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War Comes to Russia

World War II had started in September 1939. Now, almost two years later, it had spread to the Soviet Union. The war, which many people in the Soviet Union had hoped for, had suddenly come. But I could not really be happy because I could imagine how many people would be lost, how many would be killed, how many cultural treasures would be destroyed, and how many people would become homeless. And, supposing the Germans would win, would it be possible to do scholarly work under their rule? Here in the Soviet Union I had been a professor since 1925 and a member of one of the most famous learned organizations in the world, the Academy of Sciences, since 1932. But somehow I had a feeling that Germany would lose the war. The Soviets were reckless and would not hesitate to sacrifice ten or twenty million people in the war in order to win the final victory. For the first time I had a nightmarish vision of the Soviets not only conquering Germany but also half of Europe and making these countries Communist. The forebodings of mine came later true: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, Albania and the eastern part of Germany became Soviet satellites.

The next day, Monday, June 23 I went to the Academy where I met the Sinologist Alekseev. He said, "Is it not terrible? What shall we do? The Germans might actually conquer us. The Soviets

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are preferable if for no other reason than we already know how to deal with them. But do we know the Germans? Will we be able to continue our work under them?"

Alekseev's fears seemed to be justified in the beginning. The Germans advanced very fast. In about ten days they had already swept into the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I remember also my conversation with V. V. Struve, the well-known Egyptologist and director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, at the beginning of July. "The Soviets," he said, "are certainly far from ideal, but I am sure that the Germans will lose the war. Since I never bet on a loser, I think that we should go on cooperating faithfully with the Soviets to the very end." I agreed with his analysis but, in the innermost recesses of my mind, I saw a different plan of action. I preferred to join the Germans temporarily by retreating with them into Germany, in order to emigrate to Great Britain or the United States. But at that time I did not have the faintest idea if and how this could be accomplished.

The situation in Leningrad was growing worse day by day. It became clear that the Germans would soon reach the city, and I wanted to get out if for no other reason than to join my family who were on vacation in the Caucasus and had nothing but summer clothes with them. As the war was likely to be a long one, they also needed winter clothes which could not be bought in the Caucasus but only in large cities. I also had two other important reasons for wanting to leave Leningrad. The first was that more arrests were made immediately following the German invasion. Anyone who had ever been arrested or who had been merely summoned by the secret police was arrested again. A. V. Burdukov was among this group and, as I learned later, he died in jail of starvation because prisoners were not fed in besieged Leningrad. The same fate also befell a junior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies named Volin and thousands of others. Since I had also been summoned by the secret police in 1927, I feared that I might also be arrested. My other reason for wanting to leave Leningrad was that I had twice been called to appear before the draft board. The first time they simply registered me and did not ask any questions, but the second

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time they asked me if I knew Finnish or Rumanian. I could not speak Rumanian but I knew Finnish very well. Nevertheless, because I did not want to become a translator or interpreter in the army, especially not against Finland which I liked very much, I told the draft board that I did not know either language. They let me go, but the question kept nagging me whether they would let me go again a third time. It was quite possible that my translations for the Finns visiting the Academy of Sciences would be remembered and I would finally be drafted into the army as an interpreter.

My chance for escape came soon. Right after the German invasion the Academy of Sciences was being prepared for evacuation, and its scholars were to be sent to cities according to their specialties. I was assigned to the Kalmuck Republic, which was a stroke of luck for me; first, because the Kalmuck research institute had repeatedly invited me to do research there, and second, because Elista, the capital of the Kalmuck Republic, was fairly close to the Caucasus where my family was staying. It was possible that I might be able to spend the war together with my family. At that time the thought did not cross my mind that the Germans might conquer Elista. Although it had become clear that Stalin's boastful words that not an inch of Soviet territory would ever be yielded to the enemy were empty phrases, I still could not accept the idea that the Germans would occupy most of the European part of the Soviet Union and reach the banks of the Volga.

