

MIKHAIL PARKHOMOV

I SPEAK
FROM THE GRAVE

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M o s c o w

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY EVE MANNING

DESIGNED BY M. KLYACHKO

*Dedicated to the memory of the poet and fighter
Semyon Gudzenko, a citizen of Kiev*

CONTENTS

I. SEVENTEEN	7
II. LYONKA BALYUK AND TONYA PROTASOVA	22
III. IF TOMORROW IT'S WAR	38
IV. MYSHELOVKA	61
V. KANEV, RZHISHCHEV, CHERNOBYL	83
VI. SURROUNDED	115
VII. THE CAMP	138
VIII. HOPE AND BELIEF	172
IX. FEBRUARY	184

CHAPTER ONE

SEVENTEEN

Kharitonov was tortured to death today. That makes the fourth death in these past few days. First Timokhin went, then Samokhvalov and Pribylsky, and now—Kharitonov.

We were sitting together when they came for him; he had been telling me about his mother. She is seventy. She lives somewhere near Kursk. "She's all alone," he said, "and she's ailing, too. She can't do without me. That's why I've got to pull through."

The tenderness, the sadness in his voice surprised me. I answered with all the assurance I could muster.

"You'll come through all right, Petro, sure to."

His only answer was a grim laugh. He was smoking, and I watched his movements with avid fascination, until I could bear it no longer.

"Give me a pull, Kursk Nightingale, you promised."*

* The nightingales in the woods round Kursk are famous—Tr.

"Just a minute, let me take another drag," he said. He inhaled deeply, then handed me the damp butt. "There you are."

Greedily, I smoked it to the end, until it burned my lips. Six puffs! . . . At last luck had come my way.

Kharitonov lay back, his fingers linked behind his neck; softly, through barely moving lips, he sang his favourite song about the black raven. "You'll never get your prey. . . ." I sensed rather than heard the words, and the song wrung my heart.

How little I guessed that Kharitonov's hours were already numbered! Who could think of such a thing? We were all fond of him. We called him "Kursk Nightingale," or just "Nightingale," nicknames containing the unspoken affection of men. He was too young, too gay and vital, to die such a senseless death.

Although, for that matter, when is death sensible?

They came for him in the morning, and the whole day we knew nothing. It was only towards evening, when a glassy red sun was drowning in frosty mist, that two soldiers carried him back, stumbling over their long greatcoats. They held him by the arms and

legs, and with a swing heaved him into the darkness on to a heap of straw.

The door of the shed creaked shut. We surrounded our comrade. His lips were stiff with caked foam. The oldest of us, the bo'sun Seroshtan, bent over him and whispered, "Stick it, lad."

Kharitonov did not answer, only gritted his teeth.

We asked no questions. Some of us had been through it already. When they beat the soles of your feet with ramrods, pain stabs through your whole body and bores into your brain. No screams, even the most desperate, can give an outlet to its burning agony. It takes some time before it gradually dulls. You cease to feel it. Only your legs still ache and ache. That, too, I know by experience.

"He'll pull through to get married yet." Somebody awkwardly came out with the old crack, but fell silent under the weight of Seroshtan's lowering look.

The bo'sun wasted no time. He wetted a rag, wrung it out and passed it over Kharitonov's face with all the gentleness of which his calloused hands were capable. With a glance he asked me to help. I nodded and knelt down. Carefully I raised my friend's head.

Kharitonov's breath rasped in his throat. He moaned softly. He was trying to say something.

"It's shutters for me," I heard when I pressed my ear close to his mouth. "I know...."

His breathing became slower, more difficult. Was it stopping? No, not if I knew it! Hurriedly, disconnectedly I mumbled that he must get that nonsense out of his head, of course he was going to live, of course he'd get well. "We'll be back in Kiev again one of these days, strolling along Kreshchatik," I said, although I did not believe it myself. "We'll sing about the black raven many a time, take it from me." And indeed, for a moment Kharitonov seemed a little easier. He took a deep breath. And another—a breath that filled his broad chest. But then a shudder passed through him. His body stretched out and became quiet and his eyes—cold, open eyes—turned blind, lifeless. Soon their bright blue faded.

That was all.

We bared our heads. We, his seventeen friends who still remained alive.

Yes, now there are only seventeen of us. Some are dead. Some, at least, must have got

through to the east. And some... Well, after all, there were also those who threw down their weapons and ran away home. As for us, fate spared us only to send us into camps where we are picked out one by one and dispatched to Nikolskaya. As soon as the Germans catch a glimpse of the striped naval singlet or tattooed chest they make a grab—a sailor!

That was how we came to this smoke-blackened shed. We are kept apart from the other prisoners. It may be that the Germans are afraid of us, but more probably it is because we are doomed. But this is something no one can know for certain.

It is February now, and we lie huddled closely together all day. We lie on rotting straw mixed with dung that smells both sour and sickly-sweet. All round there is a strong stench of putrefaction that follows us everywhere.

I look at my comrades. Their faces are grey or waxen-yellow, their cheeks hollow, grown with stubble up to the eyes. The light is always dim in the shed, and it seems to be filled with faceless shadows, spectres. They turn from side to side, crawl about, gather straw under them, mumble and whisper. They

do not venture to leave their refuge even to relieve nature.

I myself have not been outside the shed for over a week. The time is past when we made a point of taking a short walk every day, no matter how cold it was. Senior Lieutenant Syomin used to insist that each one of us get some fresh air. But since they tortured Timokhin to death, and Syomin went down with typhus, everything has changed. Bo'sun Seroshtan insists that nobody go outside without his permission. Seroshtan is cautious. He does not want us to play with fire. Cold and boredom have made the guards savage. They have no objection to amusing themselves. They'll harass and provoke a man till he loses his temper and then shoot him. It's a bit of fun. They have to work it off on somebody. So it's best to keep out of their way.

All this I know very well. And I am accustomed to obeying orders. But something makes me rise, and I find myself on the way to the door. Let come what may, I must be alone. I cannot stay there beside the dead body of Kharitonov. "Eh, Petro, Petro, now what did you have to do that for?" I find myself saying it again and again. As though Kharitonov were to blame for his death.

"Here, where are you going?" Seroshtan asks.

"I've got to go outside," I answer without turning.

"Careful, keep a weather eye open for trouble," Seroshtan warns me. "Don't start anything. Get that?"

"All right," I answer and draw my head down into the collar of my pea-jacket.

A small grey ball lies on the snow. A sparrow. It cannot be warmed into life again. Everything is so quiet that I can hear twigs cracking in the frost. They fall at my feet with a rustle.

The camp is empty. Not a soul to be seen. Penthouses, two or three sheds, the scorched skeleton of a brick building. . . . Nothing more. