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Galina Melikhova

Jew or the Kuban Psalm  
Short novel

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*Someone said the sun is shining  
The same for everyone.  
What a lie!  
Can't we see that one raises  
His head to wash his face in its rays,  
And the other, with his head low, hides in the shadows.*

### Prologue

There are several thousand nations and peoples on Earth. Big and small, young and old. The Jewish people are among the most ancient people living on our planet.

From the depths of ancient civilizations, the faces of biblical prophets, kings, and generals are looking at us.

The voices of ordinary Jews who have experienced many trials and finally found the Promised Land reach us. The sons of Israel lived, prospered, and multiplied, forming their state, the Kingdom of Judah. The riches of the Kingdom of Judah attracted the envious eyes of their neighbors. Many powerful enemies attacked their lands. Assyrian and Babylonian kings came for prey. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were taken away and turned into slaves. The Jewish state ceased to exist under the blows of the mighty Roman Empire.

The Jews were dispersed. They settled in the Middle East, and then, in search of a better life, they appeared in Europe and Asia, dividing into two large branches: Ashkenazi Jews in Europe and Mountain Jews.

The legend of the origin of the Mountain Jews says that the Persian king Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid dynasty in 538 BC conquered Babylon and freed the Jews who lived there as captives.

Some of them never returned to Israel, while others followed Cyrus to Persia, the territory of modern Iran. Their journey continued, and they arrived in ancient Azerbaijan (Albania), where they settled compactly. From Quba in Azerbaijan to the Kuban, the Jewish population lives densely, preserving all the customs and rituals of Judaism, as evidenced by synagogues and traditional and funeral rites.

Some of them spoke Farsi while retaining their religion. The local population called them the Tat people, which means “foreign” in Farsi.

From the territory of Albania, Mountain Jews passed along the Great Silk Road through Derbent and settled throughout the North Caucasus. The northernmost settlement of Mountain Jews is the city of Nalchik. However, there were also Jewish settlements in the Krasnodar and Stavropol Krai.

Living in these territories with other ethnic groups without losing their roots, the Jews experienced all the sorrows and joys of life.

Their history is connected with the surrounding peoples and states where they lived.

### Chapter I

The Kuban is so beautiful in the summer: the river and the region it hugs!

We may limit our delight only to this phrase. Whatever else we say, the feeling of understatement will not leave us.

I mean "us" for my sister Galina – she's a teacher and has long become Melikhova – and me, Efrem Amiramov, a fifty-year-old man who considers himself a freelance artist. This little information is necessary so the dear reader at least knows who exactly wastes his precious time.

Only one feeling prompted us to tell you this story: the desire to share the delight of realizing the absolute justice of everything that happens to anyone in his life.

We believe our story will give faith in justice to those who have lost it.

Let's get started.

The Kuban River gathered around hundreds of villages resting along its waters, like lovers at the feet of its floating beauty.

The space all around is covered with golden waves of wheat stalks.

The sun rises and goes down beyond the distant horizon full of bright colors. Bogdanovka is a typical, not very small Cossack village. Jewish families lived there, among the Cossacks. No one remembered when they had arrived or how long they had been living there. Who cares?

Men left for the royal service, and some of them returned with Crosses of Saint George after the Russian-Japanese war.

They were not afraid of work and knew how to drink and paint the town red.

There were rascals and heavy drinkers, even bandits among the Jews, too, but whatever they were, people lived in harmony in the Kuban.

## Chapter II

A blondish boy stands by the hedge between two yards, watching the neighboring house, waiting for his girlfriend to appear. His blond hair shimmers with golden threads in the sun.

Esther sees Stepan from the window and runs to the door.

"I'll go to play," she shoots to her parents.

"First, help your mother with the housework," Timofey stops his daughter quietly but insistently.

"I've already helped – Yes, Mom?"

Her voice rings like a bell.

"That's true, my dear," said Reva, Esther's mother, affectionately, "If you want, you may go for a walk with your friends –"

She exhaled to the air, "The worries won't get lost –"

"Esther! Esther! Where are you?" cries out Stepan again.

"This idler won't get off our back. You know girls shouldn't play with boys," says her father sharply. He looks into his daughter's beautiful emerald eyes, admiring her deep inside, and thinks she is still a child.

Timofey went out onto the porch of his house and sharply shouted to Stepan, "Instead of standing for hours at this hedge, you would better help your father with the housework, you loafer!" Esther slipped past her father, kissed him on the cheek, and shouted while running away, "Daddy, I'll be back soon!"

That was how she fluttered out of the house.

She ran to the young Cossack already flying towards her.

"Well, when you come back, I'll show you –" Timofey laughed at his threat after his beloved daughter.

Holding hands, the children ran toward their dear Kuban. Esther's black curls clung to Stepan's golden forelock. Having reached the shore, where a gang of children was waiting for them, they rushed into the sparkling river waters with a running start.

"Esther, let's race!" shouted Styopka.

The pleasure and happiness were boundless. The children frolicked, dived, and swam in a race. Only when the lips turned blue and the teeth chattered from the cold, they buried in the sand and warmed up under the bright sun. Through half-closed eyes, with his eyelashes quivering, the young Cossack admired the Jewish girl. Her fiery black curls sprinkled with sand, and her emerald eyes shone with all the colors of the river. Feelings that were not yet clear to him touched Stepan's innocent soul. Much later, he did understand them: it was love.

### Chapter III

Halfway to the river, just half a verst from the village, right in the field among the bread, there was a huge mulberry tree, the true ataman of the local flora.

A few steps from the tree trunk, still under its crown, there was a huge stone, a boulder with a flat top, which not everyone could climb. Gently touching the stone with its branches, the ataman cuddled its friend, whispered about everything that happened in the village, and protected him from the drizzling rain. They stood side by side as if gathered for a secret conversation.

The endless silence of the wise stone and the restless chatter of the tree have brought them evermore together.

People say, and with conviction, that this stone appeared here not before but after the tree had grown. Who knows if it matters?

Just in case, if you are interested, you can still see this centuries-old idyll today.

Now Stepan and Esther are running to the village children. In the evenings, friends waited for them under the tree near the stone. They gave each other their childhood, getting older. Most of all, they loved night horror stories and funny stories they used to tell each other. The most interesting narrator was Styopa.

It was in 1910. Esther was eleven years old, and Stepan was thirteen.

Another year has passed –

Everything is very simple, extremely simple, I would say.

One movement rules everything –

What is the time? Just water in a glass,

That moves if you touch it and stops if you leave it alone –

### Chapter IV

One day, as usual, nestling close to the hedge, Styopka was looking into Esther's window, waiting for her to come out. He saw Hana and called her.

"Where is Esther?" he asked the girl.

"She has Bat Mitzvah," Hana replied.

"What is it?" Stepan looked at the girl in surprise.

"Well, it's kind of a birthday when a Jewish girl turns twelve. She becomes adult and independent, responsible for all her actions; she must know the Torah and can even get married," was Hana's coquettish answer.

"Married?!"

The young Cossack looked at her as if trying to realize something.

The friendship between Stepan and Esther resulted in something precious, intimate, and incomprehensible for both of them. He was already fourteen years old.

"I might be her husband," a fantastic thought kicked across his mind. He could not even imagine that his beloved girlfriend was long ago promised to Benya, the son of Asher and Sarah, who was two years older than Stepan.

The day after, as usual, a cry came from a neighboring yard.

"Esther! Where are you? We are waiting for you!" shouted the young man, barely waiting for the morning. He couldn't wait to meet her sooner.

"When this forelock troublemaker will finally leave us alone?" grumbled again Riva, Esther's mother.

Finally, the birthday girl arrived. She changed dramatically: her clothes, her conversation, her manners. She looked at him with a sly tenderness, and her eyes seemed unusually beautiful. Styopka could not take his eyes off Esther. Instead of curls, which only yesterday were randomly scattered over the shoulders, she had one thick braid put over a small, slightly arising breast. His heart beats faster than usual. She was his beautiful Esther.

"Wow! You are so beautiful! Well, you have a braid!" said Styopka admiringly and gently touched his girlfriend's hair. The girl was confused. A bright color appeared on her face.

"Let's go to our stone. I'll tell everyone a funny story," said the Cossack joyfully.

The guys that were waiting for them moved in a crowd. The young man, as usual, wanted to take Esther's hand, but she carefully released it.

Unexpectedly for everyone, this mischievous and fussy girl changed into a sweet, sensible princess.

Life went on. Three more invisible years have passed.

## Chapter V

Once Asher, watching the kids playing in the yard, decided, "We need to marry our son and get grandchildren. This is time for Benya to have a family. Esther grew up and became a real bride."

It was a thought that haunted him.

"Get ready, Sarah, we'll go and talk to Timofey and Riva," he said to his wife one day.

"Yes, dear, I'm also thinking about it," answered Sarah to her husband affectionately.

They dressed festively and went to the house of the future bride.

"Riva, hurry up and set the table," Timofey cheerfully addressed his wife when he saw the people he respected.

"Wait, Timofey. First, we need to talk. We will have plenty of time for sitting at the table," the guest replied.

The hosts guessed what the guests had come to see them about. They seated the dear guests and started a warm conversation with them.

"We have come to set the date for the engagement of Benya and Esther. She has been ours since she was a child, but we want to do everything traditionally, as required by law. It is the best time to marry our children and surround ourselves with grandchildren. How do you feel about that?" asked Asher, who knew that Esther's parents would like what he was talking about. Timofey hesitated. He knew that Esther was not ready to be a wife, but her friendship with Stepan would not lead to anything good. They were too keen on each other. It was high time to stop it before it was too late.

At last, he said with determination, "I think you are right, Asher."

He looked carefully at his wife. Riva understood her husband in her heart and let him know it with an approving glance and a nod.

Esther's fate was decided without her. Riva and Sarah smiled silently, knowing that with God's help, everything would be fine.

"Riva, my dear, call our bride, our little girl. We want to hug her," said the guest cheerfully. Esther entered the room where the guests were seated. Everyone admired her. She said a friendly hello and took a seat next to her mother.

"Come, let me kiss you, my beautiful daughter," said her future mother-in-law. Her words seemed strange to the girl, but she approached the guest. Sarah took the girl by the shoulders, looked intently into her eyes, and held her tightly to her heart.

"You are our beauty, our sunshine," babbled Sarah happily, admiring the bride.

After the guests had left, the parents decided to talk to their daughter.

"Darling," Timofey began the conversation cautiously, "Benya's parents came to arrange your engagement. My mother and I agreed because you and Benya have been engaged since childhood, even though you have rarely spoken to each other. He is a very nice boy and will make a fine husband for you."

Finally, Esther understood what the ceremony was all about.

"I don't want to get married!" cried out Esther excitedly. Bright color covered her face, her voice trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. Her gaze wandered between her father and mother. Seeing no sympathy or understanding in his nor her eyes, she ran swiftly out of the house.

Catching the eyes of their daughter, Timofey and Riva realized they were going against her will. They knew about the warm friendship between Esther and Stepan, but they would never allow their daughter to marry a Cossack, no way! The parents were worried about their daughter but still were glad that the engagement was with Benya, even if the only thought that his sunshine, his beloved daughter, would not be with him tore Timofey's heart apart.

