

ALEXANDER CHAKOVSKY

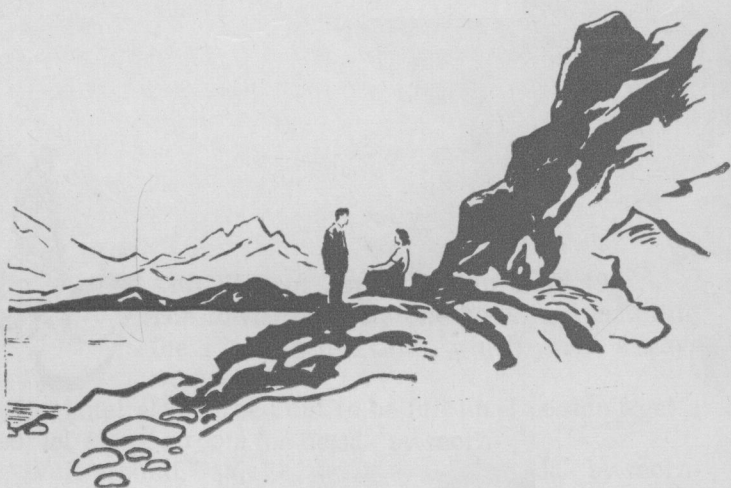
# A YEAR OF LIFE



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE  
MOSCOW

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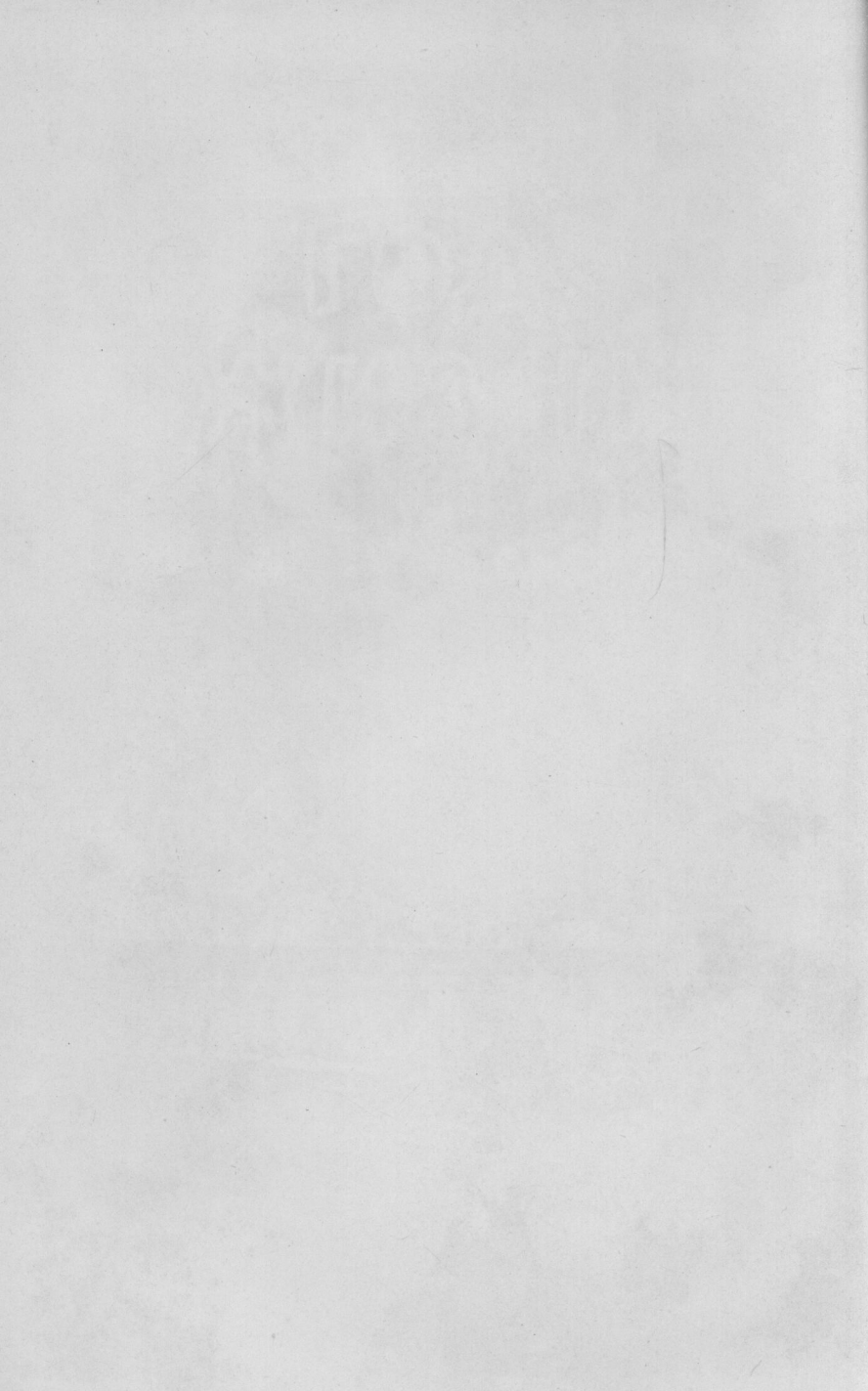
АЛЕКСАНДР ЧАКОВСКИЙ

