Her eyes were shining.

– I'm saying goodbye, Stefan. The day after tomorrow I'm leaving with my mother. By train to Kirov and from there by plane to Sochi. I have a ticket for the hospital, so it won't cost me much. Take care of yourself.
I know you're going back to the camp in September. We'll see each other before then. My mother will look for you. Come on, let's say goodbye.

I didn't want to, but she hugged me and kissed me on the lips. Her eyes were burning. I shook hands with her mother, who told me she would never forget me and that they had to hurry to catch the train.

I wasn't happy that she left. I felt empty inside. A woman loves me. She showed me. But she knows it's all in vain. That's why she's so attached to me. Hope is the last thing to die.
And how do I feel about Sura? Love? Because I responded to her kiss? The kiss was a covenant. A seal. Between two people.

The blizzard had stopped, but it was terribly cold and freezing. Nature had fallen prey to the frost.
And it was cold in the halls. The prisoners, dressed, lay stretched out under blankets. Jano was happy when he saw me
:

– I thought you weren't coming! Hungry, shivering under a thin blanket, we were shaking. At least it was warm in the camp.

– We had guests.

And, in general, I told him about Sura. I brought him something from the package I received from Sura. When he saw the goodies I brought, he said:

– Is there still such a thing in this world? Thank you, you're a good man. May God grant you health and a speedy release from prison. And me too.

– Take care of yourself. Look what happened to me. Learn from my mistake. See what laws they have. We have no rights.

– When I jumped to the woman's defense, I did so without thinking it would come to this. Sura already hated her partner and sees me as a hero. Her hero. The fact that she lives in Kotlas, that her uncle is the camp commander, is just a coincidence and a series of interrelated events. It was meant to be. She promised me we would meet again before I returned to the camp. She is a good, beautiful girl. I wish her a speedy recovery. But I am sober. My sober mind will not let me fall in love. This love is doomed from the start. If Sura truly loves me, she will suffer. Time heals all wounds. She is still young. I am sorry.

– Everyone in the barracks knows you. They were interested in who you are and where you come from. I told them what you said about yourself, and they said you seem like a decent guy. They also know that you have a four-month sentence and that you are going back to the camp in September. They are all educated, learned people. They don't know why they were sentenced to hard labor. They hate communism because it, along with hard labor, wants to change people. It's all a utopia. Do you know what utopia is? It's a dream about the future. That one day, everything will be fine. Almost certainly never. There will be abundance, people will love one another, they will not know what war is, and they will have a prosperous and idyllic life.

During our conversation, an older prisoner approached us. He looked terrible. He couldn't have been more than 40 years old, but he was completely gray. His eyes, however, were bright.

– "Are you Hungarian?" he asked me.

– Yes, I am.

– Where were you captured? And when?

– At Tisa, in the fall of 1944.

– Don't mind me asking. I wanted to know if you were in our territory with a rifle in your hands. In the Brzanski forests, Hungarian soldiers committed many atrocities.

– Were you there yourself?

– Yes, I was. And I saw what they did.

– And what did you do against them?

– We were defending our homeland. As best we could. On the front lines, people become savage, they become animals. I don't think there's anyone who likes being on the front lines. There were battles with partisans in those forests. There was no mercy, only an eye for an eye. And believe me, it wasn't in vain. There were no prisoners there.

– I read a lot in the newspapers about what happened there. Maybe it's not all true, but it was terrible.

– But do you believe me that I didn't have a rifle in my hands on Russian territory?

– I believe you," said the man calmly. "I am a philosopher, even though I am only 42 years old. I don't have much work experience, but in our country you cannot express yourself freely.

– I am not a philosophy professor by profession, but I do not trust communist doctrines anyway. If they want to impose their doctrine through these methods, then this doctrine is harsh and deceitful. I have not read much about it, but I have seen enough. At the end of the First World War, the communists dismantled the Hungarian army and thus had no one left to defend the borders. I was still young. If I get home, I will continue my studies. I'll see how. Now I have to go. Jano, I'll be back.

The blizzard disappeared as quickly as it had begun. But the cold and frost remained. At the beginning of June, the cold and frost slowly began to lose ground, making way for spring and summer. It was like March back home.

The commander was away most of the time and I didn't see him for a long time. He had important business at the center. Work continued, if you can call it that, as we were now making piles of peat mixed with earth. The gravel was more colorful and could be used as mosaic. Red, purple and yellow were the colors that changed. I often went with the doctor to the pit. There was no quota. This showed the contempt that was felt for the people working there. Their faces were unshaven, frightened, their eyes full of fear. I told the doctor that I would never go there again.

– Why aren't they shaved?

– He's not a barber. He trims his beard with scissors. I have the scissors. Orders from the commander, said the doctor.

One day, the commander called me to his office. Sura had sent me a letter. She was feeling very well. She wrote that her doctor would cure her, but that she had to move permanently to a warmer climate.

. "Take care of yourself!" I also had a package from Sura's mother. I thanked her for everything.

If not every day, then at least I stopped by Jano's often. I could see he was happy when I came. He had a cold and was coughing. I told him I would bring him some tea from the kitchen tomorrow. Hot tea.

– Now I've caught a cold, when will spring come? I'm afraid I won't make it. I'm very weak. Or do I feel better because of you? Haven't you heard anything, when these pigs let us stay at home?

– I told you that there are rumors that maybe next year we will go home. That's what the commander said. There are prisoners who have been here since the beginning of the war. The commander's replacement, a fairly young guy, explains these things to me. He whispered to me that the commander is absent because he has a club in Komsomol, which he runs together with Shura's mother. That's how I know these things. He's also waiting for the camp to be shut down. Until then, we'll manage somehow. He's found a nice girl tomarry in Kotlas and would like to get married. She's from Astrakhan. Life is different there. Here, on the other hand, it's hard. Those who are born here are used to it.

It has been raining for several days. It is July. It was warm and the snow had melted. The grass was turning green, the birch trees were budding. Day by day, nature was coming back to life, as if it knew it had to hurry if it wanted to survive. The merciless winter is just around the corner and wants to strangle it.

The pit was filled with water, and it was impossible to work. The prisoners were resting in the barracks. Everyone was doing what they wanted.

As I sat down on Jano's bed, my companions arrived. The philosopher was the first to speak.

– Hey, Stefan, we're happy to talk to you. You give us news about the outside world. We want to know if it's true that this damn place is going to be shut down.

– It looks like it. You'll go somewhere else, maybe somewhere better. It can't be worse than here. There's also news that next year, everyone, I mean the prisoners of war, will go home. That's what I know, the rest is history.

– For you, prisoners of war, it's simple. You go home, you'll be free, and only sometimes will you remember these times. But what about us? How long will we have to endure this?

– As a philosopher, you must know that doctrines change the fate of the world. And not always for the better. The Romans threw Christians to the lions. The communists want to exterminate you. Different doctrines, but both deadly dangerous. We, the prisoners of war, don't know what it will

be like when we

get home. We hear and read about democratic government, but in these troubled times, you can't know where things are headed.

– You say you are Hungarian, yet you also say that Romania is your country. How is that possible?

– We Hungarians are scattered across several countries. I hope you have heard of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But what about the revolution of 1848? Perhaps you know that this revolution was suppressed by Russian troops. The Austrians could not stand the Hungarians. By the end of the war, the leaders of the two countries had reconciled and established the monarchy. When World War I broke out and they lost the war, the monarchy collapsed. This led to the emergence of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, while Romania received Transylvania because it had a good policy. From what I can see, you don't know much about history.

– To be honest, I don't really know. I didn't learn that Russian troops suppressed the Hungarian revolution.

– Did you learn about the great Russian uprisings? About Pugachev and Razin?

– Of course. About the suffering of the peasants and their right to revolt.

– How are the peasants doing now with the collective farms? You were born under this regime. I don't know if this regime will ever be perfect. Since Tsar Peter the Great, Russia has been a real power. They rule over one sixth of the globe. They have many natural resources. And yet its inhabitants do not live in great prosperity.

– That's true, but again, I have to remind you about the regime.

– Honestly, I love Russians. They are genuine, real people. I will remember them for as long as I live. They heroically defended their homes and their country, and for the first time in history, they reached Berlin. I don't know if there were Russian troops involved in Napoleon's defeat. Politics is not our business. We have to think about how to get out of the situation we are in alive. You can see for yourselves what politics is capable of. It's a vulgar animal.

For two weeks, the political prisoners did not work at all. The commander was absent from the camp most of the time. We met once. He brought me a letter from Sura and a package. Sura is well. He also told me that he was sending many complaints to the center and that he was not receiving any answers to the problems here. I told him to go to the center himself and then he would get answers. One of the officials there is not doing his job. The next day, he left for Kotlas. Before he left, he told me:

– Last night I thought about what you said, and you're right. Some officials are just eating the government's bread for nothing. I'm leaving for Moscow this week. I have someone there.

All three of us enjoyed the package. Especially Jano, who was in desperate need of some goodies. I told the doctor that the commander was leaving for Moscow.

– What will happen to me? Will they put me with the political prisoners?

– I don't think so. Then Jano and I would share the same fate as you. I'll ask the commander who will take me back to the camp when my sentence expires.

– There's still plenty of time. Someone will come, he told me.

– I think it will be the same with Jano. We are prisoners of war. That's what I believe. Your case is more special. You were the only doctor among those SS officers. But then it was discovered that you didn't have the SS tattoo under your armpit like the rest of them. So you're not an SS man. In the end, everything comes out. Let's see what news the commander brings back from Moscow.

It was the Northern Lights season. For four to five weeks, there was an interesting light at night, almost like daylight. You could see well, you could even read. We were used to this natural phenomenon, but in this area it seemed brighter. It's true, Kotlas is further north. The climate was also more extreme here; in winter, the temperature reached -50 degrees Celsius to -55 degrees Celsius, and in summer it was scorching hot. Plants grow faster here because, with light at night, you feel like you can see the grass growing with the naked eye. The trees do not have thick trunks, and the overwhelming majority are 12-15 meter tall fir trees.

The prisoners were dying of hunger and boredom. They washed themselves in the stream that ran through the camp. We tried to talk to Jano, but every time we gave up. As soon as we left with Jano, the other people we had been talking to gathered around. I would have done the same in their place. We told them the news and hoped that they would be moved elsewhere before winter came.

– You are Russian citizens and should know where such camps are located.

– That's the biggest problem, there are so many of them and you never know where the train will stop, at which station, replied the philosopher.

The commander arrived from Moscow with the news that the camp would be closed by September. Where the convicts would be moved to was not yet known.

– What will happen to me? asked the doctor. Will they take us away with the prisoners?

– You two and Jano are registered as prisoners. I know from a reliable source that they will dismantle all the prison camps by next year, and you will be sent to the camp in Falenki, and from there you will be sent home. And we are waiting for change. Grisa, my deputy, wants to get married and move to Astrakhan. That was the good news, rejoice.

I was glad to find out the name of the acting commander. Grisa was a friendly local man with a good heart. I knew we were related somehow, but there was no point in mentioning it here. In the fishing collective on the Kama, it was different; there, everyone knew about the kinship between our peoples.

Towards the end of August, the rains began. 800 km away, in our camp, these rains began in mid-September. That was pretty much the difference. The officers here wandered around the camp all day, disoriented, eager to leave. Strangely, I believed they would leave soon, for an easier job or even home. Some of them kept saying they were innocent and had ended up there because of false informers who had lied. But people hope until they die.

Finally, at the beginning of September, news broke that five freight cars would be brought to the secondary line at the end of that week and that everyone had to be ready. That was all. But what were they supposed to be ready for, and who were they supposed to say goodbye to?

Fortunately, the weather was good that day. The commander came in and told us:

– Everyone pay attention! No one is allowed to leave the line until we reach the train cars; if you do, you will be executed on the spot. You will be taken to Kotlas, where you will be interrogated again, and you may be allowed to return home. Jano, you go to the doctor's room.

After lunch, I went into the barracks. I wanted to say goodbye to the philosopher.

– Stefan, I knew you would come. In civilian life, we would have gotten along very well; I think we became friends.

We couldn't continue our conversation because the guards appeared and took us out for roll call. We hugged each other without even asking his name.

Even now, the count was not accurate. There should have been 183 prisoners, but there were only 182. One was missing. They searched everywhere but could not find him. They went to the commander and found out that there were 183 of us, including Jano. Late that afternoon, the convoy set off. We waved

for a long time, until the train was out of sight. In the entire camp, there were three prisoners and six guards left.

The commander left with the prisoners to hand them over personally in Kotlas. I realized that I didn't even know his name, even though he was an extraordinary man. Now, he is probably more at peace because a job like his is very risky.

It was September and it snowed every day. The blizzards usually come later in the season, but we were glad because they bring real winter. We were sitting in the room talking when Grisa came in because he was bored to death. We waited every day for the commander to show up and solve the remaining problems in the camp. We couldn't be left unguarded because the civilians would have stolen everything from the camp. The commander arrived and didn't forget what he had promised.

– We managed to hand over all the prisoners. You two will return to your camp, but, doctor, it is not yet clear what willhappen to you. You are not registered as an SS officer; I have recommended that they send you to the camp with the other two, but it is up to them to decide. Go to the storeroom and find some warm clothes and shoes, because winter is coming.

There were six women in the kitchen. Now that they no longer had to cook for the prisoners, only for us, they had time to chat all day, happy. If they took them to Kotlas, to the camp, then they would have work again. The commander, together with Grisa, took inventory of the camp, starting with the barracks, the barbed wire fence, and ending with the food in the storeroom.

– The day after tomorrow, you will leave for Kotlas, said the commander. An important episode in my life as a camp commander has come to an end.

When we left the camp gate, I didn't look back. You don't say goodbye to a place like that. We were dressed in whatever we could find, so we looked like civilians. We arrived at the station, where, after a short wait, the train arrived. On the train, we talked very openly; I got used to the fact that if you understand and speak their language, Russians become very talkative and welcoming. Grisa was very happy, he could already see himself back home in Astrakhan, where the winters weren't so harsh.

– Do you know how big the Volga Delta is? It's an aquatic paradise; I grew up there, so I know. There are so many birds there that if they get scared and take off, the sky darkens. My little boat has been waiting for me for years, waiting for me to put up its sail and, after I finish my work in the delta, to take it out onto the Caspian Sea. Then we'll both be happy. If you're not happy,

it means you haven't lived. My mother wrote to me that Medred, my dog, whines in his sleep, probably dreaming of me. I would very much like to go home.

The blast furnaces of Kotlas were visible. Soon we arrived at the city headquarters, where the women were taken elsewhere. We remained in a waiting room, and the commander left to resolve our issue, as Grisa explained.

– "I hope the doctor will go with you," he said. "What can he do here alone? Bureaucracy is everywhere."

But he has already arrived.

– The problem is solved. And the doctor will go with you. Grisa, take the boys back to the camp. I told you the weather change was delayed. The radio announced that a cold spell is coming. It depends on whether the cold will intensify or not. You are well dressed. For now, you will stay in the guards' barracks. You will also enjoy their rations. I want you to promise me something: don't try to escape. I would be very upset if you tried.

We laughed, Jano smiled bitterly, and the doctor shook his head.

– We're not that stupid, I replied.

– I was joking, replied the commander.

The guards' barracks were at the confluence of the Sukhona and Vychegda rivers, where the Northern Dvina flowed onward to empty into the White Sea near Arkhangelsk. It was a large river, like the Danube. We spent several days there, standing at the window and watching the bustle of ships of various sizes and tonnages coming and going. To the north, there was only one railway line. Navigation was more profitable. The guards were not interested in us, nor were we in them. The frost arrived. As usual, it started with a blizzard. I had already been a prisoner of war on Russian soil for three years, but every time I watched these unleashed forces of nature with awe and fear. Work in the port did not stop. First the rivers, then the lakes freeze over – until spring or summer, there is no more sailing.

I don't know how many days we spent in Kotlas. Probably a whole week. We weren't bored. We knew that when the storm ended, we would return to the camp. The commander visited us only once. He didn't bring us any food, but he had no reason to; the guards had good food.

Finally! That day arrived. The storm subsided, then stopped. The next day, the commander came with Grisa.

– As soon as they announced that trains were running again, you left. Grisa is your boss, Martin Stefan, you received a letter from Sura. She knows you're going back to the camp. She's sorry you can't meet. She wishes you happiness and asks you not to forget her.

– Commander, tell Shura that this will be the most beautiful memory of my life as a prisoner and that I will never forget it. Just like you, commander, you are a good man. I thank Shura's mother for everything she has done for me.

We shook hands and he left. I had met a new Russian, whom I took into my heart. Grisa said the following:

– Be ready at all times, you have no luggage, and if the road is clear, we'll leave tomorrow. Goodbye.

He only arrived on the third day. He said that the train had been snowed in in a 14 km long stretch of forest and they had only just managed to get it out. We left the next morning.

We were given cold food for two days and chatted cheerfully on the way to the station. Jano was beside himself with excitement.

– I'm sure I'll be home next year. They're already talking about it on the radio and in the newspapers.

Where the wind blew, the snow was so deep that it felt like we were going through a tunnel. The huge locomotive pulled the carriages nervously behind it. The locomotive's echo resounded in the merciless ice desert. Grisa was such good company that I didn't even notice when we arrived in Falenki. Jano was fidgeting nervously.

– I'm very nervous, I can't sit still. The nurses are going to bite my ears off because I played a prank on one of their colleagues.

– That's your problem, from now on, keep it to yourself, look what happened to your great love.

– You're right. The same thing happened to me.

– I'll say it again: take care of yourself. You heard what Grisa said. Next year, the prisoners of war will go home. Don't even talk to the women.

There was only one officer on guard. The platoon was out shooting. Grisa wanted to return on the evening train. We went to headquarters. The mustachioed chief was there. Grisa told him about us and handed him our papers. After inspecting the papers, the commander gave Grisa the following orders:

– I am giving you a stamped order in duplicate, which you will give to the camp commander. He will sign both copies, and you will bring one copy back to me, and that will be the end of it. You can go back now.

The handover went quickly; three prisoners aren't worth much. Grisa shook our hands and told us he would never forget us. The doctor is a good man, he'll miss him. He got used to him in his life.

– Stefan, we got along well. But that's life. Jano, take care of yourself so you can come back home.

With these words, he disappeared from our lives.

I don't know how others are, what feelings they have towards their fellow human beings. It could be anyone, even someone you know. Just like me, here in prison, I meet different people, former enemies. We can barely understand each other because we don't know each other's language 100%. And yet, our feelings drew us to or repelled us from each other. From this point of view, I am a lucky man. I will remember Grisa and the others, all the people I met here. Many pleasant memories enrich a person's life. Memories make life more joyful and happier, and that is its essence.

I went up to the first floor with the nurse. It was very hot in the barracks. The work brigades return in the evening from clearing the forest. The three of us sat on one bed; we were already used to each other. Our problems and suffering brought us closer together, even though we hadn't known each other for very long. That's how it will be until we part ways.

The work brigades returned. We received our camel hair boots, which you only get when it gets cold. If it's not cold, the boots get wet and your feet freeze very easily. I saw several prisoners with frozen toes.

The news that we had arrived spread quickly throughout the camp. Almost everyone knew who we were. I don't want to mention names, because then I would fill entire pages. We were happy to see each other, because we were alive.

