Reny Klas-Glass

A Story of My Life

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A memoir of the Stalinist era

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Reny Klas-Glass, *Ein Stück Leben –*
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Evil has no ideology

Deportation, or forced displacement, has been used as a form of punishment for centuries. In the history of Russia, Siberia is synonymous with deportation. Siberia was Russia's prison. Those who had fallen foul of the law were sent there, and most didn't return. For Estonians, this remote and wild place took on an ominous meaning in the 18th century, when Estonia fell under the rule of the Russian Tsar during the Great Northern War. Siberia became the general term denoting deportation, although the destinations were not always located in the geographical region of Siberia. Therefore, deportation or forced resettlement was not invented by the Soviet regime but was an important and characteristic method of its repressive policy, which could be applied to peaceful and law-abiding citizens simply for existing. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, forced displacement is a crime against humanity with no statute of limitations.

Even before the occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party decided in secret to declare Estonians, as a nation, enemies of the Soviet regime on 31 January 1938. The perception of foreigners and people of foreign origin as possible agents of foreign intelligence had taken root in the Soviet Union. Due to the complicated relations between the Soviet Union and Germany and

Poland, Soviet national security was primarily interested in Germans and Poles but then also in smaller nations: Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Finns and other peoples living in Russia. As a contemporary aside, this is perhaps not a direct parallel but certainly a horrifying comparison to the "foreign agent" law currently in force in Russia, based on which anyone who dares to speak or act differently to the monopoly of truth prescribed by the totalitarian regime can be considered to be "under foreign influence" and thus imprisoned. Essentially, "foreign agent" is equivalent to the Soviet concept of an "enemy of the people" – a verdict based on which anyone whose presence the authorities did not like could be accused and punished. One option was that such people were deported to sparsely populated areas in Siberia.

In 1940, the Red Army entered Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The independent countries were illegally occupied and incorporated into the Soviet Union. This initiated terror and pressure to suppress any kind of resistance, including silent resistance. The first wave of repressions targeted leading politicians, ministers, the police, military officers, leading figures of the Defence League etc. They were arrested and eliminated in many cases. They were only "guilty" of having sworn allegiance to their country and of having fulfilled their duty to their country.

However, ordinary people were not unaffected by the repressions either. They were violently forced to leave their homes and deported thousands of kilometres away to Siberia, from where many never returned. The wooden crosses on their graves have rotted, and the locations are known only to those that shared their fate, and only for as long as they are still among us.

The largest waves of deportations during the Soviet occupation took place in 1941 and 1949, when around 10,000 and 20,000 people were deported from Estonia,

respectively. Combined with those deported from Latvia and Lithuania, these figures are 60,000 and 90,000, respectively. Out of the population of Estonia, which was approximately 1,134,000 in 1939, the number of victims of the two mass deportations is more than two and a half per cent. These are not just numbers; these are human lives.

In addition, the deportation of Baltic Germans was carried out in 1945, when more than 400 people had to leave their homes in Estonia, and in 1951, the deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses, when almost 300 people were sent to Siberia. In total, Estonia lost one in five of its inhabitants to Soviet repressions between 1940 and 1991. More than 75,000 of them, or nearly 7% of the population, were murdered, imprisoned or forcibly deported from their homes.

The fate of those who were on the list for deportation but were not caught did not turn out to be significantly easier. In essence, they were outlaws whose property had been confiscated and who were labelled as "enemies of the people". Formally, they were free, and although it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them to find a place to live and work, they still had to pay high kulak taxes.

The Communist Party claimed it was establishing a new type of society in the Soviet Union. In reality, the entire ideology can be summed up in one word – power – and to secure it, they did not shy away from the most brutal of attacks on the civilian population. Not even when these acts were declared crimes against humanity or genocide after the Second World War. Human life had no value in the Soviet Union. Tens of millions of people had lost their lives in the Russian Civil War, executed as part of the Red Terror, starved to death as a result of forced collectivisation, which began in the late 1920s, or in the

famine organised by the Soviet government in Ukraine in the early 1930s. The list continues in the late 1930s with the victims of Stalin's purges, World War II battles, post-war repressions and new famines. However, there were still people who were an obstacle to the "transformation of society", and this is where the tool called deportation was implemented.

Most of the deportees were "kulaks"; in other words, wealthier farmers with their families. They had provided local people with jobs, which is a strong indicator of a free society but was considered "exploitation" in the Soviet system. They did not want to enter a kolkhoz (i.e. collective farm) and give up their land, which they had laboured hard to cultivate for generations, or their livestock, which would have been equivalent to giving up a family member. All private entrepreneurs, real estate owners and even the marginally wealthier people who had "exploited" their fellow citizens as employers were also declared class enemies. Deportation was also important in combating the armed resistance of guerrilla fighters known as the Forest Brothers, cutting off their final points of support by eliminating the local population.

A summary statement was prepared for each family, which was approved by the head of the regional security department or their deputy. The files were forwarded to the central security agency in Tallinn, where a summary was drawn up for each family. It included information about the reason for deportation (labels such as "nationalist", "bandit" or "kulak" and a summary of their anti-Soviet activities) and the names of the family members subject to deportation. If necessary, compromising information was also collected.

Operative groups, as they were referred to, accompanied by armed soldiers, arrived at people's homes in the early morning hours. Then family members were identi-

fied and the required documentation was completed. Still sleepy but in shock, these people were told they would be taken away and should pack their things. They were not told where or why. Officially, they were allowed to take a lot of things with them. One hundred kilograms for the deportees in 1941, one ton for the deportation of Germans in 1945, and one and a half tons per family in 1949. In reality, no one was able to pack such a volume, and in many cases they didn't even have so many belongings to begin with. Too often, people had to pack their belongings within the allotted two hours, which was often reduced to just tens of minutes, when decisions had to be made in a state of despair, uncertainty and fear. Those rounded up away from their homes were deported empty-handed and had only to rely on the goodwill of their fellow deportees. The lucky ones were those for whom the deporters had enough humanity to recommend they take with them, for example, a sewing machine and agricultural tools, as well as food for a long journey.

Deportees were transported on trucks to railway stations and placed in cattle cars. Men were separated from their families and sent to labour camps. During the 1949 deportations, there were no more men left to separate. They had either already been murdered, imprisoned, illegally mobilised into the Red Army, or were hiding in the forests and waging a partisan war. Consequently, thousands of women, children and the elderly were deported as elements dangerous to society. The deportation of such a large number of people could not be hidden from the public and this was not even attempted. The aim was to sow fear and thereby subject society to the regime of the occupation. In general, they succeeded.

The deportation wagons had small barred windows high up, which the deportees used to try to understand where they were headed, and while still on Estonian soil,

to send letters to those left behind, in the hope that people finding the letters would forward them. Some of the wagons had bunk beds for sleeping, but some didn't, and people literally lived atop their belongings. Hygiene requirements in the wagons were met by two buckets, one for drinking water and the other as a toilet. The deportees in March 1949 also had to endure the cold. The wagons had been fitted with iron stoves, but finding fuel was often left up to the people themselves.

At first, they lived on food from home, which was shared with those who had been arrested directly on the street and had not been able to take anything with them. The soup served during the journey gave most people diarrhoea, so it was healthier not to eat it. The trains generally did not make stops on Estonian soil, but after passing the Ural mountains people were occasionally allowed out of the wagons to get food. According to instructions, everyone had to be given free hot food twice a day and bread according to the ration allocations, as well as hot water twice a day. The reality was very different. In order to receive food and hot water, one passenger in each wagon was made responsible for their group. These were often the mothers of young children, since it was understood that they would not run away or leave their children. The others were not allowed out of the wagon. The journey lasted like that for weeks.

Constant cold, empty stomachs, uncertainty and fear made people powerless; due to not being able to wash, diseases and lice spread. The sick were isolated in a separate wagon. When necessary, they were transported to the nearest hospital, and after recovery were sent to their designated location of deportation. In fear of being separated from their children and other family members, people often tried to hide their illnesses. The longer the journey took, the more frequent deaths became, especially among

children and the elderly. There were also suicides. The bodies were separated from the wagons, but what happened to them is unknown.

The author of the book "A Story of My Life", Reeli Klas-Glass, nicknamed Reny, was one of those who was designated a place on a deportation wagon in 1941. In addition to her, there were about 400 other Jews among the deported, making up around 10% of the Estonian Jewish community at that time. About a quarter of them died in Russian prison camps and forced exile.

Reeli Klas-Glass was born in Haapsalu in 1911, but she spent much of her childhood and youth abroad. Her father, Isak Citron, was an international industrialist and tycoon who had business ties with several other European countries in addition to Estonia. The Citron family lived in Switzerland in the first half of the 1920s and from 1926 in Berlin, where the author of the book and her two sisters and brother received the best possible education. The family returned to Estonia in the second half of the 1930s, when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany and anti-Jewish policies were initiated. This is what makes the story of the Citrons particularly tragic – they fled the terror of Hitler to run into the midst of that of Stalin.

Soon after the occupation of the Republic of Estonia in 1940, Isak Citron was arrested by Soviet security agents. In 1941, he was taken to the Kirov prison camp in Russia, where he starved to death in early 1942. Reny's husband, Leopold Klas-Glass, who was declared a "socially dangerous element", was also sent to a prison camp. Leopold was separated from his wife and child at the train station. The same was done to all the other deported families, who were lied to and promised that families would be reunited at their destination. In reality, the men were sent to prison camps and the women and children deported, and in the worst case, they never met again.

In the book, the author describes her thoughts and feelings during the deportation and the difficulties she encountered upon arrival in a captivating manner, and although the story in the book ends in 1941, her tribulations did not.

Leopold Klas-Glass, the husband of Reeli Klas-Glass, was released from prison camp in 1946. After that, the family was reunited in Russia and returned to Estonia, but their tragedy did not end there. After the war, at the end of the 1940s, the Soviet regime began to re-deport those who had returned to Estonia, and the Klas-Glass family was also among those deported a second time.

After Stalin's death, those imprisoned for political reasons and those deported began to be released. This time, the process was not reversed. The Klas-Glasses were released from their forced exile in 1954, a year later they returned home to Estonia. This was the end of their almost 15-year struggle, although the labels of "socially dangerous elements" and "enemies of the people" remained with them for many years to come.

Estonian Institute of Historical Memory

Preface

My mother Reny ("Reeli") Klas-Glass (née Citron) was born on 3 August 1911 in Haapsalu. Her father, Isaak Citron, grew up in Lithuania, the eldest son in a large Jewish family. Because he lost his father at an early age, Isaak was forced to leave school at the age of thirteen and become the family's main provider. He started out doing simple jobs and gradually worked his way up until he became a successful entrepreneur while still a young man. He was one of the richest men in Estonia. He was able to provide excellent education abroad (in Switzerland, Germany and France) for his four children (my mother was the third child).

Until 1936, my mother's family lived in Berlin in their house on Ballenstedter Street in Wilmersdorf. As the influence of Hitler and the National Socialists grew stronger and anti-Jewish sentiments spread across the country, the family returned to Estonia. Here my mother met her future husband, Leopold Klas-Glass, the son of a dentist. They married, and soon after, in November 1937, I was born. The Soviet annexation of the Baltic states in 1940 started a tragic chapter in the history of Estonia. All private property, such as factories, shops, houses and apartments, was nationalised. There was hardly a family in Estonia that was not adversely affected by the new rules and restrictions. The situation worsened daily. Peo-

ple disappeared into prisons, and there was a general fear that the repression would continue. My grandfather was labelled a capitalist, which led to his arrest and imprisonment as an enemy of the Soviet regime. Later, my grandfather was sent to a labour camp, where, in 1942, he died of hunger and disease.

On 14 June 1941, a week before the Third Reich attacked the Soviet Union, thousands of people from the Baltics, along with their worldly possessions, were herded into cattle wagons and sent for resettlement in the vastness of Russia as "socially dangerous elements". I was three years old at the time, and my mother was in the final months of pregnancy. We were separated from my father, who was moved to the men's wagon. Later, his train wagon was detached from our train. My father, along with the other men and a few women, ended up in one of the labour camps in the Urals. I next saw him five years later. Miraculously, my father survived.

My mother describes this period in our lives in her book, which I would like to now introduce to the reader.

My mother returned to Berlin in 1977. There, her childhood dream of becoming an actor finally came true, albeit only partially. For fourteen years she appeared as an extra or in minor roles in several German films and worked with many German film actors who held her in high esteem, such as Harald Junke, Romy Schneider and Lotti Huber. She was always proud of her work in the world of cinema, and we often saw her on screen.

My mother was a passionate storyteller, and in the hope that her story might still arouse some interest even many years later, she decided to set it down on paper. My

mother's memories from the fourteen years of deportation, recorded here in the form of a book, cover only a small part of our lives during that time. These memories describe only the beginning of her tribulations. Unfortunately, my mother did not have the strength to write down the events that followed this period, since she became seriously ill and died on 23 June 2006 in Berlin. Although I was a child during the deportation, I feel an obligation to my mother. In the afterword, I will sketch, however briefly, what occurred after the deportation of our family.

By publishing the book *A Story from My Life*, I am trying to fulfil my mother's wish to make this story available to as many people as possible.

I would especially like to thank my daughter Julia – I couldn't have done this without her and her husband's help. Many thanks also to my husband and son, my brother Eduard Klas and his family, and certainly also to the friends who supported us during the publication of this book.

Gaby Bernstein
Berlin, August 2003

14 June 1941

On the morning of Saturday, 14 June 1941, I woke up in my usual good mood.

The alarm rang. It was time to get up and go to work.

I woke my husband, Leopold: "Lolo, wake up! It's late, we have to hurry!"

It was spring. The sun shone pleasantly into our room. I opened the window and the warm spring air wafted in. The first warm days had arrived.

The happy voice of our three-year-old daughter Gaby could be heard from the next room. She was playing with the nanny, and the room was ringing with the child's laughter. Our dog Lord watched us faithfully, observing our every move and waiting to be petted. Tongue out, he ran between Lolo and me. After breakfast, Lord awaited a treat. Gaby threw him a piece of sausage, which he swallowed in one bite. Lolo used to joke at the table, and we always had fun. Our little family was happy.

I looked at the father and his daughter and thought that soon there would be four of us. I had a dream that I would give my daughter a little brother for her birthday.

It was time to go. Gaby kissed me and pleaded: "Mum, don't go to work!"

Her father also came to say goodbye to his daughter. He lifted Gaby high and threw her into the air. This always excited her, and she begged her father: "More, Daddy, more, please!" We tore ourselves away from our daughter's hugs and left her in the care of her nanny, whom she loved very much.

Lord escorted us to the gate. Chatting cheerfully with

each other, we reached the bus stop. Lolo asked how I was feeling – I was seven months pregnant and sometimes didn't feel great. I reassured him. I smiled cheerfully and said everything was fine. I reminded him that after work, we were expected at the birthday of our friend Benno's son, Mark, who would be three. I showed Lolo the gift; inside the wrapping, the bear cub Mishka was already waiting to meet the birthday boy.

We sat on the bus and looked out. Suddenly we noticed something unusual on the street: open-top trucks stood in front of many houses, with people seated at the back. They were anxious and talking and arguing with each other. Many of them were crying. Fear and anguish were reflected on their faces. There were men, women, children and old people. Soldiers with rifles stood near them. Suitcases and other bags and things were all jumbled up together – some on the street, some piled up at the back of the trucks. And there were many such fully loaded trucks; they came down the street one after the other. These unfortunate people were accompanied by soldiers. Those of us on the bus watched this horrible sight in fear. They were confused; no one understood what was going on. What had happened?

I looked at Leopold. Usually calm, with a kind smile, he was nervous, his face pale white. He tried to calm me: "Honey, don't get anxious – think of our little boy!"

We reached the city centre. Even there, it was evident that something extraordinary was afoot. There was fear, worry and panic on people's faces. Some were rushing around. Others stood in groups of two or three, whispering to each other and peering around. Many cried loudly, forgetting that they were on the street. Women's faces were swollen from crying.

Leopold and I said goodbye and went to work.

I worked as a department manager in a large store. The store was on the main street and usually had a lot of customers. The shop floor was empty that morning.

None of the attendants was at their counters. They stood in groups with anxious faces and discussed the events of the night and morning. They all spoke of what they had seen and experienced that night. Some had had relatives arrested; for others, it was friends or neighbours. No one understood what had happened. Suddenly, the voice of an elderly salesperson rang out: "What else could it be? The Soviets occupied the Baltics. Now deportations and arrests have started here too – just like in Russia! The Soviet regime maintains a reign of fear over the Russian people; now it's our turn. What good can we expect from them? Only tears, worry and separated families!"

At that moment I saw the nanny of Lolo's sister, Irene, enter the store. She came up to me in tears, shaking with anxiety, lacking the strength to say anything. After calming down a little, she told me the terrible news: Irene, her husband and their three-year-old son Anatol ("Tolik") had been arrested during the night. They had been given an hour to pack. Tolik was asleep. He had to be woken up. The child naturally had a tantrum and cried. The parents were beside themselves and were unable to pack properly. Irene had fainted.

"They were taken away with next to no belongings or food," the distressed nanny told me. She was worried for Tolik, whom she adored. Listening to the distraught woman, I immediately thought of Lolo's parents. I had to talk to them somehow. His father was still recovering from a recent heart attack, and his mother's health was not the best either. How would they survive such a blow? Heartbroken, I dialled the number of Lolo's workplace. Lolo answered. When I told him what had happened,

he replied that he would pick me up right away and we would go see his parents together.

I don't have the strength to describe his parents' anxiety. His mother collapsed. Within half an hour, she aged a decade. His father, a dentist who was respected by everyone, could not comprehend. He kept repeating: "For what? For what?"

("For what? For what?" – this question would be addressed to the Soviet regime throughout its existence. In the Baltic states, however, it was asked from the summer of 1940 right up until the present day! Ever since the Soviet Union made us "happy" by merging with us! Since Estonia became a "fraternal federal republic"! When innocent people were imprisoned, deported to Siberia, sent to prison camps… Thousands and thousands of people ask themselves the same question: "For what? For what?")

We couldn't muster words to comfort them – they were too miserable and the worry too great! Saying goodbye to his parents, everyone had only one thought: "Will we ever meet again?"

(Irene and Lolo never saw their parents again. During the German occupation, their mother and father were sent to the Harku prison camp. They died in the same way as 976 Estonian Jews who were Estonian citizens: they were murdered. It was a parental tragedy that would accompany me throughout my life and never be forgotten. I pray every night before I go to sleep and still have no peace! I loved Lolo's mother and father so much – they were wonderful people!)

When I got back to the store, I stopped at the cash register and asked our young cashier: "Erika, has anyone come to take me away?" I said these words half-jokingly, not taking them seriously myself. When I looked at Erika,

who was otherwise so cheerful and smiling, I noticed her awkward expression and lowered gaze, and the realisation hit me before I heard the answer: "Yes, Reny, there are four men waiting for you in the store. They arrived right after you left with your husband."

I felt my heart stop and a stabbing pain in my stomach. The baby inside me kicked as if sharing my anxiety. I felt dizzy and almost fell. A stranger, one of the men who were waiting for me, caught me. The men came up to me. They wore civilian clothes. One of them, apparently the leader, said I had to go with them.

"A state institution is moving into your apartment; you have to vacate it. We will show you your new apartment. It's good, better than your old one." He asked me to calmly leave the store with them. I knew right away that he was lying. Looking out the window, I saw a truck in front of the store entrance and two soldiers with rifles walking back and forth. I understood the situation!

These men had found a "diplomatic way" to get me out of the store calmly and quietly, especially since shoppers were starting to enter the store. My lovely boss, with whom we got along very well, wanted to help me. He said he couldn't let me leave during work. But they showed him their papers, and my wonderful boss had to keep quiet. He only gave me a sad, knowing look, spread his hands and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

I asked the men if I could call my husband and said firmly that I would not go anywhere without him. They let me call him but listened in on the conversation. (My request to call my mother and brother was met with a stern refusal.) Leopold was first to the phone again. When I told him what was going on, he replied: "It was to be expected! I will be there right away!"

Lolo came very quickly. From the way he was panting, it was obvious that he had run the whole way. He came

very close to me, stroked my cheek and whispered: "Hang in there! We are together, and that's what's most important!" My colleagues stood around us. They were silent, but their eyes said it all. Many had tears in their eyes; men loudly blew their noses. Some shook our hands. When I hugged them before leaving, I could feel their worry for us and worry for our future. I tried to smile through the tears and quietly said, "Thank you, don't forget us!"

Leopold was quicker to recover. He placed one arm around me and held my hand with the other. That's how we left the store and walked out into the street. The truck and soldiers were waiting for us. The men escorted us to the vehicle. Two of them, having fulfilled their "duty to the state", left while the other two stayed with us. One of them was the overweight superior. Lolo asked that I be allowed to sit in the front next to the driver, given my condition. He refused "humanely" and sat in the front himself. He also had a considerable "belly". We were escorted by two armed soldiers, as if we were real criminals.

Leopold and I held each other's hands during the whole ordeal. He tried to comfort me while I was worried for the child I carried, our "Mr X" (as we jokingly called him).

I looked at Lolo. He was very pale, with red marks on his cheeks. Suddenly, we both shouted – Benno, our friend, whose son's birthday we would have been attending in the evening, came down the street. He walked slowly and calmly, wrapped up in his own thoughts. He didn't notice us. We called to him in unison: "Benno! Benno! Benno!" He stopped and held his head with both hands when he saw us standing there between soldiers at the back of the truck. Driving past him, we managed to shout: "Benno, we are being taken away! Tell my mother and brother! They are taking us home now. Do you understand? Benno, please hurry!" The soldier on

the right thumped us viciously on the back and shouted: "Shut up!"

We caught a glimpse of Benno running quickly towards his workplace. He worked in the same establishment as my brother Viktor. Soon my mother and Viktor would find out about us. That thought calmed me considerably.

The truck kept moving.

I still had the package – the large and wonderful Mishka, a gift for Benno's son, which he never received.

At home for the last time

It was a half-hour drive to our home. The vehicle shook violently, and I found it difficult to stand up. Lolo supported me. The ride made me nauseous, and I felt a pain in my stomach, but I didn't want to worry Lolo even more by complaining. He was scared enough for me and our future child. He told me a lot during the drive. During the night and in the morning, many of the employees at his establishment had been taken away. Everyone was panicked and unable to work. On his way back to work after leaving his parents, Lolo had bumped into his older brother Eduard and told him about what had happened to Irina and her family. Eduard had promised to go to his parents immediately. As the brothers hugged each other goodbye, they too thought about the possibility of separation – maybe forever.

Lolo had another brother, Alfred, who was not only a brother to him but also a friend. He called his brother from work but was unable to reach him.

(We were destined not to see either of Leopold's brothers ever again. Eduard was killed by Hitler's Nazis in Tallinn. Alfred died in 1943.)

We finally reached our home. It was a beautiful semi-detached house, surrounded by a large garden. The truck stopped in front of the gate. We were ordered to get out. The path to the house was lined with lilacs that had just bloomed. I instinctively grabbed a branch as we passed them. The wonderfully fresh smell was soothing.

We were ordered into the house. We entered our beau-

tiful, comfortable apartment. Everything was as it always was. Flowers in a vase on the table. The furniture and everything else was in its place. Nothing had indicated that it might all crumble to dust at some point. Lord met us, barking happily. Overflowing with love, he jumped around us and licked our hands. Gaby was sound asleep in her crib. Cute and pure, she looked like a little angel. The nanny was doing her laundry. Seeing us accompanied by a whole host of strange men, she abandoned the laundry. She looked at us in confusion and, upon realising that something was very wrong, quickly crossed herself. The fat superior officer told us to sit and listen. He announced that we would have an hour to pack before we left. We were being sent to live in another region of the Soviet Union.

I asked: "Just tell me, and please tell the truth – are we going to be separated? How should we pack, everyone's things together or separately? How long will the journey take?"

The answer: "Soviet laws are the most humane in the world; they don't separate families. You can pack your things together. How long will you be on the road? I can't answer that. I don't know!"

The answer was precise and clear. The most important thing for us was that we would stay together and would not be separated. The Soviet regime does not separate families. That was reassuring. Now we had to pack our things. But what do you pack when your hands are shaking and your head is foggy? The nanny, our sweetheart, sorted and packed Gaby's things. While doing this, she cried loudly and cursed the Soviet regime and its laws.

Leopold brought in some empty suitcases. As I started to pack them with clothes, I happened to look out of the window and I would almost have screamed from joy. I saw my mother, my brother Viktor and Aunt Paula, my

father's sister, coming towards the house. When they wanted to enter, the fat one barred their way and told them to stay in the garden. They stood at the window of the room where we were packing. We were not allowed to open the window or talk to our relatives. We tried to communicate through the closed window using sign language. My poor mother was crying uncontrollably. My brother tried to comfort her, barely able to hold back tears himself.

I mechanically took some things from the closet, put them in the suitcase, and then took them back to the closet. It was like a trance, and I couldn't quite comprehend what I was doing. My thoughts were with those dear people who were standing there at the window. I looked at them and tried to guess what they were trying to say with their gestures.

Lolo helped me pack. When I took an expensive fur coat, a mink hat, elegant dresses and a coat from the closet, he put them back: "What are you doing? You're going to the Soviet Union, not a spa resort!"

The phone rang non-stop. We were not allowed to answer it. Every ring was heartbreaking. I tried to guess who was calling. My husband's parents, brothers? Benno? My two sisters? Thoughts swirled around my head, making me nauseous. On top of all that, my "Mr X" was very restless – I guess he didn't understand what was happening to his mother.

The hour was up. We had somehow hastily packed our things. The suitcases were closed. A difficult moment had arrived. We had to leave our lovely home, the nest where we had been so happy for four-and-a-half years. We asked for permission to sit for a bit before setting off into the unknown. The fatty allowed it. We sat in silence – Lolo, Gaby, the nanny and me.

Lord rested his head on my knees. He sensed the ten-

sion in the air and took turns pressing himself against Lolo and me. Our "entourage" stood with stern faces at the front door. It was obvious that their patience was running out. We all stood up, as if on command. Reaching the door, Gaby suddenly needed to go to do "a little thing". This done, she remembered her favourite doll, Daisy. She ran back into her room but, in her distress, was unable to find the doll. Then the superior officer's patience ran out. He shouted viciously in a screeching voice: "Well, now! That's enough, you bad, capricious girl! Get going!" Gaby was shocked by the sudden outburst from the "wicked, strange man" and burst into tears. Escorted by such "music", we left our home forever. Forever! Forever!!!

The next minutes are indescribable – I can't think about them without crying. My loved ones awaited us in the garden. Viktor, my dear brother, came to me. He hugged me tightly and, unnoticed by everyone around us, slid some money into my palm. He also whispered suggestions in my ear that I couldn't understand.

I looked at my poor mother, who could barely stay on her feet. I ran to her and pressed myself against her. Tears prevented us from saying anything… My mother hugged me, only able to repeat my name: Reny! Reny! Reny, my child! Aunt Paula, barely alive herself, supported my inconsolable mother. Our nanny, our sweetest soul, held her favourite little one in her arms for the last time. She did not want to relinquish Gaby. Exasperated and shaking her fist at the fatty, she gave the girl to her father. Lord jumped and barked around us. It was also incredibly difficult to say goodbye to our loyal friend. Now the entourage started hurrying us along. We were ordered to get into the back of the truck.

Final kisses, hugs, promises.

Everything else happened as if in a fog; my eyes could no longer explain anything. We were placed in the back of

the truck atop the pile of suitcases. Gaby sat on her father's lap with me nearby. The engine roared; the vehicle started moving with difficulty. Our home ever farther behind us; ever farther our loved ones: my mother, Viktor, aunt, nanny and dog Lord… The vehicle turned a sharp corner, and they were all lost from sight.

Two trains

We drove for a long time. We were already out of the city. Gaby fell asleep in her father's lap. Her father stroked his daughter's head and sang softly to her. I sat on a hard suitcase, in shock, semi-conscious. I felt nothing – completely numb. Except for the baby within me that signalled its existence with sporadic wiggles. It was good that he didn't know what was happening to us. On the road, we saw a familiar sight from the morning: trucks full of people. The difference was that then we had been observers on the sidelines, whereas now we sat at the back of one of those trucks, atop a pile of our belongings, guarded by soldiers with rifles.

The truck stopped at a train station near the city. We were told to get off the truck and follow an escort. We found ourselves on the platform. Two long trains with cattle wagons stood on the tracks. A mass of people filled the platform, as well as many *militsiya* (Soviet police) and armed soldiers. People were being hurried along. They carried suitcases and assorted bundles of belongings. Even the children were loaded up with bundles, bags and the like. Screams, cries, and curses were heard all around. People were forced onto the train. We had five suitcases and a bag of provisions. Leopold carried two suitcases strapped together across his shoulders, and one in each hand. It was heavy for him, poor thing. I had one suitcase, the bag of provisions and – most importantly – a potty hidden in little Gaby's gauze nappy. Gaby carried Mishka, the toy that had been intended for Benno's son – which was huge for her – and her favourite doll, Daisy.

We walked along a long platform that was full of people. Fatty stopped us unexpectedly: "You have to split up now! You will travel in separate wagons. This train has a women's wagon and a men's wagon. You are travelling a long distance, and it will take many days. That's why we must follow the rules. Men and women are not allowed to travel and sleep together. You will meet again when you reach your destination. Now divide up your suitcases and decide who will take which one. I repeat, the separation is only for the journey!"

Lolo and I were horrified by this development. We looked at each other in confusion and wanted to ask the "boss" what this all meant, but the tone of his voice took away our ability to speak. He gave my husband a strict order: "Now say goodbye to your wife and daughter and follow me!"

He hurried Lolo along, so Lolo barely had time to kiss us goodbye. After placing two suitcases on the platform, he had to follow the portly leader and two soldiers. The two strapped-together suitcases remained on his shoulders. He looked back briefly and waved. I saw his sad eyes – he was crying. Then he disappeared into the crowd.