# ГОД ЖИЗНИ



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

Москва





1

**I** ARRIVED in Zapolyarsk in June 1954. The town had only one hotel, not counting the Fishermen's Club, which was always crowded.

The hotel also turned out to be full up. I couldn't get a bed, let alone a room to myself.

"Wait around," said the woman at the desk, "by morning we may be able to squeeze you in."

I left my passport at the desk, my suitcase in the cloak-room, and went out.

Late as it was, there were many people sitting and strolling about in the little garden near the hotel and it took me some time to find a vacant bench.

The view was splendid. Straight in front of me stretched the sea or rather the bay, from which a chill wind blew. Smoke curled from the funnels of steamers in the harbour. Derricks swung bales of cargo in the air.

The sun was still high over the horizon and the rippling surface of the bay sparkled brightly; on the opposite shore, through a pinkish haze, could be seen mountains down which ran narrow veins of snow.

It was getting on towards midnight, but the town was not asleep. People sauntered about in the garden and along the street. A young man, most likely a student, settled down with a book on the bench next to mine.

I set off to wander through the town.

It proved to be large and sprawling. I walked along a broad street lined with new three- and four-storey buildings and reached a stretch of wasteland. Here two excavators clanged as they dug into the sides of a foundation pit. The onlookers' heads moved up and down to the motions of the scoop.

Three sailors from the fishing fleet passed me, swaying slightly, and turned in the direction of the hotel. Young men and girls sat on benches or porch steps. Through open windows came the strains of gramophones. On the vacant lots children were playing rounders. In a shooting-range shots cracked from small-bore rifles.

I had to send a telegram to Moscow. I had written it out while still in the train pulling into Zapolyarsk. It had to be sent at once: so many of my hopes rested on it.

The telegraph office was also full of people. There were no more than five or six persons queued up at the telegram counter, but a full score were besieging the little window where long-distance telephone calls were or-

dered. These, I could tell by their cap badges, were mostly fishermen, some of them obviously tipsy. The clients for the telephone demanded to be put through to Moscow, Leningrad, Arkhangelsk, Vyazma, Podlipki, Shchekotovka and goodness knows where else; they shoved wads of notes through the window, ordering "urgent" or "super-super urgent" calls, anything to get through straight away, "because we're putting out to sea tomorrow, we'll be afloat for thirty days, and they haven't fixed up telephones on boats yet."

I handed the clerk my telegram and waited patiently while she marked it up and put it on the edge of her desk. I would have liked to see the telegram collected, but the people behind me were getting restive and I was elbowed away from the window.

I returned to the hotel. There I found people waiting for rooms, seated in all the chairs and armchairs and pacing the length of the corridors. I picked my way to the desk between suitcases, travelling boxes and bales. This time I was in luck.

I got a small room with an iron bed, a locker, a chair and the black disk of a loudspeaker on the wall.

I was only staying one night in Zapolyarsk. The train that would take me to my place of work was leaving the following evening.

There were no blinds over the windows and the sun was still shining brightly. I could not sleep.

But had it been pitch dark that night I would still not have been able to sleep. I stood on the threshold of a new life, and a feeling of joy, expectation and great hope welled up within me.

I went to the window.

Clouds had gathered in the sky. The sun had turned red and was a very distinct round. The sunlit fringes of the clouds stood out clearly. On the molten metal of the

cove a small boat was sailing, looking as though it might burst into flames at any moment.

Twenty-four hours later I was in a small miners' settlement.

I remember standing in a narrow street in the settlement. The sun was bright in the sky, with the arctic day at its height. Yet my watch told me it was nearly midnight. In Central Russia the sun is generally yellow on a cloudless summer day, burning with a white heat, but here it was fiery red in the light northern night.