Everyone was happy when they found out that the camp in Kotlas had been closed down because the peat had run out. The camp had a very bad reputation among the prisoners here. Jano worked there for almost two winters and experienced firsthand what that camp meant for the prisoners. Here, in this camp, he said, we were "gentlemen." There were no medicines; if you fell ill and were lucky, you recovered, if not, that was it! They only buried you in the spring because they couldn't dig in the frozen ground. The dead were kept outside, frozen stiff, and then put in a mass grave. That was their grave. He told many terrible things.

The strong blizzard we experienced in Kotlas reached us too, but it was less intense. It brought a little snow and only a light wind. The ground was not yet frozen, and we could still pull out the stumps. After four o'clock it got dark and we had to work faster. It wasn't pleasant. Hungry and weak, who can work fast? Only animals and prisoners.

We solved the problem by putting less in the wheelbarrow. Prison teaches you many things, to take care of yourself, that's the most important thing. Here, there is no mother to take care of you.

One day, the nurse on duty came to take us to the doctor's office. The doctor was

waiting for us: "How are you feeling?" she asked us.

We shrugged our shoulders. "Fine, nothing

hurts." "The consultation will show that."

She didn't find anything unusual in any of us. She told me I was in good shape. Her face lit up when she found out that my colleague was a doctor.

– "I'm glad you're here, doctor. We'll work together. We have a few patients, but if the cold weather sets in, there will be more. Jano, you're not in very good shape, your lungs are wheezing, so I'm admitting you to the infirmary. Don't be alarmed, it's nothing serious."

The consultation is over.

The next day, the nurse came to see me again.

– I called you, Stefan, to tell you that the evaluation committee is coming from Kirov. You will definitely be evaluated at 100%. You will go to the forest for three months. At the worst possible time. Do you want to go?

– I definitely don't. It's very hard in winter, in the forest, cutting wood. It's hard labor, beyond human strength.

– That's exactly what I discussed with my husband. The hospital roof needs repairs again; it needs to be covered with shingles. There is no birch or poplar of the thickness we need in the vicinity. We don't want fir, because the trunk is very thin, it's not worth it. Spruce would be enough, but it's not good enough quality. The command explained this to me, because every building belongs to them. They also told me that after the prisoners go home, these buildings will be used as an agricultural school. There is plenty of wood for roof shingles near the Kama River. If you think so, go with the team. It won't be as hard as here; you've been away before, anyway. My husband came up with this idea. We filled the shed with wood that needs to be chopped. My husband knows you quite well and likes you. What do you say?

I accepted the proposal because I didn't want to work in the forest anymore, in a meter and a half of snow. I'd had enough. The brigade consisted of 12 prisoners and a craftsman who would select the wood. We were given warm clothes and boots made of camel hair. Over these we pulled on boots to protect us from the frost.

We set off on a Monday, with three sleds, so as not to tire the horses. These four-legged animals are wonderful creatures. They were created to withstand the long, harsh winter here. Who can gather enough hay to last until spring? The horses and cows here eat anything: slop, potato peelings, bread, flour. Anything to survive here. In spring, they were just skin and bones, walking skeletons. And even in this condition, they are able to pull and even run with their loads.

We arrived in the evening. In the middle of the forest, with no human habitation in sight. Just a lonely building with thin smoke rising from the chimney. A man appeared in the doorway, holding a machine gun. The two young officers who were with us followed him into the house. He was probably a guard too. We got out of the sleighs and tried to warm up our numb legs. We all went into the house. It was quite large, spacious, and warm. A terracotta stove provided heat. There were beds all around. It was probably a hunting lodge for the local bosses. When they felt like it, they came here to hunt and eat good food. We settled down on the beds and started to eat. Each of us received a loaf of bread, 30 grams of margarine, 30 grams of sugar, and a small can of pâté, enough for three days. It wasn't much, but it wasn't little either. The guard was an elderly man with a beard. After we finished eating, I went up to him and asked him where I could get some water. Surprised, he asked me:

– Do you know Russian?

– A little, I replied.

He showed me the canister in the corner. I asked the three visitors if they had fed the horses.

– A long time ago, and it was oats! If we go on the road, then they get oats. Come with me and see where they sleep. I can see you love animals.

The horses were in a stable behind the house. When we went in, a horse whinnied.

– I'll bring you some water right away," he said to the horses. "You should know that here, in winter, horses don't get water, only melted snow. In winter, the wells freeze, and people have to melt the snow. Melted snow tastes like spring water. And you drank the same thing earlier. All six horses had blankets on their backs. I'll sleep peacefully tonight because the animals are well cared for. It's no use, I used to look after horses myself; I love these intelligent animals. Dogs and horses are man's best friends.

The next day, the old man offered us tea.

– It's cold outside, and tea will warm you up, he said.

We hurried because we still had a long way to go. We arrived at our destination late in the evening. It was already dark, and we couldn't see much of the landscape. They were already waiting for us and took us to a smaller room where it was warm. There were beds, but more importantly, it was warm.

The next day, I looked around; as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but forest. To the east, not far away, you could see the Urals. It was cold, and our camel hair boots came in handy. We hadn't taken off our underwear yet. The sleds were getting ready to return; they had been hired by the Center and were receiving wood for the winter and areas to harvest in the summer in exchange for transportation. It was convenient for them.

I won't go into too much detail about the work here. Nothing particularly noteworthy happened. It was a small area stretching to the other side of the Kama River. From the first evening we arrived, we were struck by the strong smell of fish. Large, wide boats bobbed on the banks of the Kama River. There was also a ferry for crossing. A thick steel bar secured in mechanisms held the ferry in place. We were given two meals a day: 60 g of bread, 10 g of margarine, 10 g of sugar, and a double portion of soup. But what soup! Cabbage soup with small pieces of fish in it. It had a special taste. I still remember that taste!

The logging area was on the other side of the Kama River. We crossed the ferry every morning. The Kama was almost 10 meters wide and was the largest tributary of the Volga. Like all Russian rivers, the Kama was full of fish. The river was not yet frozen and the fishermen were still working. The fish were salted, freshly cleaned, and washed in large wooden barrels. After crossing the Kama, two kilometers away, the bark of the birch trees was white. There were also Canadian birches among them. The craftsman told us:

– I want quality work from you; there is no need to rush, nothing will happen. But I don't want to see you slacking off either. The weather is good, you can still work. When we finish, we'll go back to the camp.

It got colder; snow began to fall from the gray clouds covering the sky. It snowed all day and all night. We could see the snow piling up. The forest was not old, the trunks were no thicker than 30-40 cm. The work was going well. As soon as the tree hit the ground, we cut off the crown, and the trunk was pulled to the saw.

– We're not interested in the branches, said the old craftsman. They can stay with the locals.

I don't know if I mentioned it, but I feel so sorry that we are cutting down the forest! I asked the forest, which I love so much, and nature for forgiveness. But there's nothing else I can do. My drop of guilt is just a drop in the ocean, but I know that drops make up the ocean. I also know that the Russians have so many forests that it's hard to cut them all down.

The days passed in the same way. We didn't go anywhere, because we couldn't; the guards told us when we arrived here that we weren't allowed to leave the house. It's true, they didn't go anywhere either. So we didn't meet any other people. Only the craftsman left after work, but he came back in the morning. He had relatives here in the area.

Once, when I was on my way to work, a local was waiting for the ferry on the other side. Eight dogs were pulling his sled. Actually, there were two sleds, and the dogs were tied behind them. One sled had three empty wooden barrels; he was going to get salted fish. I have never seen a dog sled before. The local was an amazing guy. He was wearing the traditional footwear of the area, made of linden bark, 2 cm thin and 4-5 cm thick. The bark is soaked in hot water to make it more malleable and easier to work with. Instead of socks or leggings, they wear the skin of a hairy animal. Above the knees, they wear wide stockings, and their leather pants are torn in one place, revealing the black hair on their legs. The clothing down to the knees was also made of leather, but decorated with pieces of leather dyed red and black. On his head he wore a fur cap and all kinds of trinkets hung down his back. He was not tall, but middle-aged. He did not take off any

word. He saw that we were prisoners. Not even our guard spoke to him. The dogs were smart, they stood quietly in the snow. They weren't bothered by the cold; they were used to it.

We were lucky with the cart, because the weather was on our side and we finished the work. There was no blizzard or storm, and we didn't have to clear much snow from around the tree trunks. I don't know why, but here they insist that the stumps be 5 cm above the ground. I told the craftsman:

– Go, look at what your people left behind; the stumps are 50% taller than they should be. When I was at the forest district office, the forester was always making a fuss. Those were the orders back then. And you don't talk, you're prisoners of war, do what you're told, and do it well!

The next day, they took us there without tools, because we had to gather the cut wood. We didn't know when it would be transported. That was the Center's job. We, the prisoners, piled it up, counted it, filled out the paperwork, and finished. That's what the craftsman told us while we were working. In three days, we were done.

It was warm in the room. We slept, joked, and rested. The craftsman arranged his things and promised to bring us a barber. We had three weeks' worth of stubble. On Saturday evening, we went to the sauna. It was a big deal, but not for starving prisoners. For me, at least, the hot steam weakened me so much that I felt like a drunk man. But it was a measure to eradicate lice, and it was mandatory to go to the sauna, fully clothed.

Towards evening, the foreman came and announced:

– Tomorrow the barber is coming, he'll shave you, then you go to the sauna. The day after tomorrow you leave with two sleighs, because they're faster. The snow is good, frozen, and the sleighs glide easily. You'll get your food on time and leave early in the morning. I think you'll get there one day.

It was just as the craftsman had said. In the evening, after dinner, we received our rations for two days. Cold food. In addition to the normal portions, we also received a large piece of fish as a supplement for working well. In the morning, around five o'clock, the troikas arrived. It was dark, only the snow was lit up. The horses' bells rang out in the frozen Russian landscape. We wrapped up and left.

I had seen troikas before, but I had never been in one. A troika is normally pulled by three horses. They are good sleighs, spacious, and you can sit comfortably in them. Those who can decorate them as they wish. The six horses were silver in color, they seemed bigger, but maybe I'm mistaken. They ran as if they were flying, throwing clouds of snow behind them. The horses ran without stopping, at a comfortable pace. When we reached our first stop, the craftsman looked at his

watch.

– We're making good time, we'll be at the camp at eight o'clock, and at nine o'clock you'll be taken in.

I don't have many memories from that trip. Those three weeks were too short for me to remember anyone in particular. I remember that local man and the fish soup. I will always remember the summer and the birch forests. Sometimes I still dream about them.

The first thing I asked when I arrived was whether the people from Kirov had come, the ones who would be evaluating us – that's what we called the commission. They told me they had been there last week, but had left without much success. No one had been evaluated at 100%, a few at 75%, most between 50 and 30%. Such a poor evaluation had never been seen before. But it's normal – the poor diet has achieved its goal. Over the years, always hungry and starving, never feeling full, dreaming and thinking about home day and night – all this wears down a person's soul, heart, and body. An uncertain future haunts you. If you are sentenced to a certain period of time, you know that it will pass and you will be free, but here you have been for years and you know nothing. And the rumor "Are we going home next year?" fills us with hope, but who believes it anymore, when we have been deceived for years? A long promise, like chewing gum that stretches forever.

The fourth winter in captivity has begun. Somehow, I will endure. Perhaps the promise of returning home will become reality. I have already told you about the camp, what I heard and saw in Kotlas, and about the camp's dissolution. When the prisoners became too weak to work, the number of brigades going out to work in the morning began to decrease. If there used to be 12 brigades, now there were only 3-4. Over the years, many perished from starvation; their bodies weakened, and a severe cold was fatal. Prisoners died of hunger and exhaustion.

I can't complain, because of my leg injury I was under treatment for five months. It was difficult to heal before I could walk again. In the summer of 1946, I contracted hepatitis and was under treatment for between two and seven weeks. In the fall I had diarrhea. In the summer of 1947, blisters appeared on the soles of my feet, which healed with difficulty because they burst, and my feet were covered with wounds. I had a very hard time getting rid of this disease.

Meanwhile, the real Russian winter had arrived. This was nothing new to me. We chopped wood for a week. The days passed pleasantly thanks to the company. Maiourul told stories about the front in Manchuria and how Japanese soldiers fought. He had seen and experienced it firsthand. As a civilian, he may be kind and courteous, but on the front, where he may die, he is ruthless. He is part of a fanatical nation; for them, the Emperor is a demigod. They are the best

fighters in the world, their spirit of sacrifice taken to the extreme. Many Russian soldiers left their bones there, but a soldier is a soldier, he is there to fight, no one asks his opinion.

It was late November—a storm, lots of snow, mild weather, and then a harsh winter. We continued to go to work. Wheat does not grow in this area, only oats. Wheat and rye were brought in wagons and stored in the church, which served as a warehouse. It wasn't just a church, but a cathedral with five towers, one large in the middle surrounded by four smaller ones, with typical onion-shaped domes. The crosses were gone, but life went on. Two Molotov trucks transported the grain. We unloaded it from the wagons with buckets. They had no silo. I was there many times to shovel. The cathedral was not well ventilated, rather cold like an ice cave. I don't know where they ground the grain, because I never went to the mill. At noon we received 200 grams of bread and a teaspoon of oil – the prisoner's ration.

Another place we worked was the cement factory. After every snowstorm, they would take us to the cement factory to clear the snow. Two long railroad tracks had to be cleared of snow, it was terrible work. The frozen snow slid off the shovels, and the work was very exhausting. We received our normal rations here as well. Once they made us load a wagon, but we couldn't do it. Three of us could barely lift a 50-kilogram sack.

My third job was with potatoes. We had to pick potatoes all winter; they don't have time to grow properly and spoil very quickly. In mid-September, sleet already appears and the first snow falls. The potatoes are transported by sleigh, just like rye. Sorting was simple: what was good went to one side, what was half frozen went to another, and what was completely frozen went to another. The half-frozen ones went to the kitchen to feed the prisoners. It was pretty good. It was warm there, the work wasn't hard, and we hid a few potatoes in our pockets and baked them in the ashes of the stove.

Before Christmas, a comrade died of starvation. We met in the train car in Focșani, where they loaded us into cars, 50-60 prisoners in each. No matter how many of us were in the car, we always found a place next to each other. We were all fellow countrymen, except for my three neighbors, who were Romanians from Transylvania. We became friends immediately. The following month, he was the one who helped me. Because of my swollen foot, I couldn't walk; he brought me my ration of dry bread and water, which we received quite rarely. When they took us out of the wagons in Falenki, he warned a nurse that there was another sick person in the wagon, even though we were already at the door and I jumped out for fear of being left behind. His name was Grama Ștefan, he was my age, from Mureș County. He was tall,

blond, a handsome boy with blue eyes. The nurses liked him, but his body couldn't withstand the harsh, cold winter here. He caught a cold and developed pneumonia. I felt sorry for him.

Christmas 1947 came and went. It was a harsh winter that covered the whole world. We prisoners celebrated for two days. We sang carols on empty stomachs. We remembered Christmases spent at home, with all the goodies on the table. We talked over each other, feverishly telling stories about the holiday treats at home. The foresters brought us a small Christmas tree, which we placed at the end of a bed. We asked a nurse for a small candle, and so we had our own Christmas.

The year 1948 was a year of hope for us. Our dreams and promises became reality. The prisoners were no longer as loud as before; they withdrew into themselves and became apathetic. The forest brigades no longer worked with the same enthusiasm and neglected the rules. The commander no longer made a fuss about this. Perhaps he too had been ordered to ease up on the rules. There was no one left to enforce them on. The prisoners sensed that something was about to happen, but they were not afraid of the consequences.

The days passed slowly. I joined the kitchen staff. A woodcutter had badly injured his hand, and we had to provide wood for heating and cooking. It wasn't pleasant to chop wood in very cold weather, but the kitchen fed me well.

One evening, Grunfeld Mihai, the bread manager, entered our room. He was looking for me. He was a handsome man, of medium height, with olive skin and blue eyes. He had free pass everywhere. He was a notorious womanizer, a pleasant man who always joked and laughed about everything.

– Hey, Debreczeni, I came to see you. I heard you like to sing and that you have a good voice. Carnival is coming and we want to put on a little show, because this year we're definitely going home. I don't want to predict anything, but I believe the same thing as the Russians. This year we're going home, for sure! Until now, there was no mention of it on the radio or in the newspapers, but now, every day, they're saying the same thing. We'll see if it's true. One thing is certain—they can't keep us here forever. I'm planning a half-hour cabaret. Little Rado will provide the music and the choir, and you help us with a few Hungarian folk songs, whatever you know. Is that agreed? The nurses said you have a good voice, and on Sundays, when you sing, they enjoy listening to you. They like Hungarian songs.

– If I was your choice, then my friend, I will help you, so that neither you nor I will be disgraced.

As I mentioned, there was a smoldering fever among the prisoners in the camp. "Whatever will be, will be!" They talked among themselves about what it would be like when they got home. That was all they talked about at work. It would be a catastrophe if someone told them, told us, that it was all just a cruel delusion.

I didn't see Jano for a long time. I went out to work every day, and the cold put my body to the test. I didn't feel like getting dressed again and going to the infirmary. The weather got milder, and so, one Sunday, I went to see Jano. He was happy to see me, but he didn't look too good. Maybe he had something wrong with his lungs.

– I've been waiting for you for a long time, Debreczeni, only you or possibly the doctor. Your body is strong if you can hold out like this. You should see what happened to me. As I told the doctor, if I were at home and not starving like I am here, I wouldn't be sick. She knows that, but she can't help me.

– But you'll be going home this year, and then you can eat whatever you want. Just be careful at first to eat only small amounts, otherwise your stomach and intestines will suffer.

– Let me tell you more. One day, the doctor asked me if I would like to work in the kitchen. The work wasn't hard, it was warm, and I could eat more than in the infirmary. She would take care of me. I was delighted; she must have gotten tired of me. The cook was a man named Lajtar. In the summer of 1946, the Germans went home, and until then the cook was one of them. That's when Lajtar arrived in the kitchen. I went and told him that the doctor had sent me. He looked at me in surprise and told me briefly that the supervisor had to come and that I should wait there in the corner.

I sat down and waited. When the supervisor arrived, Lajtar explained why I was there. He addressed me in Russian:

– The doctor sent you here. You are Slovak and you speak Russian well. Take care of yourself, but don't steal. You can eat as much as you want; the cook is your boss, listen to him.

– You can't imagine how happy I was. There were two other prisoners and two Russian women in the kitchen. No matter how poor the camp kitchen was, you could always find something to eat, something to nibble on. I got used to the work here. On the fourth day, I felt sick. I was peeling potatoes for dinner when I started vomiting and fell unconscious. My colleagues thought I was dying and took me to the infirmary. Luckily, the doctor was there. I was unconscious and came to.

Not until evening. I'm not going back to the kitchen; it's the doctor's orders. I think I ate everything and too much, and my stomach couldn't take it. I'm ashamed. The next day, the doctor told me I was lucky I threw up, otherwise I could have had a bowel obstruction, which would have been fatal. I couldn't help myself and ate like a pig.

I secretly laughed at Jano. I told him he was lucky and that it would be best for him to stay in the infirmary until we went home.

I forgot to write about Popov. I asked the nurses about him. They didn't know where he was, or maybe they didn't want to say. Finally, I asked the doctor, who told me that he might be either at headquarters or in Moscow, at the party school. I was delighted to hear this news; he was a diligent, intelligent, and kind man.