It all happened suddenly and quickly. I stood on the platform completely stunned, not understanding anything. I couldn't answer Gaby's question: "Why did Dad leave?" I had a lump in my throat, and all I wanted to do was cry, scream, scream, scream…

I was filled with fear. Had we really been separated forever? I had heard of many horrors committed in the Soviet Union and had little faith left. I tried to calm myself nevertheless. I reminded myself of what the "boss" had stated: Soviet laws are the most humane in the world; they do not separate families!

The other man from our escort had stayed with us. He

called over two armed soldiers and turned to me: "You and your daughter are coming with us!"

The soldiers took my suitcases and bag of provisions. Gaby and I were taken to one of the cattle wagons and told to get inside. The soldiers brought the suitcases and the bag inside. After that, our "guardian angels" left. Their "humanitarian mission" was finished.

After gathering myself a little, I began to examine the wagon in which fate had placed us. The first thing I noticed, with dismay, was that there were men in the wagon alongside women. They were around the same age as my husband (Lolo was twenty-seven years old; I was twenty-nine, a year-and-a-half older than my husband). With great sadness, I thought: "Why are these grown men allowed to ride in the women's wagon, but Lolo is not allowed to? What kind of women's wagon has men? What did Fatty's 'separately' mean after all?"

Everything was very strange. I learned from my new travelling companions that they too had been separated from their husbands and fathers. They assumed that heads of families were placed in the other wagon. Other family members, including mothers with adult sons, were sent to the "women's wagon"! Those women who were themselves the "heads of the family" were also placed in the men's wagons. This all seemed very suspicious, and people were sure that the purpose was to separate family members from each other.

"We think we'll be travelling in completely different directions and never see our husbands, fathers or brothers again!" my fellow travellers told me. They added: "The Soviet regime cannot be trusted! Their laws, which entail deportations, prisons and lies, are inhumane and cruel…"

Listening to these pessimistic predictions, my heart grew heavier and heavier. I tried not to believe them. I

told myself that everything was going to be fine. My daughter and I would just have to endure this journey, and her father would already be awaiting us when we arrived there!

Oh dear. Unfortunately, my travelling companions were right, and I was naively trusting…

After a while, I started to take in my surroundings, and I was overcome with horror. "What train is this? What are these wagons?" I thought. They were genuine cattle wagons, the kind usually used to transport livestock. A large and dark, smelly wagon. Manure stains on the floor, clumps of hay, straw in the corners. Triple bunks along the walls of the wagon on both sides. The door opened to the side with an iron crossbar. Up high on the walls, directly below the ceiling were small barred windows that barely let any light in. A hole had been made in the floor for one's "bodily functions", and one had to relieve oneself in front of everyone. There were two buckets in one of the corners, one with drinking water and the other for washing. And another small box for rubbish.

I counted twenty-eight people in the cattle wagon, including four adult men and two children. In addition to Gaby, there was an eight-year-old girl, Evi. She was accompanied by her mother, Erna, and two brothers. One of the brothers was Aleks, who was twenty-seven years old. The other brother, Paul, was twenty-five. Their father was also in the men's wagon. It was a very sweet family. Erna placed Gaby and her daughter next to each other so that the girls would have more fun together. She told me immediately that they had brought a Primus stove, a bottle of kerosene, some pots and other household items from home, as well as food. She said she would cook semolina porridge for the girls.

"The children can sleep together; they will be more

comfortable that way. The most important thing is that they are okay! We adults have to survive this journey somehow. There is no room to lie down properly." That's how she explained and organised things. I was infinitely grateful to that kind-hearted woman.

Gaby immediately sat down with Evi. They became fast friends. Our wagon happened to contain some very nice people. They started looking after my daughter right away. Once they found out that I was expecting a child, they were especially caring and attentive towards me. While the kids were eating, I tried to prepare a bed for Gaby. It was damp and chilly in the wagon. I took off my coat and covered my daughter with it. She wouldn't fall asleep and kept asking me: "Will we be home again tomorrow? With father? With my nanny? With Lord?"

She was so anxious from the unusual day that she couldn't close her eyes. I quietly told her fairy tales, and I sang to her – but it was no use! Then Gaby herself started telling me the fairy tale about Little Red Riding Hood. She did so in her own way, which was funny – she mixed up all the protagonists in fairy tales. And when she tried to convince me that Little Red Riding Hood ate the Big Bad Wolf and Grandma swallowed Little Red Riding Hood, the whole wagon laughed.

Finally, my daughter fell asleep. As she did, she held my hand tightly. I guess she was afraid that I would go away and leave her alone among strangers.

I was given the best place on the top bunk by the window. This was organised by Evi's brothers Aleks and Paul. They were on the next bunk down. Aleks, who noticed that I was cold without my coat – I had covered Gaby with it – covered me with his own coat. Paul, trying to be just as attentive, placed his jacket under my head as a pillow. They were good boys!

We took turns looking out of our little window. Heart-

breaking scenes took place on the platform, the same as those we had recently gone through ourselves. Men were separated from women, mothers from children. A soldier with a rifle stood guard at the door of our wagon. As it got dark, the soldier tightly closed the iron door of the wagon. An iron beam was placed in front of the door from the outside. It was a horrible feeling – like we were a herd of animals being led to slaughter. Chills shook me. My head felt heavy and it ached; it was hard to breathe in the stuffy air. I felt like a caged animal. It made me nauseous and I wanted to throw up, but I was ashamed and didn't want to disturb others. Fortunately I overcame the nausea and was grateful to my "Mr X". My mouth was dry, but the water had run out. We had had only one bucket of water for twenty-eight people, and it had run out. I wanted to save the remaining drop of milk in the bottle for the next day.

No one was able to sleep. Some talked to their neighbours; some cried softly; others just sat and stared into space. Everyone had their own thoughts – difficult, sad, anxious.

I thought of Lolo. Where was my poor darling at that moment? He must have been hungry. The bag of provisions had stayed with me! We had eaten, but how about him?… This thought did not give me peace and tormented me all night. I remembered my mother, Viktor, my sisters, and Lolo's parents. I wasn't religious, but that night I prayed to God.

Come morning, I finally fell asleep. I woke to the door of the wagon being thrown open. New "passengers" were brought in: two attractive girls who were sisters. One was seventeen; the other was nineteen. The older of them, Margot, was blonde and slender, with large dark eyes and a beautiful face. Her younger sister, Marika, was no less

beautiful. She was the opposite of her sister, who was a blue-eyed brunette, very slim and elegant. They were scared and had been crying. Once they had calmed down a little, the girls told us their story. When their parents were taken away on the morning of 14 June, the girls were not at home. They were at school – one at secondary school, the other at the institute. When the sisters came home for lunch, they found an empty apartment. Everything had been turned upside down, and their parents were nowhere to be found. They heard from their neighbours that their parents had been taken somewhere that morning in the back of a truck, guarded by soldiers. That night, when the girls were already asleep, they were also picked up. That's how they ended up in our wagon. There was now thirty-one of us! I took a liking to the sisters straight away. I was especially drawn to the older one. She was smart and energetic, with more experience than her years suggested. It was touching how she stood up for her younger sister. In our cattle wagon we had the Aaviksoo family, a very pleasant family – a mother with her son and daughter. The twenty-six-year-old son's name was Arnold ("Arno"). He was strikingly handsome, like a movie star. A young man with curly, dark hair, bright white teeth and a beautiful smile, he resembled Tyrone Power, a popular actor of the time. His sister, Liidia, was three years younger than her brother. She had been about to marry in two days. The whole family had been preparing for the wedding. She had been a happy bride whose love was met with adoration. On that horrific night, she had been deported along with her parents and brother. Her groom remained behind. Liidia couldn't even leave him a message, because she wasn't allowed to make a phone call. Their father, as the head of the family, had of course been sent to the men's wagon. Liidia was as beautiful as her brother Arno.

In the wagon she sat alone, silent, burdened by her heavy thoughts. She did not take part in our conversations. She didn't cry. She ate almost nothing. She tried to read a book the entire time. I didn't notice her turn the page once… Her wonderfully beautiful and infinitely sad face had the look of a person who had been cheated in life.

I appreciated Liidia and loved her very much. She was an honest person and a good friend you could count on.

There was another family: mother, son Richard and two daughters – Silvia and Nora. One of them was a foster child. Arnold instantly took a liking to the pretty Nora. Richard was twenty-six years old. The men in our wagon were all of that age, twenty-five to twenty-seven years old. I thought bitterly of Lolo. Where was the justice here?

We also had a seventy-five-year-old woman, Marta Roos. She had a lot of stuff with her and was relatively content. When the old woman started unpacking her suitcases, it turned out that they were her husband's belongings (therefore, her husband must have had her clothes). Poor Mrs Marta became completely hysterical, crying and screaming, stamping her feet and tearing at her hair, even trying to jump off the train. The guard shouted at her and threatened her with his gun. From then on, Marta wore men's clothes. She was a petite woman. Her husband must have been a giant, because Marta simply drowned in the clothes.

The men were able to disembark the train in pairs a few times a day to empty the buckets and rubbish bin. Naturally, two soldiers accompanied them. We were always happy and excited when they came back with fresh water. We were informed that the train also had a store wagon where you could buy food. Only two people could go there from each wagon, of course with an "entourage".

The two then had to consider the wishes of the entire wagon. This was great news for us. We made a list and collected money. Arno and Aleks were the first we sent off as scouts. Our guard left the door open after the boys left. I went to the door, breathed in with pleasure and felt as if I was coming alive due to this breath of fresh air. It was so good! The weather was warm, and the sun was shining.

I stuck my head out far and was able to see the entire platform. People were still being brought and stuffed into the wagons. There were also captives on their way to the store wagon accompanied by soldiers. Suddenly I saw something… and I couldn't believe my eyes! Two men came along the platform escorted by soldiers – one of them was my Lolo! They had almost passed when I shouted at the top of my voice: "Lolo! Lolo!" He heard me and recognised my voice. He stopped and saw me. We were both overjoyed at this meeting. The soldier guarding our wagon happened to be kind enough. He discussed something with Lolo's escorts and then told me that he could not allow me out of the wagon but that my little daughter could hug her father. He took Gaby in his arms and handed her to her father. Lolo was happy to have the opportunity to hold his child. They held and kissed each other. Gaby pressed herself tightly against her father and whispered something in his ear. I observed this moving scene through tears. While father and daughter were talking, I hastily gathered up some food and some money. I managed to hand them to him. These moments of happiness lasted only a few minutes. Then our kind soldier was forced to break off the meeting. He must have feared his superiors. He whispered to Lolo that when he came back from the store, we would be allowed to see him again, as a goodbye.

Immediately after this happy meeting, a superior officer (why are they always so fat?) came into our wagon

with two militsiya. They inspected the wagon and were interested in how much stuff we had and how we had settled in. They checked us off a list. After completing his task and jumping off the wagon, he issued a categorical order to close the wagon door more tightly: "Leave only a narrow crack for air – that will be enough for them."

I almost started crying in dismay. Only a small section of the platform was visible through the crack in the door. I was anxious whether I would see Lolo again. Our soldier helped me out once again. He pushed the door open wider and, when he saw my husband, called him closer. Lolo came right up to the door. I held out both hands to him, and he took them in his. I hurriedly whispered: "Dear Lolo! I was very, very happy with you for four years. Whatever happens to us in the future, know that I love you and will wait for you!" He assured me of the same. I asked: "What do you think, dear, will we be together again sometime?" "Of course we will, darling! That's the only possibility! You're too little to be on your own!"

And then my soldier told us to say goodbye to each other. We kissed through the crack in the door. Margot lifted our little girl so that she too could kiss her father goodbye. "Daddy, Daddy…" she stroked her father's cheek with her little hand…

Lolo's final words were: "Take care of yourself and Gaby and 'Mr X'! I love you…" And then he left. The soldier now pushed the door wide open, and I was able to watch Lolo leave. He trudged off, carrying the bag of provisions I had given him. He turned around once more and looked for us, but I guess he didn't see us. My heart ached – my daughter was with me, but he was completely alone.

(After this happy meeting, we did not see each other for five years. Lolo ended up in a Siberian prison camp, just like all the Estonians in the men's wagon on the other train.)

Unexpected meetings

In the evening of that same day, a new "passenger" was brought to us, a sixteen-year-old boy named Peeter. There was already no room on the bunks, and we were pressed together like sardines. We had to bunch up even more in order to make room for Peeter. Oh, God! He was so fat! He could have done with two seats. Peeter's father had recently died, and the boy lived with his mother, who ran a toy store. His mother, as the head of the family, was placed in the men's wagon; the son had to travel in our women's wagon. Peeter was a young man with a good sense of humour and a mature mind.

After his arrival, to our great joy, the door was left open, and we took turns breathing in the fresh air and looking out along the platform in both directions.

Suddenly we heard terrible screams from the neighbouring wagon. We saw people running in that direction, and they spoke and fussed in an agitated way. Soon people in white coats came running, apparently from an ambulance. They had a stretcher with them. For a very long time, nothing could be heard from the neighbouring carriage – except for screams. After some time, the stretcher was brought out and placed on the platform. From our door we could see a woman lying on it. Her face was very pale and her lips were blue. She moaned. She was taken to the station building, but the screams and crying continued in the neighbouring wagon. It was terrible to listen to.

Suddenly there was silence. We noticed that their wagon was closed tight, apparently so that the cries and

screams would not be heard. Later we found out that it was a pregnant woman who was about to give birth. The husband, as the head of the family, was placed in the men's wagon, while she, with her two children and her sick mother, was placed in the wagon next to ours. The woman went into labour and gave birth before the ambulance arrived. The mother with the newborn was taken away on the stretcher; the sick old woman and children were left in the wagon. They were the people who were crying and screaming.

We saw so many terrible situations, so much human suffering, so much that one could write endlessly about the whole tragedy.

The day dragged on. Worried about the future, I could not find peace. Fortunately, my little Gaby was a good and obedient child. This was largely thanks to our lovely nanny back at home. Gaby helped us forget our sad thoughts. The whole wagon loved her. They became great friends with Evi and played all day long or told each other fairy tales. The adults were also quite happy to spend time with the girls, who made us laugh with their cheerfulness. Before evening, I once again enjoyed the benefits of the open door and peeked at the platform again. People were still being brought and forced onto the train. Suddenly I felt my heart stop and my head started spinning – I saw my younger sister, Raja, and her husband. I waited until they came close to our wagon, and then I called out: "Raja! Hermann!" They saw me in the wagon and slowed down.

"Raja, let them put you in our wagon!" I begged my sister.

She shook her head and said: "No, Reny! I want to stay with Hermann!"

"Raja, listen to me! You will not be kept together with

Hermann. You will be separated. I'm also in this wagon without Lolo."

I didn't know if Raja heard my words. They were hurried on and soon disappeared among the other people. I started to worry about my sister. I felt so sorry for her. I sent my thoughts out to her. I imagined how she was being separated from her husband at that moment, and how she was stuffed into one of those wagons – among strangers. Raja was also pregnant. Her first child was due in the autumn.

The next morning, after the second night in the wagon, my whole body ached. We sat almost motionless, after all, in seats that hardly deserved to be called seats. I really wanted to lie down and stretch my legs. Everyone started talking about how they had slept at home. We described our beds and bedrooms and sofas – everything that was now just a memory for us.

We were given food twice a day. In the morning, a bucket full of tasteless porridge boiled with water was brought to us, along with bread and salt. In the evening there was herring, bread and hot water. Fortunately, there was a store wagon, which was a great help to us. It was not possible to purchase anything extra, because the two people who were allowed to go to the store wagon for everyone in our wagon simply could not carry that much. Nevertheless, the poor things came back from the shopping trip like pack mules. There were thirty-one of us by now, after all. That morning, I wanted to go to the store, hoping to see Raja or Lolo's sister, Irene. My travelling companions talked me out of it. They warned me against carrying anything heavy in my situation. I had to agree with them. Margot and Peeter went. They also hoped to see their mothers in some other wagon. Unfortunately, they came back disappointed because they had not found anyone.

There were problems with washing in the begin-

ning, but we got used to it eventually. Two people would hold up a large towel, and one of us could wash behind it. The bigger problem was dealing with the other bodily functions. At first, we held back. Then we gradually started going about relieving ourselves. We used the same method as for washing. Here, too, the bath towel helped us out. After a while, everyone started experiencing stomach troubles. (Even in prisons, inmates are taken to the toilet in the morning, and the cells have bedpans. And men and women do not cohabit in the cells. But we had to do it in front of everyone…)

In the evening, our old Marta Roos had an incident. She started moaning with sudden stomach pain. She screamed so loudly that the guard came in from outside to see what was going on. We asked him to call a doctor immediately. We had to wait quite a long time until, finally, a female doctor arrived with a nurse. After examining Marta, who was writhing in pain, the doctor decided that it was necessary to administer an enema. The rest of us also complained about stomach problems, and the doctor agreed to send us pills with the nurse.

When both women returned to the wagon after a while, Marta yelled at the top of her voice, waving her arms and shouting that she would not allow them to give her an enema. After a while, the nurse came back with a young, beautiful assistant. Marta shouted in even more distress, but her protests were in vain. The assistant lifted Marta's skirt, pulled down her pants, turned her on her side and guided the end of the enema hose where it needed to go. Of course we felt sorry for Marta, but afterwards we all laughed when we remembered what happened. Our four boys were especially amused by such incidents. (They would later recall this enema story, joking and laughing about it. Truth be told, it was sad but also funny.)

We were also given pills. Of course, we were worried about how they would work. Everything worked out in the end, thanks to the big bath towel. We calmed down; everything was suddenly easier.

We rejoiced whenever "our soldier" was on duty. He would leave the door properly ajar. Everything he did indicated he felt sorry for us. He treated me very well, and sometimes he even smiled at me – imperceptibly, so others didn't see. Once he even put a candy in Gaby's mouth. He was probably a good boy at heart, who had to follow orders during his military service. "I wish there were more people like him!" I thought.

I remember standing at the door one time. I thought of Lolo and longed for him. "If only he'd go to the store wagon again and pass ours!" I reminisced about our happy marriage. The four-and-a-half years after our wedding had passed like a wonderful dream! How we loved each other and our little daughter, how we rejoiced when we found out that another child was on its way. Lolo was sure it was going to be a boy! He was already coming up with various names for our son. None of them seemed lovely enough. Eventually, he christened the boy "Mr X".

In my mind I travelled far from reality, from the smelly wagon and from the people. Suddenly I heard my name from the platform. Someone said: "Reny! Reny!" The others in our wagon heard it too. I stuck my head out of the wagon as far as I could and saw my brother Viktor walking along the platform. I called him and he came to our wagon, laughing happily. "I'm so glad I found you!"

Viktor was accompanied by two friends. They kept their distance so my brother and I could talk privately. Viktor said that he had searched the whole train for me and Raja. (He had learned that Raja and Hermann had been taken on the same day. Neighbours had informed our mother.) He had already found Raja.

"She is on the same train, in the second wagon from the front. Now, of course, she regrets not heeding your advice. She and Hermann were separated right after you saw them. Now she is asking to be transferred to your wagon, but none of the superiors will even listen to her. I was able to give her money, clothes and some food. She was very happy about that!"

Viktor had seen Irene in one of the wagons. She was crying constantly; her nerves were completely exhausted. Her son Anatol, restless and capricious, longed for home. Irene was having a very hard time with him. My brother had managed to give Irene money and food. He also thrust some money into my palm, saying: "Take it – Gaby and you could use it!"

Then Viktor sent his friends to get some of the things meant for me from the car. He stayed to talk with me. He said that he and our mother were horrified to see that we had taken so few things with us. I had nothing with me for the baby who was on its way.

My mother and brother had gone to a children's clothing store and bought a full set of clothes for "Mr X".

They had learned from acquaintances with "connections" that our train had not yet left and was standing at Kopli Station. They both decided to search the train for Raja and me.

"But where is Mother? Why isn't she here with you? Where is she?"

"Reny, dear! Mother had an accident!… Don't worry – she's alive! But she is in hospital."

It turned out that Mother and Viktor had already been at the station several hours before on the platform where our train stood. Our mother searched one end of the train; Viktor searched the other. She looked into each wagon and called us by name – "Reny! Raja! Reny! Raja!"

– but couldn't find us. Only strange faces looked back at her from the hideous cattle wagons. The windows of the wagons were so high up that she could not really distinguish specific people; all she saw were heads. Our poor mother despaired at not finding her "girls", and she continued to run up and down the platform – back and forth, here and there, calling our names incessantly. Suddenly she tripped and fell and couldn't get up. An ambulance was called, and she was taken to hospital. It turned out that she had broken her leg and it would have to be put in a cast. Leaving his mother there, Viktor returned to the station with his friends to try to find his imprisoned sisters. Luckily, this time he found us! I was horrified to hear such terrible news. Presumably, Mother and Viktor had been on the platform at the time when Marta Roos was given an enema. I remember that at that time, the door of our carriage had been closed tight, so no one on the platform could see what was happening in the wagon. I imagined my mother's condition when she fell and had to be taken to the hospital, her worry, the pain in her leg. She probably felt like she would not see her daughters again.

I cried bitter tears. Viktor tried to calm me: he promised to go directly to the hospital after seeing me. Our mother would certainly be happy to hear that my brother saw Raja and me. "Our mother is a fighter, Reny! She will weather the storm! She accepted the blow of fate calmly; she didn't cry or scream. My dear, we must follow her example!" This is how my brother tried to console me.

Raja and I never saw our mother again. She and my older sister were evacuated to the Soviet rear during the first days of the war, where they lived throughout the war. After the war, in May 1945, when Estonia had been freed*

* As a result of World War II, Estonia fell under three occupations: the Soviet occupation of 1940–1941, the German occupation of 1941–1944, and the Soviet occupation of 1944–1991.

from the fascists, they returned to Tallinn, their hometown. There they were faced with a catastrophe. Our mother's brother, along with his family, and my sister along with her husband, children and grandchildren – all our relatives who had stayed in Tallinn during the German occupation had been brutally killed by the Germans. Fifty people from amongst her family and loved ones alone. But how many more friends and acquaintances? She walked past houses as if they were cemeteries… My mother returned home with my sister at the end of May 1945. In July, doctors diagnosed her with stomach cancer and anaemia. My mother died in the hospital on 20 August 1945. My brother and sister buried her… Raja and I had been resettled. We received a telegram signed by doctors about our mother's death. We didn't get permission to travel to the funeral. Mother died holding a photo of Raja, me and our daughters… My poor mother! I feel terribly sorry for her!)

By that time, Viktor's friends arrived with things for me. They brought everything: a crib for Gaby, a suitcase with bedding and clothes, a blanket, pillows, and a stroller with accessories for a newborn. I also received food and toiletries.

The two sisters in our wagon, Margot and Marika, were visited by their uncle, along with his son, who also brought food and various things for them. There were suddenly many strangers. We were very happy. Everyone was talking and hugging. We were suddenly interrupted by Peeter's voice. He addressed us all: "When all these guests leave our wagon, I will go with them as if I were one of them. This is my only chance to escape. Please don't betray me! If I manage to escape, I will be forever grateful to you. Does anyone object to my escape plan?"

We agreed to his plan. Everyone agreed – let the boy take the risk! If he succeeds, well done and good luck to him!

So that's what he did.

When we had said goodbye to our loved ones, Peeter calmly went out of the wagon with them without taking any of his belongings, stopped once, waved goodbye to us and disappeared into the crowd. We never heard from him again. Hopefully, he managed to escape.

Viktor stayed for a bit longer. Saying goodbye, I gave him a big hug and thanked him for everything. When he had left, I felt my strength fail me. There was an ache in my soul for my mother. I imagined her searching for us throughout the train. Maybe she stood right by our wagon, perhaps calling for me? But I wouldn't have heard her, because my mother's voice would have been drowned out by Marta's screams and moans. I heard Marta, but not my mother… If it hadn't been for that enema, the door would have been open, and we would have seen each other. And my mother would not have broken her leg. But that's fate – sometimes it's harsh and there's nothing you can do about it…

I couldn't eat a single mouthful that evening. I felt sick. I felt like I had failed to ask Viktor something important about our mother, and the thought tormented me incessantly. Our good soldier was replaced by someone else, and he immediately slammed the door shut. Almost in tears, I begged him to leave us the narrowest of cracks. I slammed my fists on the door, told him I was pregnant, asked for even a little fresh air – but he was deaf to my pleas. That was a particularly horrible night.

Our drinking water ran out. We were all parched with thirst. As usual, we had salted herring for dinner. "Water… water… water…" each of us croaked with dry throats. In our wagon, water was worth its weight in gold.

Off we go

As I put Gaby to bed that night, I felt a jolt. Our train was moving. The occupants of the wagon were silent. Everyone's faces reflected anxiety, fear, and worry. And then, no one could hold back – everyone burst into tears. Even our young men didn't hide their tears… Marta Roos almost lost consciousness. Instead of a sedative, she took a laxative.

I took my little girl in my arms and hugged her tight against me. She hugged me. Seeing my tears, she asked attentively: "Mom, why are you crying? Do you love me?"

"I love you, my daughter, I love you so much!"

"And Dad?"

"He loves you very, very much too!"

I suddenly felt how great my responsibility was for this little, warm life… and for that other life, the "Mr X" under my heart. At that moment, I became an adult – very much an adult. And from somewhere I felt a new strength awaken in me – a strength to help me fight the difficult life ahead.

Our train moved slowly and stopped frequently at small stations. It rained all night. A terrible thunder erupted right above us. The rain, lightning and thunder added to our despair. It felt as if we were being accompanied by ominous music. My head hurt, but I was unable to fall asleep. I dreamed of being able to stretch my legs even for a moment. This was already the third night that we sat motionless in the bunks.

Aleks and Paul saw my torment. They felt sorry for me. The brothers gave up their places. They put a blanket on

me and said: "Sleep, princess!" They set themselves on top of the suitcases on the floor. Finally, I was able to lie down like a human being, although even then I couldn't really stretch my legs out properly. There were two other people sitting on the bunk, after all (although no longer five!).

I fell asleep as if dead. I saw my mother, Lolo, his parents, and my brother and sisters. My father sat on the bunk next to me, stroked my head and whispered that he had to hide from the Soviets. He was wearing prison clothes.

At this point, I would like to write a little about my father.

My father was one of the wealthiest people in Estonia and in the whole of the Baltic states. He owned large factories in Estonia, and he also owned shares in factories in Riga, Kaunas and Helsinki. His name was widely known. He had commercial as well as personal relations with the Estonian government. He was a good friend of the head of state, Konstantin Päts, and ministers used to visit us. He had trade relations mainly with Germany, as well as with Switzerland. In Berlin, he founded the company "German-Scandinavian Chamber of Commerce" and ran a large antique furniture business. He spent most of the year in Berlin. He owned several houses there. We, his children – a son and three daughters – lived in Lausanne, Switzerland, during our childhood, where we received our education and upbringing. We lived there in a separate villa with our mother, a tutor, a cook and a maid. Father used to visit us there, or sometimes Mother visited him in Tallinn for a while, leaving us in the care of the governess.

In 1926, Father bought a villa in the finest district of Berlin, and our whole family moved to the German capital. Back then, Berlin was the cultural centre of Europe. Life was great. World-class theatre, concerts, balls.

Famous musicians and actors performed. The world's best soloists performed at the opera. We had season tickets to almost all cultural events; we rarely sat at home in the evenings. The city was beautiful. People loved to sit in cafes, restaurants, and bars. My brother was a student at Humboldt University in Berlin. My older sister studied languages, Raja studied at the French Lyceum, and I attended the Reimann School of Art and Design. We all studied music. Raja was the most talented of us. She played the piano. In 1930, my oldest sister, Ethel, married in Berlin.

Hitler became chancellor on 30 January 1933. Our good, carefree life changed that day. The changes took place before our very eyes. An anti-Jewish campaign started. On 1 April, we observed the National Socialists and the Hitler Youth marching in their brown uniforms. They marched along the Kurfürstendamm and shouted, "*Juda verrecke*!" ("Death to the Jews!")

We survived the burning of non-Aryan books, the burning of the Reichstag building, and so on. We escaped Berlin twice. We escaped to Switzerland, then to Paris. After some time, we returned to Berlin. As Jews, we had to leave Germany for good in 1936 in order to save our lives. We moved to Estonia, to Tallinn.

Our parents had a house there, and we started living a normal life again. In the same year, 1936, Raja and I each got married. A year later, I gave birth to my daughter Gaby. My sister also had a daughter, a year older than mine. My father adored his grandchildren and showed off about them. I had a beautiful four-room apartment, which my father furnished elegantly. I had a nanny for Gaby, as well as a maid who cleaned and cooked, and my good husband. I truly lived like a princess! The lives of both of my married sisters were set up in the same way.

Our father pampered us and gave us expensive gifts. We had a "golden" father and the best mother. Nothing interfered with our happiness.

Father was a very humane person, a great philanthropist. He liked to help people suffering from poverty and deprivation. For example, he would open his wardrobe for someone asking for help and give away a coat, a suit or some other item of clothing. He also gave them money. He often received letters asking for help, and I don't remember him saying no to anyone. He was often approached by workers in his factories who asked for a salary raise, citing their large families, their wives' illnesses, or other such things. Unfortunately, the factories were largely joint-stock companies, and he had no right to determine wages on his own. He wrote down the details of the person asking for help in a special notebook and transferred a certain amount from his own pocket to their account each month.

He "lent" money to friends and relatives and even supported many close relatives. For example, his aunt, who lived in Latvia with five adolescent daughters, was widowed. My father arranged for them to move to Tallinn and rented them a large apartment. Her children went to school and took private lessons in English, French and music. His aunt had a maid. My father paid for everything. For his aunt to seek employment was out of the question! When the girls had grown up, my father sent two of them, according to their wishes, to America, and the third to study in Paris and sent them money. Two sisters married in Tallinn, where he arranged their weddings, providing the dowries.

My father had two sisters. The elder sister's husband was a drunkard. My aunt was very unhappy with him. They had a ten-year-old son. For her son's sake, she

endured the drunken man who was violent towards her. At my father's insistence, she finally divorced him. My father took care of her and her son. Years later, my aunt met a widower living in Riga who was raising an adolescent daughter. He proposed to her. My father arranged their wedding. Her son lived with us. For a while he lived with us in Berlin; then my parents put him in a boarding school in Germany. When the boy finished high school, my father offered him the opportunity to continue his studies at the University of Vienna. Then, after the *Anschluss* [Germany's annexation of Austria], my father sent him to Africa, because he had decided to try his luck there! However, it didn't work out, and so the young man asked his uncle to send him to America. Father agreed. My father spent more money on this relative than on his own son!

My father also financially supported his other sister, Paula. She had a failure of a husband who loved to spend and wasted money on restaurants and "ladies". He was a travelling salesman and often travelled to the provinces. It was not uncommon for him to have his restaurant bill sent to my father's address and in his name. He boasted that this "rich man" was his relative and would pay his bills.

Aunt Paula had two daughters. The older one was a smart, capable girl. The younger one had been sick since birth, and her development had stalled. My father loved and pitied Paula very much. He covered his sister's everyday expenses and paid for an apartment and a maid for her, as well as a governess for the sick child.

Our father was happy to help everyone and kept repeating to us: "Giving is easier than taking! Thank God I can give!"

That was my father – good, kind and very humane.

1940 arrives

In the summer of 1940, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, to use Soviet terminology, "voluntarily joined" the Soviet Union. They became the fraternal federal republics of their "big brother", Russia. Estonia was renamed the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Our head of state, President Päts, was arrested and deported to Russia. A campaign to portray peasants as *kulaks* (wealthy peasants) began in the countryside. Statesmen and politicians were imprisoned, as were "capitalists" (that's what they called wealthy people), Estonian writers, many artists and owners of real estate and stores. Everyone who had ties to a foreign country or had relatives living abroad was imprisoned – in other words, all those people whom the Soviet authorities considered "enemies of the people" and whom they did not trust. My father was also on their blacklist, of course! First, all his property was taken from him – his factories, houses and other assets were nationalised. My parents had to leave the house at 44 Narva Street, where they had lived in a beautiful, large apartment. They were assigned to live in the apartment of a tailor who, according to Soviet laws, had too much living space. Two of his rooms were seized; one was given to my mother and father, the other to Raja with her husband, because they too had to leave their apartment.

We, their children, helped our parents move out of their eight-room apartment. I remember how there were big wooden boxes in every room. Father had us number them. As we filled the boxes with household items, books and other stuff, we had to write everything down

in a notebook. As these boxes were carried out of the house, I felt they were like coffins… coffins… coffins… The boxes were placed in outdoor sheds. None of us ever saw these "coffins" again. Our luxurious furniture was also placed in the same shed. All this was "gone with the wind"!

Our father was arrested in November 1940. He was sent to the Tallinn Patarei Prison because he was a rich person, had been abroad a lot, had connections abroad and had lived with his family in Berlin, Germany. (He had visited America with our mother in 1925 and had connections there as well.)

People like my father did not suit the Soviet state – they had to be destroyed. It was easy to find excuses for that back then! Searching my parents' apartment at night, they found foreign currency left over from my father's trips abroad (the Soviets had made this illegal but had never announced it to Estonian citizens!). "Had I known that it was illegal, I would have immediately given the money to the state! However, since it was not announced anywhere, it never occurred to me!" my father protested during the search. In addition to the currency, they also found some watches and Mother's jewels – and that was reason enough to initiate court proceedings. The accusation: speculation! He had been married to my mother for thirty-five years. As a wealthy man, he had given my mother quite a few diamonds and other expensive jewellery during this time. He could not have dreamed that one day the Soviet regime would come and all these gifts would give them reason to accuse him of "speculation"!

A trial was held. My father was sentenced to seven years in prison. We saw him in court. He was unrecognisable in prison garb – a morally broken person. He looked at our mother and us from the court bench and just shook his head sadly, tears in his eyes. He told his

lawyer: "Why didn't I go to America with my family? Now I have destroyed both my family and myself!"

Meeting our father was forbidden. We were allowed to send food parcels but not from Tallinn, only from other cities. Once a week, our mother travelled to a small town nearby and sent a package of food to the prison from there. Workers at my father's factories wrote a letter pleading for his release and sent it to the prosecutor's office. They wrote that he was not an exploiter but a good person. This was fruitless, of course. I remember well how our father sometimes told us: "My dear children! You only get to know a person in times of trouble! When your house is full of joy and your glass is full of wine, you have plenty of friends! But if – God forbid! – your table is bare and the plates are empty, only then will you see who is ready to sit with you at a bare table!" Father's words came true. From the moment Estonia became a Soviet republic, we had fewer and fewer friends. When our father was arrested, there were even fewer of them. Even our relatives were afraid to visit my mother. Aunt Paula was the most faithful. Benno and his wife, Gertrud, were just as kind. They took care of my mother and the rest of us. Although Benno was our father's lawyer and managed his affairs in Tallinn, he was afraid to take on our father's defence. But he gave advice, took an interest in the progress of the investigation, talked to the lawyer defending our father, and so forth. Benno Markovitch was a true friend to us. In November – I was working at the store at the time – I received a phone call and heard my father's voice: "Reny, dear! Is your mother with you by any chance? I called her at home, but no one answered. The thing is that I am currently being interrogated at Pagari Street, at the building of the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). The investigator allowed me to meet your mother here before the prison

car comes to pick me up. If she comes quickly, we can see each other!"

"My mother was just here with me. She left a few minutes ago," I answered my father. "Can I come see you?"

"Yes, Reny! But come quickly. I could be taken away any second now!"

I rushed down the street as fast as I could. Fortunately, Pagari Street was not far. Running towards the NKVD building, I saw a prison car (a "black raven" – that's what those who were arrested called it!) in front of the main door. And there, accompanied by two militsiya, was my father, exiting the building!

"Reny, child! Too late! I'm being taken back to prison!" He wanted to stop, but the guards pushed him forward into the vehicle with bars on the windows.

"Farewell, dear! Kiss your mother and everyone else!" he managed to shout before the car door was slammed shut. The "black raven" drove off. I stood looking in the direction he had driven off in for a long time…

That was my last meeting with my father. My poor, poor father! How I loved and respected you! I have no words – it's so sad!

(As we heard many years later from people who were imprisoned with my father, the prison was evacuated in the first days of the war, and the prisoners were taken to various detention facilities in the Soviet Union. At first, my father was in a high-security prison in the city of Kirov. After that, he was taken to the settlement of Sukhobezvodnoye in Gorky Oblast – literally "dry camp without water" [what a horrible name for a camp!]. He died in that camp. When, we don't know exactly.)

The occupants of our wagon found out who my father was. Everyone knew his name. Some knew him personally and had been with him at charity events. Important

ladies in the city had come to him to ask for money for the poor. Father always gave generously to them. My travelling companions sympathised with me, because they knew what I had been through at my parents' home. Arnold Aaviksoo, Aleks and Paul jokingly called me "princess". Arno Aaviksoo was a wonderful friend to me and had a good heart.

Before morning, the train suddenly stopped. Peeking out the small window, we could see the name of the station: Raasiku. "Our soldier" was on guard at the time. He inched the door open, and we sprang to life.

The sun was shining. After the heavy rain, the air was fresh and pleasant. Lilacs were blooming near the station building. I gasped at the sight of the white and purple floral beauty. It reminded me of home and the lilacs in my garden.

My dear soldier was holding one such branch. Noticing the love with which I gazed at the lilacs, he handed it to me with a smile. I looked into his kind eyes, thanked him from the bottom of my heart for such attentiveness, and thought: "How good he is, so touching!" I put the branch in a glass, but I didn't have water for it.

This time, I asked permission to go to the store wagon. I wanted to walk along the platform for just a moment, to breathe the fresh air – and maybe I would see Raja? Not everyone in our wagon approved of my request. Aaviksoo, as the strongest among us, came with me. We also took Gaby with us. I had heard from Viktor that my sister's wagon was the second one after the engine. The store was in the first wagon. Therefore, we would have to pass Raja's wagon. Upon reaching it, I saw that the door of the wagon was closed tight, and no one was looking out of the window either. I was terribly disappointed. I couldn't knock either, because a soldier with a stern face

was guarding the door. He eyed us suspiciously when we tried to stop.

After buying supplies, we passed the second wagon again. It was still closed, so I did not see my sister Raja.

When our men came back from the station building with the buckets, they said that they had seen several cars and many people standing there. People came towards the platform and our train. We assumed that these were new "passengers" being brought onto our train. "They have come without soldiers and militsiya and drove there in private cars. It must mean something else," thought Aaviksoo.

I looked to the platform, and suddenly my heart almost stopped from joy. I saw Viktor, our friend Benno and his wife Gertrud coming towards our wagon at a fast pace. They had followed our train with their car. At every station where the train stopped, they had asked whether the doors of the wagons would be opened. The doors were only opened at Raasiku.

My God! How we were delighted by this unexpected meeting! It was a surprise that I couldn't have expected. My dear brother again gave me provisions and other things. I was especially happy about the Primus stove and kerosene. In our situation, these were essentials.

Naturally, my first question was: "How's Mother? Is her leg in a lot of pain?" Viktor reassured me that the pain had eased and that my mother felt better. (Of course, I didn't really believe him. I knew my mother. She wouldn't complain, suffered quietly and thought about us, not herself!)

"She's resilient!" said Viktor. "She sends greetings to you and Raja and asks you not to give up. You lose yourself – you lose everything! Everything is still ahead of us; we must endure until the happy reunion."

Viktor informed me that he had been to Lolo's train the

day before. He managed to give Lolo money and greetings from me and Gaby. I was overjoyed to hear that.

I told my brother how I had gone to look for Raja and that I had stood by her wagon but had not seen her. Viktor replied that he would now go to Raja's wagon and come back to me afterwards. Benno and Gertrud stayed with me. They said that Benno's mother, two brothers and sister had been taken away in the night. Since his deceased father's store was now registered in his mother's name, she was considered to be the head of the family. His mother had been placed in the "men's" train, and his brothers and sister were placed in our "women's" train.

I learned from Benno and Gertrud that the "men's train" had already left. I was devastated by this news. They tried to comfort me by telling me that I might meet Lolo later. "Reny, you mustn't worry! Think about your future child!"

The child within me was kicking hard, making me nauseous. I no longer believed in anything. All I understood was that Lolo was gone, the train had taken him somewhere – and it was horrible. Benno and Gertrud went to look for their brothers and sister, but they promised to stop by on the way back.

I was left alone and burst into tears – I could no longer be as resilient as they all expected me to be. My travelling companions were also worried when they heard that the "men's train" had long since departed in an unknown direction.

These men all shared a similar fate. "We may never see them again!" repeated the women, weeping.

Viktor came back soon. He had found Raja and talked to her. "Raja isn't feeling good. There is a terrible lack of air in her wagon. They have many small children who are always crying. Women are fighting with each other. There is a very unfriendly atmosphere in the wagon; peo-

ple treat each other with malice. There is no peace at all!" That's what Viktor told me.

Then Benno came back with his wife. They had only seen his sister and hadn't found his brothers. Benno was very worried about his mother. She was seventy-three years old. She hadn't worked a single day in the store. Instead, the third of the brothers had worked there, but he was not arrested, because the store was in his mother's name!

The other people in our wagon were also visited by their families and close friends. Liidia was visited by her groom – a handsome boy! They said farewell with such affection that it broke my heart. He put an engagement ring on Liidia's finger. He left her a big bouquet of roses.

Many familiar people passed by our wagon. They named their loved ones, who were all on the train. I knew many of them.

And then it was time to leave. We realised that this was the final goodbye. Goodbyes again… kisses again… tears again… promises…

Viktor, Benno and Gertrud waved at me for a long time.

After a while, our door was closed. We heard an iron crossbeam being attached to it. Everything was quiet.

A jolt… another… and another… We were off. Our train set off into the Great Unknown! My lilac branch sat in the glass – it had withered…

We had already reached Russia proper. Estonia was far behind. The train passed through all the major stations without stopping. It seemed as if they didn't want the Russian people to see who was being transported instead of cattle in these closed, smelly wagons. The train occasionally stopped at some of the smaller stations. At these, men were

allowed to bring water from wells with buckets. We had to be sparing with water. The buckets were often empty.

Once we stopped at the edge of a forest. A small river flowed nearby. We were allowed out three wagons at a time. We were able to wash in the river a little. Although the water was muddy and not exactly clean, we were amazed by its abundance. Gaby and I breathed fresh air and were glad to be able to move like human beings. I started looking for Raja and Irene, but they were not there in the crowd.

Once, our "Lux" – that's what we jokingly called our train – stopped, and a female doctor came into our wagon accompanied by a nurse. They wanted to know if anyone had any complaints, if any of us were sick. Marta Roos, wearing her husband's suit, started to complain about her stomachache again. Upon hearing the word "enema", she started waving her arms angrily…

We complained that one bucketful of water a day was not enough for us. There were more than thirty of us in the wagon, and we couldn't maintain any acceptable levels of hygiene, let alone have enough to drink. However, we were fed salty and smelly herring, which made us thirsty. We hadn't had a single bowl of soup during the whole trip. Even in prison, inmates are given *lurr* (that's what the gruel-like soup was called in prison and camps).

I complained that there was not a drop of milk for the children. We boiled porridge with water, but sometimes there wasn't even any water! I also said that I was pregnant and suffering from a lack of fresh air as well as substandard food. By then we had been sleeping sitting up for days. Were these really humane conditions? Even animals are not tortured like we were!

After listening to all of our complaints, the doctor and the nurse left the wagon.

After a while, the nurse came back with a soldier. She

gave us tablets for headaches and stomach cramps. The soldier put two new buckets on the floor – one for drinking water, the other for washing.

They left, saying, "There is nothing more we can do to help you!"

War

On the morning of 22 June, our train stopped at Kirov Station, right next to the platform. Our good and kind soldier opened the carriage doors wide and announced: "We have arrived!"

Soon, two superiors and a militsiya arrived in our wagon (the superiors could always be recognised by their big bellies; the taller they were, the bigger the belly!). They started checking us off a list. We were afraid of what would happen if they noticed Peeter's absence. Everyone had one thought in mind: "What will happen when they discover that Peter is not here?"

But apparently there were inaccuracies in their lists. To their question of whether Peeter Runge was in our wagon, we answered in chorus: "No, we don't know anyone named Peeter Runge. He is not in our wagon!" Then one of the superiors said to the other: "Everything is fine here. There must be thirty people in the wagon, and they are all there! Runge is probably a mistake on the list. We will probably find him in another wagon." The question of Peeter Runge was therefore off the agenda.

Then we heard the commanding voice of one of the superiors: "Gather your things. You will be sent to various schools from here!" He generously allowed five people to go to the store wagon one last time to buy food for all of us. Five of us went: Margot, Arnold, Aleks, Richard and me. I wanted to pass the second carriage once more – maybe this time I would be able to talk to Raja? Margot had the same thought concerning her mother. After taking a few steps from the wagon, we heard the word "war"

from the mouths of passers-by! They were talking and arguing, and again we heard the word "war". We did not understand what was happening, but this "war" caused anxiety.

We weren't left guessing for long. The sad voice of the radio announcer issued from all loudspeakers, announcing to the entire Soviet people that on that day, 22 June 1941, war had broken out between fascist Germany and the Soviet Union! These words froze us to our hearts. Now I had only one thought – to quickly find my sister Raja! We ran along the platform. Reaching the second wagon, I immediately saw Raja. She stood at the wagon door and stretched out to look around. She probably hoped to see me!

It is difficult to describe the joy we felt when we met.

Raja told me about herself. During the eight-day journey, they were only allowed out of the wagon once, and that had been in the woods. She had washed her feet in some pond of dirty water, which had led to her developing a rash. The skin on her legs was hard and cracked and red. The doctor had given her some kind of ointment, but it hadn't helped; in fact, it had caused an inflammation.

There were also thirty people in Raja's wagon. The older generation was in a state of panic; everyone was quite pessimistic. This was also reflected in my sister's mood.

They had also suffered from a shortage of water. The wagon doors were mostly shut; only rarely was the door left slightly ajar. They suffered from the stench and lack of air. When people asked the guard to open the door even a little, he only laughed at them and ignored their pleas. Their children cried, and the women in the wagon screamed hysterically. And now the news about the outbreak of war! Raja was beside herself.

"Reny, what do you think – will we meet Hermann and Lolo soon?"

I tried to comfort my sister and told her what I no longer believed myself: "I think our husbands are already there waiting for us!"

At that moment, a big-bellied superior passed us. I turned to him and asked him if he could arrange for my sister and I to be placed in the same school building. "Let us stay together so we don't lose each other! We are both pregnant; we will give birth soon. Help us, I beg you with all my heart…"

He didn't even listen to the end of my plea. "Everyone will stay in their assigned places! There will be no exchanges, changes or reunions!" he shouted as he marched on. It was no use. Raja burst into tears.

"Don't cry, my dear, I'm sure we won't be apart for long! And then nothing will keep us apart!" I consoled her.

Upon returning to the wagon, I immediately started packing. The others had already done so. I had to hurry. Finally everything was packed, and we waited with great anxiety to see where we would be taken from this smelly cattle wagon. The long-awaited hour arrived… They came to collect us, and we were ordered out. Our soldier was standing right there. I went up to him and whispered to him very quietly: "Thank you, kind person, for everything!"

He whispered back: "No need to thank me! I did as much as I could to help you! I also have a mother, a wife and a three-year-old daughter. I feel sorry for you and your daughter!"

"I wish you luck!" I finally whispered as we were being taken away.

The women were put in a truck with their children and taken to a school building. The men remained to unload things; they arrived later.

In the school building, we were placed in one of the classrooms on the ground floor. We made a bed for Gaby,

so she could sleep in a bed of her own for the first time in a long time. We settled down on the floor. What a blessing it was to finally stretch my legs after eight days spent on the edge of the bunk.

Afterwards, we went through all the classrooms in the school building with Margot and Gaby. I couldn't find my sister. Nor could Margot find her mother. We so hoped that we would be brought to the same school building. That afternoon, Margot and I decided to look for them in other schools. We waited until Gaby fell asleep, because I was afraid she might start crying without me. Since our classroom was on the ground floor, it was easy for us to climb out through the window. The men in our group praised us for such ingenuity and bravery.

At first, Margot and I wandered around the schoolyard. Then we found a hole in the fence wide enough to crawl through.

We stood on the street. It was impossible to spot us in the dark, and we rejoiced that the first step had been successful. We learned from passers-by where the other schools in the city were located. We went on "reconnaissance"! We found several schoolhouses, but alas! They were locked and there were no lights in any of the windows. We were very disappointed. We had to go back. Good thing we found the way. Our companions waited impatiently. They helped us back in through the window. That night we fell asleep immediately, as if we were dead.

We were kept in the school building for two days. We were able to wash ourselves like human beings, although there was no running water there either. We also managed to rest a bit in the school building after the long and tiring trip in the cattle wagon. Just the thought of that stench made me sick.

We walked a lot outdoors in the schoolyard. Gaby and Evi played in the fresh air with the other children from our train. Their cheeks even gained a little colour. It was a joy to see our children healthy and active. Children forget quickly!

On the third day, we were taken by truck to a harbour and put on a small ship. We travelled along the river for five days. This trip was also very tiring. We were given dry goods: bread, herring, salt. Fifteen grams of sugar was prescribed for children – this was the daily norm. Fortunately, we had a Primus stove. Thanks to this, we were able to make tea and porridge with water.

Gaby ate everything, and I had no trouble feeding her. She was a golden child, obedient and gentle. She hardly cried at all.

All the "passengers" from our train were on board the ship. Our loved ones were not among them.

The people from our wagon, "friends through trauma", stuck together; we were like one family. We decided that we would not leave each other under any circumstance. "It is clear to us that a difficult time lies ahead. We will survive these trials only if we stick together," repeated Arnold, who generally liked to take command (we listened to him happily!).

Everyone loved Gaby – she was "our common child". Everyone liked Evi too. One day, our old Marta put on a show for us. She had decided to jump overboard and was already ready to jump. With the help of several sailors, we just managed to stop her. She resisted, and it was obvious that she had taken a turn for the worse during the trip. Marta changed her clothes several times a day. Of course, they were all men's clothing! She would appear in long pyjamas, then in a suit that would have fit two of her in it. Sometimes she also wore an elegant black suit with a

white shirt and tie. Her husband's tuxedo gave her a particularly important appearance.

Marta hardly ate. She kept repeating that she would end up committing suicide. Or she complained that her stomach was causing her distress. She only ate what others offered her. She saved her own food.

Some of us, especially the men, loved to make fun of Marta. I felt sorry for her. I tried to make enough porridge so there would be enough for Marta as well.

We spent four days on the river in this fashion. On the fifth day, our ship stopped at the quay of Lebyazhye village. We, the passengers of the "Lux" train, were put into a truck and taken to the village club. We were accommodated in a large hall with many doors and windows. There were two hundred and fifty of us on the list, all Estonians. Again I set up the bed for Gaby (every time I did this, I thought of my kind and caring brother!). The adults had to settle down on the floor again.

The locals came to see us as if we were some miraculous animals. They stood around our women, mouths open. Even in these difficult conditions, our women had not stopped taking care of themselves. They wore clean and beautiful clothes and fashionable hairstyles. Many wore housecoats and pyjamas. Curlers in their hair. All this was alien to the inhabitants of the small village. Shoulder pads were fashionable back then. The locals touched our shoulders and gasped and giggled. As they did this, they said something in their own dialect that we did not understand. Gaby, who was dressed like a doll (I had gone to Helsinki especially to buy her children's clothes), greatly fascinated them. The children studied her from all sides.

I heard a man say to his wife: "Look, Katja, how these Estonian people look, how they are dressed! And here we

were told all the time that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are poor countries that cannot manage independently. The Baltics asked the Soviet Union for help, and we came to their aid. They became our fraternal republics! Maybe it wasn't like that, but just propaganda again as always? What do you think?" The woman answered him in a frightened whisper: "Shh, Ivan! Don't talk so loud! Of course it was propaganda!"

They left the hall quickly, looking both ways in fear.

I thought to myself: "How well the man had understood the situation! The Baltic states and their peoples had not wanted to join the Soviet Union. However, they did not have the strength to oppose the powerful Soviet state. Our government never asked Russia for help. That was a lie! Of course it was all propaganda!"

At that time, I spoke Russian relatively poorly, but I understood it and was able to communicate. My father barely knew Russian, and my mother didn't know any. My mother was from Rakvere. The family moved to America when she was still young. They lived in Dallas, Texas. In addition to English, German and Estonian were also spoken at my grandfather's and grandmother's home. That's why, when my mother went to Estonia to marry, since my father didn't speak English, German and Estonian were spoken at home. Gaby spoke both languages. There were only Estonians on our train. The older generation, our women, spoke some Russian; the younger ones did not understand anything. Since we were now in Russia, we were required to speak Russian. This was a problem for us Estonians. I had to act as an interpreter with my Russian.

We were called before superiors according to a list. The head of the NKVD, the chairmen of the nearby collective farms, the director of the state farm, a female doctor and a nurse were present. We were inspected like we were

horses. They assigned older people, families with children, pregnant women and persons of weaker health to the collective farm (*kolkhoz*), while younger and stronger people were sent to the state farm (*sovkhoz*). Families were not separated.

My companions were worried about me. They were all sent to the sovkhoz. "Reny, don't mention your pregnancy!" they said. "Then you can stay with us!"

Despite being seven months pregnant, I looked quite skinny. A broad coat hid my "Mr X". Those who didn't know wouldn't have been able to tell that I would soon give birth. Even the doctor who examined me and listened to my lungs and heart didn't guess it.

When I stood with Gaby in front of the head of the NKVD, I asked to be sent to the sovkhoz with my companions. "I travelled together with them, and I'm so used to them that it would be a tragedy for me and my daughter to be separated from them!" I told him.

"I see you have a small child. The conditions at the sovkhoz are too hard for you! I recommend that you and your daughter go to the kolkhoz together!"

His words made me feel dizzy. I felt sick… I tried with all my might to stop myself from vomiting. My forehead was wet with sweat. I told myself that there was no way I was going to throw up there.

I stood in front of that superior, named Vassilyev, like a wretched heap and thought how would I convince him. All I knew was that I couldn't go on living without these good people who had become my new family! I was so afraid to be left in this foreign land, alone with Gaby. "What should I do? God, help me!" I pleaded quietly.

Suddenly I was struck by a thought from somewhere that would save me and I said: "Our young people do not speak Russian. It will be hard for them. I could start translating everything into Estonian for them that they might

need to know at the sovkhoz. Please, Commander Vassilyev, don't send me to the kolkhoz!"

Vassilyev looked at me thoughtfully for a long time, looked at Gaby and answered: "I won't object. We will send you to the sovkhoz!"

I was glad that I had not been separated from my companions. I didn't even know the difference between a kolkhoz and a sovkhoz. After all, we had lived under Soviet rule for such a short time that we didn't know everything yet. Only later did I realise the mistake I had made. The work was easier and less backbreaking at the kolkhoz. Marta Roos, having heard that we were all being sent to the sovkhoz, also asked to be assigned there. Her request was granted because the superiors decided that someone had to look after the children while we were at work.

So all the people in our wagon were sent to the sovkhoz, and we were satisfied. We lived in Lebyazhye village for two days; then we were taken to our new workplace and home. There were many tears, because not everyone had managed to stay together. We had been lucky in that regard.

On the third day, fifty people, including us, were taken to the sovkhoz. Our dreams of finding our husbands, fathers, and all the passengers in the "men's carriage" did not come true. Lolo was nowhere to be found! That had all been just a fantasy.

At the sovkhoz

On the third day, we, fifty people from Estonia, were brought to Okunevo State Farm (*sovkhoz*). It was located fifteen kilometres from the village of Lebyazhye. We were taken to a barrack. There were several rooms: an office, an accounting office, a sovkhoz club and others. We were all placed in a large hall with a large stage at the club building. There were cracks between the floorboards and on the stage. There were many windows, some of them broken. There was a stove in the corner with two holes for cooking on the coals within. When the fire was lit, the whole hall would fill with smoke. There were no amenities. Since there was no electricity, we had to use a kerosene lamp. The well and the toilet (a flimsy building made of boards) were outside.

We women settled down in the hall. The men set themselves up on the stage, separate from us. Next to the stage was a small room, apparently for the performers. We put some of our suitcases there. We also went there to wash ourselves, so as not to do it in front of everyone. There were no other rooms.

We got some *koiku*s (a wide board on legs the length of a sofa) from the carpentry workshop. We sewed big bags out of sheets, filled them with straw, and thus produced mattresses. We were happy that we no longer had to sleep on the floor and that everyone had their own place. Most importantly, we could finally stretch our legs and turn in all directions. There was a canteen in the yard. The food was primitive: tasteless porridge, thin soup, and sometimes potatoes. It was something warm, though. We got

bread with coupons – half a kilogram for adults and two hundred grams per child.

There was no grocery store. We visited local residents who had their own small households. They exchanged milk, eggs and meat for our clothes. To our right, along a corridor, was a room where people with mental disorders lived. They had been sent from medical institutions to work in the fields of the sovkhoz. The men looked wild. They had dirty beards and long, dishevelled hair. The women, like the men, wore rags. They slept on the floor. Clothes, scattered rags, and blankets were lying everywhere. Dirt, stench, and lice. If the door happened to be open, we couldn't pass it without holding our noses.

At the other end of the corridor was another room. Fifty prisoners from Ukraine lived there, only men. They were sent to do the most difficult jobs, mainly to clear the forest.

Such was our "society" at the sovkhoz!

We were awoken at five in the morning. Then the political commissar (who limped and walked with a cane), the brigadier and the foreman usually turned up. We called this troika the "Three Musketeers". They spoke to us in sharp and harsh tones; they only knew how to sneer and mock. We hated them. They always came with lists indicating exactly which of us had to go to which jobs.

The day after we arrived, we were sent to work in the forest. The work was unfamiliar for us and very difficult. We sawed trees by hand – women as well as men. We had to clear the branches from the felled trees. Little by little, we learned to do the job and began to learn how to avoid being trapped under a falling tree. We worked with the deportees from Ukraine. After a few days, some women, including me, were sent to the field to pick potatoes. Since we worked quite close to our barracks, I managed to run home briefly during my lunch break. This was not permitted when we were farther away.

The work did not end until it was quite dark. There was no standardised working day. Since it was wartime, we worked without days off. Only when it rained were we able to catch our breath while we waited for it to pass. Sometimes, as if to spite us, it rained all night, but during the day it was dry and hot. This angered us.

In the evenings, we finished work late (the sun sets late in June), tired and powerless. The brigadier let us stop work by saying: "The horses are tired! You can go home!"

Gaby was often already asleep when I got home. Sometimes I didn't see her for several days any other time than when she was sleeping. One of the older women fed my daughter, and someone put her to sleep. When one of the older women stayed home due to illness, I did not worry about Gaby. When she stayed home with only Marta, my heart always ached. The old woman paid no attention to the child; she just slept through the day.

Her mother took Evi to work with her. But Gaby was too small to be able to stand in the field all day in the hot sun. I had no choice but to leave her in Marta's care. For this reason, I was very happy when I was able to go home during my lunch break. That was "our hour"! My daughter hugged and kissed me and eagerly told me things quickly, afraid that something would be left unsaid. Sometimes it was so funny that I laughed until I cried… and I felt so bad that Lolo couldn't hear our little girl's childish chatter.

I would forget myself for a moment… I didn't think about having to leave Gaby and return to the hard work again! It was very painful to leave after those happy minutes. Gaby held my skirt and cried; she didn't want to let go. I always had to tear myself from her with force. As I ran, I heard my child crying for a long, long time. She would cry after me: "Mother… Mother… Mum". I was always in tears myself.

From among our young men, only Anton knew Rus-

sian. That's why I was always sent when it was necessary to ask or explain something to the superiors. When the superiors wanted to tell us something, they turned to me. On one of these occasions, when I was in the office of the sovkhoz's director again, I asked him: "Do you know where our husbands are located? Will they be sent here too? Will I be able to see my husband soon?"

The director replied as if jokingly: "We have many men here. A beautiful woman like you will find a new man very soon. And forget the current one!"

I didn't want to hear such jokes and answered sharply: "No! I want my husband! The father of my child!" I ran out of the office crying.

There was only one pleasant person in the sovkhoz management. That was the vet. His name was Arkady, and he was thirty-four years old. He was different from the others in that he was always well-dressed and well-groomed (not like the other superiors, whose teeth were yellow from not being brushed and whose breath smelled; they wore their shirts with belts, over their pants). He always greeted us courteously when we ran into him in the canteen. Our women called him "a ray of light in our dark life". He never had anything to do with us; he never went to our barracks.

We had already been living at the sovkhoz for a whole week. I went to the canteen for lunch with Gaby, Margot and her sister. Arkady suddenly appeared and asked permission to sit at our table. Of course, we happily agreed. We chatted. He was interested in how we were doing. Then he gave us some interesting news: "On Sunday, a ship with people from the Baltics will arrive at Lebyazhye harbour. There will be men and women. They will be sent to work at our sovkhoz. It is quite possible that your husbands and relatives are among them." This news excited us greatly.

That evening, our "big family" discussed the matter. It was jointly decided that Margot and I, as the most active ones, had to be there, no matter what, to meet the ship on Sunday. To do this, we would have to walk fifteen kilometres to the village of Lebyazhye. Our plan would only succeed if it rained.

The vitally important Sunday arrived…

God had heard our prayers: the weather was rainy, and we did not go to work. Margot and I set off. So our shoes would not get soaked, we took them off and went barefoot. Our clothes got wet, sticking to our bodies. This did nothing to hinder our efforts. In three-and-a-half hours, we were at the harbour.

The ship had not yet arrived, and we had to wait.

Margot hoped to see her father; I hoped to see Lolo. We were optimistic, our hearts aflutter with happiness and excitement. Finally, the long-awaited ship approached, reached the harbour and dropped anchor. First a sailor jumped ashore, and then the first passengers appeared. We carefully observed everyone who set foot on land. It seemed to me that every young man resembled Leopold.

"Ah… yes! Look, him! No… no… no again… Look, there he is! Same height… his dark hair… No, that's not him… My God, where is Lolo! Lolo, Lolo… come faster already. I'm waiting for you…"

Then I saw a young man with a suitcase in his hand get off the ship. He stopped and looked around as if looking for someone. I was convinced it was Leopold. I ran up to him and looked into his face – it was a stranger…

Margot and I had to admit sadly to ourselves that all the passengers had disembarked. Only the captain and the crew were left on the ship.

"Reny, our men are not here! It was all a scam when we were told we would meet them in the place we were being

taken! I don't believe a word they say anymore!" cried Margot, wiping her tears.

They were thirty-four Lithuanian Jews – men and women with children. They had been evacuated away from the combat and assigned to work on our sovkhoz. They were put on two trucks, and we got back to the sovkhoz with them.

It was still raining.

Our companions were impatiently waiting for us in the barracks. From our unhappy faces, they realised that we had not met anyone, and they were just as disappointed as we were.

These thirty-four Jews were placed in an empty barrack near us. I went to visit them that evening.

They were tired and exhausted from the journey. The children cried. The women were helpless – they did not know what to feed the children in such circumstances or how to put them to sleep. I ran back home. I boiled semolina porridge and tea. I took some bread, milk and eggs and took it all to the children. The mothers were very grateful to me for this. I helped feed and take care of the children. One of them was still a tiny baby – in nappies. Two women were pregnant.

Two of the men were wearing yarmulkes. These were religious Jews. I thought: "How are those poor things going to manage here? They only eat kosher food, after all. That isn't possible in these circumstances."

Unfortunately, I couldn't go to them anymore. The weather remained dry in the days that followed, and we had to be in the field from early morning until late at night. I only heard that these Jews had a lot of trouble with the management of the sovkhoz. When they were sent to work on Saturday, they refused because their faith did not allow them to work on the Sabbath. Apparently, their superiors laughed at them and vowed to take them

to court for being absent from work. During the war, not working was subject to the most severe punishment. In the end, their barracks was simply left empty. They had been taken somewhere, but where, no one knew!

By the way, I was the only Jew among our Estonians. I was treated very well. I didn't feel like a stranger among the others! Only once did I feel insulted because of my ethnicity.

Among us was a middle-aged Estonian woman, a former circus acrobat. She was not from our wagon but had travelled in the same train. Of all our group, she was the least likeable. She had been deported completely by accident. On that terrible night of 14 June, she had stayed with a man whom she had only met the night before. When the security personnel came to arrest her lover, she was also taken. He was put in the "men's wagon", she in the "women's" one. She had nothing with her. She felt that fate had given her a raw deal, and she was often in a bad mood. We gave her what we had of our belongings to give, but it didn't help.

Since we were sent to work early in the morning and didn't get home until late in the evening, we were unable to keep our hall in proper order. There were no wardrobes. We had to dry our wet clothes and laundry right there on a clothesline. We also cooked in the hall, on our Primus stoves. We were unable to put our pots and other kitchen utensils away anywhere. We pushed some of them under beds, and some just stood in the corner. Well, the acrobat came into the hall one evening and said in a rough tone, wrinkling her nose: "It looks like a Jewish shop in here! Awful…"

This hit me hard! These words had such an effect on me that I ran out of the hall and did not want to see anyone. Then I felt alone among all those people! (Only someone

who has experienced it can understand such a feeling of loneliness, no one else!)

I went outside. The gate was not locked, and I went out into the field. There were fields all around… fields… a foreign land… foreign people. I looked up at the sky and thought: "Perhaps Leopold is seeing the same moon now… these stars. The sky… the moon… the stars… so far away, as far away as Lolo, my husband!" And then I burst into tears.

There was a gentle breeze, and the heads of rye rustled gently. It calmed me, but I didn't want to go back to the school building.

I don't know how long I stood there dreaming in the field of rye. I think I would have stayed there all night if they hadn't come looking for me: Arno Aaviksoo, Liidia, Margot and Aleks. "Reny, come home! The militsiya will arrive soon and you'll be nowhere to be found!" They hugged me and took me back to the barracks.

The circus acrobat apologised. She said she had not meant anything bad when she said "Jewish shop". Apparently, it was just an expression!

From that day on, my fateful companions treated me even more attentively and gently, as if they wanted to alleviate something. Arnold, Aleks and Paul treated me especially well. They often called me a princess because they thought I had an aristocratic demeanour (probably because I had told them how I was raised in Switzerland in a boarding house for noble young women; they loved my colourful stories about my childhood!).

I had many unpleasant nights while living at the sovkhoz.

Once I was woken up in the night and ordered to the manager's office. In addition to the director and the political commissar, there were some other men I didn't

know. They started to "pressure" me to start observing the Estonians and report to them what they were saying and thinking. They were interested in the moods of the Estonians and what they thought about the Soviet Union, the war, and so on. In short, they wanted to make me a spy (a "tongue", as they called it!).

By this time, the managers knew of my pregnancy. They had wanted to send me to work in the forest again, upon which I had laid my cards on the table! Now they emphasised my circumstances and wanted to take advantage of them. They explained to me "with great compassion" that it would be difficult for me with a newborn, or indeed with two children, in the conditions at the sovkhoz. The work would be too much for me, and my situation needed to be improved.

"If you do what we ask of you, we will find a way to make your future life here easier. Instead of physical work, we will find you something easier, for example, in the office or accounting work!"

I realised with horror what they wanted from me, and I thought: "I will never give up my people!" I tried to find all kinds of excuses so they would leave me alone. Over several nights I was brought in and pressured, but seeing that I would not give in, they finally left me alone. Each time, they became more furious and shouted at me: "We predict, Reny Klas, that you will bitterly regret your refusal! From now on, we will do nothing for you. Do not turn to us if you need help! You will not receive it from us!" That's how they threatened me. I was happy to be rid of them and could sleep with a clear conscience and – most importantly – look my people in the eye.

I soon noticed that the new boy from the other wagon, Anton, started disappearing at night. Anton was alone at the sovkhoz, without relatives. Some time passed, and Anton became the manager of the canteen. He didn't have

that job long enough to even get to grips with it. He was soon transferred to office work. We all noticed a change in his behaviour. He was extremely polite and attentive to everyone. He tried to be friends with everyone, especially the young people. When we happened to chat before falling asleep, he would try to direct the conversation in one direction or another and tried to get us to say things. He often criticised the Soviet regime… He pretended to sleep (his bed was in the hall because there was no room on the stage!), but we realised that he was not actually sleeping.

A young militsiya came every morning and evening to check us off a list. The person whose name was called had to answer: "Yes!" After the evening roll call, it was forbidden to leave the barracks (you could only go to the well or the toilet).

The mentally ill people in our barracks did not want to go to work. The women in particular were resistant. They threw themselves on the floor in the corridor and screamed and kicked. We had to step over their struggling bodies on our way to work in the morning.

One mentally disabled person – the lean and bony Dunja – was always the most outrageous. Every morning she threw herself on the floor of the corridor and caused such an awful scene that the superiors bound her hands and feet. She was carried outside and taken to the barn and tied up there. She was in the barn for two days and nights in a row. All the men went there to see her. They laughed at her and made fun of her because Dunja was not wearing pants. On the third morning they didn't laugh anymore, because Dunja was dead.

And I felt immensely sorry for her!

My "Mr X" often announced himself. He kicked in every direction. My belly was now so large that it was hard to do physical work. Erna suggested I talk to a doctor and

get myself checked. There was no doctor at the medical station of the sovkhoz. There was only a doctor's assistant who was a "jack of all trades" – they treated diseases and teeth, was a midwife and pharmacist (they made their own medicines!) and a librarian and played the *bayan* (an accordion) at young people's parties in the village. They decided my pregnancy was progressing normally but gave me a note for my superiors to exempt me from hard manual labour, since I was seven months pregnant. With this note, I went to the manager of the sovkhoz.

He read it, shook his head meaningfully and said: "There is no other job for you at the sovkhoz!" I remembered his threats when I had refused to become a "tongue".

Once I was punished very severely.

After heavy rain, we were sent to work in the field. The field was quite close to our barracks. Since I couldn't find the right shoes (only high heels!), my feet got soaked. I hurried home to change my shoes. Gaby grabbed hold of me there. She had a stomachache and felt sick. I had to leave, but she started crying and wouldn't let go of me. When I finally returned to the field, panting, I had been away for longer than was allowed. I apologised to the brigadier. He didn't answer me. Instead, the political commissar ("Stick", as we called him) read me the following order: "Punish Reny for leaving the field without permission and not fulfilling the daily quota. She will be assigned to sort rotten potatoes in the vegetable storehouse for three days!"

The vegetable storehouse was a large, cold and dark underground cellar. I was terribly cold there. The rotten potatoes smelled horrible and stuck to my hands. I felt sick, and I threw up.

The worst thing was that there were rats running around. They even circled around my legs. One of them was lying on the ground, apparently dying, convulsing.

Maybe it had been stepped on? There were all kinds of rats running in the aisle – large, small and really tiny ones. The smallest ones had difficulty moving; they couldn't see yet and kept falling over.

I was all alone there. Those were three terrible days! Like solitary confinement in a prison, only with work and sleeping at home. I wasn't allowed to go home for lunch. I quickly ate the bread I had brought with me – I was hungry. I suffered from thirst – there was no water. In the evening, I got home feeling beaten up. Good thing Gaby was already asleep by then. I wouldn't have had the strength to say a single word to her. Erna brought me hot tea and sandwiches in bed. Arno asked: "Are you still alive?" and gave me a peck on the cheek. Everyone else was also worried about me and cursed the bosses for torturing a pregnant woman like that.

At that time I dreamed only of rats… rats… They climbed into my bed and bit me. I was awoken in the night by my own screams. I scared all the other sleepers. But I didn't hear a single bad word from them – on the contrary, they were very understanding. My "new family" consisted of good people.

I worried a lot about Gaby. My daughter had become pale and thin. Erna, who took care of her, told me: "Your Gaby is suffering a lot because she doesn't see you for days. At least you see her while she is sleeping – she doesn't see you at all!"

Yes, it was true! I could only spend time with my child on the days when it rained! But it rarely rained. It was a hot and dry summer. I was also worried about the impending birth. There was no hospital nearby.

"What happens if the time comes and they don't call me an ambulance? My future child is in danger? And what will happen to Gaby if I am taken to a hospital somewhere far away?"

These thoughts tormented me and did not let me sleep. Then I asked myself: "Did I really make a mistake in not accepting the position of 'mole'? Should I really have agreed for the sake of my children? No! A hundred times no, no matter what happened to my children and myself, even if we would perish there! I acted according to my conscience!" That was right!

One evening, I shared my concerns with Margot. She tried to calm me: "When the time comes, we'll see! There's still two months until the birth. Try to sleep! You have to keep your strength up for your children!"

Arnold, who lived near us and also loved to comfort me, overheard this conversation and said: "Reny, don't worry about Gaby. When you are in the hospital, our women will take turns getting 'sick' and not going to work. If they don't manage to get a day off from the doctor's assistant, I'll be 'sick' myself and take care of your daughter! As for the birth, if urgent help is needed, we'll handle the delivery ourselves; our boys are strong enough to drag 'Mr X' out of you!" Arnold was a good boy. He always tried to encourage me. (Arnold Aaviksoo – that was his full name. Arno Aaviksoo! A terribly good boy!) We also had fun moments at the sovkhoz. People are still people, no matter what conditions they have to live in. Most of us were young. We had a sense of humour; sometimes, we were able to forget all the misery.

One rainy day, we were all together in the hall. Suddenly, someone had the idea to put on some entertainment on the stage. We drew lots to see who would go first. I was first! I played Marlene Dietrich, a famous film star at the time. I sang a song from the movie *Blue Angel* – "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt…" I lifted the tail of my skirt and showed my legs, which were considered beautiful. Due to my belly, it ended up being quite funny! My performance went well, and I had to repeat the

number. My "Mr X" kicked me hard at the same time – I guess he liked it too?

Liidia had a beautiful voice; she performed some romantic songs, which were very well received. Our circus acrobat performed her best trick. Her body seemed to have no bones at all.

Richard turned out to be an excellent juggler. He juggled the plates without dropping any of them. Margot played the guitar. Her sister Marika sang some Estonian songs.

Marta Roos amazed everyone. She dressed up in a man's tuxedo and demonstrated some old dances: the vengerka, quadrille, waltz, tango and so on. She hummed the melody herself, and we all accompanied her in chorus. No one would have thought this old woman, dancing with ease and grace, was seventy-eight years old! She was wonderful and had to do an encore as well!

Of all the performances, the most successful was the "Dance of the Black Swans" from the ballet *Swan Lake*. It was performed by our boys Aleks, Paul and Richard. We laughed ourselves silly. Since the performance elicited such rapturous and prolonged applause, they performed one more number. In this, they surpassed themselves, improvising a scene from our life at the sovkhoz: the manager, the lame political commissar with a cane, the nose-picking brigadier and the stuttering foreman. They succeeded in this performance so brilliantly that we almost fell on the floor in convulsions of laughter.

At the same time, we kept looking anxiously towards the door to make sure no one from the management came in – that would have been a disaster! Fortunately, the rain continued, and everything worked out perfectly.

After pleasant experiences, there were often tears. Sadness awaited us. Early the next morning, we learned that we were being sent to a farm to collect potatoes. The

younger people among us were selected for this, including me. The name of the farm was Komsomolsk, and it was located twelve kilometres from our sovkhoz.

"You will stay there for eight to ten days. You will only come back when all the work is done. Take everything you need with you and off you go!" commanded the brigadier.

I was terrified to leave Gaby alone for so long. "For God's sake, please don't send me there! I can't leave my daughter alone; she will start to cry and suffer badly! Eight to ten days apart is too long for her!" I begged them.

The only response to my request was a joking answer from the political commissar: "Citizen Klas, you're asking God for help! Understand that there is no God for us Soviet people! Second, among the Estonian women there are those who will look after your child! You'll see! You want to play with dolls with your daughter? You have no cause to be capricious and a crybaby! You'll go work with the others! Go on!" The political commissar was so angry that he had stopped addressing me with the formal singular pronoun. There was nothing I could do but obey.

Gaby woke up just as I had managed to pack some food and clothes for the trip and was about to set off. Seeing me at the door, she started to cry. I had to delay leaving in order to calm her down. She held me tight around my neck with both hands and did not want to let go of me.

"Mum… Mum… don't go! Stay with me!" she begged. What could I do? I had to tear myself away from her by force. I left her in Erna's care and ran outside, crying loudly.

My companions weren't outside, and I couldn't see them on the road either. All around were only fields… fields… I didn't know where our brigade had gone.

"Oh dear me! If I don't catch up with them, I'll be pun-

ished again!" I thought in fear and remembered the vegetable storehouse, rats and the smell of rotting potatoes.

Suddenly I saw Vasily with a horse hitched to a cart. Vasily was one of those "crazy people" who lived on our corridor. His job was to transport pots of porridge to those working far from home who could not go home for lunch.

Vasily was our "monster". He was a stocky, pimple-faced redhead with a huge head and thick neck. He had unwashed, greasy hair and a long beard. His tongue hung out of his mouth, and he drooled like a baby, his chin constantly wet. He always stared at us Estonian women with his crazy, bulging eyes. Sometimes he tried to touch some of us. We pushed him away and scolded him – then he'd calm down and become melancholic. Now I had to face him! "As long as he doesn't harm me and 'Mr X'!" I thought.

Since there was no other option, I turned to him: "Vasily! Do you know which way our brigade went? Do you know where Komsomolsk is?"

He nodded, muttering that he knew where they went and would take me there.

I got into the cart with Vasily. The weather was warm and the sun was shining. The smell of hay hung in the air; it was quiet all around, only birdsong could be heard. It was nice to sit in the cart and do nothing. I started to daydream. My thoughts drifted far, far away…

Suddenly I heard Vasily's idiotic laughter right in my ear. He pounced on me like an animal and punched me in the face. I was terribly startled, but I did not lose my composure. I knew I had to do something quickly to save myself from this monster. I was wearing high-heeled shoes, and I kicked him with all my might in a "specific area".

Vasily writhed in pain. He let go of me and fell on his back, his body convulsing all over, more like a wounded animal than a human.

I jumped off the cart, ran down the road as fast as I could, and soon I saw my compatriots! They stopped at my shouts and were startled when they saw me. I was shaking all over and was deathly pale. I was unable to calm down for a long time. I couldn't shake the image of Vasily from my eyes.

Later, our men loved to joke about my "methods of self-defence" and said that I was very good at them! When one of them jokingly tried to approach me, the other would warn him: "Hey, stop! Be careful! Reny has her methods. If she strikes you 'there', you will have no descendants!"

We worked diligently at Komsomolsk; we wanted to pick the potatoes quickly so we could go back home. We all slept on straw spread on the floor of a shed. Couples of lovers had already formed from amongst our young people: Aleks and Margot, Paul and Marika. There were also scenes of jealousy. For example, the two sisters liked Arnold. He preferred the younger one, Nora, who was more beautiful. Richard became involved with a married Estonian woman whose husband had been taken away on the other train.

After a hard day in the field, we usually fell into a deep sleep. Our working day lasted fourteen to sixteen hours, from six in the morning until dark. I slept badly, because I missed Gaby and worried: "How is my baby coping there without me?"

On the fourth morning, Aleks suddenly said: "Reny, you want to see your daughter? I can help you – I have an idea. I see how you can't sleep at night. I feel sorry for you. You keep tossing and turning and can't sleep, while we sleep as if we were dead. Now, listen to me carefully! Can

you endure great pain? We need your right hand to hurt!"

Naturally, I was ready to endure any amount of pain just to get home to my daughter! Aleks took a towel, made it wet, wrung it out and placed it on my right hand. Then he took a brick and used it to hit my hand with all his might. I didn't make a sound – I just bit my tongue. My hand immediately swelled up and turned red. Aleks explained to me that the wet towel would prevent any bruising.

Luckily, I felt no pain; I only thought of Gaby and that I would be able to see her now. I grabbed my stuff and almost ran towards the sovkhoz. My "companions in misfortune" were happy for me!

When I arrived at the sovkhoz, I went straight to the clinic. The doctor's assistant gave me three days off. He advised me to give my hand cold-water compresses. He couldn't comprehend how my hand could be so swollen from working in the potato field.

Upon seeing me, Gaby jumped for joy and did not want to let go of me. She clung to me as if afraid I would go away and leave her again. Those three days were "our days"!

Gaby would cause me great worry and frustration in the times ahead. When we first came to the sovkhoz and were sent to the sauna, Gaby slipped on the soapy floor and fell badly. After this fright, she started to stutter. Now, after separation, I noticed that her stutter had worsened. In addition to everything else, I found lice in her hair. I was horrified! I immediately smeared her head with kerosene. Fortunately, the sauna was heated that day, and I was able to wash my daughter properly.

I thought bitterly of my mother and our nanny – what would they have thought if they had seen the state in which I found their favourite! It turned out that all the older women had been sent to pick cucumbers while I

was away. Only Marta Roos stayed home with my child. She spent more time sleeping than looking after my child. When Erna came home from work in the evening, she was horrified to see Gaby unwashed and dirty.

One day, everyone got a great fright. When they came home for lunch, Gaby was nowhere to be found! Marta was sleeping peacefully in her bed. The women woke her and asked where Gaby was. Roos didn't know. They looked everywhere for the girl – in the yard, the corridor, the canteen… They went out of the gate, ran along all the roads and paths leading to the fields, checked by the river, called her name – all in vain, for the child was nowhere to be found! They were about to go to the director to inform him about the child's disappearance when they suddenly heard a child's voice from the neighbouring room, where the "crazy people" lived. Opening the door, they found Gaby. She was sitting on the lap of a woman, who was combing Gaby's hair and singing to her.

When they tried to take the girl from her, the woman protested violently. Gaby didn't want to leave either, because she didn't want to stay with Marta Roos again.

I decided that I had to do something about my daughter. I could no longer leave her in the hands of fate like that! I remembered that I had just heard that some night work on the threshing machine was about to start. I managed to get signed up for it. Our women did not approve of this, because they considered the work too difficult for me. I ignored them. I thought that if I worked at night, I would be free to devote the day to time with my child.

Once, while walking with Gaby, I happened to meet Arkady, the vet. He was very attentive to me and my daughter; he knew how hard it had been for me since the separation from my husband and sister. Arkady said that he had been to the village of B___, where many people from the Baltics had been sent. He advised me to write a

letter to B___ and address it to: "Estonians". He told me to write the names of the people we were looking for and include our address. Arkady even gave me paper and a stamped envelope and promised to pick up the letter and send it.

I told my companions in misfortune about it, and we immediately made a list of our loved ones. There was a glimmer of hope again.

Three days passed. I started working on the night shift with the grain thresher. It was very difficult. There was a pile of grain on the floor of the barn. The bucket would be filled with grain and poured into the machine. The lever of the machine had to be turned by hand, and this had to be done very quickly! Clean grain came out the other side, which again had to be poured into large sacks using buckets. Our young people came back from Komsomolsk, and some of them started working alongside me. My job was to mix the grain. Arnold and Aleks thought this was easier than the work with buckets and sacks.

Our brigadier lay on top of a pile of grain and slept. Sometimes, however, he also observed our work. He thought I turned the lever too slowly. "You need to do it faster… faster!" he yelled at me. But my hand was tired, and I couldn't do it faster. Then he suddenly got up, came to the threshing machine in an important, pedantic manner and began to crank it with all his might, very fast. "You see, Klas, how it should be done! Why are you slacking – get to work! Come on, get on with it!"

After that "demonstration", he returned to the top of the pile of grain and lay down again. The men wanted to punch him for that! (That's what they said!) I somehow managed to calm them down. Every time the brigadier ordered me to work faster again, I nodded obediently, while thinking: "If only you had to spin the wheel all night long while pregnant…"

The work started at eight o'clock in the evening and ended at half past five in the morning.

We got home at the time the others were waking up to go to work. After the night shift, the youngsters slept till midday. I could afford only two or three hours of sleep, because Gaby was an early riser. It was good to be free during the day. I was able to feed Gaby properly. Since the stove was free during the day, I didn't have to wait in line to put our pot on it.

My daughter changed beyond recognition. Her cheeks were pink again; she was happy and did not cry at all.

We walked together. We visited the locals to exchange clothes for food. Gaby had started stuttering less; everything was getting better!

Now I was worried about "Mr X". He had stopped moving. At first I was so tired that I didn't pay any attention to this, but after a while I started to notice that he hadn't announced himself for several days. Everything was quiet inside me, there was just a big belly.

I turned to the doctor's assistant. He said everything was fine. I often had intense back pain, and work was tiring. But all I had to do was look at my clean, bright-faced daughter and I forgot all the fatigue.

We received a letter from the Baltic people of the village of B___. It turned out that there were only Latvians and Lithuanians there. There were no Estonians among them! Those hopes were also dashed.

One morning at the end of July, we arrived home after the night shift. Our barrack companions were already up and ready to go to work. Suddenly, the night shift foreman entered the hall. He informed the workers of the threshing machine that since the storekeeper had been caught stealing, the management of the sovkhoz needed to take measures. An inventory would begin! All the grain would be weighed. It was possible that the committee would not

be finished by the evening. For this reason, the night shift would have to go to work that day!

The brigadier would not hear our protests. He quickly turned his back and left the hall, slamming the door.

The "Three Musketeers" appeared after he left. The political commissar had a list and issued orders: "Everyone will go to work, even those on the night shift!" We could barely stand from fatigue and said: "We can't go to work, we don't have the strength!" Seeing that we stood still and were not moving, the political commissar flew into a rage and shouted: "No arguments! You will sleep at night!"

Then I went very close to him with my big belly and said in a low voice: "Have mercy on us! We worked all night… we're completely exhausted… we can't even move!"

Enraged by my words, he raised his stick and waved it, shouting: "Have mercy on you? No! We are at war. The Soviet Union is at war, but you don't want to work! Come on – step to it! I order you! Slackers! Freeloaders! You want to eat Soviet bread, but you refuse to work! Whoever does not go to work will be prosecuted!"

We had to submit. Tired and exhausted, we went to work again.

I was sent to weed the pea field. I had to weed while on my knees and felt a pain in my stomach. The sun was baking; the temperature was thirty-eight degrees. When I managed to run home briefly during my lunch break, I found Gaby crying and frustrated. She clung to the tail of my skirt and said: "Mum, you promised me you'd stay with me during the day!"

She could not comprehend that I couldn't keep my promise. In her mind, I had cheated her (she knew that I worked during the night and was with her during the day!). Was I able to keep my word to my child? Was I even

human? I didn't even know why I had been deported. There had been no court or deadline! I didn't know what I was accused of. Why had my family been separated? For what?… For what?… The crucial question – for what?

In the evening I returned to the barracks, barely alive. The older women who were sick at home said that Gaby had been moody and cried all day. They had been unable to calm her. She hadn't wanted to eat, either. Despite being very tired, I made some food for myself and Gaby. My daughter calmed down a bit and became happier. The two of us had just finished eating when the night brigadier appeared in the hall. He announced that the inventory in the barn needed to be finished quickly and that the whole night shift had to go to work immediately.

I couldn't stand it anymore and loudly cried out: "I have no strength left! It would be better if you just shoot me and my child! This life is unbearable! We are people too! You have more mercy for animals than for us! Do you really have no human feelings for a pregnant woman? You are monsters!"

We all had tears in our eyes. I held Gaby in my arms and cried loudly.

Were they human? Did they have hearts in their chests? Consciences?

The "Three Musketeers" and the manager arrived at the barracks. They must have heard my screams. They stood around me and shouted at the top of their lungs: "Go on then!" threatening me with prosecution. The political commissar ushered me towards the door with a stick – I almost collapsed.

So I was on the night shift again and ran the thresher all night. It felt like forced labour. The night brigadier lay atop the pile of grain again, sleeping soundly, farting and snoring.

Arkady suddenly appeared in the night. He pretended to walk in casually. He looked at us with a sad, understanding look, his eyes searching for me. He left without saying a word.

In the morning we came home from work, half dead. I walked like a drunkard, and my head threatened to burst with pain. I arrived at the barrack, hunched over and aching like a hundred-year-old woman. I couldn't straighten up. There was a terrible pain in my sacrum.

The others were still at home. They gave us hot tea and helped us lie down. They were especially worried about me.

I could hardly lie down before great pains took hold in my back and stomach. I noticed with horror that I was covered in blood. Liidia was a nurse; I called her over. Seeing me like this, she was shocked and immediately ran to call the doctor's assistant from his home but came back alone. The doctor's assistant had told Liidia that he wouldn't be able to help with anything anyway and that I would have to be taken to the infirmary at the village of Lebyazhye straight away. Liidia ran to the manager and woke him up. At first, the manager objected that he could not provide us a horse for so many hours during the haymaking period, because it would disrupt the fulfilment of the daily plan.

After this, Liidia told him that I could die if I didn't get help soon. If something happened to me, the responsibility would fall on the manager.

Liidia's story apparently worked, because he gave her a letter for the stableman, in which he ordered Vasily (that idiot!) to take me to the hospital in Lebyazhye. Liidia was horrified when she heard that I had to ride alone with the crazy Vasily. She asked for permission to come with me,

justifying this by saying that she was a nurse and I might need her help on the way. The manager agreed.

When Liidia returned to the barracks and Arnold found out that we would be travelling with the weak-minded Vasily, he too began to worry. Since he had the day off after the night shift, he decided to take us there himself: "I won't let that idiot Vasily take Reny to the hospital!"

The others bid me a warm and cordial farewell. Many had wet eyes. I understood that they feared the worst.

Evi's mother Erna promised to look after Gaby and not leave her in Marta's care. I gave Erna some money for food for my daughter and a new woollen sweater so she could exchange it for groceries. We decided not to wake Gaby.

Soon Arnold arrived with the cart. He hadn't even taken Vasily along with him. We had to hurry. The boys carried me out. They carefully lifted me onto the cart and covered me with a blanket. Liidia sat next to me. Arnold grabbed the reins and the horse took off.

A car would have covered the fifteen kilometres in no time! Our horse, called "Vihr" (Whirlwind), moved at a very slow pace. It was weak and tired, often stopped and would not pull the cart. It would only move forwards when it heard Arnold's voice and felt the whip on its back. It seemed like the manager had told them to give me the oldest and weakest horse! This was meant to be an ambulance for a woman about to give birth!

The pain in my stomach intensified. Even though it was hot outside, I shivered.

My eyes were heavy after the sleepless night. I drifted off briefly… woke up… and fell asleep again. Through my sleep I heard Arnold's soothing voice: "Soon, soon we will arrive! Just a little more, Reny!"

Finally, we arrived in front of a two-story building. It

was made of wood in a simple style. The sign read: “Village Hospital”. Arnold went to find out where to take me. He soon came and announced: “First floor!” He carefully took me in his arms and carried me into reception. His pants were bloody.

In hospital

The midwife who examined me said that there was no gynaecologist in the maternity ward and that she was filling the position of doctor. "If a surgeon is urgently needed during childbirth, a surgeon-gynaecologist is flown in by helicopter from the regional centre of Kirov. In addition, we have a doctor in the first department, a young woman who just graduated from university. She is an intern at our hospital. I discuss more difficult cases with her."

The midwife gave me a thermometer and went to get the young doctor. The doctor looked at the thermometer, took my hand and whispered something in the midwife's ear – I couldn't hear it.

They asked Liidia and Arnold to accompany them to the next room. After a while, everyone came back with serious faces.

The young doctor came to me, patted me on the back and said: "I am sorry, but I am obliged to inform you that your health is in a dangerous state. You require urgent surgery! We don't have our own surgeon here. We have to call a surgeon-gynaecologist from the regional centre. He will be flown here by helicopter. The doctor might get here in time, but he may also be late! We understand that you have a three-year-old daughter. We need to get a written statement from you as to who will be responsible for her should something happen to you. We will do everything we can to save your life, and we hope you will be saved. We are obliged to warn you and to ascertain your wishes, especially regarding the fate of your little daughter. Do you understand me?"

I understood everything… everything. I thought that I was probably going to die soon. I named Raja and Irene. I asked that they find them and said that we had travelled on the same train. But until they were found, my daughter needed to be placed in Erna's family. She would be looked after there.

The doctor and the doctor's assistant told the others to leave, because they wanted to move me to the ward.

"Until the gynaecologist arrives, the patient now needs to rest!" said the midwife, adding: "Now say farewell to Citizen Klas!"

Before leaving, Arnold whispered to me that he and Liidia would be back.

As I heard later, Liidia and Arnold had gone straight from the hospital to the NKVD, to Vassilyev, the same superior officer who had assigned us work in the Lebyazhye village club and had recommended that I go to the kolkhoz with my daughter. The siblings told him my story, about our hard life at the sovkhoz. How, while pregnant, I had been sent to work in the forest to cut down big trees. How I had to crouch in the field from early morning until late at night, hot and sweaty. How I had to work the threshing machine on the night shift in order to be with my child during the day, and how I had been ordered to do three shifts in a row – thirty-three hours without stopping! That a young and strong man like Anton Kivi was given the opportunity to work in the office, but I was not helped at all, even in my condition! I was sent to do the hardest physical work. And now I was bleeding out in hospital and my life was in danger! I urgently needed surgery, but there was no surgeon-gynaecologist in the hospital. He had been called and had promised to come by helicopter.

"Now every minute is vital! The gynaecologist might not arrive until after the poor woman is already dead! If

Reny Klas dies, her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter will become an orphan! Commander Vassilyev, help save her!" Arnold told Vassilyev.

"I wanted to send Reny Klas to the kolkhoz right away, but she didn't agree. She definitely wanted to stay with her wagon companions and asked to be assigned to the sovkhoz with them. I agreed because I had no idea about her pregnancy!"

Vassilyev went to the phone and got connected to the hospital. He learned from the midwife that the gynaecologist had not yet arrived, that they were impatiently awaiting him and that my condition had worsened. Vassilyev ordered them to take good care of the patient and to let him know as soon as the doctor arrived.

Arnold thought Vassilyev was more worried about himself than me. Human feelings were alien to NKVD employees! He was responsible for the entire oblast, including our sovkhoz. Higher authorities could well come to check the conditions under which the deportees were living and working. He was responsible for handling anything out of order, although during our entire stay at the sovkhoz, no one from the NKVD had been there. But that was Vassilyev's duty!

Before Liidia and Arnold left, they had to tell him about the conditions at the sovkhoz and what the management was doing there. Vassilyev promised to improve our circumstances. He also promised to keep an eye on my condition.

When the siblings returned to the hospital, my situation was even more critical: the baby could no longer be saved, and my own life hung in the balance. High fever and severe pain. The gynaecologist still hadn't arrived. The midwife allowed Arnold and Liidia into my room for a moment. I was so weak I couldn't talk to them. Only one word escaped my dry lips: "Gaby!"

Liidia and Arnold decided to leave me alone and stay at the hospital to await the gynaecologist so they could talk to him.

There was a garden by the hospital. They were allowed to sit there right under the open window of my ward. If I needed anything, all I needed to do was call out.

I don't know how long I lay there like that. I slept and woke up. I suddenly remembered that my friends were sitting in the garden – right under my window.

"My good and lovely friends!" I thought. "I should tell them to go to the canteen and buy themselves something. Those poor things must be hungry!" I got up from the bed with great effort, my legs shaking. I slowly staggered towards the window. Suddenly the room spun. I couldn't see anything anymore. There was a whistling in my ears. I screamed and fell to the floor…

When I opened my eyes, I saw Arnold and Liidia sitting by my bed. They smiled at me.

The midwife entered; she also smiled. From her I heard what had happened to me in the meantime. She had heard the sound of me falling in my room as well as the scream. Because she had arrived quickly, she was able to deliver my child right then. I gave birth to him unexpectedly and in a normal way… It was a boy! But my poor dear "Mr X" was dead. According to the midwife, the fact that I gave birth myself was a great miracle. She had not even dared to dream of such a fortunate result (as the doctor explained to me later, the child inside me had died a long time earlier, and I could have gotten blood poisoning!).

"You're not out of danger yet, though!" announced the midwife. "The foetal decay damaged your body. We hope you don't develop blood poisoning or any other complications, because we do not have the necessary medicines to treat such things here in the village hospital. Since you

still have a high fever, you need to be very careful and remain in bed. We will not lose hope, because the worst is over!"

I asked ironically if the surgeon-gynaecologist had arrived.

"No. I called the Kirov Regional Hospital and they said he has not yet flown out," answered the midwife, disturbed by the question.

"So this is how emergency medical care works here, when a person's life is at stake," I thought. "My condition is critical; I'm on the verge of life and death! But I will fight death. My strength will not fail me. For Gaby and Leopold, I have to live!" That's how I convinced myself there. "Yes, my dear Lolo, we were not destined to have a son, our 'Mr X'." But my daughter was destined to have a mother nonetheless.

I later learned from other patients that my poor "Mr X" had been lying in the bathroom of the hospital for several days. Then he was finally thrown into the same latrine. (Since there was no running water in the hospital, there was no water in the latrine. It was just a large wooden box-like construction with a hole, on which one had to stand while relieving oneself.)

I was at death's door for several more days. Since I had lost a lot of blood, my strength would not return. Several blood transfusions were performed. The fever did not subside. I was mostly asleep; I heard and saw everything as if through a fog. One day I woke up to hear someone softly singing. It was a wonderful melody. I opened my eyes with great effort.

There was a huge bouquet of wildflowers on my blanket, and next to the bed I saw my dear friends Arnold, Liidia, Nora, Margot and Aleks. When they noticed I was awake, they all sang together: "Long live… long live…"

I remembered that it was 31 July, my birthday. I was so

touched by their thoughtfulness that tears ran down my pale cheeks as I thanked them.

Due to heavy rain, no work was done at the sovkhoz that afternoon. They remembered my birthday, and so they decided to surprise me. I was handed two more bouquets – one from Gaby, the other from Evi. The girls had picked them themselves.

My first question was: "How is my daughter? Is she well?"

"Gaby is healthy and well. Erna stayed home and is taking care of her. Don't worry about her – everything is fine! All of the others, including Arkady, send you greetings and best wishes and look forward to your return to the sovkhoz!"

The midwife hurried my guests away. She had given orders that they could see me for only five minutes, and came to remind them: "Time's up! Reny is still too weak for longer communication. She needs complete peace!"

"Go ahead, darlings! Thank you for everything!" I said in farewell to them.

There was thunder outside, a torrential rain. For those five minutes, my poor friends had had to walk thirty kilometres (fifteen there and fifteen back!) in the rain, wet and barefoot.

There are so many good people in the world, after all!

Vassilyev, the head of the NKVD, called the hospital every day. He kept up to date with my condition.

After each call, the midwife told me about it: "Comrade Vassilyev, the head of the NKVD, called again today. He was interested in your health!" And every time there was great respect in her tone. In the hospital, there were already stories about the relationship between Vassilyev and me. The gossip started. Staff and patients – forty of

them in all – drew their own conclusions from these phone calls. They were convinced that I was Vassilyev's mistress. (Vassilyev was forty-five years old and looked very good!) More than once, I heard women discussing among themselves: "You have to appreciate his taste – Reny is young and beautiful…". Their imagination was working at full speed!

I benefitted quite a lot from these rumours. The hospital staff surrounded me with extraordinary attention. They had started changing my bedding every day, and I was given a brand new hospital gown. Since my hospital slippers were quite worn, they were lined with cotton wool. I received better food. One of the nurses even bought me a toothbrush and tooth powder and soap. When I began to recover, I was brought books.

I was in the hospital for almost three weeks. When I was discharged one fine day, I was too weak to walk. My legs were as thin as sticks and shaking…

My only wish was to get back to the sovkhoz quickly, I missed home – I wanted to see my daughter as soon as possible, to hug her. She was now my only one, because my son was gone…

The hospital gave me a note that released me from work for three days. The midwife said that if I was not able to work by then, the doctor's assistant at the sovkhoz would extend the duration of the sick note.

I immediately called the manager of the sovkhoz. I asked for a horse to be sent for me. I told him I was too weak to walk fifteen kilometres. He refused, of course; he couldn't spare any draft animals during the hay season. "One gesture of pity is enough for you! You'll come by yourself!" he said and hung up.

I started descending from the first floor of the hospital. In front of me was a long flight of stairs to the ground

floor, then another flight of stairs leading to the front door. I went down two steps at a time, then sat down, went down two or three steps, sat again… and so on. My forehead was wet from the overwhelming effort. When I finally reached the final step, I sat down to rest. Then I caught sight of a young man from Tallinn I knew. He was headed for the door to the first floor.

I called to him cheerfully: "Alik! Dear Alik! Help me – I have no strength to continue!"

He answered me: "I also have no strength – I have dysentery!" Saying this, he grabbed his stomach and rushed through the first-floor door.

I stepped onto the street. It was pouring rain. I didn't have a jacket or an umbrella and was immediately drenched.

There was a market square opposite the hospital. One area was for the horses of people from the kolkhoz. I went to ask the farmers to take me to the sovkhoz. None of them agreed. Every one of them found some reason why they couldn't take me. I was greatly disappointed, and I didn't have the energy to continue. I didn't even know where to go… My head started spinning, and my vision went dark. I was afraid I would faint.

Somehow, I managed to get back to the hospital and sat on the stairs. On the bottom step of the stairs sat a toothless, wrinkled old woman with a boy about three years old. The boy started crying and asked something. After that, the old woman untied her dirty blouse, took out her wizened breast and gave it to the little boy to suck on.

I asked in wonder: "Grandma, is this your child?"

"Where'd you get that idea? This is my great-grandson Vanja, my daughter Masha's grandson!"

"Then why are you breastfeeding him? You don't have any milk there!"

"Let the child have some fun – then he won't cry!"

And upon that I heard: "Oh, how naughty! You bit your own great-grandmother with your sharp teeth!"

Though I was weak and sad, this amused me terribly, and I began to laugh loudly.

By this time, the rain had stopped. Feeling a new strength, I started moving again. I decided to go to Vassilyev, hoping that he would help me. I asked a passer-by where the NKVD building was located. They pointed me in the right direction. When I arrived, it turned out he was not there. "Vassilyev has gone home. If you want to see him, you can find him at home. His house is around the corner on the right," the warden at the NKVD door told me. I went there and found myself at the door of a house surrounded by a beautiful garden.

This must mean that the most important man in the village of L___ lives here, Vassilyev, the head of the NKVD!

My heart beat loudly. To go or not? I was anxious. I started counting the buttons on my dress: yes… no… yes… no… yes… Yes! Reny, don't be a coward! Plans must always be carried out! I knocked, trembling with bravery.

A rather young, sweet woman opened the door. I asked in an unsteady voice: "Excuse me, does the head of the NKVD, Vassilyev, live here?" Then I saw Vassilyev himself. He walked into the hall and looked at me questioningly. Right there, I told him about the inescapable situation I was in. I said I hadn't known of another way of getting an appointment with him.

"The manager of the sovkhoz would not allow a horse to be sent for me, and there is no way I can get home. I can barely stand. Help me, please, Commander Vassilyev!" were the last words of my plea to him.

He listened to me rather attentively. Then he told me to wait in the hall; he even brought a chair for me to sit

on. I heard him call his coachman and order him to take me to the sovkhoz in two or three hours. I breathed much easier and thought: "I acted correctly! Those higher up are apparently more sensitive to the needs of others than lower officials who think too much of themselves, only enjoy ruling and issuing orders."

The door to the other room was ajar, and I saw Vassilyev and his wife sitting at a sumptuous table. It seemed to me that there were very tasty dishes, the like of which I had not seen for a long time – but "hungry eyes exaggerate". There was a samovar on the table, steaming joyfully. They drank tea according to the old Russian custom, nibbling on sugar. They ate with good appetites.

I remembered that I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything since early morning, and I could feel my stomach rumbling. At that moment I felt so miserable, poor, almost like a beggar! My mouth watered as I watched the Vassilyevs devour the delicious food.

"What well-fed, satisfied faces they have. If only they'd offer poor Reny a cup of tea or even water!" I thought. My mouth was dry. But I was too proud to ask them for a glass of water. I would have really felt like a beggar then… Maybe for Gaby I would have asked, but for myself – no!

When the coachman came to pick me up, it was already quite dark. Vassilyev saw me out the door. I thanked him and apologised for bothering him. He shook my hand goodbye, gave me a little smile and wished me a speedy recovery. (I was very surprised!) I sat in an elegant cart. The horse was a beautiful, slender animal with a shiny coat. It was immediately obvious that it was cared for and well fed.

The rain had passed; the air was clean and mild. A gentle breeze was blowing. The sky was cloudless. The cart moved at a steady, fast pace. The horse was young and nice-looking. The moon and the stars accompanied us,

and the stars shone like little electric lamps. It felt like I was in a fairy tale.

"Am I, Reny, a deportee, really sitting in the luxurious carriage of the commander of the NKVD? It must be a dream, not reality." These thoughts made me smile the whole way.

I was sorry that my companions were all in the barracks and couldn't see me! What would they say? Especially Arnold. He would have had another reason to laugh and make jokes! I would definitely have to describe this episode to him later…

The coachman sang an old Russian melody. It fit so well with the nature around us. Afterwards I sang an Estonian song.

I closed my eyes and lost myself in thought…

All of our group were at home, including the night shift, because work on the grain thresher had ended. When the carriage stopped in front of the barracks, they looked out the window. Some ran outside out of curiosity. "Who has arrived at such a late hour in a beautiful carriage, with a coachman and an impressive horse? Probably some high official. Maybe Vassilyev himself?" After finally recognising the "mysterious traveller" in the luxurious carriage, they shouted joyfully: "It's Reny! Our Reny has arrived! And in such a carriage, with a coachman, a horse – like a princess!"

"We didn't call you princess for nothing!" This came from the enthusiastic Aleks and Arnold. And how happy this "princess" was upon reaching her "magic castle"!

Back at the sovkhoz

My "big family" welcomed me warmly and with much love. They had not believed I would recover and that we would even meet again. I couldn't wait to see my little girl. She slept soundly and held her dear doll Daisy in her arms, while the big bear Mishka "stood guard" at her feet.

I didn't want to wake her. I only gently touched her warm hand and stroked her head. She didn't react. Yet it seemed to me that she smiled in her sleep. "Tomorrow we will be together, my dear little one!" I whispered to her.

I had three days off – what joy!

I received some good news: Margot and Marika had found their mother! They had unexpectedly received a letter in which she announced that she was at a sovkhoz sixty kilometres from the city of Kirov. Their mother invited her daughters to join her. She promised to send them an invitation as soon as she received a response from them. I was very happy for the girls.

They had found their mother due to the fact that we had sent lists of names to the village of B___, which included our names and those we were looking for. Although there were no Estonians in B___, our lists were delivered to other districts, sovkhozes, kolkhozes, and so on. These lists had travelled through the entire oblast. (A man named Meželaitis from Lithuania was particularly effective in searching for deportees. All lists reached him. Many found their loved ones thanks to his work. For his "continued activities", he was later prosecuted and sen-

tenced to many years in prison.) We Estonians started receiving lists with inquiries about missing relatives.

However, there are never only happy events. I learned that our dear Richard was no longer among the living. He had been buried two days earlier.

Richard had been working in the forest. Absentmindedly, he had not noticed a tree falling, and it had hit him on the head. The doctor's assistant had later found that his skull had been fractured. Death had been instantaneous.

Richard had not been brought home. He lay in the shed for two days. On the third day, the coffin was placed on a cart driven by Vasily and buried in a small village cemetery near the sovkhoz. Richard's mother, sisters and all of our group saw him off on his final journey. Arkady was the only one from the management of the sovkhoz to attend the funeral.

The news depressed me.

Another blow awaited me. The morning after I got home, I started rummaging through my suitcases. It turned out that many things had been stolen from me: Lolo's coat and suit, some of my dresses, underwear and more. Worst of all was the fact that my handbag with money (the money Viktor had given me!) had disappeared. There had also been gold watches, earrings, a brooch and a diamond ring, as well as my toiletries – powder, lipsticks and so on.

I reported the theft to the militsiya and management. They promised to take the necessary measures. I'm sure they did nothing at all. Later I saw the wife of the potter. She had always been pale and expressionless, but now she was suddenly made up – her lips red, her cheeks rouged, her face powdered. The potter and his wife started to dress well. Of course, not in my clothes! They had enough sense

and cunning to not do that! I told the militsiya about my suspicions. But that's as far as it went. It was not state property, after all, just the belongings of one deportee. If a starving person had stolen just one potato or cucumber, they would have been judged harshly. Nobody cared about my losses!

The theft was believed to have taken place during Richard's funeral. Everyone in our group, including Marta Roos and Gaby, had attended. At the same time, the potter and his wife stayed to repair our stove, which had been emitting smoke. The day before, they would also have had access to our suitcases – everyone had been ordered out of the barracks for the day. We were told that we had a lot of bedbugs, flies and spiders and that therefore, a sanitation day would be organised. Some kind of powder would be dispersed, and no one would be allowed to remain in the building.

The sanitary cleaning was carried out by some Ukrainian prisoners. At the same time, the potter started working on the stove with the assistance of his wife. Despite the toxic air, they both laboured away. Things had been stolen from some others among us. Of course, we could have discussed endlessly who the thief could have been, but the fact was that the things were stolen.

Evi's mother, Erna, gave me back the money I had left her for feeding Gaby. She said she had fed my daughter together with hers and would under no circumstances take any money for it. Besides, other women had also fed Gaby in the evenings. They all loved her, and she was "their common child".

I was touched to my core by the kindness of Erna and all the others.

It was so important that in such difficult times we were able to live with such kindness. This was very lucky!

That evening – I was already in bed – Arnold and Aleks came to me and told me an interesting story about Anton. Since he worked in the office, he had Sundays free, and he always used them to visit his mother and sister, who lived in the neighbouring kolkhoz.

Our young people, who didn't trust Anton at all, decided to rummage through his suitcases while he was away. First of all, they found our letters, which we had written to our relatives in Estonia and which we had requested he send. There were also letters he had written to the Estonian KGB in Tallinn. In them, he convinced the security authorities that he was ready to perform any task to benefit the Soviet homeland.

He named all the Estonians who were working with him at the sovkhoz and stated which of them had made critical remarks about the Soviet government. He divulged what the general mood among the Estonians was in relation to the war, their thoughts and so on. At the end, he promised in the future to keep an eye on the Estonians as "unreliable elements" – that's what he called us!

Apart from letters, political books, textbooks and the like, the suitcases contained various equipment: work clothes, a padded jacket, durable boots, gloves, warm underwear and so on.

"Our suspicions have been confirmed again! Anton Kivi is not a deportee like us but a spy sent by the KGB. Presumably, his mother and adult sister are doing the same thing as Anton. Indeed, it is strange that they were not all sent to one sovkhoz or kolkhoz! After all, Vassilyev doesn't separate families!" remarked Aleks and Arnold.

"We have to watch out for Anton! He may cause a lot of trouble! But one day his time will come, and this scoundrel will pay for his treachery," Arnold told us.

Marika said that, during my hospital stay, she had been severely punished. She had had a cold and had

approached the doctor's assistant in order to be excused from work (she had wanted to dedicate those free days to Gaby!). The doctor's assistant had stuck a thermometer under her arm and turned to the next patient. Taking advantage of the moment in which the doctor's assistant was busy, Marika began to rub the thermometer. She was unable to check the reading, though. The doctor's assistant returned to her and took the thermometer, looked at it, shook his head and stuck two thermometers under her arm, staying by the poor girl's side for ten minutes. When the time was up, both showed only 36.5 degrees. (It turned out that the first reading had been 40.5 degrees.) The doctor's assistant became enraged and began to shout hysterically: "You charlatan! I will report your behaviour to the management! You'll pay for this!" He almost had a tantrum and pushed Marika out of the office.

Of course, he kept his word. The manager called Marika and reprimanded her, after which she was sent to the vegetable storehouse to sort the smelly rotten potatoes. She was there for three days. As the rats ran across her legs, the poor girl remembered my punishment.

However, fate was kind to her, and as if as a reward for those days of torment, with her sister they received the first message from their mother.

The three days off helped me regain my strength a little. I walked a lot with Gaby and Evi. Sometimes we sat down on the grass to eat. I told the girls fairy tales from my childhood or ones that I made up on the spot. "More!" they pleaded enthusiastically. And so I kept coming up with new stories. We sat on the grass, drank milk and ate cucumber sandwiches. We were happy.

One such day, Arkady happened to pass by. His face lit up when he saw me. He extended both hands to me in greeting and said: "Reny! I was very worried when you

were in the hospital! I wanted to visit you, but I didn't dare. After all, we are strictly forbidden to have even the least contact with the deportees, with those who are forced to work here. Through Arnold, however, I was constantly informed of the progress of your illness. I'm really glad you got better and came back to us!"

He gently stroked Gaby's cheek and offered her and Evi *pryaniks* (gingerbread-like biscuits). He put one right in my mouth. Arkady was married, but I had never seen his wife. Despite eight years of marriage, they had no children. I had heard from the locals that his wife was sick and could not give birth. Arkady was always well dressed. He had a kind look in his eyes. Whenever I saw him, everything seemed easier. I felt he was a good person.

After three days, I went to see the doctor's assistant. He did not extend my exemption from work. He told me to go to the hospital where I had been because they knew my condition. He had no idea! Of course, my condition did not allow me to undertake the thirty-kilometre journey on foot.

I had no other option than to go to work the next day.

What worried me most was that I had to abandon Gaby again. The three days after I left the hospital passed quickly; they were a great gift for both mother and daughter.

The haymaking was over. The Estonian brigade worked on the seed-cleaning machine. My job was to transport the grain by horse to the machine. Whole "mountains" of grain had to be loaded onto the cart. When the "mountain" was high enough, I sat atop it and drove to the seed-cleaning machine.

I had never in my life had to work with horses before, so the work was unfamiliar at first. Of course, I wanted to prove to the men in our group how industrious I could be, and I took the whole thing very seriously.

The horse was weak and starving. It could barely move, and then only when yelled at and beaten with the reins. Of course I couldn't beat it – I just touched its back. Instead, I used all the swear words that only men would use: "Come on, lazybones, let's go! [*Russian profanity*]!" And to my utter delight, it would move, recognising the familiar curses. I was proud of my "achievement" and sat atop the pile feeling satisfied and important.

Unfortunately, the further I drove, the more my pride and importance diminished – the rye disappeared. The road was full of it as the grain fell from the cart in all directions. When I arrived, my cart was empty. There was no "mountain" left, and I basically sat in an empty cart.

The others were very amused at my "great achievement". Our young men Arnold, Aleks and Paul were particularly entertained at my expense, I the "*kolkhoznik*".

Of course, I soon got to grips with the job. I, the "talented student", was even praised when I arrived atop my "mountain". "Reny, you may still make something of yourself! You will become a proper kolkhoznik!" they joked. "Your parents should see you now!"

The days were getting shorter and shorter. There were frosts and rains. Every morning we were sent to work before dawn. We walked down the narrow path one after the other like a human chain. This chain included the Ukrainian prisoners, the crazy people from "that room" and us Estonians.

When I saw myself in that line of exhausted people, all dragging their wet feet with difficulty and shivering in the cold, I said to Arnold, who always walked behind me: "You know, Arno! Sometimes I feel like I'm not myself but a character in a novel. If I ever get free, I'll write a book about our life at the sovkhoz!"

"Be sure to do it, Reny! And let me read it! Maybe I'll make a film of it – even more interesting! But you will have to play your own part in it, Reny! You're the best fit for it!"

I told others about this in the barracks. They saw that my romantic sensibility had not left me yet. They liked me recounting the plots of books and films and telling stories from my own life.

I described life in the home of my wealthy parents in Tallinn. I told how I was taken to Switzerland as a child and brought up in a boarding house for young girls. I graduated from the French-language secondary school there. Then we moved to Berlin with my parents. In 1936, we had to flee the Nazis to Estonia.

I talked about the trips to Europe in my youth, how we stayed in the most expensive hotels, various adventures, impressions and my favourite pastimes. My friends and companions by fate asked me to continue telling stories, and they listened with great interest. I diverted their thoughts elsewhere; they drifted far, far, away from the grey reality. They often urged: "Reny, tell us more! No one can do it like you do! You are a true actor; you have a talent for conjuring images!"

Of course, I was delighted by these words of praise, although I don't think I always deserved them.

By the way, Lolo had also liked it when I told him stories. Sometimes I went to the cinema without him. He enjoyed playing bridge with his friends on Sundays. The men played cards, and the women went to the cinema. In the evening, already in bed, I had to recount to Lolo the film I had seen. I described everything to him thoroughly, getting caught up in it. Sometimes I added a detail or two, or I left something out. Sometimes my imagination flowed… The film became so engaging and interesting that Lolo also wanted to see it. The next day he would go to the cinema alone. Arriving home after the screen-

ing, he would joke: "The film was good – but yours was better!"

As a young girl living in Berlin, my dream was to become an actress (many thought I had the looks, but the talent… maybe I had that too?). My parents were categorically against it; they did not want me to become an actor. They thought that an acting career was not proper. They kept saying to me that a theatre life was frivolous and not suitable for a girl from a good family! On this matter their views were old-fashioned.

I often became so enthralled by a heroine in a novel that I would want to play her myself. I especially dreamed of playing the part of Anna Karenina. I jokingly convinced Lolo and my children that I had been the French tragic actress Sarah Bernhardt in a previous life. When the children were older, Lolo and my daughter and son jokingly liked to call me Sarah Bernhardt.

At the pigsty

After some time, the management of the sovkhoz decided to start rebuilding the pigsty. This work was entrusted to our three young men – Arnold, Aleks and Paul – as they were construction engineers. They were told to compile a budget first and then deal with the reconstruction.

I worked with them on the budget. I had to translate it from Estonian into Russian. Once the paperwork was complete and the budget approved, the repairs and reconstruction began. The management assigned me to continue working with the boys as an assistant.

My first day on the job consisted of scraping sticky, smelly pig manure off the floor of the pigsty with a broad knife. It was dirty and very unpleasant work. The manure was spread in a thick layer across the floor, and I had to use all my strength to remove it. I scraped like crazy, leading to painful blisters on my right hand. I didn't complain and persevered, because I was happy to be in a dry room and work alongside my dear friends. The boys were amused by how quickly I hauled the manure. "Reny, you will be rich! Shit means money!" Arnold predicted with a laugh.

That evening, after dinner, we all sat together and talked. Everyone talked about their work, where they had been and what they had done – who had been working in the forest, who had dug a silo, who had picked potatoes or cucumbers. Then our greatest joker, Arnold, suggested: "Ask our princess Reny what work she did today, what she was up to!"

I answered proudly: "I scraped pig shit all day!"

Everyone laughed out loud. Arnold laughed loudest, hands on his belly… (When I saw Arnold again thirty years later, he recalled this story and burst out laughing again, still clutching his stomach. The only difference was that it was no longer the same Arno – the handsome joker – but a proper grey-haired man.)

These were the funny, tragicomic moments in our lives.

The long war, uncertainty about our long-term future, difficult conditions at the sovkhoz – all this caused us great worry. Since we were mostly young people, we tried to encourage each other and keep each other afloat. We whispered among ourselves, fantasised, and never lost our sense of humour.

Then the harsh cold autumn came with its strong winds and rains, and we were no longer in the mood for laughter. We were worried about how we would withstand the winter and survive it. Our club hall in the barracks was cold, because the iron stove did not provide heat.

Since the days were shorter, we started getting home from work earlier.

The trouble was that we couldn't all fit together to cook at the tiny stove. There was a queue of those who wanted to heat their pot or saucepan. Everyone was hungry and wanted to eat immediately.

There was no kerosene for the Primus stove. We only received a small amount for the lamp so that we would have light in the hall. The situation had to be resolved somehow. We exchanged clothes for a tripod with an iron ring from the locals, under which we could make a fire. We gathered twigs and birch bark in the yard, put it all under the tripod and set it alight. We put our pots and pans on the ring, and that's how we cooked our meals. Sometimes it would rain, and then Gaby would hold an

umbrella over our heads and we would wait for the food to cook.

More than once, I cooked nettle soup, because the locals were not always willing to trade us food. They were collecting their own supplies for the winter and wouldn't readily exchange milk, eggs or potatoes.

We froze in our barracks. The windows were still unrepaired – there was no glass in them. The wind blew through the floor and walls. We all went to work sick. Our colds did not go away, because there was nowhere to dry clothes soaked in the rain. The doctor's assistant did not give anyone an exemption from work if they had a slight fever, a cold or a cough, because then there would have been no one to send to work.