The settlement was surrounded by grim, forbidding mountains. In some places there were narrow tongues of snow, like streamlets running down the slopes. The gaps between the spurs seemed to be filled not with mist but with a wild and boundless sea in which the peaks floated like icebergs.

But there was no sea—the Arctic Ocean lay miles and miles away. What I was looking at was really mist faintly tinged by sunlight.

I had come to the North, to a place within the Arctic Circle, to the edge of the world, and once there I was eager to take in everything: snow and bears, the cold ocean, the arctic day and the arctic night.

At intervals along each side of the street stood wooden houses. Between them grew a chalky-white plant, somewhat like a tall mossy growth. Later I learned that it was Iceland moss, the favourite food of the reindeer.

The street was deserted—the settlement was inhabited by mine workers, and those who were not at work in the mountains at that hour had gone to bed.

A red sun, almost sheer mountains, sombre and grim against the seas of mist, and peaceful homes—that was the world I saw.

From somewhere in the distance came the sound of a radio bringing the muffled chimes of the Kremlin clock.

It was odd and extraordinary to hear those midnight chimes with the sun shining.

I spent the night in a small hotel and early next morning set off for the management office of the mining works. At the personnel department, where I handed my papers to a secretary, I was told to wait.

Ten minutes later a flimsy office door, unevenly lined with bubbled leatherette, opened and through it came a man wearing calf-length leather boots, riding breeches, and an unbuttoned jacket which revealed an embroidered Ukrainian shirt belted with a narrow Caucasian strap. This was the head of the personnel department. Under one arm he carried a cardboard file.

No sooner had he stepped into the room than he inquired:

"Engineer Arefyev?"

I flushed. True, a month before I had qualified as an engineer, but till that moment no one had called me engineer in earnest, and in such a casual, ordinary, matter-of-fact tone.

"Let's go to the managing director," he said without waiting for me to reply. "Your institute has sent us your papers." He tapped the file under his arm.

"But why are you taking your suitcase with you?" he asked, noticing with surprise that in my confusion I had picked up my things.

We went up a cement stairway to the next floor and turned down a long corridor. And all the time we were walking the two words "Engineer Arefyev" rang in my ears.

How pleasant it was to hear these words—"Engineer Arefyev speaking. . . . See that Engineer Arefyev's orders are carried out. . . ."

So intoxicating were these words that the next moment it seemed to me that I was uttering them aloud. You fool! Acting like a kid. I cursed myself and stole a glance at my companion.

He had heard nothing, of course. He was walking a few paces ahead of me, his shaven head bent, his neck thrust forward a little, as though he were getting ready to gore someone.

We went into an office, and I saw the managing director. A big, heavy man, he was sitting at an incongruously small desk. On another desk, an even smaller one, stood the telephones—two of the usual sort, one field telephone and a microphone.

The head of the personnel department stood behind the managing director.

"Sit down. Why are you standing?" asked the managing director affably, though, I thought, with a faint touch of irony, as he thumbed through my file. The voice was unexpectedly thin for a man of his bulk.

"Sit down," he repeated, motioning towards two chairs with flat wooden backs. "When did you arrive?"

Continuing to look through my papers, he muttered with an occasional glance at me:

"I see ... the Moscow Transport Institute ... candidate member of the Party.... Single?" he inquired. "Well, why are you blushing? It's easy enough to get married. Much easier than to get unmarried. It says here that you've asked to be sent to work in our territory. Is that so?"

"I asked to be sent to the Arctic," I replied.

"Good for you! Why do you speak in such a quiet voice? A miner speaks in a loud voice. A tunnelling engineer—that's a big thing. Well," he said, banging the folder shut and pushing it aside scornfully as though it were of no account, "what if you go to the mine? That,

too, is in our zone. For one thing, it's near the settlement, there's a cinema there, dancing, and the 'washer.' Have you learned to drink vodka yet?"

Without waiting for me to reply, he turned to the head of the personnel department.

"The Minister gave me hell the other day. 'What's all this drinking going on in the Arctic?' he demanded. 'It's time you put a stop to the idea that if you're a miner, especially in the North, you've got to drink.'"

"We don't do enough cultural and educational work," replied the other calmly. "The result of our remoteness from cultural centres."

"Our 'remoteness' be damned," muttered the managing director. And turning to me again, he asked, "Well, how about the mine? We need engineers there too. The tunnel's eight kilometres away from the mining settlement. In winter the snow-drifts will cut you off from us for weeks. You'll live like a bear in its den. Make up your mind."