The days passed slowly, and we wanted them to fly by. We wanted summer to come so we could finally go home... home. It was the middle of March when Grunfeld came and told me he had postponed the cabaret until the end of the month. He needed time to gather everything he needed. He went around to all the houses in the neighborhood and was lucky that the nurses helped him.

I must write that when I arrived here in January 1945, I slept on wooden beds. I had a fierce battle with bedbugs that were everywhere. I had no peace at all, my underwear was covered in red spots from crushing them in my sleep. Those with sensitive skin became infected and had to go to the doctor. We cursed the Russians and told the doctor that it was a disgrace. We were given no solution against the bugs, no matter how much we asked. We tried to get rid of them with boiling water, but to no avail. It was not until late autumn that we were given iron beds.

Over the years, many things have changed between us and the Russians. I am only expressing my opinion about those with whom I came into contact on a daily basis—the nurses, the guards, and, in general, the locals we encountered when we went out to work. Apart from Ivanov, no one else pushed us to work and march faster. When we worked in the brigade, we were woken up at 6 a.m. The room leader went to get food. According to the unwritten law of prisoners, the corner of the loaf of bread was passed from hand to hand. Everyone knew their place in line. No one measured the piece of bread, but we believed that corner was bigger than the middle piece. Prisoners have sharp eyes when it comes to their stomachs. A few extra grams... and it's something.

No one pushed us from behind to go faster. We lined up at 6 a.m. at the gate, and it was still dark. The tools were in a shed next to the gate. By the time each brigade received its tools, the sun was already rising. In rows of five, we left the gate after

being strictly counted. Then, outside, we hurried to the cutting site, either one after the other or in pairs. In front and behind us were two guards with dogs. The guards did not interfere with the work. They stood around the fire and talked. Let the day pass.

After we leave, there will be an agricultural school here. That is why we prepared the tree trunks for shingles. Long barracks were built on the sides of the camp. On one side was the canteen, and on the shorter side, a library and a club. In the canteen, on one side, there was a small stage. On the eastern side of the camp, beyond the barbed wire fence, there was a sports field for the young people to exercise.

If I remember correctly, it was already towards the end of March when Grunfeld came to me:

– "We're having a party on Sunday afternoon. I'm sure you've prepared something, I trust you. What will you sing?"

I have listed them. The weekend brought bad weather. The wind was blowing hard and the snow was blowing. The hall was packed. The prisoners were excited about the opportunity to have fun after years of unhappiness and misfortune. I don't want to bore anyone, but I want you to understand the work Grunfeld put into organizing the cabaret. He was helped by Hermann, the club manager, and little Rado. Hermann and I were good friends because I was the most avid reader in the library. He was a pleasant man with a handsome face. Little Rado was short, bald, and, strangely enough, had a potbelly, which only the cook could have had in prison. Many didn't understand how this was possible, but it was simple: he had inherited his parents' genes and ate with the Jewish community in the camp. The prisoners' doctor was Dr. Schonn. At home, Rado was a composer—in Budapest, he had been the conductor of a chamber orchestra. Hermann told me this; it wasn't a secret, but few people knew. The club had four violins, and they had their own story. I mentioned earlier that musicians were also recruited from among the prisoners in Debrecen. Some of them ended up here, and so that the violins would not disappear, they gave them to the club. The Gypsies did not go out to work very often, as they were very weak. The cold and hunger took their toll; two of them did not survive and remained here forever. The three who remained were not very keen on playing and rarely visited the club.

There were also a few amateurs among the prisoners. Rado was one of them, and being a composer, he understood music. Dago Kalman and Kovacs Istvan often played the violin. There were two others who played the flute and one who played the balalaika. We also had a small drum set and a tambourine at the club. Grunfeld

He demonstrated his talent as an organizer in planning this carnival. The curtain was improvised from a few thin blankets.

Hermann stepped in front of the curtain and greeted the audience. Given the conditions, the organizers made a great effort to ensure that the show lived up to expectations. This year was to be the year we went home. The audience began to cheer, applaud, and at one point even shout, "We're going home, we're going home!"

The curtain rose. The backdrop, which I will describe, was created by a Hungarian corporal. I don't remember his name, but he was talented and tattooed many prisoners who wanted one. On the back wall, he painted a mosque and an imam praying; next to the mosque, there were several Arab-style buildings, men, women, children, and a donkey pulling a cart. Above the painting was written
"Tehran," and below, "Istanbul." Everyone chose what they liked. On one side of the stage was a painting of a fountain surrounded by palm trees. Grunfeld, who played the eunuch, put on a huge, brightly colored turban, painted his face red and brown, and wore colorful clothing. Around him danced five small, very thin prisoners, masked as dancers, with improvised bras and painted faces.

The musicians stood in the back. They also wore turbans, but that was all that made them part of the oriental decor. The music had a Turkish flavor, and the "dancers" danced to a slow rhythm. The three guards, portrayed by prisoners, watched the show, smoking hookahs, improvised from a pot and a rubber hose. When they had had enough of the hookah, the guards began to dance too. Grunfeld, in his exuberance, began to sing funny songs, touching his dance partners with his bottom and provoking giggles among the "dancers." A few lyrics stuck in my mind: "Tehran—a beautiful place, but even here my wife is a burden" and "The fly is biting my butt, fig leaves will be my underwear." The audience was dying of laughter at the lyrics and the antics of those on stage.

The blizzard outside could be heard faintly, but inside the hall there was a summer atmosphere, and the prisoners had forgotten where they were. This happiness was brought about by Grunfeld. At the end of the performance, he thanked everyone and told them that the second part would consist only of music, songs, and good cheer.

When the curtain fell for the second time, 12 prisoners stood in two rows on the cleared stage, the shortest in front and the tallest in the back. The choir leader was little Rado. The first two songs were sadder, then we sang lively and funny songs. We were a huge success. The choir left the stage, and then I followed. I sang several songs and ballads.

about various historical periods. Some titles: "Matei Corvinul once quarreled with the Emperor of Austria," "My name is Balogh Adam," "You are the great Tyukodi," "The horseman has a beautiful life," "The stamp with the black stamp has arrived," "I am a hussar, a common soldier," "I don't walk on the main street." The last song was an Italian song that I really liked,
"I also have someone at home." I thanked them for their patience in listening to me, and they applauded me for a long time.

The musicians followed. The three performed a composition by Rado entitled "Night Fell on Old Buda" and many other old songs known to almost the entire audience. We ended with "Rakoczi's March." After the curtain fell, Grunfeld reappeared.

– I hope you enjoyed yourselves! Now we can go home. I just want to tell you a few jokes, he added, and we were in stitches. Not everyone knows how to tell jokes, but Grunfeld was a natural.

After the show, the German doctor congratulated me and asked if it was true that we were going home soon.

– Let's hope so, doctor, at least I believe so and I'm looking forward to it. We all have faith in that. I asked the doctor, and she told me that our situation is discussed daily on the radio. Think about the fact that the camp in Kotlas has been closed down. I have already been in three camps, two of which have been closed down; only this one remains. We just need to be patient a little longer.

I went to visit Jano, who welcomed me warmly:

– You haven't been to see me in a long time. I have good news: I have a little girl from Galja, that petite brunette nurse. Apparently she looks a lot like me, but I'll never get to see her because they're staying here. Galja works in a children's home in Ufa. Where is that?

– About 1,000 km south of here. It's much warmer there.

– See, Debreczeni, what life is like? Will I ever forget my little girl?

– Probably, with time. Some things must be accepted as they are, and time will help. Out of sight, out of mind.

By the end of April, the weather had changed, and the snow was beginning to melt, revealing the first rooftops. In early May, a delegation of nine members, including two women,

came to assess the prisoners, and the sick were assessed separately. Everyone was agitated and anxious, not knowing what to think. Most wanted to be declared healthy, hoping to be allowed to go home. The commission worked continuously for ten days, and in the end, the members of the delegation withdrew, just as they had arrived.

In mid-May, we received the long-awaited order: everyone was to take a bath, we were to receive clean underwear and clothes, because in two days we had to be in Kirov. Our joy was boundless; we hugged each other, shouting at the top of our lungs: "We're going home!" After so many years, were we really going home?

We set off for Kirov, but it took five days to get there because we didn't have enough carriages. There were around 580 prisoners, and apart from the German doctor, we had all been in the Hungarian army. I managed to get into the same car as the doctor and Jano. When the train left in the afternoon, I felt a deep emotion. When we arrived in Kirov, the cars were not locked, but no one was crazy enough to escape now that we were heading home.

I said goodbye only to the doctor, thanking her for her kindness. I would never forget her.

– Neither I nor my husband will forget you, she said, and kissed me on the mouth, according to Russian custom.

That woman was kindness incarnate, and her beauty was worthy of her noble soul: blonde, with blue eyes and a small, snub nose, she always had an encouraging look in her eyes when she asked, "What hurts, what problems do you have?"

In Kirov, we were housed in a two-story barracks near the train station. The city's former name was Vyatka, but the communists renamed it in honor of Kirov, a friend of Lenin who was executed by Trotskyists. The days passed without us doing anything, just talking about our journey home. A few days later, they were looking for volunteers for various jobs. I volunteered, without knowing what it was about, and ended up unloading sacks of salt from two barges in the port. I didn't do any other work while I was in Kirov.

Time passed, but there was still no sign of us continuing our journey. From what I understood, the trains for us weren't ready, and in the meantime, they were constantly checking us. They were looking for former SS members, but there were no such people among us, or perhaps they were receiving information from home about so-and-so who had done things against the law. Like the militiaman who was taken off the train.

I often met the always cheerful Grunfeld:

– "See, Debreczeni, you were right. The important thing is that the carnival was a success. I wasn't wrong about you."

– It's no use, you were the salt and pepper of the show. Where are you from, because I understand you speak Russian?

– I was born in Bergova, in Transcarpathia.

In the first days of June, they loaded us into train cars. We had wooden bunk beds with hay mattresses, sheets, pillows, and blankets. There was a pleasant smell of freshly cut pine in the cars. There were 20 of us in our car.