It was almost dark in our hall in the evenings; a small kerosene bottle with a wick could not illuminate the entire large room. The dampness, the cold and the darkness made us uncomfortable and gloomy.

Gaby and Evi often woke up in the night. They coughed and caught colds. We put blanket after blanket on them, but they were still cold and cried.

Many times I went to the manager and asked him to do something, because our living conditions were inhumane. He promised to check up on all of my complaints, but he never kept his word.

September came to an end. We harvested potatoes even in the rain; the management was afraid that we would not be able to harvest the crop in time and the potatoes would rot.

The ground was wet and cold. We worked without gloves. Our hands became stiff, fingers red, swollen and painful. We didn't have suitable footwear. Our feet were terribly cold! We wore as many of our clothes as we could. Our women could be seen in elegant furs, modern

coats… But what happened to these beautiful, expensive things? They were soon ragged and dirty!

One day I came home for lunch. Gaby ran up to me saying: "Mother, Mother! There is a letter for you!"

"From whom, dear?"

"I don't know, Mum!"

I asked Marta Roos for the letter. She handed me a blue envelope with a stamp and seal. I looked at the handwriting and… I recognised it.

"My God! It's Raja! My sister Raja has written to me!" I shouted.

I opened the envelope with trembling hands. I read the letter, in tears. She wrote that she had been looking for me all these months. By some miracle, she had found my name and address on a list that some Latvians had and decided to write to me immediately.

She wrote that she was living in a village called Darovskoje, sixty kilometres from Kirov – the same city where we were dispersed among various schools on the first day of the war. She was renting a room from a woman who worked at a kolkhoz. Raja wasn't working, because she was imminently expecting the birth of her child. She informed me that she had also recently found Irina in the same way. She was living in another district. Raja knew nothing about our husbands.

Raja asked me to send her a telegram as soon as I received the letter. If I agreed, she would immediately contact the local NKVD so that Gaby and I could be sent an invitation and we could travel to her.

I wept bitterly while reading the letter. I poured out my longing, my concern for all my loved ones… It was a terrifying reaction. Arnold's voice brought me back to reality.

"Dear Reny! Why are you crying? You found your sister! Think instead about how to send the telegram!"

I hadn't considered that yet. There was no post office at our sovkhoz. Arnold suggested contacting our vet, Arkady: "He's the only person here who can help you with this!"

I knew that Arkady always had lunch at the canteen of the state farm around that time. Taking Gaby along, Arnold and I rushed there. We were not mistaken; Arkady was there and had just finished eating. There was no one else at his table. We sat and I told my faithful friend about Raja's letter.

Arkady was very happy for me and promised to send a telegram immediately. Together, we wrote the message. It read: "Letter received. Agree to come. Send invitation. Best. Kisses. Reny!"

Saying goodbye to us, Arkady wished me a successful reunion with my sister and added: "If you have any difficulties or problems with the departure, contact me! I will help you as much as it is in my power, Reny!" After these affectionate words, he left. He probably didn't want to be seen talking to us more than was necessary.

In the following days I worked diligently in the pigsty. The floors had been scraped clean; the smell of manure was gone. My "new bosses", the three boys, praised me for a first-class, attentive job.

One morning, it was raining hard, and I got drenched while running to the pigsty. I immediately took off my shoes and put them to dry by the hot stove. Since they weren't dry by lunchtime, I decided not to go home for lunch. I wasn't worried about Gaby, because Erna had stayed home with the girls due to the rain. She had promised to make food for both of them. Aleks and Paul went to the canteen for lunch despite the heavy rain. Arno didn't want to go and stayed in the pigsty with me.

When we were alone, he brought out from a corner an open bottle of vodka, a piece of bread and some herring. I had some boiled potatoes, bread and cucumber with me. The accompaniments to the vodka were superb. Arno brought a clean table on which we could sit comfortably.

"Tell me, Reny, what was your nickname at home?" he asked and looked at me in a strange way.

"My loved ones called me Reny, and sometimes just Runna!" I answered him.

"From now on, I will call you Reny, too! I like that name. Reny, tell me about your mother! I know nothing about her!"

"I am glad to talk about her, because I love her very much! She was a wonderful woman and a very good person. My mother is from Rakvere, Estonia. When she was three years old, her parents moved to America with their two daughters and two sons. They settled in Dallas, Texas. My grandfather died when my mother was twenty-two. My grandmother visited Tallinn with both of her daughters. Each of the sisters was already engaged to someone in Dallas, but when my mother met my father, it was love at first sight. Aunt Roza also fell in love with a handsome young man. Their American grooms-to-be were forgotten! A grand wedding was held, and my grandmother moved to Tallinn with her daughters. They did not regret their decisions, because both had happy marriages."

I told Arnold about my family, my parents, my brother Viktor. Arno also wanted to know how I had met Leopold and about our marriage. It was so nice to talk about my loved ones.

"Reny, you have a very beautiful mouth and pretty teeth! When you smile, I feel like the sun has come out", he interrupted me suddenly.

"Dear friend, don't compliment me like that! It will lead me to think God knows what. Especially when a

handsome boy like you says it. In a pigsty of all places – that's too romantic! Don't you think?"

We laughed heartily.

Suddenly I noticed that Arnold's face had become thoughtful and serious: "Reny, I promise you I'll never speak of this again, but right now I can't not. I love you, Reny, I have for a long time!" he said, stuttering.

He looked into my eyes for a long time, holding my head in his hands, and continued uncertainly: "Darling, I realised that I was in love with you when I carried you in my arms to the hospital, when I was covered in your blood, when I knew during your illness that your life was hanging by a hair. You were on the edge of life and death; I couldn't find any peace! Then I realised how important you had become to me…"

I wanted to interrupt him, but he didn't give me the opportunity.

"My dear Reny! I know you love your husband and you are waiting for him. I respect you for that. But if you were eligible, I wouldn't hesitate for a second. I'd marry you! Gaby would be our daughter. I love your child because she is also a part of you! Everything about you is dear to me!"

These were sincere words from a pure heart. Arno's eyes were wet, and I noticed a tear…

I had never known Arnold like this. I had always thought he was light-hearted, fun and joking – a proper heartthrob and idol for young girls! And suddenly there was this other Arno who opened his soul.

"My dear Arno", I said to him gently, "You have always treated me with extraordinary attention and affection! I also love you very much, but in a different way – like a best friend! You are right: I love my husband. You have Nora! She loves you. Are her feelings not reciprocated?"

"Yes, of course! Nora is wonderful, a good girl, a won-

derful person! And beautiful, apart from everything else. Only she's not you, Reny! You are my ideal! In you there is everything I like. I won't find a woman like you again!" Arno pressed me against him and started to kiss me. "We will part ways soon. You will go to your sister; I'll stay here! My life will be empty here without you", he said between kisses.

"Arno, you must be reasonable! Life is a serious matter, full of worries and thorns. You will get over this, and Nora will help you!"

"Your mind and heart are in the right place, Reny", Arno replied, but didn't let go of me.

At that moment, we heard voices and footsteps, and the brothers appeared at the door.

"We're back! You didn't miss out on anything – once again, they had that hard-to-digest millet porridge at the canteen. Our bellies are bulging again! Only a sip of water can help! Did you leave us a drop?"

Our time alone was over. "And thank God!" I thought with relief. I wasn't far off forgetting myself. Arno was so charming and handsome in his youthful, fiery passion that it would have been difficult to keep a cool head at such a moment…

That same evening – I was already in bed – Arnold came to my bed. He sat by the bed and whispered in my ear so softly that no one else would hear: "Reny, dear, forget everything I told you! I promise you that I won't talk about my feelings again! I thought everything through carefully – you are right, wait for your husband and the father of your child! I only wish that we can be friends for the rest of our lives! Whatever happens to you in the future, know that you have a faithful friend in me!"

"Arnold, you are a good and smart boy! Be happy with Nora!"

He kissed me on the forehead and went to sleep.

(Later, I noticed that Arno's attitude towards Nora became gentler. But as long as I was still at the sovkhoz, I always felt Arnold's care.)

Reny in Berlin in 1936

Reny, early 1930s

Reny, 1970s

Reny, 1980s

Reny

Lolo

Mother Lydia

Father Isaak

Reny and Lolo in Tallinn again

Reny and Lolo at Gaby's wedding

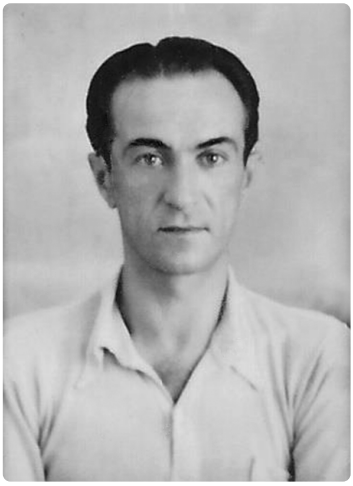
Reny with a six-month-old Gaby

Two-year-old Gaby

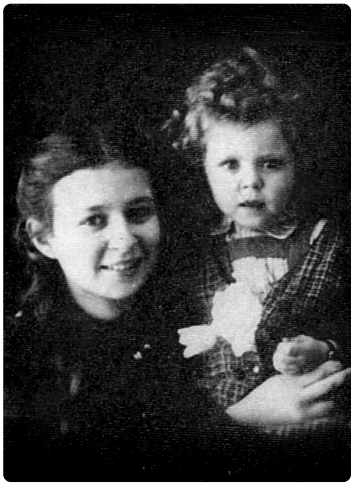
Two-year-old Gaby

Viktor and Gaby

Reny after returning from resettlement



Lolo after returning from prison camp



Gaby and little Eduard at the settlement in Slobodskoye

Gaby as a student

Lolo, Reny and Lolo's sisters Irene and Sophia

Gaby, Reny and Eduard in Tallinn after returning from resettlement

Reny, Raya, Marina, Hermann and Gaby

Reny and Arno reunited in Tallinn in 2004

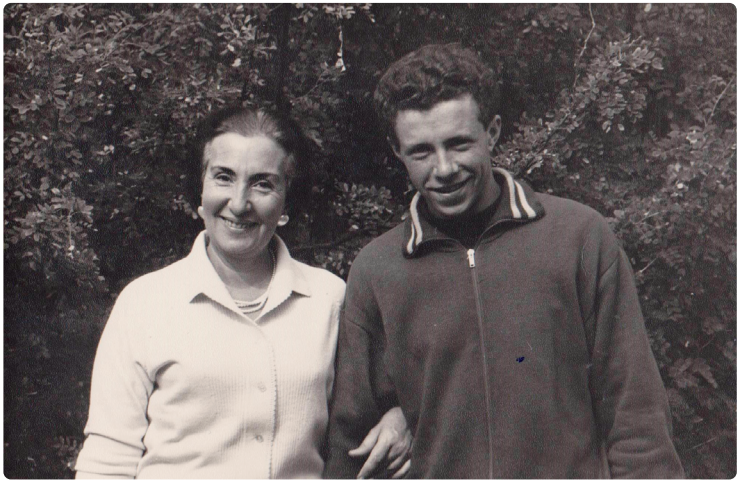
Reny on her 75th birthday in Cologne with Gaby

Reny on her 85th birthday with Gaby, granddaughter Julia and great-granddaughters Charlen and Danielle

Reny with her grandson Georg in Spain

Reny with her grandchildren Vivien and Georg

Reny and her grandson André



Reny with her son Eduard in Võsu on 31 July 1967

Reny on her 90th birthday in Cologne with Gaby and Eduard

Reny with her son Eduard in Berlin on 31 July 1997

Waiting

Now a new life began for me – exciting, full of expectation and hopes. I was impatiently waiting for a letter and invitation from Raja. I didn't sleep well at night. I had nightmares and woke up covered in sweat. Thoughts of leaving didn't allow me a moment of peace. Our political commissar had more than once said jokingly that the deported Estonians were prisoners similar to the Ukrainian criminals. I was plagued by doubts as to whether the invitation I was expecting from my sister would help me leave the sovkhoz. Perhaps it would save me from imprisonment altogether?

After being robbed, we didn't have enough money for the trip either. I offered to sell the locals some of my things, but they didn't have the money to buy them.

The burden of worry made me terribly nervous. I lost my appetite, lost weight and had bouts of weakness. My "friends in tragedy" tried to encourage me and said: "You'll see, everything will work out! You just have to be patient."

It was at that time that Margot and Marika received an invitation from their mother. The sisters decided to wait until I had also received an official document, and then we'd make an application to the board of the sovkhoz together.

Every day felt like a year!

When I came home for lunch, I always asked: "Has a letter arrived for me?"

Finally, after ten days of fretting, I received a letter from Raja. It included the long-awaited invitation. Raja wrote that I had to hurry, as the river would soon freeze

over and the steamers would stop running until spring. The journey would be too long with a horse; moreover, the roads would soon be in very poor condition, and then no kolkhoznik would make such a journey. "You must hurry, Reny! If you're late, we won't be able to meet yet!" With these words, she concluded the letter. The invitation stated that my daughter Gaby and I were allowed to settle in the village of Darovskoye, where we would spend the rest of our resettlement period.

Together with the sisters, we went to the manager to ask to be allowed to go to Lebyazhye village to meet the head of the NKVD, Vassilyev, and complete the necessary documents. To our great surprise, we received permission. We immediately set off. Though the river had risen, we reached the village of Lebyazhye.

People were still working at the NKVD. Commander Vassilyev was also there and received us rather politely. After listening to us, he asked us to write our statements and biographies. "The response will be sent to the sovkhoz", he said.

All three of us – Margot, Marika and I – were in high spirits as we left Vassilyev's office. We were indeed lucky that Vassilyev had accepted our statements and had not impeded our departures.

We had taken the first step! What then?

Dead bodies were carried out of the "insane room" every day. People died like flies! Among the deceased was the feeble-minded woman who had once held Gaby in her arms and combed her hair. She died of exhaustion. Many deportees from Ukraine died. They had been working in the forest in extremely difficult conditions in all kinds of weather. I felt especially sorry for the young Ukrainian with whom I had worked in the forest and who

had taught me the right way to hold a saw. He became weak and died in the night. His body was taken out at dawn, just as we were leaving for work.

Our barrack had become like a morgue. There were dead bodies every day. They were kept for two or three days; then Vasily took them away.

Life at the sovkhoz became more and more difficult. It was cold outside; it was cold in the barracks! There was nowhere to warm up! Every day brought new torments.

Our Marta Roos lay down and couldn't get up again. She stopped eating. Her face, hands and feet swelled up, as did her belly. Poor old woman – she also lost her hearing! She lay in bed for days and didn't talk to anyone; she just slept or cried. Barely alive, Marta was taken the infirmary at Lebyazhye village. There she soon died.

We were informed of her death only after she had already been buried. Everyone felt sorry for her. We remembered how she had dressed like a man and how she had once so charmingly demonstrated old dances. We felt somehow empty without her.

The days passed slowly for me. There was still no response from the NKVD. We were all sick. The stove provided no heat at all. Cold air blew in from the windows, walls and floor, and the barrack was cold and damp all the time. We came home from work with soaked clothes, and in the morning we put them back on just as wet, for there was nowhere to dry them. We didn't even have a rope long enough to hang all the clothes on!

One night, our little Evi got sick. She was taken to the hospital in a serious condition. The doctor there diagnosed Evi with double pneumonia. Erna was not allowed to stay in the hospital with her child, and the poor mother cried those days…

Gaby had a terrible cough, and her throat was sore all the time. She became skinny and moody. In addition, she was bored without Evi. My poor girl had to sit in the barracks for days, because her galoshes were worn out and she had no other footwear. I went to work in lightweight shoes. I went to work with bronchitis. I spoke with a hoarse voice, and sometimes my voice disappeared completely. I could only whisper. Marika's lungs were weak. She was fading visibly. Paul gave her great care and love. I went to the management of the sovkhoz repeatedly to complain about the conditions in the barracks. I asked that they replace the broken panes and instal double windows. They promised to take measures, but with no apparent results.

Rats appeared. They must have been cold too and had crawled out of their underground burrows. Sometimes someone accidentally stepped on one of them, and then the room was full of rat squeals.

One night, I noticed that Gaby was holding something in her hand. "Look, Mum, what I've got!" I started screaming in fright – Gaby held a squirming rat in her hand! I asked her to throw the animal out of the window immediately (on this occasion it was good that the windows had no glass in them!). Bedbugs were everywhere. Somehow we gradually got used to them, but the rats made us despair…

One morning it hailed hard, and we couldn't go to work. I used a free moment and went to the home of an old couple who lived nearby. They were kolkhozniks and had a cow. I managed to get milk for Gaby from them in exchange for men's underwear.

The kitchen was pleasantly warm. I warmed myself by the Russian stove, and we chatted a bit. The old man asked about the conditions in which I lived and was interested

in the other deportees as well. I told him about our plight, how we were suffering from the cold and damp and how we fought against the rats. The management knew how we lived but did nothing.

I told him: "It's still autumn. I can't imagine how we're going to live in the winter when it's freezing outside."

"Live? You are educated people from the city. Have you really not realised – you were brought here not to survive but to die! You will perish here in the same way as many exiles before you!"

During an inspection raid in the evening, we asked the young militsiya to speak for us to the management of the sovkhoz. To tell them how sick we were from the constant cold and walking in wet clothes and how it was not possible for us to dry our clothes. That our children were suffering. One of them was already in hospital with pneumonia. It was unknown whether she would recover at all. That Marta Roos was already dead, and so on. "If nothing changes, we will all perish here." I translated into Russian what the others told me in Estonian.

The militsiya replied: "I can suggest how you can improve your life. Refuse to go to work one day. Force the management to face facts! Demand that they improve your conditions! Maybe you will achieve something. If you put their daily schedule in jeopardy, they may start to act! But if this situation continues, you will all be buried soon. Just promise me that you will never tell anyone that I gave you such advice. I haven't told you anything! Agreed?" Of course, we all promised to remain silent.

Sabotage

The next morning, we did as the militsiya had suggested. When the "Three Musketeers" entered the barracks at dawn with orders for the day, we lay on our bunks and did not move. Only Anton was dressed and ready to go to work in the office. The "Musketeers" were enraged. They shoved us and shouted. We ignored them.

"Reny, please explain the meaning of this spectacle!" They asked this very angrily.

"We will not work until this barrack has acceptable living conditions!" Again, I translated what our men told me. "We don't want to die yet!" This I added myself.

The "Musketeers" were incensed. We remained lying down.

When they had started work at the offices, Anton came to the barracks. He said I was being summoned to the manager's office.

The entire management of the sovkhoz sat together in the manager's office: the chief of staff, the "Three Musketeers", the chief accountant, the secretary and strangers, some in civilian clothes and some in uniform. One of them was a militsiya but of a higher rank than our militsiya. Among these men, I also noticed Arkady, our vet, with an awkward gaze fixed on the floor. He obviously found it very unpleasant to be in such company that condemned me so harshly. I was immediately asked to explain why the Estonians were refusing to work – they called it sabotage and said it might result in criminal punishment! I tried to describe our situation to them and

explain that we had no other way out. I told them that the living conditions in our barracks were completely inhumane: rats and bedbugs and windows without glass where the wind blew in. If we were forced to live in such conditions in winter, we would all perish! I told them about the sick Evi and the death of Marta Roos and more and more. I justified our actions and asked them to understand the tragedy of the situation. "We are also human, after all!"

They all listened to me with anger in their eyes. The secretary wrote down the entire story, and when I had finished, the paper was given to me to sign. I did not agree to this and protested. The superiors demanded that I sign: "We are all here to witness your story. Endorse it with your signature!"

I had no other choice, so I signed. Finally, they asked another question that hit me hard: "Tell us, and be honest, who advised you to strike? We know who this person is, we need you to confirm it."

"No one suggested it, no one!" I turned to leave.

Anton appeared again during the lunch break. He was acting strange, or did it only appear that way to me?

Anton said that a legal statement concerning the Estonians had been prepared, in which we were accused of organising a strike at the sovkhoz. The matter would go to court. In wartime, strikers were punished particularly harshly. A long sentence would have to be served. "And you, Reny, will be punished most severely for inciting the strike!"

"Why me?"

"The management found that it was you who complained the most and made endless objections. It was you who provoked the others! You know that people from the Baltics are considered a socially dangerous element. By defending and justifying your actions, you are spreading

anti-Soviet views. Today, with your opinions about sabotage, you convinced the management that you are an anti-Soviet activist!"

Anton's speech made me feel dizzy. I almost fainted. How was I suddenly the main agitator? What exactly were they accusing me of? That I had to repeatedly translate for those people who did not speak Russian themselves? That I had to pass on their complaints, requests and claims? Why was I more guilty than all the rest?

I was desperate and beside myself. Instead of travelling to be with Raja, I could end up in jail for many long years! What could be scarier? And my little daughter? What about Gaby? Would I really lose her now, too? I would not survive being separated from her! Would she become an orphan, without a mother or a father? The Soviet government had already taken everything from me! Now it wanted my life and that of my child. That's how it proved at every step that it was "the most humane power in the whole world"! "There is no other country in the world where one's chest can breathe so freely", as they sang in a Soviet song.

Anton stood before me, with an awkward expression on his face. As if justifying himself, he blurted out: "Reny, understand, I am only passing on the words of the superiors to you. I personally do not share their point of view. Believe me, I see that they are being overly harsh. After all, I am also an Estonian and I sympathise with my compatriots! Especially with you, Reny!"

I turned away from him. The fake traitor made me nauseous.

Arno, Aleks and Paul were outraged that I was considered to have agitated the workers just because our people did not speak Russian. The boys forcibly took me to the manager. The entire management sat together in the manager's office. They discussed among themselves and

dictated something to the secretary, who typed it up on a machine.

Seeing us standing at the door, the manager shouted and slammed his fist on the table: "Get out! We will not talk to rioters and strikers! Today will cost you dearly! Many years in prison!"

On the evening of that fateful day, Anton informed me that he had been ordered to send the letter to the prosecutor's office that same day. When I told our boys, they wanted to beat up Anton. I could barely hold them back. We had enough to worry about with the unpleasantness we were already enduring.

When I had put Gaby to bed, Margot and Marika came to my bed, their faces red from crying. They were so hopeful that they would soon see their mother, and now everything had collapsed. The three of us sat side by side next to Gaby's bed as she fell asleep without uttering a single word. Jubilation had been so close, so close.

The next morning, we had to go to work again. The strike was over. During the lunch break, I saw Arkady in the canteen. Gaby and I ate lunch at the table. He sat down near us, and thus we were able to talk while we ate.

I asked him to call the village of Lebyazhye and ask Vassilyev whether any answer had been received to the statements the Gustavsson sisters and I had made. (The reply had to come from the head of the NKVD at the regional headquarters at Kirov. He was all-powerful; Vassilyev could not decide anything on his own.) Arkady promised to fulfil my request. He also told me some sad news: our young militsiya had been dismissed, he would be tried, and there was a chance he would be very severely punished. The management of the sovkhoz had learned

from somewhere that it was he who had advised us not to go to work.

A new militsiya had apparently already been deployed. I felt sorry for the honest militsiya who had always been so nice to us. Anton had been the snitch, of course. The "eyes and ears" of the superiors had fulfilled their duty.

Arkady and I agreed to meet by the well in the evening.

Late in the evening, it was already quite dark. I went outside to the well. Arkady was already there waiting for me. We pretended to meet by chance. Arkady said he had called the NKVD. He had found out from the secretary that no answer had arrived for either me or the sisters and that we would have to be patient.

After that, Arkady drew me into the shadows of the yard, put his arm around my shoulders and whispered: "Reny, I'm utterly appalled! I was embarrassed to be at that shameful interrogation! It was all so unfair and inhumane! I think you Estonians did the right thing. You had no other option. Poor Estonians! It is not your fault that Estonia became part of the Soviet Union and you were deported. I feel especially sorry for you, Reny. They will prosecute you and may sentence you to ten to fifteen years. You must leave here with your daughter at all costs. You must save her and yourself. I will help you as much as I can."

He suggested that Margot and I go to Vassilyev and ask him for permission to leave. He had heard from the village of Lebyazhye that the last ship before spring would leave in the next few days.

"Court proceedings, prison and separation from your child await you here. You have nothing to lose. You just have to act quickly", he said, convincingly.

After dinner, I told the others of this conversation and Arkady's recommendations. I chose a suitable time for

this, when Anton was elsewhere; he was often away somewhere for many hours. It was jointly decided that Margot and I would secretly go to the village of Lebyazhye the following morning. We would have to beg Vassilyev to let us go, on our knees if necessary.

"You are an actor, Reny. Play the part brilliantly and convincingly!" Arno Aaviksoo encouraged me. "But this escape of yours must be arranged in such a way that the management will not notice it."

We were now working in the potato field, picking potatoes. We worked in pairs. We had to throw the potatoes into large wooden crates that had the names of the pairs on them. The full crates would periodically be taken away to be weighed and emptied and then brought back again. I worked in a pair with Liidia, and Margot worked with Nora. Our group decided that they would not take breaks (we were allowed a quarter-hour break every three or four hours) and would fill our crates instead. We were convinced that we would be back home by evening and that everything would be fine after that. It all depended on the next day working out.

We agreed that if we were delayed, we would call Arkady at his home at seven in the evening. Marika, Arnold and Aleks would be there awaiting our call. Everyone in our "big family" supported us; they all tried to give us advice, each attempting to outdo the other. Everything was thought through and agreed upon. Now all that remained was to implement the plan. It would only be possible through our unity. We knew that Anton was the only one who could betray us – and we decided to take that risk.

We were unable to fall asleep that night. It wasn't only Margot, Marika and me who couldn't sleep; Arnold, Nora, Liidia, Aleks and Paul also found it impossible. They sat with us and shared our nervousness. We remembered

Peeter, that nice young man from our train wagon, and how that brave sixteen-year-old boy had dared to take a risk and had escaped.

Margot and I laid it all out before us. We had a choice between imprisonment and freedom. We chose freedom.

Prison or freedom?

Margot and I got up before the others the next morning and made our beds. Our faithful friends Arnold and Aleks hid us in the "make-up room" adjacent to the stage behind suitcases and other assorted stuff. The "Three Musketeers" would not have been able to find us there. Soon we heard the others getting up, and the "musketeers" entered the hall. They read out the work orders, and when our names were called, Margot and I nudged each other and almost burst out laughing. The new militsiya – who, thank God, did not recognise our faces yet – conducted the roll call. When he called our names from the list, Liidia answered for me, and Nora answered for Margot. We chuckled with satisfaction. The trick worked, and the militsiya did not suspect deception.

Then the hall of the clubhouse fell silent. Everyone went to work. It was time to act. Arno's mother, who was sick and had promised to look after Gaby, let us out of our hiding place.

I went to my daughter's bed and kissed her forehead. She didn't wake up. We said goodbye to Arno's mother. "Farewell, my dear girls!" she whispered as she hugged us.

The corridor was empty, and no one was about outside either. It was still dark. Then off we went!

The sovkhoz workers had already gone to work, but the office workers were still sleeping soundly. It was six in the morning. Margot and I hid in the outhouse near the gate. The gate and courtyard were easily observable through the gap between the door and its frame, as well as through cracks in the walls. Suddenly, it occurred to us: what if the

gates were locked – what then? Then our plan would have failed and the risk would have been for nothing.

As each of us pleaded with "our god", we exited the outhouse and slowly walked towards the gate. Suddenly we heard a dog bark. We froze. The barking was a long way off…

Then we were at the gates trying both of them, the smaller wicket gate as well as the big one. Both were locked. We thought it was all over! We were trapped. Should we go back to the barracks? What would we do there? We stood there in shock, not daring to look at each other for fear that we'd start crying.

Then we heard footsteps. They approached the gate. We heard a key being turned in the lock. We barely managed to run back to the outhouse and close the door before we saw a man standing awkwardly at the gate through a crack in the wall. He was standing with his back to us, and we didn't recognise him. We held our breath in fear and watched his every move. Then he suddenly turned towards us, and we recognised the figure as Arkady. We called him quietly. He was extremely happy when he recognised us. He had come to check if we had managed to sneak away. I guess he had feared that the gates might be locked and we wouldn't be able to reach the road. Since he had the keys, he decided to see if we might need his help.

We hugged our saviour in joy and gratitude. Why had such a kind and lovely person ended up in such a hell, where people were not considered human and their lives were worth nothing?

After checking both directions carefully, Arkady opened the gates and whispered: "Go now, girls! Good luck!"

Kissing our cheeks, he gave us some pryaniks for the trip.

We reached the main road. There was no one to be seen – no cars, no horses, no people. Fortunately, it was still dark, and we strode quickly. Gradually it started to get light. The whole road became visible. A ditch ran along one side, and tall trees grew on the other side of the ditch.

We hid behind these trees from passing cars and kolkhozniks driving horses. We had to hide repeatedly in this way, and each time our hearts almost stopped in fear. One car surprised us, as it drove past at such a speed that we didn't have time to hide. Fortunately, the danger passed quickly.

God had heard our prayers, and after three hours we reached the village of Lebyazhye.

With trembling hearts, we entered the NKVD building. In response to our request to meet Vassilyev, the secretary sitting in the front room announced that he was away on business and would be back Friday afternoon.

Margot and I almost cried. This meant a two-day wait, as it was only Wednesday! After our initial shock, we regained our composure a little and asked the secretary whether an answer to our application had arrived. She checked a cardboard binder, shook her head and said there was no answer and that we would have to wait until Friday to talk to the commander himself.

We thanked her for the advice and stepped out into the street. We fell into distress.

What should we do, and where should we go? It would have been stupid to return to the sovkhoz! We decided to finish what we had started. Come what may! We asked a passer-by where we could stay the night. There was no guesthouse in the village, only the kolkhoz dormitory. So we went there. New obstacles awaited us there, since we were asked for documents we did not have. We were prisoners on work release, as we referred to ourselves, under the watchful eye of the NKVD.

We returned to the secretary. She wrote us a certificate, which the deputy head of the NKVD endorsed with his signature. The certificate stated that deportees Reeli Klas and Margot Gustavsson were allowed to stay at the kolkhoz dormitory for two days.