Getting to Elista proved to be a major undertaking because all railroad lines to the Kalmuck Republic and to the Caucasus led through Moscow, and Moscow had been declared a closed city. No outsiders were permitted to enter or pass through Moscow, so I had to look for other ways to go south. One was by ship, and this was the route I chose. I left Leningrad on July 18, 1941 taking with me two suitcases and two large bundles of clothes, topcoats, blankets, and other things for my wife and children because it was absolutely impossible to buy anything outside of Leningrad. I found a man with a cart who was willing to transport my belongings to a pier on the Neva river. There a small river boat took me to Shlissel'burg where the Neva flows out of Lake Ladoga. There I took another steamer

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through a canal along the southern shore of Lake Ladoga to a place called Sviritsa, where the Svir' River, coming from Lake Onega, enters Lake Ladoga. After almost two weeks I finally reached Rybinsk on the Volga where I had to wait three days for the next steamer to take me down the river. It was impossible to find any accommodations in Rybinsk, so I went to the local museum, showed my credentials, told them that I was a scholar with no place to stay, and asked whether I could stay overnight in the museum. I was permitted to sleep on a couch in a small empty room. In the apartment for the museum porter there lived a young woman with her small child whose husband had just been drafted. That evening she invited me for tea, but she apologized that she would have only hot water because neither tea nor sugar had been available for more than two years. I took along some tea, sugar, candy, and cookies which surprised the young woman. "Where did you get these?" she asked. "I brought them from Leningrad." "Oh," she said, "here in Rybinsk we've had absolutely nothing at all."

From Rybinsk I rode on a large steamer to Astrakhan where I had to cross the Volga, which is very wide at that point, to Kanukovo, formerly called Kalmytskii Bazar (Khal'mag Bazaar). Kanukov had been a revolutionary, and the town was renamed in his honor. There I slept on a wooden cot in a school, for lack of any other accommodations, and waited for a bus which a few days later took me to Elista. As soon as I had put down my suitcases and bags, I took a train from Divnoe, some ninety kilometers from Elista, to Kislovodsk, arriving there on August 21. In peacetime, Kislovodsk could be reached from Leningrad in three days, but this trip took one month and three days. On August 25, my younger son Nicholas' birthday, all four of us, together with our dog, left for Elista where we arrived a few days later.

At the Pedagogical Institute I taught courses in Mongolian philology and the history and syntax of the Russian language to the senior students who were being trained to become teachers in Kalmuck schools. There was also a research institute under the directorship of I. K. Ilishkin, a Communist Kalmuck, who was a decent and honest man. Later, one of the teachers at the Pedagogical

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Institute was a certain Lipin who was Jewish. He had left besieged Leningrad, where he had almost starved to death, with his wife, his sister-in-law, his young son and another young boy who was the son of his brother who remained in Leningrad. Late one night in December the train carrying them arrived in Astrakhan. It was rainy and cold and, with the street lights turned off and all windows curtained, the city was pitch dark. Lipin and his family were strangers in the city and had no idea where to find shelter. They could not stay at the railroad station because it closed between midnight and seven in the morning. They went to the police station, but the police told them, "We are not a hotel and we don't give out hotel information to strangers. Get out of here!" They spent the whole night outside in the rain. Lipin's small son caught a severe cold, then pneumonia, and died.

Another instructor at the institute was an air force officer named Gosudarev, a very pleasant and friendly man, who taught the military subjects currently mandatory for all students in the Soviet Union. When the director of the institute and the party committee demanded that all teachers turn over two months' salary for the purchase of government bonds, Gosudarev objected that the teachers could not possibly afford to donate that much money because they were already living on a starvation diet. The physics teacher, a certain Braga, overheard his remarks and denounced him, and Gosudarev was arrested and disappeared.

We lived in the dormitory of the Pedagogical Institute, along with other instructors and students. Our room was on the upper floor of the two-story dormitory and had three iron beds, a couch, four chairs, a table, a wardrobe and a cupboard. The winter 1941-42 was very severe. The snow in the steppe was three feet deep, and the temperature plummeted to forty degrees below freezing. Our room was very large but had only a small cast iron stove. It normally used coal or wood, but neither being available, we tried our best with coal dust and dried reeds. The stove smoked a lot but warmed our room to only around 57 degrees Fahrenheit or about 9 degrees Centigrade. One day we learned that Selvin, the institute's deputy director for finance and economic affairs, had been seen

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pushing a wheelbarrow filled with excellent coal in the direction of his house. We soon discovered that the basement of the institute was full of this high-grade coal, but it was for the exclusive use of officials and administrators who lived in good apartments in special buildings with central heating which actually worked. They also received coupons for clothes and other merchandise which were unavailable to the rest of us. With reference to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, I can testify that I have seen many animals being more equal than others, and that in Elista I belonged to those who were less equal.

Food was scarce, and our only warm food was a thick millet gruel which we obtained at the dining hall of the Pedagogical Institute. I received 800 grams of black bread per day and each member of my family 500 grams. I also received one kilogram of sugar a month and the others only half a kilogram each. With great difficulty I managed to get a pass for the dining hall of the party committee which served good food. Since only employees could be served there, I gave my millet soup and bread to my wife and children.

In addition to all these privations, the omnipresent NKVD was also active in Elista. Soon after my arrival in the fall of 1941, the deportation of all persons of German origin began. The entire population of the Volga German Republic, some 600,000 persons, was exiled to Soviet Central Asia, and many died en route. A certain Marika Ruppen, who was a student at the institute, was also deported by the NKVD, and her father, an army officer, was discharged and arrested. I was also summoned to the NKVD to have all our identification cards inspected. Fortunately we were listed as being of Russian origin. When the cards were first issued back in 1937, the interrogating official in Leningrad had only required verbal answers to various questions. My principle had always been never to make myself conspicuous, because the first rule of survival in the Soviet Union was never to draw attention to oneself. So to the question of ethnic origin, I had answered "Russian." The chief of the local NKVD, by the name of Sobachkin, thought this peculiar and asked, "But your name is not Russian." I quickly responded, "My

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great-grandfather was from Czechoslovakia," and this satisfied him.

Our children went to school. Valerian was placed in the ninth grade, the next to last grade of a typical ten-year high school, and Nicholas was in the sixth grade. Both of them were the best students in their classes because they had come from Leningrad where the schools were much better than those in the Kalmuck Republic. Toward the end of November all students in the upper grades of high schools and at the Pedagogical Institute were mobilized and sent to Kotel'nikov near the Don River in order to build anti-tank ditches. Valerian was sent there, too. His living conditions were very difficult and he had to work outside in very cold weather. He returned at the end of January 1942, tired and exhausted and with a very severe cold. In addition, he had also lost the watch which he had received for his birthday on April 19, 1941. While spending a night in one of the peasant houses near Kotel'nikov, he had taken his wristwatch off in order to wash up, and when he returned five minutes later, it had been stolen. A few days after his return, he became severely ill with pneumonia and had to be hospitalized. His young and strong body overcame the disease, and by the end of March he had recovered and returned to school. His teachers were very fond of him and tutored him privately so that he could catch up, and at the end of the school year he moved up to the tenth and last grade of his high school.

In spring 1942 I received a job offer from the Pedagogical Institute of the Karachai area, which was located in the city of Mikoyan Shakhhar. I decided to go there because we were all fond of the Caucasus, and Mikoyan Shakhhar was not far from our beloved Kislovodsk. Toward the end of July 1942 we went by truck from Elista to the Divnoe railroad station, where we boarded a train bound for Cherkessk. From Cherkessk another fifty kilometers by truck took us to Mikoyan Shakhhar. Here we obtained a well-furnished three-room apartment not far from the Pedagogical Institute with a kitchen, bath and central heating. The Pedagogical Institute made a very pleasant impression and its director, G. G. Leonov, was an amiable man.

Life in Mikoyan Shakhhar was peaceful, but the situation at

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the front was catastrophic. The Germans had already taken Rostov-on-the-Don on July 25 and were coming closer. At the beginning of August the local government announced the draft of age groups and Valerian was among them. Fortunately the conscription proceeded alphabetically, with one or two letters being called up each day. We calculated that my son's turn would come about on the tenth day. I was desperate because I feared that if he were drafted we would never see him again. Losses had been tremendous, and they were bound to be still greater once the Soviets started their counter-offensive. A few days after the call-up began, I was walking in the street when I noticed that all draft posters and announcements had been taken down. I asked someone and he told me in a whisper that the Karachai and other mountaineers had refused to hand their sons over to the draft board and therefore the whole draft had been canceled. I was overjoyed. On August 8, the order came for the entire population to evacuate Mikoyan Shakhhar and to go by foot about 300 kilometers to Kizlyar near the Caspian Sea. Nothing came of the order as the only people who actually left were civilian and military officials as well as party members. Before they left I went to the military commandant and asked him to take me and my family with him. He replied, "You are not a party member, Professor. Nothing will happen to you. We will return soon and everything will be all right. Anyway, we have only a few cars and too many people, so we could not take you with us even if we wanted to." As we were to find out soon, his refusal was a blessing in disguise. The local mountaineers ambushed the commandant and his entire convoy. Everybody was killed, and the bodies were later found in the forest not far from Mikoyan Shakhhar.

As soon as I had found out I had to remain with my family in the city, I went to the food distribution office and asked them to give us some flour and other foodstuffs which would at least keep us alive until the Soviets returned. They replied, "We have nothing." However, as soon as the Soviets left the city, the local population started plundering the stores and warehouses, carrying off large barrels of butter, sacks of flour, and sugar. So the Soviets' last official word to us had turned out to be yet another lie. I stood by

helplessly. To join the looters would have been much too dangerous as several people had already been badly stabbed. Not only stores were plundered but also the party committee building and the library. The looters burned the Communist propaganda library, called the "Red Corner." Several statues of Lenin and Stalin were toppled and smashed to bits. Both sides of the street were littered with typewriters, infant scales from the maternity ward, and many other things. The looters had abandoned these items when they discovered they were too heavy and quite useless to them.

There were several Jews living in the city and one of them was a student at the Pedagogical Institute. I met him in the street one day before the Germans moved in and asked him, "Why don't you leave the city?" He replied, "But, Professor, why should I? The Germans are a civilized people, the people of Lessing and Goethe. It is all Soviet propaganda about them." "No, my friend," I said, "unfortunately this is no propaganda. You see, I am of German extraction and I am not a party member, so nothing will happen to me. But you are in great danger if you stay." He did not believe me and about two weeks later, soon after the Germans had occupied the city, neighbors denounced him to the Gestapo. He was arrested along with his family and several other families. They were all gassed in a panel truck constructed in such a manner that the exhaust gas went into the interior of the truck.

The crimes committed by the Gestapo units in German-occupied areas were cruel and inhuman. But how could the Germans find out who was a Jew? The population in many areas of the Soviet Union is dark-eyed and has a darkish complexion. It is extremely difficult to tell a Jew from a non-Jew. But the Germans had no trouble finding Jews: the local population reported on their Jewish neighbors.

Anti-Semitism has always been strong in Russia and, later, in the Soviet Union. Under the Tsars pogroms were commonplace. After the revolution, anti-Semitism became even stronger because in the first few years after the revolution many Bolshevik officials were Jews. The people equated Jews with communists and regarded the Soviet government as a Jewish government. Nasty anecdotes

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about Jews in general and Jewish commissars in particular circulated. I remember in 1920 a government agency in charge of food supplies in Petrograd with the acronym PEPO which stood for *Petrogradskoe edinoe potrebitel'skoe obshchestvo* (Petrograd United Consumers' Organization). It was instantly reinterpreted as *Petrogradskie evrei prodovol'stviam obespecheny* (Petrograd Jews are Provided with Food).

Calm returned the day after the looting. Everything that could be stolen had been stolen. The streets were virtually deserted, and an eerie calm settled over the entire city. Suddenly I saw a huge dust cloud in the distance. It was caused by a cavalry unit approaching the city which, to my great amazement, consisted of Caucasian natives who had deserted to the Germans. "Who are you?" some people asked. They replied, "We are the Führer's auxiliary troops." They were soon followed by a Russian regiment who announced that they were "the Führer's Cossacks." People were eagerly pumping them for news when suddenly we heard in the distance a loud rattling noise. The first German unit was approaching on personnel carriers designed to traverse any kind of terrain. It was the 49th Corps of the German army. The soldiers were disciplined, friendly and helpful. Order was restored in the town immediately, and it gradually dawned on us that we were no longer Stalin's subjects. A new life lay before us.