Riva followed her daughter out. The girl was sitting on the porch, huddled against the railing. She was looking at the hedge where Styopa, her faithful and devoted friend, waited for her day by day.

"Forgive me, Stepan!" said Esther quietly, looking up at the hedge where the image of the young man appeared before her.

"Is the happy childhood over? Will we no longer run together to the beloved tree and the cherished stone where Stepan and the boys used to spend joyful evenings?" flashed the thought in the girl's mind.

Sitting next to her daughter, Riva embraced her and explained, "Daughter, you have to put up with our customs and traditions. There is nothing you can do. I did not want to marry your father just like you do, but now I'm happy."

"But I won't be happy," said Esther through tears.

Finally, the day of the engagement arrived. Benya put the ring on the bride's finger, for the first time looking closely at her future wife, who was staring at the same point with a detached gaze.

Esther's thoughts were far away, and Benya just admired his future wife and thought about how happy he was.

## Chapter VI

A handsome, sturdy lad with a gold-brown forelock watched the neighbor's yard curiously, leaning his whole body against the hedge. An incomprehensible excitement was on the young Cossack's soul.

"Why doesn't Esther go out as usual?" he thought, "What are these guests and this fuss in her house?"

Unable to stand it, he shouted, "Esther!"

Much later, Hana came out with her head low and approached Stepan.

"Hana, why can't I see Esther? Where is she? Who are these people in her house?" asked the Cossack indignantly.

After a short silence, knowing how hard it would be for Stepan to hear it, Hana said quietly, "Don't call her, please."

"Why not?" wondered Stepan.

"She's getting engaged with Benya."

"With Benya? What did you say? I didn't understand," said the young man, confused.

Hana repeated reluctantly, "Esther is marrying Benya."

For a moment, unable to understand anything, Stepan was still in his ghostly past, but the illusion disappeared quickly, and he understood what was happening.

"What does it mean? My dear girl is getting married, and someone else, not me, will be by her side!" flashed through the boy's mind.

"Esther, how will I live without you?" was his second thought.

"Esther!" cried out Stepan's whole being, but his lips remained mute as he repeated the name of his beloved. It seemed that the village and the entire world heard that silent cry.

Leaving the yard, Stepan wandered down the street. The young man came to the cherished stone that reminded him of the happy days with his beloved when he told her stories to cheer her up.

He fell, covered his face with his hands, and wept. He was in love for the first time, and he had always loved only Esther, since he was a child, with all his heart. He had never revealed his secret, but she guessed it and was happy.

"Why did she hide her marriage? Why? The Jew took her away from me!"

This burning resentment stuck a lump in his throat, and the stony word "Jew" burst out frantically.

The young Cossack lay there for a long time, harboring inside vengeance and anger against everyone around him.

It was time for the wedding. The hedge, where the Cossack used to stand, was sad and lonely. From the window, the Jewish eyes and the young Cossack watched each other sadly. Their hearts were worried, as before, waiting for something –

## Chapter VII

One day Afanasy, Stepan's father, came home and said quietly. "Daria, Timofey and Riva have invited us to their daughter's wedding."

"Lord, what will happen? Our son is still suffering!" the young man's mother was worried.

"There's nothing we can do, it's not their destiny to be together," Afanasy reassured his wife.

"I think it will pass in time," Daria reassured herself.

Cossacks and Jews drank to the health of the young and each other. The whole village was in high spirits. Chuppah and kiddushin rituals were performed, as required by Jewish law. The bride and groom were under the wedding canopy. It was as if their coronation was taking place under heaven, and the whole life of the couple was dedicated to creating a family. Chuppah, supported by poles, is open on all sides. From this moment, a new family is born to continue not only its line but also that of Moses.

At last, the young ones were left alone.

"Esther!" said Benya with excitement, touching slightly his bride, but she recoiled from him like a savage.

Fear and excitement overcame the girl, and her eyes filled with tears. Immersed in her thoughts, in her lurking dream, she thought of the man she had grown up with, the friend and the man she dreamed of the future with.

"What will happen to him? Where is he now? Is it over?" was the young beauty thinking.

The groom watched the bride with tenderness, understanding her situation. He knew about the friendship between Stepan and Esther but did not think how dear they were to each other.

Benya was a good, well-mannered boy, tall and with beautiful features. He was about nineteen years old. Cautiously approaching his wife, he whispered, "Esther, dear, everything will be fine. I promise you."

He approached her holding out his hand. The girl understood that the law of Jewish traditions couldn't be changed, because it was one of the covenants.

Timidly, she gave the groom her hand of fidelity and her maiden honor. That evening, the young couple realized that their lives had changed. A new feeling of a flaming body rekindled a little fire in Esther's smoldering heart. They became husband and wife.

## Chapter VIII

Stepan went far into the steppe on the day of the wedding of his beloved, so that nothing would remind him of the past. He hated the whole world. Everything he had lived for and treasured most in the world was taken away from him.

“Oh, Esther! How could you be so cruel to me? Today, melancholy and sadness again took possession of me. Today I feel sadness and sorrow again. How, my love, can I get rid of this pain? I didn't know that one day I would lose you,” thought the young man, but he understood that it was not of her own free will that Esther became another man's wife.

Anger and resentment haunted him.

## Chapter IX

Everyone in her husband's family loved Esther. However, one could often see her thoughtful. In her mind, she often saw the image of a young man with whom she had spent all her happy childhood.

Her parents often visited their daughter. Esther had a good husband who loved and spoiled her like a child. Benya fell deeply in love with his wife and thanked God for the happiness he had been given.

“Benya, I want to tell you something,” said Esther once to her husband.

“My dear! What do you want to say?” said Benya in surprise.

“You will be a father soon,” said Esther modestly.

“What?” he couldn't believe his ears, “What did you say again?” asked the future father in confusion.

Embarrassed, she looked at her husband in silence. Benya, too happy to wait for an answer, grabbed his wife in his arms and spun her around the room.

“Lord, thank you!” Benya said excitedly, raising his hands to the sky.

“What was that noise? What happened?” Sarah rushed into the room worried.

“You'll be a grandmother soon: that's what happened!” shouted Benya cheerfully, running to his mother and hugging her tightly.

“Oh, what a joy! We must hurry to tell Timofey and Riva. They will be so happy!” said Sarah and rushed off with the good news to her relatives. Hearing the good news, Esther's parents decided to prepare a dowry for the unborn child, according to Jewish custom.

## Chapter X

Benya was a good shoemaker and shod almost the entire village. He sewed shoes and gave them for sale.

On Sundays, villagers would see the young couple strolling among the small shops selling beautiful things and jewelry. One day, Stepan saw them while choosing a saddle for his horse. Turning around in the noisy crowd, he saw familiar eyes staring at him point-blank.

The Cossack's heart sank. He could not tear his gaze away from the one that occupied his heart and thoughts. The husband threw an enormous cashmere shawl over his wife's shoulders. Her cheeks, flushed with excitement, merged with the bright shawl colors. Esther never took her eyes off the one she had often thought of, without seeing anyone or anything else.

“How are you, Styopa?” she asked a passing friend. The boy's heart beat harder. He was confused and left in silence without an answer.

Esther, back home, was thinking a lot and answering inappropriately. She could never forget Stepan.

## Chapter XI

Time passed, and life went on. Today, there is a bustle in Esther and Benya's bedroom.

Esther is giving birth. Outside, a young father and his parents are waiting and worrying. Hearing the baby cry, they realize that it has already arrived. The door opens. Riva, panting with happiness, almost shouts:

“Benya, dear, you have a son, and we have a grandson, a grandson!”

Everyone rushes to embrace and congratulate one another.

Timofey, with tears of happiness, raises his hands to heaven and says:

“Thank you, Living and Eternal Lord, for giving us a grandson by your mercy. My faith in you is grand.”

“My boy,” admires the young mother as she hugs the baby, already wrapped in swaddling clothes by the midwife invited for the delivery.

“Thank you for my son. How are you feeling?” says Benya, anxious, as he enters the bedroom and sits on the edge of the bed, keeping his loving eyes on his wife and son.

“Let me hold him,” Benya eagerly takes the baby in his arms.

“We’ll name him Yakov, after my grandfather,” says the happy dad.

“All right, let it be so, Yashenka!” replied the young mother, still very weak after childbirth, looking at her son in his father's arms.

On the eighth day, according to Jewish custom, the baby was circumcised. Sarah hung a six-pointed gold star on a leather strap around the baby's neck.

“Yashenka, this Mogen David will protect and preserve you,” the grandmother said as she kissed her grandson.

This child was surrounded by care and attention from the very first days.

## Chapter XII

The storms of the First World War swept over the world.

Then two revolutions shook Russia. In February 1917, the Tsar was deposed. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks came to power.

Under these blows, Russia split into Reds and Whites, who began to destroy each other for their ideas with the redoubled force.

There was a violent confrontation between the Whites and the Reds in the North Caucasus, the Kuban, and the Don, like all over Russia.

The disaster continued onwards. Defeat at the front, ruin, the total devastation and desolation of many peasant farms demanded an explanation.

Agitators appeared out of nowhere and helped to find the culprits.

"Non-Christians are among us!" they incited the people.

A wave of pogroms swept across the Kuban and reached the village.

Afanasy tried to stop the drunken rioters by blocking their way and shouting, "What are you doing, you fools!"

"Get out, or we'll deal with you too, you defender!"

The rioters threw the Cossack away and rushed through the village, swearing at him.

## Chapter XIII

It was the Sabbath. Sarah and her daughter-in-law were preparing for the evening meal. Timofey and Riva came to visit their daughter and to see their beloved grandson on the Sabbath.

"Yashenka, smile," they said, doting on him as they loved him more than life itself.

"Come on, Yashenka, look at mommy!"

Esther played happily with her son, showing what he could do.

A hard blow to the gate surprised the household. Hearing the noise, Asher opened the door to see what was happening. When he saw people noisily entering the yard through the breached gate, he asked in bewilderment, "What's going on?"



"You're asking, Jew," said one of the assailants in anger and struck Asher on the head with an iron bar. Asher fell on the porch. Blood poured from his head. The blow was fatal.

Timofey and Benya rushed to defend the women and children.

"Run away with the children!" shouted Timofey to the women.

Everyone screamed, and babies cried. The terrified women and children did not know how to escape from the house. They were surrounded.

"Esther, run through the bedroom window, save our son!" shouted Benya to his wife in Hebrew.

Backing away, Esther jumped out the bedroom window into the backyard, clutched the baby to her chest, and ran. The eyes of the young woman were full of horror because of what was happening.

## Chapter XIV

"I must save my son!"

With this thought, she ran in her socks along the paths she knew, away from people and her home.

She ran past Stepan and his friend Yegor without noticing anything or anyone, with fear in her eyes.

Holding the horses by the reins, drunk, they were vigorously discussing the events. Seeing Esther with the baby in her arms, Yegor said slyly:

"Look, Stepka, here comes the one you've been pining away after till today. Go and take her at last, see if you calm down. You'll get away with it now: the war will justify everything."