At the kolkhoz dormitory, we were given a room with two beds. We felt like we had gone from hell to paradise. The room was bright, clean, comfortable and had electricity. The radio was playing. Ferenc Liszt's *Liebestraum* – a piece I adored – was being broadcast! The performance was superb. With grief, I remembered Lolo – how he loved to listen to good music and how we had often attended concerts.

After our wretched barracks, it seemed unbelievable that we were in a normal room and sleeping in clean beds, listening to music and sitting under electric lights. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, we would not have to listen to the horrid shrill rants of the "Three Musketeers": "Go on! To work, to work!"

That evening, we went to the post office to call the sovkhoz. Our friends were already waiting for our call in Arkady's apartment. Margot and I explained to them that Vassilyev was away on business and would not be back for two days. The boys told us to definitely wait for him. They reassured us that, through their joint efforts, they had completed our portion of work and that the management knew nothing of our absence. Gaby was also fine. We agreed to call again the next day. On the way back, we stopped by the hospital to visit Evi. The nurse led us to the ward where Gaby's friend lay. I wouldn't have recognised the girl. She had become terribly emaciated, her face small and cheeks hollow. She was happy to see us; she smiled at first, then she started crying, and she asked for her mother to come and see her. We tried to comfort her and promised that her mother would come to see her

soon. I remembered the young doctor from the department adjacent to where I had been. I decided to talk to her. The doctor agreed that Evi's mother should be in the hospital with her daughter, because the girl's condition was very serious, and it was not certain that she would survive. Penicillin was unknown at the time, and during the war, village hospitals would hardly have had the necessary medicines. The doctor promised to call the manager of the sovkhoz in order to allow Erna to see her dying daughter.

We were terribly dejected when we left the hospital, and I thought bitterly that the living conditions at the sovkhoz had destroyed this sweet girl. She was eight years old and had not yet had a life…

Back at the kolkhoz dormitory, we received some books from the administrator. We hadn't held a book in so long. We lay down on our clean beds and started reading. The music played. It was all extraordinary for us.

Margot said: "It's like a dream you don't want to wake up from!" We didn't turn the light off even while we slept – it would have been such a shame to be in the dark again.

On Friday afternoon, Margot and I stood again in front of the gloomy NKVD building. The decisive moment had arrived! What if Vassilyev still hadn't returned? What would we do then? I was reminded of the words of Hamlet: "To be or not to be…"

We gathered our courage and entered. The secretary told us that Vassilyev was back and in his office.

I entered first. As soon as Vassilyev saw me, he announced that there had been no response to my application. My nerves failed me, and I burst into tears. Through the tears, I told him about the inhumane conditions in which we had to live at the sovkhoz, and all our

ordeals. I finally told him that if he didn't give me permission to leave on the next ship, I would kill myself. And I would die along with my daughter! Better to die than to live as a forced labourer at this sovkhoz!

Vassilyev let me speak, then went to the phone and made a call. I understood that he was talking to the head of the NKVD of the Kirov Oblast. Vassilyev told him about my difficult situation. He said that I had recently given birth to a dead child in the village hospital and had fought for my life for a long time and survived only by a miracle. My health had still not quite recovered. Now I had found my sister, who was living as a deportee in the village of Darovskoye in the same oblast, but I had not yet received permission to go live with her. Vassilyev reminded him that the last ship would leave in the next few days. I understood that Vassilyev was speaking in my support, which made me happy and gave me some hope.

Of course, I couldn't hear what the "all-powerful" official replied, but Vassilyev's answer to him was: "I personally have no objections. After all, she will still be a deportee in the village of Darovskoye and will start working there!"

When the call ended, Vassilyev turned to me and said in a benevolent tone: "May your daughter live – and you as well. I give you my consent. Go to your sister!"

He told me to wait in the reception room while the secretary drew up the necessary papers. I was so happy, I was ready to kiss him! When I thanked him, I thought I even saw him smile.

Leaving the office, I thought that even hardened NKVD officers had feelings!

Margot, pale from nerves, sat in the reception room. I went up to her and said encouragingly: "Margot, I received permission! Don't worry, you and Marika will be allowed to leave as well! Vassilyev is not the harsh person

we thought him to be. Good luck!" And Margot entered Vassilyev's office.

I couldn't believe my eyes when she came out after a couple of minutes, in tears. Distressed, she told me: "Marika and I were denied permission! Vassilyev said that since we don't have small children, he won't allow us to go to our mother! We will see our mother only when our period of deportation ends."

When Margot had asked how long this would last, Vassilyev had answered that he did not know exactly, but he thought it would be about twenty years. Vassilyev had not said anything more to Margot and had pointed coldly at the door.

I had not expected such disappointment. I felt terribly sorry for Margot. I hastily knocked on his door again. I hadn't finished what I had to say when Vassilyev shouted angrily: "Citizen Klas! I refused her in clear and understandable Russian! The Gustavsson sisters will not be going anywhere! I am categorically against their departure! They will remain at this sovkhoz for the duration of their deportation period. That will be all!"

Vassilyev was a completely different man to that of ten minutes previously. There was nothing human about him anymore; his eyes were cold and evil.

I went back to Margot and was unable to rejoice in my permission to leave.

I received a printed piece of paper from the secretary. It read: "Statement. This document has been issued to Reny Klas as permission for her to move with her three-year-old daughter Gaby Klas to the village of Darovskoye, to Okunevo Sovkhoz, in Kirov District. Reason: health-related. Upon arrival at her destination, the deportee, R. Klas, must immediately report to the district NKVD. Vassilyev, chief of the NKVD of Lebyazhye District. 22 October 1941."

Our hearts were heavy, but we still decided to stop by the hospital on the way back. We wanted to know if Erna had been allowed to come and be with her sick daughter. She hadn't been there the day before, and Evi had been waiting impatiently. We calmed down when we saw Erna by her daughter's bed.

Evi was calmer, held her mother's hand tight and would not let her leave her side.

We decided not to tell Erna about our disappointment. She had enough to worry about herself.

When we arrived back at the sovkhoz late in the evening, the others immediately surrounded us and started asking: "How did it go? Did you get the permits? Can we congratulate you?"

When they saw our pale faces and tearful eyes, they understood that things had not gone well for us.

Seeing her sister, Margot said anxiously: "They refused, the scoundrels! We won't see our mother again, perhaps in twenty years!" She then burst into tears, hugging her sister.

The permission in my hand "burned", and I was almost ready to tear it to pieces. I felt so sorry for the girls.

When the others found out about my permission, they understood my ambivalent feelings.

"Reny, you have to leave! Think of your child! You know what awaits you here – court, prison… You have to escape; otherwise, you will both perish. You won't help the sisters by staying here. We understand perfectly how you feel right now, but in this case you have to think about yourself and your daughter!"

Margot and Marika repeated the same thing to me once they had managed to regain their composure a little. "Reny, don't think about us now! Everyone has their own destiny! Rejoice that you will soon escape this hell!"

Later, when Gaby was already asleep, I started packing our things. Liidia and Nora helped me.

After that, I took some buckets to the well. There I met Arkady, who seemed to be waiting for me. His face lit up when he saw me, and immediately he wanted to know what had transpired at the NKVD. I told him everything that had happened to us: the sisters' rejection, the disappointment, the tears.

He embraced me and gently said: "Dear Reny, you have a duty to your child! Consider the fate of Gaby and yourself and leave with a clear conscience! In spite of it all, you too should be happy! Write to me as soon as you have arrived at your sister's. I will wait for the letter! Perhaps you need some help? Don't hesitate to ask, I'll help you in any way I can! I have grown to love you, Reny, and to love your child. I'll never forget you!" (In his passionate speech, Arkady had addressed me with the informal personal pronoun!) "And this little package is for Gaby for the road!" He pressed into my hand a small bundle wrapped in newspaper.

I drew Arkady deeper into the yard, behind the outhouse, so that no one would see us. I gave him a big hug and kissed him. I thanked him for everything, wiping away my tears. Then we pulled away from each other. I was afraid that someone might be sitting in the outhouse and watching me kiss the vet through a crack in the wall. People often have dirty thoughts – they don't believe anything pure could be possible!

Sitting on my bed, I opened the package Arkady had given me – there were brand-new children's felt shoes, a few pieces of sugar and biscuits.

When the others got up the following morning, I stayed in bed. The "Three Musketeers" appeared. Noticing that I hadn't gotten up yet, they jokingly asked: "You're not getting up? Are you again planning to…?" "I'm not going on

strike, but I am not going to work either! I have a permit, and I am going to leave!"

When they asked to see the document, I told them that I would only show it to the manager.

They were angered by what they perceived as an arrogant answer and were unsure whether to believe me. As soon as the workday started at the offices, I went to the manager's office. He was sprawled in his armchair. He looked at me questioningly and said: "Have you come to complain again? Yes?"

"I haven't come to complain, Comrade Manager! And I hope I will never have to do that again! Not for myself or for others! You are going to have to relinquish this Stakhanovite! I'm going to join my sister! Here is my permission!"

I handed him the statement, which he read several times. At the same time, the chief of staff and the political commissar entered the office.

The director gave them a telling look and asked: "Did the Gustavsson sisters also receive permission? Are they also about to leave?"

I wasn't sure how to answer him. His question surprised me. I wondered how he knew about the Gustavsson sisters. From Anton? After recovering a little from my surprise, I answered carefully so as not to incriminate Margot and Marika: "Yes, they also talked to the head of the NKVD, Vassilyev!"

The director suddenly turned to the chief of staff and the police commissar, and I heard him say: "So this is how Reny Klas and the Gustavsson sisters abandon us!"

I didn't hear the rest. My ears were ringing, and my head was spinning. After leaving the manager's office, I immediately ran down the corridor to our hall. It was raining heavily, and the others were all at home. Only the men were away, working on the pigsty. I immediately

told Margot and Marika what the manager had said about them. Margot exclaimed joyously: "It's fate! It's fate! We'll also leave! Let's take the risk – it can't get any worse! Miracles don't happen if you just sit around with your hands in your lap!" After discussing the matter, the sisters decided to leave with me and Gaby. Even if it didn't work out, they had nothing to lose, because prison awaited them if they stayed anyway!

Now we had to act quickly.

Liidia ran to where the men were working, because first we had to solve the problem of transport. Aleks and Arnold were always capable of coming up with something; they would find a way out of any situation.

Margot and Marika started packing their things. My things were already long packed. Liidia returned, panting from the run. He announced that the boys had gone to look for Arkady, because he knew all the local kolkhozniks. Only he could arrange for someone to drive us to the village of Lebyazhye.

We were soon ready to leave and sat atop our suitcases. We were given our pay – a very small amount, but still better than nothing! We got a few loaves of bread and salt from the canteen. And then, to our great joy, we saw our boys drive up with Arkady – on two carts!

Arno praised the sisters for their bravery. Margot replied: "In life, you must not get caught up in the current. You have to give your destiny a little push – otherwise, you won't achieve anything!"

The time had arrived to bid farewell to our "big family". It was so hard. We had survived so much together and spilled so many tears together!

Everyone stood around us, talking, giving instructions and crying. Gaby, "our common daughter", was given a particularly gentle farewell by everyone, with countless kisses and hugs. Only Gaby's friend Evi and Erna were

not among us! Erna had been like a second mother to my child!

We knew that we would never see many of our fateful companions again – perhaps none of them.

Arnold approached me. Taking my hand, he pulled close, hugged me, held me tight and whispered: "I love Gaby, I really do! Reny, be brave! I wish you luck!"

We were placed on the carts. Margot and Marika had one cart, Gaby and I had the other.

The horses set off. Next to the gate stood our dear friend Arkady. He held his hat in his hand. As we passed him, he bowed deeply to us and wiped a tear from his cheek.

Our group accompanied us all the way to the main road. There they waved to us for a long, long time.

The horses moved slowly to the accompaniment of the familiar curses they knew well.

I took my daughter in my lap and held her tight. For the first time in a long time, I felt that she was mine, only mine. And so we rode, mother and daughter, towards a new life… to a new settlement… towards the Great Unknown…

Small and large obstacles

After four hours, we reached the village of Lebyazhye. We immediately drove to the harbour. There we put our suitcases, Gaby's bed and the pram in the storage room. At the ticket office we found out that the ship would leave at noon on 26 October. That was in three days' time. And that would be the last ship to leave before March of the following year. We bought three tickets. The administrator at the kolkhoz dormitory was happy when he recognised us. I then showed him my NKVD permission and explained that the Gustavsson sisters had come to see my daughter and me off. We were given a good room with three beds. For Marika's sake, we immediately turned on the radio and turned on the light.

"Now that's what I call a change of scenery! Hooray! We will live again – and we will survive!" declared Marika enthusiastically.

In the evening, we called Arkady at the sovkhoz. All our friends were there awaiting news from us. Arno spoke the most. He told us that the girls should not go out into the street during these three days, because some NKVD employee or Vassilyev himself might see them there by chance.

"If it rains, we will come to say goodbye to you. See you soon!" were Arnold Aaviksoo's last words.

We took his advice. Margot and Marika sat in the room for three days, and I brought them food from the canteen.

I sent a telegram to Raja that Gaby and I were on our way to her. I walked a lot with Gaby. I wanted her to get some fresh air. We saw a lot of militsiya on the street.

They wore blue hats; I called them "blue caps". Every time we came back from a walk, I was nervous, wanting to see that everything was okay with my sisters. So far, thank God, everything had gone well.

I left Gaby with the girls and went to see Evi at the hospital. Erna was there and never left the child's bedside. Evi was so weak that she wasn't speaking anymore. She recognised me and smiled at me. I left with a heavy heart, leaving them alone. I promised to return the next day.

The following day, Evi no longer recognised anyone. She was restless and wasn't making sense. I was glad that I could be by Erna's side during those difficult days. Erna's eyes were swollen and red from sleepless nights and tears. I convinced her to lie down for a while and let me sit by the child's bedside while she did so. She agreed and lay down next door. I sat by Evi's side and held her warm hands. The child lay calmly, breathing heavily. She must have thought I was her mother, because her dry lips whispered: "Mum… Mum…"

She looked like an angel. Golden curls framed her pale face. Her eyes were closed, and I admired her long, dark eyelashes. She was so beautiful on that snow-white pillow. My heart ached to think that this child could not be saved. This eight-year-old should live, live!

Erna slept only a little, because her heavy heart would not let her rest. We had to say goodbye, because our ship would leave the following day.

It was especially difficult for me to leave Erna, because it was terrible to leave behind a miserable mother with her dying daughter. As I left the hospital, I blurted out: "Why? Why such a punishment?"

I had barely arrived back at our room at the kolkhoz dormitory when there was a knock. Margot, Marika and I were terrified at first, but we were in for a pleasant sur-

prise. Arno, Nora, Liidia and the brothers Aleks and Paul entered. A loving God had apparently considered their wishes. The weather was poor, and our friends had been able to come and bid us farewell.

Aleks and Paul had been to the hospital. The doctor told them that Evi could not be saved and that she would probably not survive the night. Both brothers were depressed.

It was very quiet in the room. We thought of poor Evi and Erna, and we were in no mood to talk.

Arnold broke the silence: "Children, we still have a lot to discuss and we don't have much time. Let's get down to business!"

Arnold suggested that if Margot and Marika were caught by the NKVD before the ship left, they should say they had come to escort me and Gaby, that they had wanted to help carry our luggage from the storage room to the ship. In this case, the girls would have to give up their belongings, because they would be taken back to the sovkhoz, but they would be able to explain themselves, and the only trouble would arise from them being away from the sovkhoz for three days. They would not be suspected of attempted escape. Arnold kept a clear head in every situation, and his suggestions were correct.

Margot and Marika sat in the arms of Aleks and Paul. It pained me to see them. A few more moments and they would be separated, possibly forever. Both brothers said to the girls as they left: "If you wait for us until the end of our imprisonment – then we'll see each other again!"

Kissing Nora, Arno said that they would go to prison together and come out together. Although he said this half-jokingly, there was great sadness and bitterness in those words. Poor young people, poor young lives…

The next morning, we got up very early. We decided to go to the harbour while it was still dark outside. We had

to go through the whole village, and this was dangerous for Margot and Marika. The girls tied the scarves around their heads in such a way that only half of their faces remained visible. They followed us and pretended not to know us. But Gaby, who did not understand why we were not allowed to show that we knew these aunties and could only be friends with them again on the ship, repeatedly turned toward them. I could barely stop her from running to them. There were many militsiya on the street, and I was afraid of them. A light rain fell. Gaby was wearing her felt shoes without galoshes. I had to carry her so that her feet would not become completely wet. She was heavy. Margot and Marika would have wanted to help me, but they didn't dare – we were supposed to be strangers!

Eventually we reached the harbour.

It was early and boarding had not yet begun. We would have to wait more than two hours. There were many people standing by the dock and a whole bunch of "blue caps". We agreed that Marika would board first with Gaby, and Margot and I would carry the luggage aboard. I found an old man who agreed to help us. We carried all our things onto the ship successfully. We found a free corner and set everything down there. We stood by our things and waited to see what would happen with the girls. There was still three-and-a-half hours until the ship was set to depart. All this time we were afraid something might happen; we were ready for anything! Time dragged on – three hours seemed like an eternity (I was reminded of Einstein's theory). We perched atop our suitcases as if on pins and needles…

Thirty minutes remained…

Then fifteen minutes…

Ten more…

Five minutes!

And then it was twelve o'clock.

We prayed. Even Gaby placed her little hands together in imitation of us.

At half past twelve, the ship was still in port.

The girls were shaking as if in a fever, their teeth chattering.

Finally, at 12:45, we heard the ship's whistle!

The sailors removed the gangway, pulled up the anchor and started the engine.

We set off.

There was only one room on the ship with beds. Almost all of them were occupied. With great effort we found three separate bunks. That was enough, because one of us had to guard the luggage anyway. A Jewish family from Lithuania settled near me – a man, a woman and five children. The father's name was Haim, the mother was Haja and the children were Berke, Shmelke, Rivale, Itsik and Shorele, aged two to twelve. Gaby started playing with the children, while I talked to the parents. They were nice people who had lived in a small Jewish settlement in Lithuania. They were currently evacuating to the south.

We had been sailing for several hours, and we gradually started to calm down. We imagined that the danger had passed. However, we saw quite a few "blue caps" among the passengers, and this made us anxious.

In the evening, we found out that they would start checking documents on board. This was carried out by a group of "blue caps", along with some individuals in plain clothes. We were very scared, of course, and racked our brains as to what we should do. Margot and Marika were so panicked that they saw no other way out than to jump overboard. Better to die than to be taken back to the sovkhoz!

I was just as nervous as they were and thought feverishly about how to save them. Nothing came to mind! I thought with regret of Arno and Aleks, who would

surely have been able to figure something out. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps I should talk to Haim – maybe he could help or recommend something!

I sat down with Haim and Haja and told them everything: about the deportation from Estonia, the inhumane conditions at the sovkhoz, the sisters' escape in order to join their mother, and other things. "The girls would rather die than go back to that hell. When the inspectors reach them, they will jump into the river!" I said, summing up my story. Haim fell into thought. After a while, scratching his head, he announced: "I could help the girls! Our family is being sent to Tashkent, but the documents don't say how many of us there are. Perhaps we have seven children instead of five!"

I invited Margot and Marika over to the Jewish family. Haim said he was ready to help them and explained what they had to do.

When those checking documents reached Haim's family, they faced a mother, father and seven children: Berke, Shmelke, Rivale, Itsik and Shorele, with Margot and Marika sitting amongst them. Five children were truly Jewish, with big dark eyes and black curly hair. The other two had button noses, one with light hair, the other a brunette – typical Swedish women (the girls' father was Swedish)!

The family was having lunch together at the time. They ate chicken and chatted and laughed.

The inspectors looked at the "bunch of children" and asked the father of the family if they were all his children.

The proud father replied that they were.

"What about these two?" The inspector pointed at Margot and Marika.

"Yes, these are daughters from my first marriage!" Haim nodded as if confirming his words.

And thus the "blue caps" left this friendly family to their lunch!

They didn't say a word when they checked my documents.

We looked at each other and breathed a sigh of relief. Haim announced cheerfully: "Well, my daughters, you've escaped!"

We all burst out laughing, and the girls hugged and thanked Haim. He pointed meaningfully to his forehead and announced: "A Jewish mind! I am a religious Jew and have never lied! I think that this lie is not a sin and that God will forgive me for it!"

Our journey continued without major adventures. We travelled along the river for four days. The ship rocked heavily. It was sleeting. It was cold on the deck as well as in the cabin. I had a toothache, and my whole cheek swelled up. Even this did not disturb my high spirits. A soldier was travelling with us. He had been wounded in the leg and had been in the hospital for a long time, and now he was going home for a month to his wife and three-year-old daughter. Gaby reminded him of his daughter. He gave the girl a rag doll, some boiled sweets and sugar.

Everything was fine. Our good mood was spoiled only by the thought of imminent separation. Margot and Marika could not imagine that we would be living in different places.

Raja had written to me that we would have to travel to Kirov, find a driver at the market there, and have him drive us sixty kilometres to the village of Darovskoye. That's where the Renzhata Kolkhoz was located. From there we would have to find the house of Vera Ivanovna Likhachova.

The girls had to travel by ship to the regional capital and from there another sixty kilometres by horse to their mother.

On the fourth day, we arrived at the Kirov harbour, and Gaby and I had to say goodbye to the sisters. I learned from the captain that the ship would leave in an hour. I decided to leave Gaby with Margot and Marika on the ship while I carried our luggage to the storage room. Since the market was right there near the harbour, I thought that I could also arrange our ride. Haim and his older sons helped me move our things to the storage room. I only left a blanket and Gaby's potty on the ship with her.

From the storage room, I ran to the market and spoke to all the farmers who had horses there. I asked them to take me to the village of Darovskoye. None of them was willing to undertake the sixty-kilometre journey! They explained that the roads were in poor condition at the time, that their cart would get stuck in the wet, soft soil and that the horses would not be able to pull it. At a time like this, one could, apparently, not rely on a cart. I wasted no time bargaining with them and realised with a start that I would have to hurry back to the ship. On the way, I heard the first whistle. I was horrified!

Would I make it back to collect Gaby?

The second whistle already sounded, but I was still running…

With the third whistle, I arrived at the ship. Haim barely managed to give Gaby to me before the sailors removed the gangway and drew anchor. Someone threw the blanket and potty ashore, and the ship started sailing.

Margot and Marika shouted something at me, but all I heard was "Reny! Reny!". Fate separated us so suddenly that we weren't even able to say farewell.

The girls stood on the ship's deck with Haim, Haja and the children. They all waved at us!

I stood on the dock with Gaby in my arms and watched the ship go. "The sisters have gone!" I told Gaby and burst into tears.

I quickly found a kolkhoznik at the port, who took us to the kolkhoz dormitory. An unpleasant surprise awaited us there, because it was closed for renovation. Our ride quickly unloaded our things and disappeared. It was snowing. There was no footpath. Instead, there were long, narrow boards and mud all around. To keep Gaby's felt shoes from getting wet, she had to be picked up. In addition to her, there was a blanket, Gaby's potty and my bag – I wouldn't be able to go anywhere like that!

I started asking passers-by if there was anywhere else to stay in the city. Everyone answered that there was nothing, apart from the kolkhoz dormitory, and kept walking.

So there I was, with Gaby in my arms, a blanket, a potty and a bag in a strange city, not knowing where to go. I looked at the people passing by. Everyone was hurrying; they seemed to be rushing towards the warmth of the homes that awaited them.

It started getting dark. My tooth hurt badly. One of my garter belts came undone, but my hands were full and I couldn't do it up.

I turned to passers-by again and asked if anyone could offer us a place to sleep for one night. Some said no; others said nothing at all and just continued on their way. Then suddenly a woman asked if we were evacuees. I answered yes, because I didn't want to say that we were deportees.

"Then why aren't you at the culture centre? All the evacuees are there. If you want, I'll lead you there!" She took my bag and blanket, and I immediately felt relieved. There were many people at the culture centre, mostly mothers with children. Everyone bustled back and forth with teapots, saucepans, baby potties and so on in their hands.

The children were on bunks in a large hall. I noticed an empty bed next to a woman with a son. I put Gaby down

there. Then I asked the boy's mother to keep an eye on my daughter while I was away.

I went to search the market again, but again, it was no use! However many people I asked, no one would even discuss the sixty-kilometre journey. I bought milk, bread and fried fish from the market and went back to Gaby. She was calm and had not missed me. She had befriended the boy on the neighbouring bunk and was playing with him. The boy's mother offered us tea, and we ate a little.

I wondered what to do next. And then I had an idea: to go to the NKVD. After all, I had their legal permission to travel to the village of Darovskoye! I remembered how Vassilyev, the head of the NKVD, had given me his coachman and cart for the trip back to the sovkhoz. I concluded that the commander here could also help me reach my destination. I went out again. The NKVD building was quite far away. Much to my disappointment, no one was there except the guard. When I told him my story, he said he could not help me. He did, however, give me the addresses of two owners of horses. One of them was not at home; the other was not willing to undertake the journey.

On the way back, I went through the market again. There were no horse owners there anymore. Again, all in vain!

This time, I had been away for quite a while, and my heart was already aching for Gaby. I wondered how she was doing there alone among strangers. I ran back to the culture centre with my heart pounding. Entering the house, I was horrified – there was no one in the hall. The beds had disappeared as well! There were no mothers fussing with teapots, saucepans and bedpans, no children making noise. The culture centre was empty; there was no "culture" left! There were only dirty papers, empty bottles and sticky garbage littering the floor.

A woman was washing the floor. With her skirt rolled up high, she sang calmly: "My heart, all I desire is peace… Thank you, my heart, for being able to love like this…"

I interrupted her singing and asked where everyone had gone and what had happened. The cleaner said she didn't know anything and continued singing: "My heart, all I desire is peace…"

I ran into the street. Two boys were playing with a ball. They were helpful, and when I asked which school building the evacuees were taken to, they agreed to direct me there.

When I arrived, I immediately realised that I was in the right place, because mothers were fussing with teapots, saucepans and potties. They ran to the bathroom and back again. I could hear children's voices, their giggles and crying. The children were on beds. I started looking for my daughter.

Suddenly I heard Gaby's voice; she was crying. I saw a stranger by my child's bed. She shouted: "Whose child is this? Where is her mother? This could be anyone's child. She may not even be an evacuee!" All this abuse was directed at me!

I angrily approached the woman and told her that I was the mother of this child.

"Very well, may I see your documents!" was her reply.

I had to admit that I was not an evacuee but rather a deportee. I showed her my NKVD certificate.

"This is not the place for deportees! This is only for women with children who have been evacuated! Vacate the bed immediately and clear out with your girl!" Like a gendarme, she stood up straight in front of Gaby and me and waited for us to leave the room.

We stood on the street again. It was now completely dark. I held Gaby with one hand and the blanket, the potty and my bag with the other. With this burden I

could not take a single step, so I just stood there. Wonderful music poured out from the open window of the house opposite. It was Tchaikovsky's Trio. I was not familiar with this piece from the concert hall; instead, it had often been played at Lolo's home. Irene would sit at the piano or Eduard would play the cello while their friend Raja played the violin. (My husband's family was exceptionally musical. Their mother was a singer, a graduate of the Warsaw Conservatory. Lolo and his older brother played the violin well, Eduard and his father played the cello. Both daughters played the piano. They were able to form a family orchestra. Birthday children were usually woken up with a serenade!) This soulful music suddenly brought back many memories for me. I couldn't hold back my tears; it conjured up all my loved ones…

"Why are you standing here freezing?" I suddenly heard a man's voice. I awoke as if from a dream. Turning my head towards the voice, I almost shouted for joy – the soldier from the ship was standing in front of us. He appeared like a heavenly angel. Right there, I told him everything – what I had been through and my current situation. The man was shocked by what he heard.

"I want to help you and your daughter. Let's go find you a place to stay together!" He took Gaby in his arms. We walked along several streets and entered many houses to ask for shelter for even one night. We were sent away. Finally, when our hopes had almost been extinguished, a married couple on the edge of the city agreed to take us under their roof for one night. It was warm and cosy in their cottage. The woman set up the samovar, and we drank hot tea. We warmed ourselves and were able to rest. Even my tooth, which had been tormenting me all these days, no longer hurt. My kind friend told the family about our difficulties in continuing our journey. He managed to convince the man to take us with his own horse. However,

the man promised to take us only as far as the village of Makarye, which was only thirty kilometres away, asserting that that distance alone was too much for his horse. He wouldn't take us in exchange for money but asked for an expensive men's suit. He was only willing to go to the trouble because he felt sorry for me and my daughter. Naturally, I promised him Lolo's suit.

Early the next morning, I took my things out of the storage room and immediately gave him Lolo's suit, as promised, since he wanted to be paid in advance – he was clever.

The road was horrible – just mud! The men had been right to refuse to drive while the roads were in such a condition. The wheels of the cart kept getting stuck in the mud, and then the cart had to be pushed from behind. To lighten the load, the man and I walked alongside. Only Gaby sat in the cart, on top of our suitcases. The horse was so weak that it moved only under the pressure of the man's whip and curses: "Hey, wretched creature! Giddy-up! Giddy-up! Move yourself!"

We reached the village of Makarye just before evening. The man took us to the kolkhoz dormitory. We were placed in a large room where men and women were sleeping on beds. They were mostly kolkhozniks from the area. These rural people did not take their clothes off at night and slept in their fur coats. Dirty felt shoes and smelly foot-wraps were scattered in the corners. Still, I was happy with this humble shelter, because we had a roof over our heads!

We had to spend two days in the village of Makarye, because again I could not find a means of transport to get us any farther. I was ready to give away all my belongings just to reach Raja.

We were already so close, and yet so far away. With tears in my eyes, I begged the men to have mercy on a

mother and her daughter, but it was no use! No one wanted to embark on such a route. On the second night, when I had already buried all hope of leaving this village, I found a woman who agreed to take us the thirty kilometres to the village of Darovskoye in exchange for two dresses and two pairs of shoes (for her daughters). (I had to give up one men's suit, two dresses and two pairs of shoes in order to travel sixty kilometres!) This female kolkhoznik promised to set off with us early the next morning. I was happy because the next day, 2 November, was Gaby's birthday. She would be four. Thus fate itself prepared a birthday present for us!