At the station, we moved in columns of five people and took care of each other so that we would all end up in the same carriage. We succeeded. The two weeks spent in Kirov were good for waiting for our fellow sufferers with whom we had set off on December 6, 1944, from Focșani on an unknown, cold, frozen Russian journey.

Of the three Romanian boys, I only met Miholca Gheorghe. He told me about the other two. Grama Ștefan died of pneumonia. Urs Gheorghe volunteered under the flag of the Tudor Vladimirescu garrison. We were happy to see each other; he was a good boy. I also met Uncle Bela. At one time, he was the commander of the prisoners. He was a Jew from Kiskorosi and had a heart of gold. He always said, "Don't kill yourselves with work if you want to get home." He looked pretty bad. He walked around with Dr. Schonn.

– "You see, Debreczeni, I'm from Debrecen too, just like you. That's where we were born. Have you ever been to Debrecen?"

– Yes, twice.

I got a nasty boil on the underside of my right hand. I was working in the brigade, it hurt terribly, but now it was impossible to continue working. I told my foreman. His name was Adrian, he was a pretty good guy. Should I go to the doctor tomorrow morning to get it checked out? The boil hurts terribly.

– Well, my friend, now you're in my hands. Go straight to the infirmary and you'll have to endure some severe pain. When the boil is ripe, we'll cut it open with a pocket knife.

I spent two weeks in the infirmary. I couldn't sleep at all. I was almost paralyzed. Every movement was painful. Outside, the blizzard was howling, bringing the cold back. Finally, one day, the doctor said to me:

– Tomorrow morning I'll cut out your boil.

The next day, when he made the incision in the reddish-brown skin and freed the area, the pus splashed the doctor in the face. He started spitting like crazy, rinsing his mouth and washing his teeth.

– Well, I really did that. I've never done anything like that

before. All the pain disappeared immediately.

I also met Klein Mihai, my quarrelsome companion from the train car; he was terribly thin.

– Well, how are we, Comrade Klein? Homeward bound? He

walked past me silently, without saying a word.

I met the two Kovacs Pistas. The one from Zala had a more olive complexion, while the one from Baja had fairer skin. The one from Zala was more talkative, frequently mixing German words with Romanian and Hungarian. The one from Baja was quieter by nature. He was a helmsman on a ship. As a helmsman, he was alone and didn't have much to talk to. He traveled from the source of the Danube to the Danube Delta. At the helm, in solitude, he learned to play the violin.

Angi Sandor was from the village of Alfalău, a true Szekler. At one time, we worked together in the tree-cutting brigade. Like a true Székely, he was skilled at everything related to woodcutting. He explained the position of the roots and how to find them under the tree trunk based on its position. He and Tanko Balint spent a lot of time cutting wood for cooking and heating the rooms.

Tanko Balint was a Csango from Gyimesközéplak. It was the first time I had ever seen a Csango. Before I met him, I had only heard about them. I have fond memories of him. He could tell stories about his fellow villagers, about the surroundings of his native village, and especially about his sheep. He had a girlfriend at home. He said that his family had been sheep farmers for decades. The potatoes and corn in his village were devoured by wild boars from the nearby forests. The pigs would not move from the potato fields. Day and night they grunted on them. They stayed in packs and together they were not afraid. The sows protected their piglets very well. A small squeal from them was enough and the sow seemed ready to pounce on you. I won't even mention the wolves. They rushed at you like tanks. They defended their herd like madmen. And the bears raided the cornfields. You weren't allowed to

kill, you couldn't use a gun on animals. Only gentlemen could hunt them, and only a few. And so his grandfather turned to animal husbandry.

– We had 22 hectares of pasture land and a flock of over a hundred sheep. We also had cows and two horses. My father was in the army in Brăila. There he met a Greek merchant, with whom we are still in touch. In the spring, when it was lambing season, around Easter, we would slaughter 20-30 lambs and put some of them in our icehouse. I invented the icehouse that is on our land. How did I find the place? I noticed that during the long, hot summers, the grass was greener and the air was cooler in one spot. And the sheep liked to stay there. My friend, you should know that chance can be decisive in a person's life. Once, a pregnant dog disappeared, and we knew she was about to give birth. But where had she gone? I started looking for her, taking all my dogs with me. I had about 10 dogs, and in the end they found her, with her three puppies. I felt the cool air again. "Well, let's see what this is all about," I thought to myself.

I looked left, I looked right; it was a place thick with bushes, different trees, and pieces of rock here and there. Amazed, I noticed between two rocks a narrow opening from which the coolness was more noticeable. I reached my arm inside and it was even colder. I looked into the opening, but couldn't see anything. I started to circle around the opening. All around me were rocks. I decided to give up.

I took a hammer and a chisel with me and started enlarging the opening. I didn't think I would have so much work to do with the entrance. It took me almost two weeks to get it ready to put a door in. After the door was installed, I started widening the entrance. The oil lamp didn't provide enough light to illuminate the interior. I took a powerful flashlight with me and became a cave explorer. Maybe it was just because the cave was mine alone. I had heard a lot about caves, but I hadn't read much about them because I didn't have time. Curiosity drove me to explore the place more closely. I was sure it was an ice cave. There was nothing special at the entrance to the cave, just a draft and cold air. As I went further, the cave began to get deeper and higher. I could even stand upright, and after about 50-60 meters, the rock wall was frosty. Further on, the first icicles appeared, but I couldn't go any further. By the light of my flashlight, there was only ice. Icicles of various shapes and sizes, and nothing else. If I accidentally slipped and fell, no one would know, and that would be the end of my life. I would have frozen to death in a few hours, so I stopped. From the door where the cave began to rise, I made a fence and shelves on the walls. When I finished, I took my father and showed him what I had done. He was happy. When the time came for lambs, cheese, and sheep's milk, we had a place to

We store it. My father's friend, the Greek merchant, receives the frozen meat, cheese, and curd.

I told you this because I liked him, he had many interesting stories to tell and he was sincere.

I remembered my friend Balint's adventure with the wolves. The Ghimeș region is also called the Cold Region, because summer is just like autumn there. He said that the winters were so cold that you could easily say, "We're in Siberia."

– The cold of -40 degrees Celsius is so commonplace that you don't even notice it anymore. During one such harsh winter, our house was surrounded by wolves. The terrible storm was stirring up the snow, and the pack of wolves was howling. My friend, have you ever heard wolves howling? In this terrible weather, when they are hungry, when they smell the sheep and cannot reach them to satisfy their hunger. We locked the dogs in the sheep pen, and they were silent, sensing the breath of death. Even 100 sheep could fit in our pen. The sheep stood quietly, sensing the danger. A sheep is such a gentle animal that you can skin it alive without it bleating. For three days and three nights we were surrounded by wolves. Carefully and quickly, we climbed up to the attic and threw hay down to the animals. Instead of water, we brought them snow. On the fourth day, the wolves left. They probably smelled something to eat or were tired of starving. During the day, I would climb up into the attic and watch them from there. They would wander around, lying in groups, with one or two howling. I think that of all wild animals, wolves can go hungry the longest.

My thoughts take me back to that day, January 3, 1945, when we arrived in Falenki. There were two two-story hospitals there, which were Russian military facilities. What immense joy it was for me and for all of us to finally be able to get out of the train cars. I was convinced that this was how they wanted to exterminate us. The cold and hunger would have killed us in those unheated freight cars. For two or three days, we received two pieces of dry bread without water. Maybe tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. The wells were frozen; where was there enough water for so many people? Prisoners must remain silent! We sat on the bare floor, one in the arms of another, so that at least the upper part of our bodies was warm. But the floor was cold, like ice. That's how people froze, especially the elderly. Over the course of those four years, most of us died.

I knew Falenki station well. My comrades and I had unloaded many wagons here, filled with grain needed for bread. I looked at the hospital buildings through the carriage window. Four years is a long time in a person's life when those years are spent in bitter captivity. Which is not

It means four years of life, but four years of starvation. Continuous starvation. I immediately remembered the people I had met during those four years. I don't remember their names, because there were so many of them. We were strangers, we didn't even know each other, but over time, we became close. I met real people. People with characters that I will always remember fondly for as long as I live. My heart fills with warmth when I think of such people. I think a lot about Ivanov, one of our guards. He hated me, even though he was a repentant man. His freckled, fox-like face and his blue, tearful, always half-closed eyes are always before my eyes. I never found out why they let him go in 1946.

I went to the other side of the car, where I could see the town. Stabo, where I had wandered around a few times, the cement factory where I had worked, and the Orthodox cathedral without a cross, which those godless communists had turned into a grain warehouse. With joy, but also with regret, I thought that from now on, all of this would be just memories.

– With Kirov, things were different. I didn't know the city. I had been to the port a few times, when we carried bulk salt from German barges. That was all. The freight cars were waiting for us far from the station. We didn't stay long, because we left around midnight. The three of us, me, the doctor, and Jano, were all happy. From the other cars, we were surrounded by the joyful shouts of the others.

Finally, it was certain that we were heading home. All the prisoners' bodies vibrated with joy, with the long-awaited desire to go home, to get it over with. It wouldn't be long before we got home. Sitting on the doctor's bed and talking over each other, excitedly and loudly, we wondered when it would end. How many days would the journey take, when would we get home, when would we reach the border, and how long would they keep us there, and so on. The train raced madly through the night. From time to time, the locomotive whistled, its sound resembling a ship's siren. The carriage swayed like a drunk man; the 20-ton carriage was not evenly loaded. We barely weighed 5 tons, including the beds. We held on to the beds that were nailed to the walls of the carriage.

I asked the doctor where he wanted to go. To Austria, where he lived with his family. That's where he was drafted from. Although he hasn't heard from them in years, they must be there.

– And you, Jano, where are you rushing off to?