"She's a long way off," said Stepan through his teeth.

"If you're a man, you'll catch her," Yegor continued to provoke him.

Something vile and terrible stirred in Stepan's drunken soul.

"Eh!" shouted Cossack, jumping on his horse.

Esther heard the hoof clatter and realized that someone was chasing her.

"I must save Yashenka!" was her only thought.

Finally, she saw the cherished stone, hid the sleeping child behind it, and kept running.

"Lord! Do save my son!" she begged the Almighty, running away.

The frightened woman heard the clatter almost behind her, turned round, and saw Stepan. Esther stopped abruptly, dazed with surprise, her eyes wide open, for she couldn't believe what she was seeing. She was looking straight into the familiar features.

"Could it be Stepa?" flashed a thought in the young woman's mind.

"Get away, Esther, get away!" shouted Stepan, sobered by fright, in a voice not his own.

But the horse reared up and knocked the young woman to the ground with a hoof strike. He jumped off the horse and rushed to her. He did not know what he was doing because he was madly in love with her. Cramping, whispering something unintelligible, Esther looked at Stepan with a bewildered look. Clutching his hands to his head, he fell to his knees next to his love. Hugging her dear head, which was bleeding, he started screaming wildly and calling for help.

"What have I done? My darling! Forgive me! I'm sorry! Help!" shouted the Cossack. Esther looked at Stepan without taking her eyes off him. She still could not understand that her murderer was her Stepan.

Yegor rode up imposingly, dismounted from his horse, and came closer.

"So, have you calmed down?" he asked with a smirk. He didn't expect to see what he saw. Esther was lying in front of Stepan, convulsing and moaning.

"You're something, Stepan! Cut her throat so she does not suffer. Don't you see she is dying? What a pity!" continued Yegor.

"Go away, you bastard, I'll kill you!" the Cossack hissed in anger and squeezed his saber in his hand, unable to withstand the vile advice of the provocateur.

Yegor did not move and continued, "Come on. I speak the business."

Furious, he struck Yegor in the face with his saber and shouted in a hoarse voice, "Go away, go away!"

Yegor yelled wildly in pain, grabbed his cheek, jumped on his horse, and shouted as he went away, "I'll have my revenge, you bastard!"

## Chapter XV

Stepan knelt one more time in front of his beloved.

"My – son –" whispered Esther in syllables, barely squeezing them out of herself, then looked towards the road without turning her head and again straight into Stepan's eyes. That look stopped on him forever.

"Esther! Wake up! Don't die!" the young Cossack shouted, shaking the lifeless body, "God! Do whatever you want with my life, but don't take her away, take me away!" the madman begged the Almighty.

"My love, wake up, live!: the Cossack pleaded belatedly, "What have I done? What have I done? Forgive me!" clutching his head, the culprit howled. One more time, in despair, he shouted madly, "Esther!"

This time Esther didn't hear the sufferer cry, but the whole Bogdanovka, Earth, and Heaven did.

Numbly, he looked at his departed love, which he had dreamed of all his life.

"Now she is beside me, but I can't hear her, and she can't hear or see me," he thought.

The eyes, those eyes the young Cossack once admired, were lifeless. How could he forget that last look of hers?

"Farewell, my life," Stepan whispered, closing the eyes of his beloved forever.

After fixing the torn clothes on her body, Stepan took off his shirt and covered the one he loved most. He had dreamed for all his life to take her in his arms and hold her to his chest. He took the lifeless body and went nowhere without sorting out the road.

The road led past the stone where they had dreamed of their future. Without tearing Esther from his breast, he sat on the bench under the tree where he and the boys had once entertained each other. Finally, Stepan put her dear body on the ground and knelt before it. The images of the past were flashing before Stepan's eyes, the past which was impossible to return. He was brought out of his stupor by the whimpering and crying of the child, whose life his mother had left to God, Stone, and Tree. As he came closer, the Cossack saw the baby under the branches of a familiar tree that swayed above him.

## Chapter XVI

"That's what Esther wanted to say," guessed the Cossack. Stepan took the baby in his arms, looked closely at his face, then clasped the child tightly to his breast, as his mother had done. No one knows how long he sat beside the body of his beloved with the child, who watched curiously the leaves above his head, swept over like a fan with the breeze.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt him. Your son will be mine. Farewell, darling, and forgive me!" addressed the culprit to the baby's mother; she found rest under a little mound by the tree, which immediately covered it with its branches, protecting it from the mad world.

Stepan wandered home with the child in his arms.

"Whose child is he?" asked Afanasy and Daria.

"Mine, mine only," said the young Cossack proudly.

Stepan's mother took the child from her son's hands and wailed, guessing whose child it was and that her son was the cause of the baby's orphanhood.

Years later, Stepan confessed to his mother and father what he had foolishly done and could not forgive himself for the rest of his life.

"A part of Esther is always with me," Stepan reassured himself. He took the child in his arms and said, "I'll call you Sema."

That was the way the Jewish child Yasha became the Cossack son Semyon.

## Chapter XVII

Afanasy saw what happened to his neighbors and ran to Suruil, a Jew who lived on the outskirts of the village. Suruil was a respectful person. He was small in stature, with a Cossack mustache curled upwards, strong-willed and brave. He had not yet recovered from the wounds received on the battlefields. Suruil was lying in bed when Afanasy, out of breath, ran into the house.

"They are beating Jews!" shouted Afanasy.

"Who? Why?" Suruil sat up in his bed, agitated.

"Who knows? Strangers came, said something, and off they went –" answered Afanasy.

Suruil looked at his wife point-blank with anger.

"I didn't want to upset you. You're ill. Your wounds haven't healed yet," replied the Cossack woman, Suruil's wife.

Soldier of the tsarist army, with two St. George Crosses for his heroism and feats of arms, Suruil jumped out of bed in a frenzy. He fought in the Russian-Japanese War in 1905 and participated in the First World War. Even later, during the Civil War, he became a lieutenant in Kochubey troops. He smoked tobacco, which he planted and harvested on his own.

He ran out into the street barefoot, wearing the shirt he was lying in, and took his saber on the move.

"Beasts!" said Suruil angrily.

"Sotnya, follow me!" shouted the commander at the top of his voice and stepped onto the road. He felt pain and resentment for the innocent Jews beaten for nothing.

Fellow Cossacks with sabers and whips in their hands began to join him on his way.

As he ran towards the crowd, he saw beaten people lying in blood and moaning or without any sign of life. Suruil stared at them with bloodshot eyes like a beast. His mustache twitched with a nervous tic.

He looked angrily and huffily at the Cossacks around him and shouted, "Where are they? Who has done this? You beasts! I'll chop them to death! Why?"

Everyone looked around, but those who incited had already fled. There were only those who beat and killed without sparing even children, and there were their victims lying in their blood.

The bloody veil fell. Everyone realized what happened. Those who, by fate, had become executioners sobered and stood with their heads down, not realizing what they had done.

Even the innocent Cossacks froze in horror. They were ashamed of the executioners who lived among them.

"Executioners are not only those who kill but also those who call for it. Their hands are in the blood, and those who did it, too. What can we do if people do not live by their wits?" said Suruil and slowly wandered home with his eyes full of tears, glancing at Afanasy with gratitude.

## Chapter XVIII

The year 1918 swept over Russia. Stepan, still very young, left Semyon to his parents and volunteered for the front.

When the Republic coped with the rebellions, the Central Committee of the Party sent the most steadfast communards to the army. Courage and valor became a duty for everyone.

Stepan was one of the youngest commanders. He became a commissar. At home, Stepan devoted all his time to his growing son. He taught him "things for real men".

Very soon, Sema became the best rider in the village. Sometimes his father would let him shoot with a Nagant Revolver or chop burdocks and sunflowers with a saber.

In the summer, Stepan would take his son to the river; they would bathe and rest on the shore. When Stepan met his son's eyes, he would immerse himself in the beautiful but unreachable past.

Sometimes the father took his son to the stone and the tree, where he sat for hours while the child played by a small hill. Then Stepan would spend the whole night immersed in dark and bitter reflections.

He no longer felt any jealousy, anger, hatred, or excitement. He poured moonshine on the past and remained devoted to his love in his thoughts and soul for the rest of his life. Sometimes in his sleep, he would cry out, "Esther, I'm sorry!"

Little Semochka would take a mug of water, bring it to Stepan, and say, stroking his father's head, "Don't be afraid, father, I'm with you."

He never realized to whom his father was addressing with anxiety in his sleep. At school, the boy studied well. He was an example of discipline for others. At the same time, he was persistent and achieved what he wanted. Time was passing. The year 1928 came, the year of collectivization. Stepan became the ChON commander (the Forces of Special Purpose). He traveled throughout the Kuban, smashing kulaks and counter-revolutionaries; sometimes, he took the boy on these trips.

"Watch and learn," Stepan said.

Since childhood, Sema saw his father as an example to follow.

Once, when Sema was playing on the street, one of the boys called Sema a jude. In blood and tears, he fought off three Cossacks with anger.

A man passing by stopped the fight and asked, "Who is such a hero?"

The stranger had a scar that ran across his cheek. That was Yegor, marked by Stepan, who returned after a long absence.

"This is Stepan's son, a foundling," the guys answered almost in unison.

Since the day of the pogrom, Yegor, fearing revenge, had gone to town to his relatives. He heard that Stepan had adopted the boy. Under the shirt torn during the fight, a six-pointed star gleamed in the sun. He understood everything: who the boy was and whose son he was, too.

The features of the one he and Stepan had killed, the one who came to him and Stepan in painful dreams and nightmares, were revealed.

"Stepka's a fool. The Jew will find everything out. He won't forgive him!" muttered Yegor, spat, and walked quickly away.

With bruises, abrasions, and a torn shirt, Semka flew into the hut and shouted angrily, shaking his fists out the window, "I'll show you!"

He came up to Stepan, smearing tears on his cheeks, and asked demandingly, "Father, why are they doing this? They mock a thing I have around my neck, and things on their necks are different. Why?"

Stepan hugged his son affectionately by the shoulders, looked into his green eyes, madly similar to the eyes of his only beloved, and said, "You will grow up and understand everything, and when you understand, you'll forgive them. Now let me take this star off so that no one could ever hurt you."

Stepan carefully removed the lace with a golden six-pointed star from his son's neck; he opened Sema's hand, put the mysterious star in it, and said, "Take care of it as the apple of your eye. It is your destiny."

The boy hid his great jewel and secret.

He would often take out his box and carefully examine his treasure.

Stepan's personal life never took shape. His mother's timid attempts to talk about marriage failed. The son would laugh it off or wave his hand away, sharply throwing, "It's not the right time."

"Son, we won't last forever. You're always traveling. The boy needs care, at least a stepmother's care."

"Why does he need a stepmother? He's fine," replied Stepan.

However, rumors about his adventures and victories on the dating front reached the village. Stepan remained lonely, unable to find in other women what he had forever lost with his first love.

One day, a gypsy band came to Bogdanovka.

"Gypsies are here, Semka, come quickly!" shouted the boys in the street. Sema ran out, pulling up his pants as he went.

The performance was a success. Gypsies from the band performed their songs and dances. They had a bear. An old gypsy played the violin and guitar, lighting up the spectators' fun. Sema laughed and clapped his hands the loudest. Seeing the sparkle in the boy's eyes, the old gypsy handed him the violin and said, "Here, try it."

With the memory of his ancestors, the boy took the bow and put it down on the strings.

After moving happily the bow along the strings, he had a dream of playing the violin.

"Thank you! I will play the violin like you," said Sema, passing the violin to the gypsy.

Sema already played the piper, the hand harmonica, and the drum made by his grandfather Afanasy, who felt guilty for his son and tried doing his best to make Sema have a good life.

## Chapter XIX

"I see you want to play the violin, son," said Stepan once to the future musician, holding a violin, "You will learn from David. He is the best music teacher."

Where he got this violin remained a mystery.

Sometimes, Stepan came home tired after work, exhausted and devastated; he relaxed in uncontrollable drinking and came to his senses when little Sema took the violin and the bow and played simple songs and melodies.

When the boy touched the strings, Stepan felt a shiver passing through his body and soul. He remembered Esther's father playing. Semyon's love for music passed from his grandfather Timofey, who could draw tears of sadness and joy with his virtuoso violin playing. The faces reflected feelings in different ways.

Enraptured by visions of the past, Stepan held his breath and absorbed the melody of the fate of past years.

However, the main thing in Sema's upbringing was military discipline. The boy felt the need for maternal affection. No matter how hard Stepan tried, he could not satisfy this need of the child.

Sometimes, Sema felt his father's attentive gaze. In the shadow, Stepan's eyes inquisitively watched the boy's face, similar to Esther's, like two peas in a pod. Stepan saw more and more of his beloved features coming through. Sema knew nothing about his mother and sometimes asked his father, "Who is my mother? Where is she?"

Stepan held the answer to this question deep inside him, which kept him awake, deprived him of sleep, and disturbed him with nightmares. Sema felt that Esther, whom his father called, was his mother.

One day, after another fight with the enemies of the people, the kulaks, Stepan returned to the village. He fell ill and never recovered from his illness. When he felt that the end was close, he called Semyon to his bed and whispered with lips sealed with fever, "Son, I'll tell you about your mother."

"What are you talking about, father? We'll talk about it later when you get better," said worried Sema, as he thought his father was talking deliriously.

Stepan's father and mother sat beside the sick man's bed.

"No, you must know everything," whispered the father barely to his son. Barely breathing, he told everything: about life, Semyon's origin, his love, the rise of the cruelty he felt for the boy's mother, the rock where Stepan picked up Semyon, and the mound where he buried his only love and sat for hours together with his son. Stepan made this difficult decision – to tell Semyon his secret – before he passed away.

"Why, why are you torturing yourself and Sema?" said tearfully his mother, who had helped her son grow from this child into a strong and healthy young man whom she loved as her grandson. Afanasy, Stepan's father, silently lowered his head and stood beside him. Before, Stepan would have killed anyone who tried to tell Sema what had happened to his mother and relatives.

Once again, he recalled the place near the rock where he had secretly buried his only love. It was an inconspicuous mound, under the branches of a mighty tree leaned low, that shielded it from the bright summer sun and the heavy autumn rains. It was where the leaves whispered in the breeze, talking to Esther, who rested beside it, about her son. Her very soul lived in this place. Esther had been here since she was a child when she was alive. That is why this place was crucial for Stepan. Here rested his beloved.

Stepan closed his eyes in mortal agony. His eyelids fluttered as if feeling the strange glowing of some unknown world.

Esther's image filled his soul. Her image called to him, and Stepan's heart leaped to meet the call.

In an instant, the gates of all paths of error opened before him. His soul froze in front of a new world, foggy, obscure, like the world of the underwater depths, where vague creatures and shadows moved.

"Son, don't leave us!" Stepan's mother wailed and fell on her knees before her son. Afanasy clutched his head with his hands and sobbed like a child.

## Chapter XX

Semyon stood motionless after what he had heard. Stepan's confession flashed again through his mind. Cruelty was born in the young boy's heart.

The beautiful young man convinced himself that he had the right to be merciless to this world, which was so cruel to his mother and relatives.

What he heard stunned him. Painfully reliving the past, the young man silently left the house, habitually took the violin, which fell into his hand, and slowly walked out of the yard.

His feet led him to the stone where his mother had once hidden him, where the young Cossack had picked up the baby. Sema approached the mound. He examined his mother's grave, which he had seen many times. He knew nothing about her but had always felt her presence and love.

Semyon had heard some rumors about the foundling, about the pogrom, but only Stepan revealed the whole truth before he died.

"Daddy, daddy, what have you done?" whispered the young man painfully, resentful deep inside of his and his mother's fate. Then he sat on the ground, embraced the mound, kissed it, and wept bitterly.

"How long I have looked for you and found you here! How I missed you, how short your life was! What are you like? Not even a photograph. How I long to see you! What did they do to your life?" said the son to the mother he had never seen.

He lay like that, deeply resentful of the perpetrators of his mother's fate, of those who had separated them since childhood.

His gaze stopped on the violin, which had been lying nearby all this time. Sema got up, picked it up, and played. Not the bow, but his wounded heart cried on the violin strings. It was his mother's tenderness pouring outward, embracing her son. He was pouring out his pain from the depths of his heart with this play.

Everything around froze, empathizing with the violin.

Bogdanovka stopped from playing.

Neighbor Herzel approached Sema.

The Cossacks called him simply Grisha. He was the younger sibling of Suruil called by Athanasy during the pogrom.

"What happened, Sema?" asked Grisha.

Sema was silent. There were no words to express what he was thinking.

"I was taking a walk and heard how beautifully you played. Your violin was weeping," Grisha continued.

"It will never weep again!" Sema said angrily, hitting the violin against the rock.

The violin broke with a groan, and the strings burst. It was the last cry of his former life.

Hertzel snatched the pieces out of Semyon's hands.

"Don't be silly. Why did you do that? The violin has nothing to do with it!"

"Here, under this mound, lies the one who gave me life, the one I've been searching for since I was a child. She was treated with cruelty," said Sema with resentment and pain.

"What are you talking about, my dear? Really?" said Hertzel sympathetically.

"Now I shall live a new life – with no pity nor sympathy. My principle is revenge," said Semyon angrily.

"Calm down, Sema, you're not alone, I'm with you," said Herzl.

Grisha's sincerity warmed the boy. He lowered his head to his friend's shoulder and sobbed even harder.

## Chapter XXI

Herzel was very talented: good at dancing and playing various instruments. He had recently had a son.

"Let's go to our place. I'll introduce you to my son," Grisha said with a smile, trying to reassure the young boy.

Grisha's mother, an intelligent and good-natured woman, warmly welcomed the guest. The Jews who remained after the pogrom in Bogdanovka knew about the fate of Yakov-Semyon, but kept silent. After all, Stepan himself and his parents brought up a Jewish boy.

When Semyon saw the baby, Herzel's son, sleeping sweetly in his mother's arms, he imagined that his mother and relatives held him tenderly like this.

Semyon's soul was at a loss.

"I might have had the same thing, but now there is no one with me," thought the guy.

"Grisha, thank you. I understand you want to support me, but you know, I think I'll go to him. I must see him off. After all, he is my father, who suffered in the past. God is his judge. Grandparents have no one but me. He never got married and never gave them other grandchildren. I'm their only one," said Sema gloomily.

"Of course, go, you're right. I want to tell you that the entire village knows how much he loved your mother and you. What happened is already in the past. Not out of spite, but out of love, he did it. And remember, I'm with you, dear," said Hertzel.

As Semyon approached the house, he saw Afanasy sitting on the porch with his hands on his head. His shoulders were shaking. Daria's wailing and lamentations were coming from the house. Afanasy saw his grandson and seemed to come to life. Sema came to his grandfather and sat down beside him.

"Don't be mad at your father. He loved her alone all his life, from childhood until his death. Stepan lived for you only. We have no one but you. Don't leave us! We won't survive it," said Athanasius tiredly, "If we are to blame for anything, I'm sorry!"

"I love you and Grandma. After all, you made my childhood happy. I loved my father, too, but I dreamed of my mother and felt bad without her. I wanted to say "Mom" so much. Well, you can't go back to the past. Let's go to him, for my grandmother is there alone."

They silently entered the house.

## Chapter XXII

At the age of eighteen, Semyon was drafted into the army. He got used to military discipline from childhood, endured all the hardships of service with ease, and thus earned the encouragement of his commanders.

"Thank you, father, for bringing me up in a manly way," Semyon often thought. After his service, he remained in the army and entered the NKVD school.

The NKVD troops got the man with convictions that made him an executioner.

From 1936 to 1938, there was a period of repression.

Semyon turned into an "exemplary" commander: a special agent.

Once, interrogating an "enemy of the people", he hit the defendant with his belt in the face. Grasping his eye, he screamed madly in pain and said through his teeth, "Jew –"

A shiver of hatred ran through the executioner's body. He stared into the victim's face with a wandering, half-crazed gaze. He could no longer assess the situation realistically and make informed decisions.

The atrocities he committed were accompanied by killing and torturing. When he returned home alone at night, he suffered from insomnia. A later remorse came, "How am I living? What am I doing?"

Then another day came, and once again, Semyon was adrift.

### Chapter XXIII

In 1942, Semyon was sent to the front as a platoon commander with the rank of senior lieutenant, as he was an NKVD officer.

His unit was located in the rear. They had to shoot cowards and traitors fleeing in panic from the battlefield.

"You shoot soldiers in the back, you coward!" said once battalion commander Captain Alexey.

"I am following orders," replied the senior lieutenant Semen.

"You are only helping the fascists to kill our people," said the captain.

"This is war. Cowards and traitors must be shot," replied Semyon.

"I wish you were in their place," continued the battalion commander.

"You may be right, but I just faithfully do my job," replied the platoon commander.

The next day, in the first attack, gunfire hit Captain Alexey. Semyon, as if continuing the previous conversation, fastened the strap of his cap on his chin, rushed out of the trench, which was thirty meters behind the company of the penal battalion, and shouted, "Hurrah!"

His shout seemed to him idiotic, but he still rushed ahead.

Nothing touched Semyon, neither bullets nor shrapnel.

"Who authorized you to make your own decision? If you want to be a commander of the penal battalion, then you will be," yelled the Major, who arrived at the battlefield.

For the first time in his life, Semen violated an order and did not repent. Yet he got orders and medals for his combat services.

### Chapter XXIV

August 1942. Germans in Bogdanovka. The Jews from Nalchik were worried by this news. The Jews in Bogdanovka called themselves Tats to save their lives. Some people said that they were not Tats but Jews.

Many managed to evacuate.

Kimho heard this news and decided to save her mother-in-law and her husband's relatives who lived there. She hired a carriage. As soon as she was about to part, her sister Hagule came running and shouted, "Where are you going, you fool? They are bombing there! I won't let you go!"

"Go away, leave me alone! I'm going to take them anyway. Get out of my way!"



Kimho pushed her sister away. When she reached Bogdanovka, she put her relatives in the carriage. As soon as they left for Nalchik, Messerschmitts arrived and started dropping their deadly cargo on Bogdanovka.

In Nalchik, Kimho's sister stood at the gate of the house. When she saw the refugees from Bogdanovka, she burst into tears.

"You're back alive!" she said through tears.

"Thank God we are all alive," Kimho replied.

She had been waiting for her husband for fifteen years after the war.

The war was over. He didn't come back. Kimho never received a condolence letter or a notice that he might have gone missing in a battle. Kimho waited for him. Her love was immortal.

She lived with her cousin Memei and every day told her children how she and her husband loved each other. That was what she lived by. She and her husband had only been married for less than a year. Kima was a good-looking woman. She was often wooed.

Many people told her, "Why are you wasting your time? You should get married. He'll never come back."

She replied, "What will people say? I know he's alive. What if he comes back? I love him very much."

Yes! Some women come into life to show the world that fidelity exists!

"How stupid you are," they told her.

Indeed, her husband returned after 15 years, but with another wife and children.

One day she was told that her husband was back.

At first, she thought they were fooling her, but Memei said sternly, "Yes, he is back, but I won't let you go there."

"What right have you to keep me away from him?" replied Kimho angrily and began to get ready to meet her husband, putting on her best clothes. She pushed her sister away and wanted to leave the house.

"He's wife and children with him," Memei shouted after her.

"What wife? I am his wife," Kimho said in surprise.

"You were and still are according to our traditions, but he is with another woman now, and they have children. Don't go, please," the sister said pleadingly.

The sisters embraced each other and cried. One cried for the offense and love she had been waiting for years, and the other cried for her sister's fate.

Kima lived all her life in the family of her cousin, who became her most dear. She continued to tell her sister's grandchildren about her love for her husband and his love for her.

Her fantasy mixed with the events in her heavy fate.

She used to open an album with pasted postcards and Russian folk love songs and sometimes sang Jewish songs in her native language, adding words from her life.

She sang to her sister's children and grandchildren, who were hers.

Her husband later told her that he had been wounded and concussed. He lost his memory.

"A Cossack woman pulled me away from the battlefield and healed my wounds. Well, we got married," he continued his story. They had children. After a while, his memory returned to him, and he went to Nalchik. He remembered Kimho with gratitude, for she had been waiting for him faithfully. He was also grateful because she saved his mother and relatives.

Her sister's children considered and still consider her a second mother. Kima helped her sister raise her children and loved them very much. They talk about her with gratitude and love.

Most of all, she loved Efremchik, who became her life, joy, and happiness, and he loved her just as much as he loved his mother –

He is our poet, composer, and performer of author's songs, the pride of Mountain Jews, People's Artist of Kabardino-Balkaria, Amiramov Efrem Grigorievich.

In Bogdanovka, the Germans herded the remaining Jews into a heap like cattle. Near the village outskirts, there was an ancient well that long ago was full of life. The Germans chose this place to massacre the Jews.

A policeman next to the Nazis was Yegor. The time for revenge finally came. It was for the Jewish girl that he had an enormous scar on his cheek.

"Schnell, schnell, Jude kaputt!" shouted the Nazis, driving elderly people in the last lines with rifle butts.

"Alik! Alik! My grandson! I won't give you to them! You're my soul! My heart! My life! God, help me!" screamed the old woman.

"Take the boy, please, I beg you – " she held out her grandson to the Cossacks standing aside. The Cossacks watched the scene with tears.

"His father will come back and take him away," she continued, but people were afraid for their lives, even if they wanted to help. Those brave men who tried to snatch the children from their parents' hands, were stopped with gunshots.

One of the fascists grabbed the screaming, frightened grandson from the woman's hands and threw him into the center of the crowd.

"Alik! Alik!" the woman shrilled again. A violent blow in her back interrupted her scream.

"Granny! Granny! Take me! I'm hurt!" cried the boy hysterically in a hoarse voice, but the grandmother couldn't hear her grandson. His cries and screams were lost among the other cries and tears of the defenseless people. They were Hertzels' mother and son, Efrem's brother and grandmother.

Helpless, humiliated, and offended, Jews were crying for help, but there was nowhere to wait for it. They were crying out in the wilderness.

Cossacks saw from the windows what was happening to their neighbors. They cried but couldn't help, fearing for their lives.

Suddenly a woman joined the crowd driven by the Nazis and policeman Yegor to the well and walked with the Jews. Yegor turned round and saw his mother.

"Mum, where are you going? They are going to finish them off!" shouted Yegor to his mother.

"I know," answered Yegor's mother calmly.

The policeman understood nothing and shouted again at a loss, "What are you doing? You are not a Jew!"

She turned her head towards her son and cried out, "Jesus was a Jew – What are you doing? Catch yourself on, son!"

She rushed to her son with fists. The Nazi next to Yegor saw someone rushing at the policeman, and shot from his automatic rifle. The mother fell right at her son's feet.

"What are you doing, you bastard? Who are you shooting at? She is my mother!"

Yegor grabbed his weapon, but the next automatic rifle shot interrupted him mid-sentence. He fell next to his mother. Their heads touched. Their hands intertwined in a last shake. With numb lips, Yegor said, "I'm sorry, Mummy."

"Son –" whispered the woman in agony and tried to embrace her son with her other arm, but it sank lifelessly. The mother's heart stopped as her son's heart did.

"Schnel, shnel, Jude kaputt!" continued the Nazis.

They took the Jews to an abandoned well, gave the men the shovels, and forced them to dig a deep ditch.

"Dig, Jude!" shouted the fascists.

Not one had any doubt why they were digging the ditch.

Voices and hands reaching for each other embraces and farewells by the well. The Jews buried the fruitless suspense for the last minutes of their lives when they still hoped for help and prayed.

The Nazis lined the Jews up and proceeded with the execution.

If only it were possible to look into those souls who were separated from their children, from their relatives, from a part of themselves while waiting for death.

After the war, the remains of about 500 people were found: many were shot in the head or back.

Many corpses intertwined in a tight embrace. Even death could not separate them. After the execution, the fascists threw the ditch with Earth and left.

Across the steppe, one could hear the horrifying groans for several more days, and the hill moved as if alive.

Death reconciled Yegor with the Jews. He and his mother found their last home in a mass grave.

Many graves were scattered everywhere. They marked the bloody path of the fascists across the Earth. No sign, no monument, no gravestone –

After the war, 472 names appeared on the granite obelisk in Bogdanovka. We bow down before you, innocent victims of fascism.

After the war, Hertzal put orders and medals on a new suit and – together with fellow citizens from Nalchik, whose fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters, and relatives were buried alive in that well – on May 9, Victory Day, drove solemnly in a stream of cars to Bogdanovka to pay tribute to those who remained lying there forever.

## Chapter XXVI

On that mournful day when the Jews were killed in Bogdanovka, one of the war prisoners had his heart squeezed with inexhaustible longing and bitterness. Clutching his heart, he lay motionless. A friend nearby asked him, "What happened? What can I do to help?"

"There is nothing to do. My heart feels the trouble. There must be something wrong with my relatives on the outside," said worried Hertzal.

His whole being refused the thought of the death of his son, mother, relatives, and friends. Anxious, despite the real danger of death, he continued to live and helped others to live.

After hard work, exhausted prisoners lay on bunks in the barracks. Hertzal decided to dance a lezginka to warm their souls. Before the war, he would join the circle of dancers on the stage with a naked saber and dance a delightful lezginka. He was tired but still danced so contagiously, with various steps and somersaults, that his friends started smiling.

The camp authorities were informed that a circumcised man was dancing a Caucasian dance in the prisoners' barracks.

Drunken fascists suddenly appeared in the barrack:

"Come here, dancer," called one of them out, barely speaking Russian, "A Jew?" he asked, looking straight at the dancer.

"A Karachai," answered Hertzal.

"They say you are a good dancer. Come on, dance," hissed the Nazi in lame Russian. While the fascists were laughing, clapping, and whistling, Hertzal went to the middle of the barrack, realizing that if he did not fulfill the fascists' desire, he would let his friends down.

"Erssa!" said the former director of the Karachai-Cherkess Ensemble, ballet master Hertzal, and ran barefoot on the stone floor on his toes. The Nazis did not let him stop and kept laughing, clapping, and whistling. Hertzal's toes were bleeding. Finally, one of the Nazis said, "All right, that's enough – Have some rest. You'll have to go to work in an hour or two."

"Are you going to let the Juda live?" said another fascist.

"Don't you see? He'll die soon. Let him suffer."

They left the barracks.

Hertzal fell to the floor. His hushed friends came closer and saw a terrible scene. Hertzal's feet, which had been doing steps and somersaults for them, were all bruised and skinned. Blood was trickling from his toes and knees. His friends carefully took their dear dancer, put him on the bunk, and wrapped his legs with any rag they could find. They had to go to work at dawn.

Shooting broke the silence in the barracks.

"The fascists are panicking. Something is going on over there," said one of the prisoners to his comrades.

The doors of the barracks opened with a noise.

"Brothers, you are free!" shouted the partisans.

Everyone rushed towards their rescuers, embracing them and crying with joy.

Hertzel tried to get up and fell again.

"Guys, help us to take our comrade. He can't walk," said Hertzel's bunkmate.

When the partisans came closer, they saw a man with sunken cheeks, an exhausted face, and beautiful grey eyes full of light. His bleeding feet were wrapped in dirty rags. They took him under his arms and led him out of the barrack.

"He is our dancer," said one of the prisoners proudly.

Hertzel returned home to Bogdanovka when the war was over. He knew nothing about the fate of his son and his mother.

There was no one at home.

When his neighbors told him everything, his life turned upside down. Until that moment, he still hoped deep in his heart that he would meet his son and his mother.

## Chapter XXVII

These bloody milestones marked the path of the fascists in the Caucasus. Seeking to assert their dominance, they raised the swastika standard over the grey peak of Mount Elbrus. The inhabitants of the multinational Caucasus stood up to defend their land, showing miracles of bravery, heroism, and selfless love for their motherland.

They stood firm. A simple detachment of Red Army soldiers overcame all the difficulties of the ascent and threw the fascist flag deep into the abyss. Not only regular units fought the fascists. This front passed through every town, village, house, and family.

As in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, a broad partisan movement developed in the Caucasus. The old, grey-haired men, the beardless boys, and even children joined in it.

The Caucasians fought for the freedom of their land without distinction of religion, nation, or language. History has left us with many names and examples of this.

Jews were warned to call themselves Tats to save their lives. Many citizens had connections with the partisans. One of Rabbi Rafram's sons was among them.

When the Nazis broke into the courtyard of his house on a traitor tip-off, his sons were off. Rafram warned the family to stay inside and left the house.

"Are you a Tat?" said one of the Nazis.

"No, I'm a Jew," Rafram replied proudly.

"Jude?" hissed the fascist, grabbed the old man by the beard, and threw him to the ground.

Together they began to beat the old man with their feet and the butt of the machine gun.

Rafram's wife Hizilim, daughters-in-law Efet and Arjus, and his daughter saw what the fascists were doing to the old man, ran out to the courtyard, and begged them to leave him alone:

"Tats, tats, we are tats!" they shouted, but the fascists continued to beat the old man brutally.

Rafram's daughter ran out of the courtyard and into the street.

"Father's being killed! Help!" screamed the frightened woman.

She raised her hands to the sky and prayed, "God help me!"

One of the Nazis threw the kippah off Rabbi Rafram's head. The old man grabbed it and clutched it tightly, forgetting the pain he felt from each blow.

When the Nazis were sure the old man was dead, they left.

"He is ready," said one of them, purple with physical activity.

The other fascist saw Kimho in the courtyard, swatted her ears on both sides with both hands, and followed other soldiers with laughter.

Blood gushed from her ears. She screamed in pain. That courageous woman who had saved her family, fearing no bullets or bombardment, was defenseless, like a child.

When Rafram's wife and daughter ran to the old man, they saw him tightly clenching the kippah with a proud look in his faded eyes. With the help of his daughters-in-law, they took him under their arms and dragged him inside.

"Daughter, why is Kimho shouting? Can you check?" Rafram's wife asked.

The young woman ran up to her sister.

"What's wrong with you?"

She immediately saw Kimho's face covered with blood.

"I can't hear, I can't hear!" kept repeating the girl.

"Mum, she can't hear. The fascists hit her on the ears."

The daughter was confused.

Rafram soon died of fascist beatings.

Hizilim, Rafram's wife, could not bear the death of her husband and began to wither from day to day. She gave up household chores and food went to bed, and never got up again.

"Mum, you must live, at least for our sake," her daughter begged.

"My place is by his side," she answered.

So she joined the one who was the essence of her life.

## Chapter XXVIII

Due to the particular importance of the defense of the Caucasus, the Soviet government established the Medal for the Defence of the Caucasus, awarded to thousands of soldiers and officers, as well as civilians who took an active part in it. Among them were Jews from Nalchik.

Semyon returned from the front with honor and with awards. He was appointed head of the KGB.

In his district, he got access to the documents and eyewitnesses and learned the story of the Jews from Bogdanovka. He learned about the policeman Yegor, who found peace with his mother on the same hill as the Jews.

He learned about the mother and son of Herzel.

He was dumbstruck. He felt the call of blood.

Semyon hurried to visit the mournful places.

The road went past the cherished Stone and Tree.

The passage of time razed his dear grave mound almost to the ground.

"What? How could I let it happen? I should have put a monument to you long ago," Semy

on said.

In his heart, he still felt pain and resentment for the fate of the one who had found her last shelter here.

In complete silence, he continued his journey to the place of tragedy: the mass grave.

"I bow down to earth and promise to keep eternal memory for you," Sema said aloud.

He turned around and saw a grey-haired man approaching the hill and shaking with sobs.

The orders and medals on his chest were jingling with his steps –

The features of the stranger were strikingly familiar to Semyon.

"Oh! You are Hertzl!"

He recognized his friend and rushed towards him.

"Sema, is that you?" said Hertzl and embraced him.

"I know everything about your grief and share it with you. Hold on, Grisha, you can't bring them back."

"I came to say goodbye to my mother, son, and relatives. I'm leaving for Nalchik. My relatives are already there. Come to my place if you want," Herzl continued.

The friends parted with great sadness in their hearts.

## Chapter XXIX

Semyon brought a simple white stone and a fence on a cart. The date of the short life of Esther was engraved on the stone. He and his colleague placed the monument on the mound and surrounded it with a small fence.

"Well, it's fine now," Sema said, "Still, something is missing."

The assistant said, "We always put a photograph on the stone."

"I don't have her photo. I've never seen her. I wish I had," sighed Semyon.

On a usual day, Semyon and his staff received the signal of the "well-wishers" and went to an address where a family was supposed to be engaged in illegal skinning and cattle slaughtering. When he entered the gate, he saw a girl sweeping the yard.

"What a beauty!" he thought.

"Who are you looking for?" the girl asked.

"The master," replied the stranger.

"Dad, someone's asking for you!" shouted Tsilya.

When the master of the house came out, the Lieutenant Colonel glanced at the girl and said calmly, "We have come with a search. We have received a signal that you are engaged in the clandestine skinning business."

The house owner was surprised. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Prove it."

He saw something familiar in the military man's features.

"I won't search your house, but be careful," said Semyon quietly so that his subordinates wouldn't hear.

For the first time in his life, he changed his principles. It was the fault of Tsilya, the master's daughter.

## Chapter XXX

The sense of duty was overwhelmed by some other feelings arising in Semyon's soul.

The master's wife came out. She came closer, took hold of her heart, and whispered, "Oh my God! Yashenka, my dear, is it you? My God! You look just like Esther!"

The unfamiliar woman opened her arms to the astonished Semyon.

Stunned Semyon said, "What are you talking about?"

Hana was laughing, crying, and shifting her gaze from Semyon to her husband and daughter. She said excitedly, "I told you about the fate of my friend Esther. Mardakhai, you remember her. He is her son, brought up and raised by the Cossacks. He is our violinist. I am so happy to see you alive and well! I followed you in your childhood, but after the death of Stepan, I lost sight of you. Thank you, Lord, that you saved and kept him alive and unharmed for us," Hana happily addressed the Almighty.

"Where is the Star of David that your grandmother put on you when you were born? It must have saved you for us," the woman continued.

Semyon stood stunned by the news he heard.

"What a stroke of luck! She's my mother's friend! At last, there is someone near and dear." A joyful smile appeared on the military man's face.

"Make yourself at home, son. Nothing will prevent you from learning our traditions and realizing your true roots. Let's go inside, Yashenka or Sema, I don't know what your name is nowadays," Hana could not calm down.

"Not now. We'll have time for that," Semyon said in confusion.

For the first time, he felt the warmth of home.

When he got home and took out the cherished box, he again felt anxiety, pinching sadness, and hope for a better future. He unbuttoned the collar and tied the leather cord wide. Semyon decided to put on his talisman and never took off his star for the rest of his life.

As he began to frequent Hana and Mardakhai's house, he realized that he could not live without Tsilya. One day Hana said, "Sema, dear, here I have found something that I have kept for so long and wanted to give to you, but it never worked out."

With these words, she held out a photograph to him.

In the old yellowed photo, Sema saw bright, radiant eyes, a delicate and pure oval of the face, and dark curls that covered the white forehead. For a long time, he looked at the features of the one he had dreamed of seeing all his life.

"Here she is!" the son finally breathed out.

He hid the photograph on his chest as his most sacred and dear thing.

He went to the best photographer. The photographer enlarged the photo, put it in a wooden frame, and handed it to Semyon.

One day, when he came to Tsilya, he unexpectedly turned to his close people, "If you can, visit Esther with me."

The next morning, they all came together to the monument hidden in the shade of a tree. Tsilya, always restless and defiant, was silent, clutching a bouquet from her garden to her chest. Semyon and Mardakhai, without a word, attached the frame with the photograph to the gravestone.

"Now, I think that's all over. Now you can rest in peace," Semyon said affectionately, kissing his mother's picture frame.

Hana put flowers on her friend's grave, "I knew you were here. I visited you, dear. I'm sorry I didn't come often. It was a mystery to everyone where you were. Many thought you were there with your family."

Tsilya was looking out the window, eagerly awaiting Semyon's arrival.

"Daughter, do you like our Semyon?" Hana asked her daughter one day. Tsilya blushed and said nothing.

Having fallen in love with Tsilya, Semyon proposed to her. Tsilya waited for this moment with impatience. The wedding was according to all Jewish customs. A year later, Tsilya gave birth to a son. In honor of Semyon's grandfather, he was named Timofey. Life went on.

After the war, a new internal war began: repression and purge of the party organs, now of Jews.

Sema fell under the millstones of this terrible machine. He was dismissed from the KGB. The family decided to change their residence and move to the city of Nalchik.

On the eve of their departure, Sema said to his wife, "I'm going to say goodbye to Esther." The word "Mum", which he did not know, worried him very much, and he could not pronounce it for some reason. That word was holy for him.

He was standing at the grave beside the stone where the whole life story of his mother, his Dad, and his own story began. Sema sat down, lost in deep thought. He tried to recall the most vivid moments of his life.

The tree rustled and whispered, bending its branches in front of Semyon.

"Confession!" a thought stabbed into his heart. It was here at the stone that had known him from his nappies. It was a ghost of his former life, which appeared and charged him with the bill for the hurt and suffering he had caused to others: the man who lost his eye during the interrogation; the fate of his mother, whom he had never seen, but had learned about her from his father; all those he had shot from the rear and sent under convoy to the camps.

Past, future, present. A kaleidoscope of events and faces flashed in his mind, one after another, and gradually formed a picture called "the life of special officer Yakov-Semen".

"Forgive me who can and I forgive all who have deprived me of my mother and kin. Farewell, wise stone, take care of my Esther."

Semyon wiped the glass on the photograph with his handkerchief and kissed it. Then, he went further to the grave where the victims of fascism were buried. He stood still, thinking. He was brought out of deep thoughtfulness by his wife's gentle voice, "Darling, we have to go. We will tell our children about them."

Semyon had long had the desire to leave.

Many Jews had left Bogdanovka before the war after the pogrom.  
He also had the spirit of a Cossack.

## Chapter XXXI

They received a warm welcome in Nalchik. There were many of their relatives and co-religionists there. They sold the houses of his Dad and Tsilya's parents and used the money to buy a good house with a large yard and garden in Nalchik.

Taking into account Semyon's previous merits, military experience, and rank, the authorities took him back to work in the KGB.

Time has passed. Tsilya's mother, Hana often told a neighbor, "Thank God! All is well! We are happy. We have a good son-in-law, the son of my close childhood friend."

Sometimes, Hana would wake up in the night from a troubled dream and talk to her friend, whispering silently with her lips: "Don't worry, Esther, I'll try to be a grandmother and mother good enough for two."

Tsilya was expecting her second child, but her hopes for a quiet, peaceful life in Nalchik did not come true.

In the spring of 1951, at midnight, a black pie wagon drove up to a house with a front garden.

"Who do you want?" the owner asked.

"You. You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"Come with us, you'll understand."

That was their dialogue. A man's fate was sealed. Tsilya clasped her hands in silent prayer and began to ask God for help. She realized that no one could help him.

"Semochka, darling, why? We will wait for you –" Tsilya said through her sobs, pressing her son to her breast. Nearby, her father and mother stood sharing her daughter's grief.

Hana tenderly embraced her daughter and grandson and assured them in a broken voice, "Don't worry, everything will be fine: the authorities will sort it out. Right, Dad?" she addressed her husband.

Mardakhai nodded his head silently, knowing in his heart the correct answer.

Semyon was taken out and forced into the car. Tsilya ran barefoot after her husband.

"Take care of yourself and the children. I'll be back," he shouted to his family.

"Semochka, my darling, why?" sobbed Tsilya.

Father and mother ran out after their daughter.

Suddenly Tsilya's face turned into a grimace of pain, "Oh, mummy!" Tsilya clutched her lower abdomen.

"It is not yet time, my daughter," Hana said fearfully.