I felt like one who has been itching to get to the front, and after finally getting there is suddenly sent to the rear, to a safe spot near headquarters.

"No!" I said firmly.

"What?"

"No!" I shouted in such a loud and resounding voice that I felt quite embarrassed.

"Now your voice sounds good to me," the managing director said chuckling. "Then you're going to the tunnel?"

"I am. I'm a tunneller and I want to build tunnels." I tried to speak calmly and reasonably to soften the unfortunate impression given by my childish outburst.

"That's the spirit!" said the managing director approvingly. "You've decided well. We need you badly at the tunnel."

He rose with unexpected agility.

"Do you know what your job will be?" he asked, in a more formal tone.

I was on the point of replying, because at the ministry I had been told more or less in detail of the significance of the tunnel under construction. But not wanting to sound too bumptious, I said:

"In general terms."

"Until you get settled everything will appear to you in 'general terms.' In short, go and talk to the chief engineer about it."

"What stage of the work are we at now?" I asked.

"At the first—on the sector we propose to send you to. On the western sector they've already begun tunnelling. Next Monday we'll start sending men and equipment to your sector on the eastern side. Your job is to start work as soon as possible, to drive a gallery and to catch up with Kramov on the western side."

"One more question," I said. "In what capacity shall I work?"

"In what capacity? Why, as sector chief. And what job did you have in mind?"

I coughed to hide my excitement. I had not expected an important appointment like that.

My embarrassment did not pass unnoticed.

"To tell the truth," said the managing director, "we're taking a risk. It's a responsible job. Of course, I've faith in your honours diploma and the recommendation Professor Mashov gave you. We have all studied his textbooks."

The managing director drummed his fingers on the desk and added:

"For the time being we'll consider you acting chief." And I realized that he had decided this on the spot, after having had a look at me. "If you do well we'll drop the 'acting.'"

He bent towards the microphone and said in an unexpectedly low voice:

"Operator . . . get me the chief of the building department!" A green light flashed on on the little table and from somewhere out of the night a loudspeaker boomed:

"Falaleyev speaking."

"Listen, Falaleyev," said the managing director, "a new engineer has arrived."

"Oh yes," said the loudspeaker.

"He's been sent from the Moscow Transport Institute."

"I see!" came the reply, in somewhat sinking tones.

"He's going to work at the tunnel."

"Pavel Semyonovich," interrupted the invisible Falaleyev, "the mine's the place for him. He needs to get his bearings, to learn things. Why send an inexperienced pup to the tunnel? He'll flounder there."

The managing director snatched the microphone roughly from the table and shouted:

"You and I were pups once too. D'you understand that?"

"I understand"—this was followed by a sigh.

"Then make arrangements for him to be driven to the sector on Monday. Take him there yourself!" ordered the managing director in a sudden burst of anger, adding in a low voice, "That's all I have to say."

He gave the microphone another angry bounce and without changing his tone said to me:

"Go and see the chief engineer!"

The head of the personnel department gathered up the folder with the papers from the desk and arranged the sheets neatly. We walked to the door.

"I wish you luck," the managing director said to me.

I spent the whole day at the works and got back to the hotel only in the evening.

The receptionist sat in a dark distant corner behind a table spread with a newspaper. Behind the woman stood a stuffed brown bear on its hind legs, its front paws stretched over her head as though guarding her. I noticed that these paws were in big blue mitts. The effect was unexpected and amusing.

I was famished and asked whether there was a buffet at the hotel.

The receptionist, a middle-aged, sullen-looking woman wearing a kerchief on her head, replied that there was no buffet and that hotel residents took their breakfast and dinner at the works canteen.

"What about supper?" I asked.

"Doctors say that supper is bad for the health," she replied without a smile. She was one of those people who look even grimmer than usual when they say something funny.

"Is there nowhere I can get a snack?" I asked.

"Well, there's the 'washer.'"

"And what might this 'washer' be?"

"If you like a pub, a beer-house," she explained, amazed at my ignorance.

"Why is it called a 'washer'?" I went on gaily, happy at the prospect of stilling my hunger.

"Because of its shape—it's like a washer. Just go down the avenue and you'll see it before you've walked a kilometre."

The fact that she called the narrow street of the settlement an "avenue" and that the local bar was built in such strange style cheered me up completely.

"One more question. Why does the bear wear mitts?"

At last something like a smile flickered over the woman's grim, stony face. She said:

"People who stay here shake hands with him, greeting him when they arrive and saying 'good-bye' when they leave. They're shaking his paw all the time. And