The woman came to pick us up at six the next morning, with both daughters. They burned with curiosity to see the dresses and shoes. They grabbed them from my hands and shouted with delight.

These final thirty kilometres took us the whole day to cover. The horse was as weak and thin as the previous one. Again, we had to make frequent stops because the wheels kept getting stuck in the soft, soggy soil. The kolkhoznik turned out to be a kind woman. Since I didn't have felt boots like her, only shoes, she told me: "You sit in the cart with your daughter; I can handle it!" and walked beside the horse. Indeed, she had the strength of a man! When she pushed the cart with all her might, we moved forward!

We had fun with her as well!

She was a tall, fat woman with red cheeks who talked a lot and always on intimate topics: how she slept with her husband, how they expressed their love, and so on. The funniest thing was what happened when the horse stopped to pee. Then she also spread her legs to pee! Despite the cold, she didn't wear any underpants under her skirt and coat! I was repeatedly confronted by this spectacle.

Struggling to hold back my laughter, I thought: "I must definitely describe this scene to Lolo!" Lolo always liked to hear stories about my funny incidents – he would laugh until he cried.

I held Gaby in my arms and told her that today her father would definitely be thinking about us, because it was his daughter's birthday!

"Where is dad? Is he in the place we are going to?"

"I don't know! But it is possible that your father will soon come and join us", I told her encouragingly. She talked about her father often and missed him very much.

With a heavy heart, I thought: if only Lolo were awaiting us when we arrived. I had plenty of time to daydream during the long drive. I thought of my loved ones, those I no longer knew anything about. I thought about Lolo and my poor mother and her broken leg, my father somewhere in prison, and of Lolo's parents, who, tragically, had been killed. My thoughts were increasingly sad and gloomy. Gaby fell asleep in my arms.

This is how we spent my daughter's fourth birthday!

We arrived at Renzhata Kolkhoz late in the evening. From Raja's letter, I knew that the house where she lived was fourth on the right of the same road we would arrive on. I counted the houses: first… second… third… fourth…

We stopped at a small single-story house. After a few minutes, a young woman with a kind smile exited the gate.

"You must be Reny? And this little girl must be Gaby? I am Raja's landlady, Vera Ivanovna Likhachova!"

These words made me catch my breath; there was a lump in my throat. I was unable to answer her; I just held out my hand. She told me with a smile that my sister was in the hospital and that she had given birth to a daughter,

who would be named Marina. "Do you think it's a beautiful name, too? Raja was waiting for you, but you didn't arrive, and then she went into labour and had to be taken to the hospital. Both mother and daughter are well and will be home in the next few days. Come into Raja's room and settle in! My son and I will get your things!"

So I entered Raja's room. It was small but comfortable. Familiar things everywhere. A large photo of Raja's husband, Hermann, hung on the wall.

I finally felt like I was home.

I sat on Raja's bed, put my head on her pillow and started crying…

This time they were tears of joy.

Epilogue

A letter came from Liidia from the sovkhoz. I found out about little Evi's death. The girl had died the night before we left Lebyazhye village. It had been hard to recognise Erna – she was inconsolable. Glass had been fitted in the windows of the hall and the frames had been repaired, but everyone was still cold and sick, because there was no heating. The doctor's assistant would not release anyone from work, because the management had forbidden the issuance of such doctor's notes. They were afraid that they would not fulfil their annual plan, and so they had started treating the Estonians and other prisoners even more harshly.

One of our Estonians, Linda Epold, had recently poisoned herself with sleeping pills. She could not withstand life at the sovkhoz! (I remembered the quiet young woman with whom I had always sympathised. She was just so unlucky! The day before she was deported, the dentist had ground down almost all of her teeth in order to cover them later with porcelain crowns. Her other teeth had been pulled out – they would be replaced with dentures. On the train, Linda had had stumps instead of teeth. She couldn't eat properly. Her ground-down teeth broke, causing inflammation and great pain.) After hearing of the impending trial, she had fallen into a depression.

"She decided to end her life rather than go to prison for many years! Three days ago, we buried her next to Richard." That's how Liidia ended her letter.

She asked me to write back quickly, because after the

court verdict, which would affect all the Estonians soon, our correspondence would end.

I received a sad letter from Arnold Aaviksoo. He gave me some shocking news – his bride, Nora, was no longer alive. She had contracted dysentery and died quickly, in great pain.

According to Arnold, Nora had been working with the boys repairing the pigsty. Once they had had herring and bread for lunch. There was not enough drinking water in the bucket. Since the well was farther away than the river, Nora had drunk dirty river water, developed a bloody stomach disease and was immediately taken to the Lebyazhye village hospital. Arnold, who had also drunk from the river, also fell ill and, a little later, was taken to the same hospital where Nora already lay.

"I was glad to end up in hospital! That way I could be by Nora's side all the time and support her. I held her in my arms until her last breath. Nora died in my arms… The death of my beloved has shattered my life", Arnold wrote. (I remembered Arnold's words when we were leaving, when he said half-jokingly: "Nora and I will go to prison together and come out together!" Poor optimistic Arnold! And poor sweet Nora! Fate was too cruel to both of you!)

Arnold's letter continued: "We buried Nora next to little Evi. I find it comforting that they lie there side by side. Reny! Now I don't care what happens to me. You're not here anymore! Nora has left me. Margot and Marika left us behind. Our close-knit 'big family' is no more. Everyone is depressed. I feel terribly sorry for my mother, because she will be alone now. After the trial, Liidia and I will go to prison; later we will be sent to a camp, God knows where! I wish with all my heart that at least you will be happy. I'm glad you escaped forced labour. Don't forget me – I love you. Your Arnold."

By Christmas, I received a letter from Erna. The court had made a decision a week earlier. All our Estonians, except for Arnold, Erna and Arnold's mother, were sentenced to ten years in prison, plus five years of resettlement. Arnold received an even harsher sentence – fifteen years in prison, plus five years of resettlement. In addition to the strike, his record of sins included a number of other "transgressions", such as hostile speeches against the war, anti-Soviet conversations and anecdotes and other such allegations. I remembered grinning when, after the roof of the pigsty had been repaired, Arnold climbed on top of it and jokingly shouted: "Hello! Now I can pee on the entire Soviet Union from here!" In the evening, he told us all about it in the hall. Presumably, Anton also heard this and reported everything to the management of the sovkhoz. In any case, what Arnold had said was known to the court, was discussed in complete seriousness and was greatly resented.

Basically, all of our evening conversations (thoughts and opinions) were recorded in the court documents. Once the verdict was announced, everyone was arrested and sent to prison. There were no further reports from them.

"This means that I, too, would have been imprisoned for fifteen years and sent for resettlement for five years!" I thought while reading the letter.

There was one more piece of sad news in Erna's letter. Our vet was accused of having friendly relations with the Estonian deportees, meeting them in his private life, and helping and pitying them. Unfortunately, old horses in the area fell ill and became lame. This gave the management of the sovkhoz suitable grounds on which to dismiss Arkady. He was awaiting a trial on accusations of professional negligence and treason!

"I'm afraid that he will be convicted and face a long

prison sentence", Erna wrote. "I met Arkady one day. You wouldn't recognise him; he has become very thin. He behaves with dignity and says that he does not regret anything, because he acted according to his conscience. Arkady asked about you, Reny, whether you had settled in and if you were enjoying being with your sister. He asked me to send greetings to you and to Gaby. Don't write to him yourself, because it might make his situation worse. We deportees are like the plague – all the locals shun us!

"I go to the cemetery as often as possible. I now take care of two graves, Evi's and Nora's. There are no flowers at the moment. I will plant flowers in the spring!

"I miss you very much, Reny! I think about you a lot. May God bless you, because you deserve it.

"Kisses, Erna."

A letter also arrived from Margot and Marika. They wrote about how they had reached their mother. When the ship arrived in the regional capital of Kirov, Marika stayed at the harbour with their belongings, and Margot went to the NKVD to talk to the highest official. She justified their escape from the sovkhoz and ended her "presentation" by saying: "We escaped only due to the great love we have for our mother and due to our longing for her. We couldn't have acted any other way! Our future depends on you! Either put us in jail or let us join our mother. You also have a mother, don't you? Maybe you have children, too? Then have mercy on us! We are not criminals. I promise you that we will start working honestly at the sovkhoz!"

The superior officer was lost in thought for a moment and then said: "If you promise not to run away again, you can go to your mother!" Margot happily made this promise. And so the girls saw their mother again.

Margot had been right on the day of the escape when

she said: “You must not get caught up in the current. You have to give your destiny a little push – otherwise you won’t achieve anything!”

Margot and Marika escaped imprisonment. I was happy for them and thought with joy that I, too, had had a small part in shaping their fate.

Tallinn, 1971

After fourteen years of resettlement, I was living in Tallinn again. In Tallinn, I also met Arnold again, completely by chance on the street, after not seeing each other for thirty years! I was rushing to the cinema one fine day. I was crossing a crowded square when I was suddenly stopped by a middle-aged man with two children. He turned to me with a smile and said: "Hello! Do you recognise me?"

I stopped. I looked at him in amazement and thought he had confused me with someone else. I wanted to move on. Suddenly his voice and smile seemed somehow familiar. Then I realised that standing in front of me was Arnold!

"Reny, I recognised you right away; I haven't forgotten the way you walk. And you haven't changed much either; you're as beautiful as you were before!"

"Arnold. Now I recognise you, too!"

He kissed and hugged me right there on the street. My heart constricted. I couldn't believe this man was the same Arnold I had known so many years ago.

I looked at him carefully and saw how much his face had changed. His temples were grey, his facial features were sharper, and the expression in his eyes was different. Only his smile had remained as sly as before, and the dimple I had once liked was still there.

He was elegantly dressed, was still slender and had good posture, and looked even taller than I remembered him.

My God! How we rejoiced at this chance meeting! Of course, I didn't go to the cinema. There was a nice little cafe nearby. We went and sat down there. I asked him to

tell me about his life and the fates of our mutual friends.

Arno had been imprisoned for fifteen years. He struggled in several detention facilities with special regimes where political prisoners were kept. He was even sent to the worst, Vladimir Prison, which all prisoners dreaded. Later, he spent another five years at various forced labour camps, also under very difficult conditions. In winter it was forty or forty-five degrees below zero. Eventually, after twenty years of imprisonment, he was allowed to return to Estonia. He was already forty-seven years old by then! He had come to Tallinn nine years earlier. He married a woman seventeen years younger than him.

"I got married because I wanted children and to live a normal life at last. My wife Vilma is a good and decent person. I have nice children. I am satisfied with my life."

I really liked his children. The boy was about eight years old and resembled the young Arnold I knew at the sovkhoz. The same dark curly hair, jolly eyes and his father's charming smile. His daughter was four years old. Pretty, with light hair and blue eyes, probably like her mother. Arnold had named his daughter after Nora; a little Nora was in front of me. I remembered that the older Nora had also been blonde with blue eyes.

As if reading my mind, Arnold started talking about Nora and her tragic death: "I would have been happy with Nora. We suited each other!" And then suddenly he asked me: "Tell me, dear Reny, can a man love two women at the same time, but in different ways? All these years I have asked myself this, because I loved both you and Nora!"

This question came so suddenly that I had to think a little.

"I don't believe so! If it is true love, then you can only love one woman at a time, not two at once! I think the second one was an illusion!"

Arnold didn't say any more about his feelings.

I learned a lot about what happened to those in our group after we left the sovkhoz.

The superiors had planned to send Erna and Arno's mother to another sovkhoz. Both women were very nervous, because they didn't know where they might end up. Two days before being sent away, Erna died. It was a quick death, as a result of a cerebral haemorrhage. Evi's death and the imprisonment of her sons had broken her. Erna was buried in the Lebyazhye village cemetery next to little Evi. At least fate had been kind to her in this way. (In the spring, when she had wanted to plant flowers on Evi's grave, she herself was already under the soil.)

Arnold's mother had died a few years earlier, but in Tallinn, as she had wished.

Her daughter Liidia had spent ten years in prisons and camps. She had suffered an accident in one of the camps; she had fallen in front of a tractor, and it had run over her. Both legs and her spine were injured, and she was disabled for the rest of her life. Despite this, she was still sent for resettlement for five years. Arnold said she used crutches or a wheelchair to get around. Of course, Lydia's groom, whom she loved so much, did not wait for her; he got married, had a family with two daughters and now was already a grandfather. Liidia was single and lived with her aunt, who took care of her. But she was in good spirits and did not complain: she read, embroidered and knitted a lot, and she was interested in music, and this filled her life.

Aleks and Paul came back to Estonia after ten years in prison and five years of resettlement. They were living in Rakvere. In Siberia, they had married local girls. Aleks had a daughter and a son; Paul had four sons! Arnold still met them. Their old friendship lived on.

After their period of resettlement was up, Nora's sister came back from Siberia with a husband and three children. She lived in Tartu. The circus acrobat had a nervous

breakdown in prison, went crazy and was sent to a mental institution. She never recovered.

Arnold knew nothing about the rest of our "big family". Some had returned to Estonia; many had died in prisons and camps.

Arnold told a curious story about Anton. After the trial of our group, Anton fell into disfavour among the sovkhoz management. Maybe they were afraid the boy knew too much and might divulge something. In short, they started to scold him for every little thing and they found all kinds of faults in his behaviour. In the end, he was accused of having lost the trust of the sovkhoz management and of acting as a double agent for the Estonians. Anton was put on trial and sentenced to five years in prison and five years of resettlement for cooperating with the Estonians who were on strike at the sovkhoz! Many years later, he ended up in the same camp as Arnold. There, too, he had tried to make his life easier and offered himself as a mole, wooing superiors and guards, hoping to instil confidence in himself. He probably succeeded, because he soon got the most coveted and privileged job, which was every prisoner's dream – he was a bread-cutter in the kitchen. It was a nourishing and easy job!

The fellow prisoners kept Anton in mind and understood his cunning plans. They unanimously decided to get rid of him. (Among them were murderers with life sentences who had nothing to lose. Killing a person who annoyed them was a trifle!) One day they carried out their decision. They jumped on him, dragged him to the ground and started kicking him. Seeing that he was still moving, they struck him on the head with a bar until he was dead.

"Serves him right! It was a well-deserved punishment for that traitor!" Arnold concluded.

C'est la vie

I already mentioned that I was sent for resettlement for fourteen years. It was only after Stalin's death that people were gradually released. I returned to Estonia in 1955 with my husband, daughter Gaby and son Eduard, who was born in 1948.

Leopold and I had to go through a lot. I will write about this in the second part of my book.

Margot and Marika also came back to Tallinn with their mother after fourteen years of resettlement.

Our meeting after such a long separation was full of joy. The sisters said that life on their sovkhoz was no better than that which we had fled. The work was hard and often overwhelming. Morally, it was easier for them, because now they were all together. Their father, Sven Gustavsson, died in a camp. Almost all the older people who had been on our train or on the men's train died. Many of them died in the camps, where they could not stand the camp regime and working in the harsh cold. When Lolo came to me after five years of separation, he said that people had died like flies.

Margot married a deported Estonian, who was much older than her, at the sovkhoz. I did not like this man very much. He was very reserved, spoke little and complained about everything. They had no children. Margot was still a very beautiful and charming woman. She looked young. But her marriage was not a happy one.

The years had changed Marika a lot. She looked sickly and was very thin. I learned from Margot that Marika's lungs were very weak. She remained unmarried. She had

loved Paul very much and could not forget him. Now she had a friend with whom she lived.

I often met my "girls", as I used to call them. Margot and I were especially close. The sisters' mother was a nice person but very sick. She had problems with balance and hardly ever went out of the house. She later died in her sleep. We all went to the cemetery to see her off.

I was great friends with Arnold until I left the Soviet Union in 1975. He visited my home, and I visited him and his wife at their home. Vilma understood our cordial relationship. She knew that it was a pure friendship based on shared memories.

Now, as I am writing down my memories, I often think of my distant friend Arno and his last words as we parted: "Reny! Don't forget to write a book when you're in the Free World! Promise me that!"

Yes, dear Arnold, I have fulfilled my promise – I am writing a book! But you don't know this. I can't tell you about it!

We organised several "evenings of meetings and memories". We, the few who were still left of our "big family", gathered in Arno's apartment, because it was the largest. Most of us lived in one room with our families – as did I! Such were the apartment conditions in the Soviet Union. Margot, Marika, Aleks, Paul and Liidia, and Nora's sister and her husband came. Leopold also often took part in these meetings. But Margot always came alone, sometimes with tears in her eyes… Her husband had found out about the romance between Margot and Aleks; he was jealous and would cause a scene. He forbade Margot to meet Aleks on those evenings and did not allow her to come to Arnold's. But Margot was energetic, did what she wanted and always sat next to Aleks at the table.

We talked a lot, laughed and reminisced. But each of us realised that we were no longer who we once were. We already had "our own lives"… our families… other interests… other feelings…

That's life – *C'est la vie*!

A happy event: 10 September 1946 Terrible news

Finally, I received the long-awaited letter from Leopold, written on 5 September 1946. Gaby and I were having breakfast when the postman came and said: "There is a letter for you!"

I recognised Lolo's handwriting immediately. My heart wanted to stop when I opened the envelope.

"My darlings! My dearest!

"I am very happy and extremely pleased to announce that I will be released on 13 September 1946, and I can join you after five years of forced labour. I will not leave the camp alone; my friend Lembit Reinsalu will come with me. His wife, Reet, and daughter, Linda, live in the village of Renzhata. We have been good friends for twelve years, so we will travel together. We will come by horse, with a coachman. We don't know when we will arrive. Don't expect us before evening!

"I am very happy, happy, happy. It's hard to believe how lucky I am to see you soon, my Reny, and kiss my sweet Gaby. 'Wait for me and I will come back, just wait for me!!!' That has been my song to you all these years. I will finish my letter; I am too excited now. I will hug and kiss you for the last time on paper. From now on, you, my Reny, will be truly mine, mine, mine, mine!!!

"Love you! Lolo
"10 September 1946."

I read Lolo's letter to Gaby, and we were overjoyed at the wonderful news from her sweet father. My daughter hugged and kissed me and was so happy that she would have embraced the whole world. She was already eight years old – a big girl, already a schoolchild.

"My father won't recognise me", she told me.

"Three more days and we'll all be together", I thought.

Gaby and I couldn't sleep those three nights. We were too excited. On 13 September 1946, from 2:00 pm to 8:35 pm, we waited for Leopold. We waited, waited, and waited… And finally the moment came when we heard a knock on our door and Leopold stood before us, beaming.

It is impossible to describe our meeting. It's not necessary. The feeling of overwhelming love cannot be described!

I noticed right away that Lolo was somehow sad and pensive. He had something on his mind that he didn't want to talk about at first. I later found out what was troubling him. He told me about what happened to his friend Lembit Reinsalu. Reinsalu and Lolo had left the camp together. They had travelled in the same cart and gone first to Lembit's wife, then to me. Approaching house no. 4, where Reet lived, they saw a light in the window, getting closer and closer to it. Both were happy that Lembit would soon see his wife and daughter. Lembit jumped off the cart and ran towards the house. Suddenly, he stopped and grabbed his chest. He didn't manage to say a single word. His face pale white, his forehead covered in beads of sweat, he died of a heart attack in Lolo's arms under his wife Reet's window.

Lolo had had to endure such a tragedy before coming to me. Lolo had heard Lembit softly repeating Reet's name, how he had called his daughter: "My darling, my little bird, Linda, my sun" – and he cried bitterly.

It was hard to leave a dead friend in the hands of the distraught Reet and go to his family, where happiness awaited him.

You can also die of too much happiness.

It was the most wonderful day of my life. When we put Gaby to bed after dinner, she lay hugging us, and her father and me and put her hands in our hands. The three of us sat like that in silence.

Suddenly we heard Gaby's voice: "We pray to God together." She held my hand in hers.

She said this so earnestly and wholeheartedly that we realised how spiritual our daughter was.

Leopold asked me: "Reny, do you pray to God?"

"Gaby and I turn to God in prayer every night. We know he exists. He granted our greatest wish: you came back. He kept you safe, and I am grateful to him for that!"

Leopold hugged me and Gaby very, very tight. The three of us sat in silence for several minutes like that. I saw tears on Leopold's face. When our little girl was about to fall asleep, she said to her father, hugging him: "Daddy, I'm going to love you very, very much! You are my father."

Kirov
Lebyazhsky District
Okunevo Sovkhoz

Leopold ("Lolo") Klas-Glass
Reny ("Reeli") Klas-Glass
Raja Meiertal – Reny's sister
Irene – Leopold's sister
Arnold Aaviksoo – Reny's friend

Now, in 1999, I am eighty-eight years old.

I have been living in Berlin since March 1977. In this book I tell about the most difficult years of my life.

There was a great deal of worry, and the loss of many relatives and friends. My husband Leopold died in 1974 in Tallinn. My husband's parents and his brother Eduard were cruelly killed by Hitler's Nazis; his brother Alfred was killed during the war. Little Gaby and I were deported to Okunevo Sovkhoz in Kirov Oblast, and I stayed there for fourteen years. As a result of the hard labour at the sovkhoz and the lack of medical care, my pregnancy ended tragically – I gave birth to a stillborn child. But life went on. I worked, raised little Gaby and hoped that life would get better after the war and that we would return to our homeland and Tallinn.

There were also good and friendly people at the sovkhoz. Our vet, Arkady Zolotov, tried to help us in whatever way he could. I was also helped by Arnold Aaviksoo and the caring Erna. Arno was a great friend to me. Soon I also found my sister Raja and brother Viktor.

Later, after the end of the war, my husband Lolo returned to me after five years in prison.

We went back to Tallinn. Life gradually began to return to normal.

On 25 October 1948 at 11:11 pm, I gave birth to a son. The next day, Anna Klas came to congratulate me on the birth of my son. She asked me: "Reny, have you chosen a name for your son yet?"

"Yes", I replied, "we'll name him Eduard, in honour of your husband and Eri's father." She hugged me; we kissed and burst into tears. Anja thanked me for this gift.

In the happy days that followed, my husband and I had many good and kind friends. We became friends with Georg and Ilona Ots and visited them often. Ilona and I are still great friends. I often call her from Berlin, and we talk for a long time. Jüri and Astrid Järvet, Arvo and Nora Pärt, Neeme and Lilia Järvi, Anatoli and Fira Hanson, Kaido Kuusik and his mother, and Anna Ekston and

others visited us. So did Arnold Aaviksoo. Arnold and I had toiled side by side at the sovkhoz during those difficult years. We meet now as well when I am in Tallinn. We share many memories and are warmed by a strong friendship.

My childhood and youth were spent in Berlin. As a young girl, I dreamed of becoming an actress. I passed the exams and was accepted to the Reinhardt Kunst Schule, but my parents were against it, and I gave up my studies because I didn't want to upset my mother and father.

In my youth in Berlin, I was well acquainted with the actor Ivan Mozzhukhin, who lived in the house next to ours. While visiting him, I also got to know the singer Fyodor Shalyapin and the film directors Turzhansky and Volkov.

From 1985 to 1996, I had roles on film sets in Berlin. The parts were small, but each one brought me joy, because my dream had come true.

In recent years my husband, older sister, niece Marina and brother Viktor, Anatoli Hanson, and my sister Raja's husband Hermann Meiertal have all died.

On 3 November 1999, I was once again at a concert by the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra at the Berlin Philharmonic. The conductor was Neeme Järvi. After the concert, we met and talked. We remembered how I had met him and his family in Vienna after they left Estonia.

Also present at this concert was composer Arvo Pärt, with whom we have shared many an experience. He currently lives in Berlin with his family.

I am proud of my friendship with these great musicians.

I dedicate this memoir to my dear children Gaby Bernstein and Eduard Klas, their spouses and children, my sis-

ter Raja Meiertal, my relatives Eri Klas and Georg Heindriks, and my friend Arnold Aaviksoo.

And one more note: sometimes I ask myself what fate would have befallen me, my husband and my daughter, Gaby, if this terrible episode in my life had not happened. We would probably have been murdered right after the start of the war, just like my husband's parents and his brother – the father of Eri Klas – whose name my son, Eduard, now carries.

Afterword

When my mother and I arrived at Vera Ivanovna Rengina's cottage, we found out that my Aunt Raja was still in hospital after giving birth to a daughter. This is how our life in the village of Darovskoye began. This tiny settlement consisted of a few dozen small wooden houses, each with a plot of land that allowed for planting some vegetables and keeping a couple of chickens and perhaps even a pig or a cow. Most people worked at the kolkhoz. We were ushered into a small room that served as Aunt Raja's home. We awaited her return from the hospital with her newborn Marina. After a few days, they arrived, but my aunt was very sick. She had malaria, as well as an acute inflammation of the mammary gland, so she could not calm Marina. Raja lay in bed facing the wall for days, and we could not communicate with her. My mother started exchanging clothes from our suitcases for milk from women in the village so that Marina would not starve. There was seldom anything left over for four-year-old me. We all suffered from hunger back then. I often went to bed hungry. In addition to this, I became seriously ill with measles. However, as often happens in life, there is no bad without good. My aunt contracted measles, which in turn helped her get rid of malaria. She slowly recovered until she once again showed interest in her child, and a spark of life was ignited. One day, I was home alone when someone knocked on the door. I opened the door, and a beggar entered the room with a cloth knapsack. I told him: "We have nothing ourselves; we are deportees." Then the beggar opened his cloth bag and gave me a piece of bread. I will never forget that.

Rumours had spread among the villagers that my aunt was a psychic, that she read cards and could predict the future with them. The village women, whose men were at the front, started visiting us. They asked my aunt to read cards for them and predict their fate and the fates of the men. In gratitude, they brought us milk, eggs, potatoes and more. Thus we somehow put food on the table.

Little Marina was a frail child. Seeing her, the village women shook their heads: "She will not survive. There is no life in her eyes." Marina fell seriously ill with pneumonia and was taken to the hospital. Antibiotics were unknown at that time. According to the doctor, the only hope was to do a blood transfusion. Without further ado, my mother offered her blood. The blood transfusion was conducted without the required tests, such as blood grouping. However, Marina's system accepted the blood; gradually she recovered and was soon able to return home. That's how our life went; food was scarce, and my mother slept on the dining table because there was only space for one bed in the room. Today I don't remember where Marina and I slept. I don't even remember how long we lived with Vera Ivanovna. After several rejections and months of effort, all four of us got permission to move to a bigger city, Malmyzh. Relatives of Raja's husband, Hermann, had been forced to live there, namely his mother and sister-in-law, as well as his mother's old acquaintances and other deported people from the Baltics. Evacuees from other parts of Russia also lived there. I only remember that the journey there was arduous and tiring.

In the meantime, we learned that my father and Uncle Hermann had been convicted under the infamous Section 58. One of them had to serve a five-year prison sen-

tence and the other had to serve three years, each as "enemies of the people", in a forced labour camp in Siberia, beyond the Urals. However, as far as I remember, life was a little easier in Malmyzh. We moved to our new home as free individuals, and my aunt and mother found work. Marina was taken care of by her grandmother and Uncle Hermann's mother, who lived with us. I went to kindergarten. I think it was 1942–1944.

One day, after three years in the labour camp, Uncle Hermann came back. Now there were five of us. At that time, many people we knew well were arrested. As it turned out later, they were given long prison sentences of up to twenty-five years as "enemies of the state". They were accused of anti-Soviet activities and propaganda and spent years in labour camps. Someone had made reports to the security agencies. Unfortunately, from our family, Hermann's wife, who lived with us, was also arrested.

In 1946, after five years in the camp, my father returned to us. A year had passed since the end of the war. He and a friend, a fellow prisoner whose family was also in Malmyzh, covered the final fifty kilometres on foot. Unable to bear the burden of what he had survived, the friend died on his family's doorstep. My father was also nothing but skin and bones. Uncle Hermann and my father both received permission to return to Estonia, their homeland. In the meantime, Raja had a son, and we were all able to start our journey home.

The journey was very long, tiring and dangerous, but we finally arrived in Tallinn. The war was over, and life was hard for everyone, but we were happy to be home and together again. My father got an engineering job in a factory, and we settled in a two-room apartment on

the factory premises. One night, two militsiya took my mother to the city jail. She was accused of leaving her place of deportation without permission. My father did everything in his power to free her. After my mother spent six weeks in prison, they were about to send her back to where she had been deported, accompanied by an armed guard. But luckily, my father managed to get all the necessary documents in order in time to track down my mother on the way and bring her back home.

We moved on with our lives. In 1948, my brother Eduard was born. I went to school, and my parents went to work. In the same year, a decree was passed that prohibited all former deportees from living in the capital of the republic or within a hundred kilometres of it. So we moved to the provinces, where we again had to start from scratch. A small town around a factory became our new home. I went to school again, my parents went to work, and my brother went to kindergarten. These circumstances did not last long, I think about one year; after that, we were deported again and forced – this time all together, with our bags and at our own expense – to return by train to our initial place of deportation. We arrived at another small town called Slobodskoi, also in Kirov Oblast, where we had to settle down on our own. My parents' identity cards (their internal "passports") were confiscated. They had to report to the authorities every week and were not allowed to leave the city. I went to school again, and my parents found jobs. We moved every few months, because we were not very welcome as tenants. The rooms we managed to rent were small, so in most cases, I had no place to sleep and slept either on the stove or on the floor. None of the houses we lived in was connected to sewage systems. We had to bring water from a communal well that had a pump, which was sometimes located a few streets away.

It was my job to carry the water. In winter, in minus-forty-degree frost, the water pumps froze and had to be thawed. Then I carried water home in two buckets using a *koromyslo* (shoulder yoke). That's how we lived. It wasn't easy, but we were together. In 1953, Stalin died, and a year later we were finally freed from resettlement. I was about to graduate. My parents waited for me to finish school. In 1955, we returned to Tallinn to start all over again.

This is the general outline of what my mother wanted to record in the second part of her memoirs. I felt an obligation to her to describe at least what I remember from my childhood. I have tried to recall the facts without conveying the emotional background. You, dear readers, may judge for yourselves how well I succeeded in this.

Gaby Bernstein