Mardachai rushed to her daughter to support her as she sank to the ground.

"She's gone into labor," Hana said worriedly to her husband.

The father and mother helped their daughter to the bed. Tsilya's mother took out everything she had prepared in advance from the cupboard, and her father rushed to fetch a midwife who lived nearby.

The grandmother took the baby girl from the midwife's arms.

"Esther, darling, we have a granddaughter. I wish you were here with us," Hana said aloud to her departed friend.

The baby's loud cry brought a smile to her mother's face. Tsilya took her daughter from Hana's arms, held her close, and whispered with lips chapped with pain, "We'll wait until your daddy comes back."

Hana and Mardachai looked lovingly at their granddaughter.

"Look, darling, she looks like Sema and Esther," the grandmother babbled happily, "She will have the same beautiful eyes and curls," she continued.



"Tsilya, I think Sema will be happy to know that his daughter will have his mother's name," said Mardahai to his wife and daughter, looking tenderly at his granddaughter.

"Well, hello, Esther!" said Tsilya, looking at her daughter, "We'll wait for Daddy."

"Of course, we will. God willing, Sema must meet his daughter, his mummy," said grandmother joyfully, looking at her granddaughter.

## Chapter XXXII

Semyon was driven further and further away from his home by the black pie wagon. The prison gates slammed shut behind him, drawing a sharp line between his former and future life. Semyon fully experienced what he had doomed to dozens and hundreds of innocent people for his idea.

In anticipation of the trial and investigation, Semyon remembered many things, even in which he sometimes participated, such as arrests and expulsions. Later, the repentance came, "How could I do it?"

Episodes of his past life began to pass before his mind's eye. There were arrests and the use of force to extract confessions.

Most often, his thoughts went to the man who had fallen under the hot hand, was left without an eye, and perished in the depths of the Gulag because of him.

The trial and execution were swift.

The prosecutor announced, "Guilty. An enemy of the people. Article 52. Ten years in the camps."

Devastated, Semyon went on a transit route. He repeated the path of tens of thousands of Soviet citizens, whose free labor was needed by the Motherland.

The country, especially after the war, needed working hands to perform "heroic feats of labor" just for a ration of bread. The country required gold, platinum, and diamonds, that were discovered in Siberia, beyond the Arctic Circle. The convict, "the enemy of the people", was supposed to develop these territories.

In the distant pre-war years, the country had become a Gulag archipelago. Sema was sent under convoy to Kazakhstan and then to Yenisei. In old cargo barges, unequipped for transporting people, convicts like Semyon were rafted down the river to the Arctic Ocean.

Both the dead and the living were unloaded at the port of Dudinka. There were almost no guards here, as there was nowhere to run. There was tundra and permafrost all around. They were taken to the Putaran Plateau, where deposits of copper, nickel, gold, and platinum were discovered.

## Chapter XXXIII

They were housed in cold barracks, blown by the northern winds from every side, and the next day, they were sent out to work.

With a pick and shovel, with a wheelbarrow to push in front, thousands of the "enemies of the people" like Semyon, began the development of the Polar Regions. Next to Semyon on the bunks in the barracks, there were a former political worker and a major, who had been wounded, unconscious, taken prisoner, and when he returned, was declared a traitor and exiled to the camps.

Deprivation and trials united them all without distinction of rank, title, nationality, or condition. They were all convicts. This unity allowed them to survive in these inhuman conditions and preserve this unity until the end.

One day, several weeks after he arrived in the camp, Semyon was pushing a heavily laden wheelbarrow when he heard a gloating laughter behind him. When he turned around, he saw a dirty, haggard, one-eyed face and a toothless mouth curving in laughter, "Ah! Jew, you here too? Do you like it here? Get what you've condemned the others to."

"What do you want? Leave me alone," said Semyon nervously.

"If I say a word to my friends about who you are, they'll stab you tonight."

"I don't care," interrupted Semyon. He recognized his fellow countryman and realized it was his fault that this man was there. He also realized that everything would come back in boomerangs in life.

"Did I do it?" the ex-NKVD officer asked himself.

"Do you want an easy death? No way. Live and die. Remember, I'm watching you with one eye. You took the other one, you executioner. As long as you live, you will remember it," continued the exhausted man who had suffered at Semyon's hand.

Semyon spent several painful years in prison and was released only in 1956 when a wave of rehabilitations of the innocently accused and convicted went through the country.

All these years, his family lived in ignorance and fear for Semyon's life.

One day, in late autumn of 1956, a former military man in a grey overcoat, completely grey-haired, knocked on the door of a familiar house. The door creaked open, and a face with wide-open eyes, painfully acquainted for Semyon, appeared in the doorway.

"Who are you?" asked the girl cheerfully.

The man stepped forward, picked the child up in his arms, and whispered excitedly in her ear, "I'm your daddy, my daughter!"

"I'm Esther," the girl said and hugged her father tightly.

There was a commotion in the house. Hana and Mardakhai rushed to embrace Sema with tears in their eyes.

Tsilya stood in the doorway as if made of stone, and Timofey silently clung to his father's chest –

Semen said excitedly, "It's all over, son! We're alive and together. What a joy! Tsilya, my dear, wake up, that's me," he said, hugging his wife with one arm and holding little Esther, who was smiling, with another one.

Life went on as usual. Even though Semyon was rehabilitated, he refused public service after his release, together with the idea of getting a job with the authorities and his ideas.

Semyon started harvesting agricultural products for further processing.

He became an active member of a Jewish organization, visited the synagogue, and helped people in need.

## Chapter XXXIV

In 1970, a new wave of repatriation of Jews to Israel began. It became Semyon's dream. He managed to get past all the obstacles and get permission to leave for himself and his family.

Semyon and his wife went to say goodbye to their neighbors.

"You are our brother and sister, don't go away. We are here, and God knows how things will work out there," neighbors and relatives said at parting.

These radical changes frightened some people who hesitated, but others decided unreservedly to move.

Semyon and his wife were among them. The deep-seated dream of many generations, subconsciously living in every Jew, was the restoration of the state. It attracted Jews from all over the world to Israel.

A large and friendly family was waiting for the train to depart. The train passed by the Chop checkpoint (the USSR border) and traveled across Romania to the Austrian capital, Vienna, and then to Israel.

On the station square, there was an obelisk in honor of the fallen soldiers, who liberated the town during the war. Haunted by his memories, Semyon stood at the obelisk with his head down. The images of his war experience flashed through his mind, following each other. Suddenly, like a whiplash on his bare heart, he heard his carriage neighbor saying through set teeth:

'Judas! Traitors! We sacrificed so many lives for you! They didn't beat you enough! You lived better than us and spat in the well from which drank. Now we have to drink it!'

Semyon gasped with indignation and rushed towards the stranger, but his son next to him held him back.

"Dad, you can't prove anything to him, don't even try," Timofey addressed his father. In the last part of the journey, Semyon's family traveled by ship. One morning at dawn, in the misty haze, the family saw the shore in the sun's rays. It was the Promised Land their heart longed for, as well as hundreds and thousands of Jews from all over the world. Semyon, Tsilya, and their grown-up children stood on the deck, mesmerized and breathless.

The beautiful shore was getting closer. The ship anchored in the port of Haifa, and Semyon finally exhaled, "We are home finally!"

Hana leaned against Mardachai and wept.

The last doubts about their choice disappeared when they went down the gangway, saw smiling faces, and felt firm handshakes and hugs of strangers.

"Shalom, hello, welcome!" they heard around them in different languages.

The children managed to get jobs very soon. Tsilya took care of the household. Tsilya's parents took care of the family.

Semyon, instead, had difficulties. His "Soviet past" made itself known. Many years spent in the ranks of the NKVD and KGB had left an imprint not only on Semyon's consciousness but also on his actions and character.

Every time he tried to get a job in public service, Semyon was rejected. The initial broad smile and helpfulness on the official's face faded very quickly.

"Come in," says the official, "I'm listening to you. Yes, we are hiring. Would you be so kind as to show me your documents?"

As soon as he read the questionnaire, his smile turned into a grimace.

"Sorry, I have to consult with my superiors. Come back in a week."

That was the end of every attempt to get a job. Everyone was afraid of the former secret service agent and KGB officer. Semyon faced with such distrust, hardened and became disillusioned. He said nothing to his family but harbored a deep resentment in his soul.

Tsilya felt deep inside the state of mind of her husband and did not ask anything. She just treated her husband with redoubled care and attention.

One afternoon, a long-distance call rang in the empty flat. Semyon picked up the receiver and froze.

"Hello, Sema, how are you, mate? This is us."

They were former members of the KGB intelligence department, who had once been not only colleagues but Semen's comrades.

"Where are you guys?" Semyon asked excitedly.

"It's not meant for the phone. You'll get the details when we meet. Soon you will get a visa and a ticket to the United States. There's a job for you."

Short beeps sounded in the receiver.

## Chapter XXXV

This was how Sema ended up in the USA. The job he was offered as a former secret officer became for him the meaning of the rest of his life. He became an intelligence expert. His wide experience, work knowledge, and vast network of agents came in handy.

It seemed that fate finally provided Semyon with prosperity, and the well-being of children and grandchildren, and his Tsilya was always near. Tsilya's parents stayed in Israel because they believed they had nothing to do in America.

Years have passed away. Semyon Beniaminovich had long since retired.

It was 1994. Visiting a small open-air café on Brighton Beach by the ocean was almost his ritual. Whatever the season and the weather, he would sit at the same table, in his favorite spot, smoking a Havana. He would wear a hat and a beautiful and expensive suit, holding a cane in his hands, and watch the waves crashing against the shore, the flight of seagulls, and the sunset. These

sounds of the world around him revived in his soul the music of that first violin, his father's present, which strings he first touched with a bow. His thoughts often traveled far away. The pictures of his distant childhood in Bogdanovka came back to him again.

Tsilya was gravely ill. She was fading from day to day. Semyon and the children did not leave her side.

"Sema! My darling!"

She knew what was going on in her husband's soul.

"When you are in the Motherland, kiss the land where I met you. Say thanks from me to the one who gave you life and you to me. I was happiest with the most beautiful man in the world. Even when I was waiting for you, I was proud of you. I love you very much. When I pass away, hold on, don't give up. You have to live. You have children and grandchildren who love you. You are strong, and they need you."

Tsilya barely spoke.

"You have always been and will always be there for me, my love," Semyon replied with tears and hugged Tsilya, taking hold of his heart. It started to remind him of itself.

After the funeral of his faithful life companion, Semyon plunged into memories even more often.

"I will soon be with you, and we will finally be together," Semyon thought at these moments. He sat there, immersed in his thoughts.

"My son! I need to get to Russia. I want to see my past. My thoughts are all there," Semyon said to Timofey.

"I know, Dad, you've been dreaming about it for a long time. Tomorrow, I'll take care of the visa and ticket," Timofey said sympathetically.