– I'm going to Nyitra, in western Slovakia. I don't know what it's like there now, because I've only received one letter from home. I hope everything is okay; there hasn't been any fighting in my area.

I'm going to Alba Iulia, where my mother, whom I haven't seen for eight years, is waiting for me. My sister is in Budapest, my brother Laci is a prisoner in the Caucasus, and my other brother, Gabi, spent a year and a half in Bessarabia. I hope we'll all meet again at home, healthy and well.

I must emphasize something. The journey to Iaşi took three weeks, but I don't remember anything about it. It's as if someone wiped my mind clean. The excitement, the joy of returning home, the impatience, or whatever else there was, left no trace in my memory. I only remember the soybean soup we were given and the frequent stops at small stations, where we received our daily food ration. Along with water. I remember the water. And now there were many problems with water. In the camp, the problems with water were the frozen wells, and here, on the way back, it was the fact that there were so many of us. A lot of water was needed for the prisoners. And for cooking. Because of the jolting, the constant noise, and the heat, we became apathetic.

Human nature is strange. Many events and happenings remain clear in the mirror of memory, while others disappear forever. My childhood friend, Ocsi, was rickety and could barely stand up. If you touched him, he would fall down. If I scared him by pushing him, he would call his mother for help. Memories of kindergarten: "Alunelu, alunelu, let's play, may we be lucky!" That's all. A one-meter pike caught with a hook. A 52-kg catfish, caught at the Dromba bridge, baited with a roasted goose. People came to see this miracle. And so many other memories...

I have two memories left. One is related to Moscow and the other to Kharkiv.

We arrived in Moscow in the morning, and the train stopped right in front of the station. There were 14 tracks between our train and the station. I don't know which Moscow station it was, but that's what was written on the building. The two days I spent there were a celebration for me. It was the middle of summer, the weather was superb, and crowds were bustling around the station. Trains passed by one after another. The freight cars didn't stop, they just whistled briefly and moved on. The view on our side was of the station. On the other side, we could see part of the beautiful Russian city. Below us flowed the Moscow River. It wasn't a big river, but it had been improved with a canal into which part of the Volga flows. There is plenty of water here. As I mentioned, Russian rivers, whether small or large, have a high flow rate.

There could have been 80 meters below us. People were swarming like ants. Everyone wanted to get their share of this wonderful summer. After a long, cold winter, people were enjoying the warmth and joy of summer to the fullest. Beyond the river were houses and tents. Music could be heard day and night. The popular song of the time could be heard loud and clear: "Evening on the Moscow River." Spotlights, lanterns, campfires

They lit up the starry sky of Moscow. There were all kinds of boats, ships, motorboats, sailboats, pedal boats, inflatable boats, and inflatable mattresses. For me, it was a magical sight. I can say that I didn't sleep at all. The night and the two days were unforgettable; those sights, those enchanted landscapes are always in front of me. The hesitant hope for happiness and freedom.

Why did we stay in Moscow for so long? No one told us. Maybe bureaucracy delayed our departure. Maybe they checked our names again. Roll calls are a national disease in Russia. If you work outside the camp, before you leave, there is a roll call. When you finish work, you line up, because there is another roll call. Before you re-enter the camp, you line up and then there is another roll call. It wasn't a problem. But sometimes, they couldn't get the numbers right. They were capable of keeping us there for hours until the problem was solved. We would go out for roll call and roll call. I want to tell you something else about this.

– It happened in March or April 1946, the Germans were still with us. There were three brigades. We were ten or twelve brigades. The Germans never did their work, they just wandered around the fire. They were terribly cold. "Take them to the factories, they're workers, not woodcutters," they said angrily. Once there was a big scandal in front of the camp gate. The weather was bad that day, the wind was blowing hard and it was snowing. Unpleasant weather for prisoners. It was already dusk when we lined up after work. The Germans always lined up faster. And then, one of the Germans was missing. Anyway, they turned the Germans around and twisted them around, freezing cold. The commander was frantically rushing around them. There was nothing he could do. It was already dark. We Hungarians remained silent. In such situations, it is better to be patient and keep quiet. Although we were terribly cold and hungry. The intense cold, walking in waist-deep snow, cleaning the trees, cutting the trunks to the required size, gathering the branches and piling them up exhausted us. For a man weakened by hunger, it is too much. Work beyond his strength. And one more thing: someone who works for three months cutting trees in the harsh Russian winter, as a prisoner, does not recover in six months to the point of being 100% fit for work. Maybe 70%, or even 50%. If I remember correctly, I worked two winters and two summers cutting wood.

But let me get back to what I wanted to tell you. It was already pitch dark. The path we had trodden down in the morning was covered with snow brought by the strong wind. The Germans were in front of us. They had earned this, because they were already there when we, the Hungarians, arrived. It didn't matter to us. We were already agitated because they would count us again at the gate and keep us there until midnight. But that didn't happen. It was a tragicomic coincidence. Everything was already prepared at the gate.

a guard with three dogs, to go to the clearing to see what had happened to us. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Half an hour later, we were already in the camp. It was only the next day that we found out what had happened. After they closed the gate, the commander, accompanied by dogs, came out in front of the brigade. From the last row of Germans, one fell down and didn't move. They picked him up and took him to the guard room. We set off for work. Many of us saw the incident, but when the shortage appeared, the imaginary shortage that the commander noticed, no one said anything about what had happened that morning at the gate. No one. Not even among the prisoners? Why didn't I say anything? I saw everything, they were taking someone into the camp. Now that I remember the incident... What happened that day? It was impossible for the guards to watch over all of us, and because they were soldiers, they had to follow orders. It was impossible for the prisoners to speak because they didn't have that right. Prisoners only have the right to remain silent. The Russian winter was showing its power. It was -30 degrees Celsius, but that wasn't the main problem. It was the clothes. The cold wind penetrated through the smallest holes in your clothes, making the cold seem even worse. In winter, you had to carry a saw, an axe, a shovel, and a rake. With the shovel, you had to clear the snow from the tree trunk so that the stump was two centimeters above the ground. It was the law. If you didn't do that, the amount of wood you cut wasn't counted. You needed the rake to gather the branches into piles, both in summer and winter. In this freezing hell, life is not wonderful. Everything I have told you really happened. We prisoners, shivering with cold, hungry and apathetic, were not interested in what was going on around us. The daily head counts wore on our nerves. And at night the alarm would sound. Alarm, line up in the courtyard. In winter we froze during this time. The weak ones caught cold, had a fever in the morning, and already had pneumonia. Meanwhile, while we were in the courtyard, the barracks were ransacked. I asked a nurse, who was more talkative, what the guards were looking for in our dormitories. Sharp objects, knives, writings, money, jewelry, things that the prisoners had not declared. They found almost nothing.

We had long since passed Moscow. The summer heat was tempered by the open carriage door. The locomotive provided us with a cool breeze as it raced blindly along. Before our eyes, the landscape resembled home, especially for us Transylvanians. Many rivers and streams rushed to meet their brothers. We sped over large and small bridges.

One morning we woke up and found ourselves in Kharkov. There were carriages in front of us, so we couldn't see anything of the station. We were at the end of the station and already knew that we would be staying there for two or three days. The fact that we could be stuck here for another two or three days brought back unpleasant memories. The railway workers had already arrived to check the carriages, hitting the wheels and chassis with their long-handled hammers and checking the carriage couplings. One of them, a young man

Tall, blond, with blue eyes, he asked us, "Domoj, domoj?" (Going home?) Yes, home. I was the only one sitting at the back of the carriage, enjoying the warmth of the sunny morning.

A hilly region stretched out before my eyes. I was waiting for breakfast. They brought bread, butter, sugar, and, as a surprise, tea.

– What a great start to the day! I said to

the doctor. Jano was resting.

– "You have lung problems; go see a doctor as soon as you get home, Jano," the doctor advised him.

At around 4 o'clock, they brought lunch. What a surprise! Cabbage soup! In tall aluminum pots, giving off an inviting aroma. Just like on Christmas Eve in 1944. But what a difference in quality between the two events. Back then, we were on the brink of death, fighting for a spoonful of soup. Now, here, we were eating civilized, spoonful after spoonful, cabbage soup with pieces of meat in it. You can't forget these things until you die. The memories are so strong, it's as if it happened yesterday. I told the two of them the legend of the cabbage soup. Jano had come with the same group, but they didn't get any soup in that car.

– Several died there, and a few tried to escape. They forced open the side of the carriage and jumped out, but they didn't know there was a guard at the end of the carriage. He noticed them escaping, raised the alarm, the train stopped, and the four were executed. You can't forget what happened after that. The executed prisoners were thrown back into our carriage because that was where they had tried to escape from. The guards loaded them into the carriage, and one of them, a Russian or perhaps a Slovak who knew Hungarian, said to us: "Your executed comrades are staying here. Take care of them as if they were your own eyes. If any of you are missing, one of you will be shot. Be careful, we're not joking." They counted us. Thirty-eight prisoners were alive, along with four dead prisoners; that was all that remained of the 50 of us who had left for Focșani. Those who died during the journey were taken out of the wagon. Every 2-3 days, they would bang on the wagon door and ask us: "Umir iest! Tot iest!" ("Is anyone dead?") We traveled for a long time with the 4 corpses. At a larger station, they took out the corpses of the poor wretches who were frozen stiff. Perhaps they would have escaped from captivity and made it home. The bitter cold came in through the hole in the wagon; we had nothing to plug that cursed hole with. One of us suggested putting the four corpses in front of the hole in the carriage. Everyone rebelled: "That's all we need, someone else falling out of the carriage. Can you imagine what would happen? The Russians would execute you first." They gave him a real dressing down. Three more comrades died before we reached our destination. I caught such a bad cold there; my lungs still feel the cold.