## Chapter XXXVI

Semyon Beniaminovich came to Bogdanivka in late autumn. A lot has changed here. He left his luggage at the hotel and, without rest, walked eagerly through the village and familiar streets. He was born and brought up by his father here; he grew up, got married, went to war, and returned after the war to an empty house, where there were no more grandfather Afanasy, his father, and grandmother Darya, his only dear people. He dreamed of meeting the one he was looking for, stealthily watching the mothers of his peers, sometimes with envy; he dreamed of the tenderness and affection they gave to their children.

"This is where I grew up and lived."

He approached the house and noticed an old man on a bench at the neighboring house where his childhood friend Vasily lived. They had been friends until Semen left Bogdanovka.

"Are you looking for someone?" the old man asked and approached the stranger.

"I used to live here," said the elderly gentleman.

The tall old man looked the stranger carefully in the face, studying him:

"Semka! My dear! Where are you from? Don't you recognize me?" almost shouted the old man, grabbing him with both hands.

"Vasily!" said Semyon joyfully, and they hugged each other tightly.

"Maria!" shouted Vasily.

A frightened woman looked out of the gate.

"You frightened me! You're shouting like a madman. I thought something happened," the woman grumbled, looking surprised at a very nicely dressed old man in a hat and with a cane.

"Of course happened! Look who's here! Do you recognize him?" Vasily continued excitedly.

She looked carefully at the genteel old man in a hat and with a solid cane and said. "Sema!" She froze in place.

Vasily and Sema had grown up together. They served together and even went to the front almost at the same time.

Maria and Vasily had attended Semyon and Tsilya's wedding and saw them off with pain in their hearts as they left Bogdanovka.

"How is Tsilya?" Maria asked.

"She's gone," Semyon said, with his head low.

After a short silence, Maria said, "Why are we chatting in the street? Let's go inside. We'll talk there."

## Chapter XXXVII

"I can't. I have an important business to attend to now. I'll stop by on my way back, I promise," said Sema. His thoughts were still where he had been longing to go.

"We are waiting for you," said Vasily, and for a long time, he looked at his friend, who was walking away slowly, leaning lightly on his cane, where his memory led him.

He found himself at the cherished stone. The overgrown tree was still whispering with the same stone almost sunk into the ground. Semyon approached the monument, overgrown with grass, and looked at the photograph.

"My poor, I left you here alone."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the photograph from the dust, fixed the leaning frame, and said, "I'm with you now. I'm sorry I left you here alone. We're together at last. Tsilya asked me to thank you for your son, to whom you gave life and with whom she was happy. I've been looking for you for a long time, and I found you here. You've always been with me even when I didn't know. I dreamed about you," Semyon said, and tears appeared in his eyes. He spent his childhood by this mound but learned about who was under it as an adult man.

The wind swayed the branches of a huge old tree. Semyon leaned on a massive ancient cane, then against the stone. Then he sat down on the edge of another small stone, which had once been a bench, leaned his completely grey head on his clasped hands, closed his eyes, and lost in deep thoughts.

## Chapter XXXVIII

*Maybe it wasn't a dream: maybe it happened.  
Grief – suddenly my heart was blinded in that instant,  
I lay on the ground, my eyes streaming into the earth.  
Efrem Amiramov*

Semyon sat there thinking.

He turned round at a sudden blow in the back and got a second blow on the head.

Behind him, a one-eyed old man stood holding a stick.

"Well, hello, Semyon "Stepanovich" or whatever they call you, "Yeniaminovich". Don't you recognize me? The whole village knows you're here. I knew I would find you here," the one-eyed man hissed like a snake.

The former special officer recognized his old ward, a ghost from the past that haunted him everywhere.

Semyon didn't answer and once again lowered his head on his bound hands, feeling a small wound on his forehead. The old hand could not strike a heavy blow. The big and hardened body of the military man didn't feel those blows.

The old man said something else, leaning on a stick, with anger and hissing. Then the ghost from the past realized that it was all in vain, that his words and actions were neither seen nor heard, and hesitated.

It was useless to speak and act further.

Semyon's thoughts, which greatly stirred his heart and soul, were far away. The old man stood a little longer, cursed the man who had left him a cripple for life, and walked away, leaning on his stick.

Semyon's head lay on his bound hands.

The pictures of his life, the last sufferings of his fate, passed in an endless flow before his mind's eye.

Something pinched his heart. He released the knot on his tie, pulled at the collar of his shirt, from which the top button had come off, and began to gulp in air, slowly slipping to the ground next to the old fence and the barely visible modest grave. He felt a burning in his chest.

Thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed. In its reflection, he saw the black silhouette of the back of the man who walked away, leaning on a stick, and grumbled to himself, "It's all right. We'll all be in front of the Almighty soon. I am a messenger from hell. At the judgment, I will tell Him what you have done to me and many others. Soon, you will face the judgment."

It started raining. In the shroud of rain, instead of the vanishing old man, a creature, fragile as a grass blade, appeared and headed towards him.

"Is she an angel?" Semyon thought.

Semyon saw familiar features in the approaching image as if she had come from a photograph. This gentle, young creature lowered in front of him, hugged his big grey head, put it on her lap, and ran her hand gently over the small wound.

"Mum –" Semyon said joyfully, with surprise.

"Son –" she answered as if justifying herself.

"Mum –" said her son tenderly but with reproach because she left him.

"Son –" she said as if she wanted to say, "This is what happened."

"Where have you been? I've been looking for you for all my life," the son whispered.

"Son, don't be afraid, we won't part with you anymore. We'll be together forever."

Though their mouths were silent, and their lips were closed, there was a tacit conversation between them. It was the illusion of a bursting heart, the long-awaited dialogue that Semyon had dreamed of all his life.

"Mummy!" he wheezed for the first and last time.

His heart could not bear the strain, and the last glimmer of remorse and farewell to his hard life appeared in Semyon's eyes.

At that moment, his flesh, as if by the weight of his sins and deeds, fell into a muddy rain puddle and spread out in it, separating his soul from his body. The primordial purity of his soul was exposed in the image of a baby left in his mother's arms: Semyon recognized himself in it. She clasped him tightly to her breast and disappeared with him into eternity.

At last, his soul found peace –

On the dead face of the old man, who had had a harsh life, was a smile of happiness and bliss, like that of a sleeping infant in his mother's arms. After all, his mum, whom he had dreamed of all his life, was now forever with him.

The rain continued falling, washing and mourning the body near the humble grave.

Vasily summoned almost the whole village and sat for a long time resentfully at the table with guests. He was waiting for his dear friend to receive him with honors. The soul of his dear friend was near them, watching everyone, but no one saw it and did not even guess –

Such was the fate of Yakov-Semen, a Jewish Cossack from Bogdanovka.

#### Instead of an afterword

My name is Galina. I want to express my mood. I realize that my dear brother and I are describing many events, and I want my feelings to linger today like a dewdrop trembling on a leaf. I have finally finished writing my short novel with which I have become so affinity. I'm like a child, rejoicing in this snow outside my window. It's so beautiful! May what you have in mind come true! That's what my soul wants. It's warm today, even though it's freezing outside. These flakes – They fall so smoothly from the sky, clinging to each other so as not to get lost. They gently touch each other cheeks and lie down next to each other. Sparkling in a sunshine ray, they form a snow-white featherbed. My mummy is in front of me. She whips up the featherbed and covers it

with a sheet, white and starched like the crunch of snow I hear outside the window. There is a hope in my soul that we will all be close to each other, scattered by fate. I know we will never be lost. Our roots are intertwined. We cannot exist without each other.

What can you find in my soul? If you open it, my soul would probably make the whole world seem like a small island somewhere in the distance.

Sometimes it's empty. I don't know it, and I don't know if I have it. It cries or laughs. That's how people are made. We energize ourselves. We search deep down for the sweetest things that we have lived, that we have enjoyed, and that we have been too happy about. A modest smile appears on our lips, and our eyes, half-closed, open wide, with a little spark, with hope for happiness and love. We hope and wait for something unearthly, no matter how old we are.

After all, the soul does not grow old. Even when life ends, the soul lives for us and with us. Take care of your soul. Do not clog it with nonsense. Respect it. It's priceless. It's eternal, and we're eternal, too.

This may seem funny, but it was a little cry of my soul today. One always wants reality to correspond to fantasy.

Yours,  
Galina M.

Efrem Amiramov

At the obelisk

*In memory of four hundred and seventy-two  
Mountain Jews, buried alive in one well in the village of Bogdanovka in the Stavropol region in  
August 1942. Among them were my grandmother Istir, my dad's mum, and my brother Alik, aged  
seven.*

I  
472 –  
Some were shot –  
Some were buried alive –  
There's a hill,  
There's grass on the hill,  
And the wind in the arms of the dust –

472 –  
Old men,  
Women,  
Children.  
Life, you're wrong  
When you give up to death  
The flame of living hearts  
The faith of breathing flesh.  
Death.  
All is over.  
People, how can you do this?  
I'm against it!  
I'm in pain.  
I'm scared.  
Believe!  
Death.  
It's far and near.

There was life burning in them,  
and now  
there is the granite  
of the obelisk above them.  
Soulless granite,  
like the others,  
Who could have allowed this to happen  
A star burns in the void  
There's no peace on earth  
If there is peace  
It's for those  
who don't know laughter  
and tears.  
What are tears and laughter?  
Only the fog of passing dreams!

The words are beaten  
By life  
As love is beaten  
by the heartless toe-rag  
472 –  
I have,  
I do have your wounds.

II  
The moon choked in the clouds –  
Only one star,  
like a tear  
Wants to dispel the fear.  
Night wipes her eyes  
With a handkerchief made of clouds  
I can hear –  
I can hear –  
I can hear –  
My brother speaks to me.  
He says,  
That he  
Was buried alive.

III  
I have not seen you,  
My brother,  
The war separated us  
by death.  
I know you weren't a soldier –  
You were a boy  
Seven years old.

You're still seven years old now,  
Even after a century  
You won't grow old,  
No



You are saved from getting old  
by death.  
You've never known the fire of love,  
It was killed with you  
I beg you,  
Forgive me  
I haven't forgotten you!  
We haven't forgotten you!

#### IV

Death awaited them  
There,  
    beyond the village,  
        near the well.  
Even the wind calmed down,  
Hearing the death  
laughing.  
Death.  
Death.  
Death.  
The war has decided  
that you all must die.  
A cruel injustice.

Their heads fell on their chests.  
They wanted to live so much –  
472 –  
They did not sing  
the song of their lives.  
The wind tore the fields,  
The wind howled, mad with grief,  
He saw the earth  
breathing  
The earth was breathing,  
Not the sea.

#### V

The salt of a tear  
inflames the wounds,  
that time  
cannot control.  
The mounds rise up from the earth –  
Silent.  
Soulless.  
Impassive.  
The mounds hide bones,  
Devoured by worms.  
We rarely go  
to visit them  
and wash them with our tears.

We're afraid

Afraid to disturb  
The peace they  
didn't want.  
We're afraid  
to disturb  
This hills of sorrow  
With our pain.

VI  
Death carries away this century, too.  
It's like all others,  
will become history.  
The globe won't slow down –  
The rusty bullet will wound again  
Our souls,  
Stabbing our memory  
The wind of sorrow burns us.  
Our life melts away,  
melts away,  
runs away  
into the endless night –

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