That one. And the hole in the wagon was finally repaired, but it was pointless. No one in the wagon knew I was Slovak. I speak Hungarian well because in my country, the population is mixed. In the camp it was different, there was order. There were no threats, no death threats. To see my home again! That is my only wish.

– Comrade, be strong! You endured the horrors of the wagon, you endured the cold hell of Kotlasz, we're going home; in two weeks we'll be home. Have faith, keep your chin up! You've caught a bad cold, but you'll be treated at home and that will be that! You'll be your own master, the doctor told him.

A few days later, the train crossed a large river. In the morning, we were in Chișinău; the river must have been the Dniester. We were getting closer to our country. We would soon see the Carpathian Mountains and, beyond them, our real home, Transylvania!

We followed the same route as on our departure: Focșani, Iași, Chișinău, Tighina, the Dniester River, and then the endless land of the Russians. We stayed in Chișinău for a few hours, barely seeing anything of the city. The land was flat, with some low hills here and there, and lots of good soil for farming. We saw acres and acres of corn and wheat fields.

We arrived in Iași in the evening. The large city near the Prut River, the capital of Moldova, an old aristocratic city. Large and beautiful palaces, extraordinarily beautiful and valuable Orthodox churches, chapels. A few hours after our arrival, we had a pleasant surprise. The city council came to welcome us and wish us a safe journey home. After the authorities left, several women appeared and brought us all kinds of cakes, sweets, and cigarettes in their white aprons. The country is waiting for its children to come home, at least those who are still alive.

In the meantime, our carriages were moved to Romanian tracks and we found out our final destination: Focșani. That's where the sorting would take place. The station in Iași doesn't bring back many memories: just the local authorities and the women who brought us sweets. We received lunch early. Bean soup with smoked meat and polenta. It was already a traditional Romanian meal. I was already home. We ate our portions with gusto. And those from Hungary ate with gusto too, even though they don't eat polenta. I like it very much.

It was getting dark when the train started again, but with a Romanian locomotive and a Romanian conductor. The Russian guards left and were replaced by Romanian soldiers. Before departure, a Romanian officer jumped into our carriage and told us:

– You are coming home from captivity. You have no identity papers. Without them, you are nothing.

– Wait a minute, I'm the only one in this car who knows Romanian. Say what you want to say in Hungarian. You should know, by the way, that this train is full of Hungarian prisoners and only a few of us are Romanians, Transylvanians.

– I don't know a word of Hungarian. Translate what I say in Romanian into Hungarian.

– Those who asked to go to Romania, home, will receive in Focșani a document certifying that they were prisoners of war in Russia. From the beginning of their imprisonment until their release in Focșani. You should take good care of this paper, because it will be used to issue your identity card and military service record book. Those in Hungary will receive this official document only at home.

And so it was. At dawn we arrived in Focșani. At 8 o'clock the order came to get ready and line up in front of the wagons. No one was allowed to take anything with them except the clothes they were wearing and a small bag for bread. We would receive breakfast at the sorting station.

We marched through the streets of the city, according to Russian custom, in a long line of five. We spent six days in the city camp. From December 1, 1944, to December 6, 1944. In November 1944, I was taken prisoner. I don't remember what the city looked like. I went to the forest three times to fetch wood for the camp kitchen. I remember the long streets, the pavement, and the trees on the side. The stones were slippery, and it was hard to walk. That's all.

– At the sorting, we lined up again, five abreast, Russian style. The count came out right. Order: everyone takes a bath, but not before being shaved, then we receive clean clothes and run to the dormitories. The food was thin but filling. I have no idea what it was. Our beards were two weeks old. The shaving and bathing turned us into wet mice.

The clothing warehouse was full of uniforms from various armies. It was a colorful, mixed world. You couldn't choose. It was very difficult for them to find decent uniforms for everyone. I received a Hungarian cap, a Russian jacket, and German pants. On my feet, I had some canvas shoes with very thin soles. Everything was done quickly, almost thrown at us. On the third day, we were lined up very early in the morning. First they took us, the Transylvanians. Hungarians, Romanians, they finished with them quickly. Unfortunately, they sent us to the rooms. I wanted to see the doctor again and

Jano. I watched the call from the window, searching for them in the crowd, but to no avail. After they finished with the Hungarians, they sent them back to the rooms where I had entered. Jano noticed me first.

– "I'm glad you came, my friend. Tonight or at dawn, word is we're leaving. They're in a hurry to get rid of us, and they're right. We're in a hurry to get home as soon as possible. It costs a lot to feed so many mouths for nothing."

– I'm so glad I came, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life if I hadn't said goodbye to you all. If we lived in the same country, then maybe we would meet, but like this, with three of us going in different directions, it's impossible.

All three of us were in tears. Friendship, mutual support, and kind words meant so much during those difficult times. We hugged each other and wished each other good luck, health, and happiness in life. And Jano was right; during the night, the Hungarian prisoners left. Only good fortune brings some people home.

We won't stay here long either, that's for sure. That was the opinion of many. Everyone received orders to head in the desired direction. The Székelys did not ask for orders, they just crossed the Carpathians and were already home. They were tired of traveling. A few convinced them to ask:

– Why walk home when we have a train? We'll get off at Siculeni and from there, anyone who wants to can walk.

I looked for my fellow Székelys. They were sitting together on the edge of their beds, counting the time and the departure of the trains. Sover Istvan from Alfalău, Angi Sandor also from Alfalău, and Tanko Aron from the County of the Three Chairs. Sometimes, I worked together with these three comrades. The last one left was my friend, Tanko Balint. We had a closer bond. Although he was a Csango, he spoke Hungarian well. Not like the Székelys, but not like the Csangos either.

– "My friend," I said to Balint, "you're going to be fine. Your family is waiting for you at home. I don't know what awaits me at home; we don't have a home, we were renting. We'll see what happens from now on. You can find me in Lunca de Jos.

Then I looked for my Romanian friend, George, to see if we could go together. He was in a hurry to get to Baia Mare, and from there he had four villages to cross before reaching his native village.

– We're heading in the same direction, let's go together to Cluj, and from there we'll go our separate ways.

We gathered to leave. We didn't know when we would set off. Ten days passed and we were still there. We got used to polenta, bean soup, potato soup, tea and marmalade, which was plentiful. We also got used to doing nothing, waiting for true freedom. People were walking around the halls impatient and nervous, some even arguing with each other. If we stayed much longer, they would have started fighting.

As we were discussing among ourselves, an official entered the room, and I decided to ask him if he knew anything about our situation. Would we ever be able to return home? We had been there for two weeks. They were concerned that we might escape.

Like a professional, confident and calm, he sat down on the edge of the bed and said to us:

– Listen carefully to what I am about to say. You were soldiers in the Hungarian army, you were taken prisoner as Hungarian soldiers. You have no documents to prove your identity, to prove who you are. You told the Russians whatever you wanted. We want to know who you really are. If you told them what the Russians wrote about you, then you don't exist for now. You will exist when we issue you a document certifying that you are indeed a prisoner of war who has been held captive by the Russians for so long. And once you arrive home, based on this document you receive from us, you will be issued an identity card and military service record book. This document will also certify that you are Romanian citizens. If any of you escape, you will not receive the document issued by us and you will have no identity. So, be patient, everything will be fine. You have been in captivity for years, I know it has not been child's play, but bear with it for a few more days. I suggest that no one escape.

Almost three weeks passed before I received my release papers. It was a moment of great joy. The next day, I picked up my travel orders. The Székelys got together and boarded the train to Siculeni. We waited for the express train from Ploieşti, which was coming from Bucharest and going to Cluj. On the train, I met Hagyo Kalman. He was also rushing to Oradea. At the station in Cluj, I met Nyiro Istvan.

I said goodbye to my comrades and remained alone, a free man.

A legacy in words

After four years of imprisonment in Soviet camps between 1944 and 1948, Debreczeni István returned home to Alba Iulia. He became a passionate autodidact, an avid reader, and eventually enjoyed his own library full of valuable books. He settled in Ilva-Mică, Bistrița-Năsăud County, where he married Ana and raised two children: Ștefan and Dorina.

He worked at the local sawmill and, over the next few decades, helped anyone who asked for his assistance, providing document translations and legal advice. He was recommended for the School of Judges in Bucharest, but, being in love with the mountainous area, he refused and chose to remain in Ilva-Mică, where he continued to be a support for friends and acquaintances. He remained passionate about sports, education, and nature.

Together with Ana, he spent his last years in Cluj-Napoca, under the care of his daughter Dorina. There, at the end of his life, he embraced his first great-granddaughter. Despite his old age and physical weakness, he continued to read daily, learn Esperanto, and exercise as much as his body would allow.

In the last months of his life, one of his granddaughters surprised him by publishing his manuscript in Hungarian, thus fulfilling his heartfelt wish and healing a wound that had been open for over 60 years.

Debreczeni István passed away on August 31, 2007, at the ripe old age of 85. He left behind a close-knit family, a wife with whom he spent 57 years, two children, four grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

Each generation lives in the present by relating to the experiences of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. For us, Debreczeni István – "grandpa" as we used to call him – is a role model whom we follow with love and whom we take as an example. His first great-granddaughter, the only one he ever got to hug, is now a student at the Faculty of Law at the Sorbonne University in Paris.

A few words in conclusion

We chose to publish the Romanian version as he wanted, faithful to the original manuscript, with the emotions, feelings, and expressions he had when he wrote them and when he lived them. It has been 17 years since he left us, but our thoughts continue to go to him, to Grandma Ana, to Ilva-Mică, and to the memories that give us nostalgia for a much simpler and more beautiful time.

My grandfather's wish was to publish this book. Today's technology allows me to publish it and make it available globally, if not in print, then at least in electronic format.

"I had to write this in memory of my comrades in suffering. If I succeed, it will appear in book form."

You succeeded, Grandpa.

"The son of man is nothing before the greatness of Destiny."

Your grandson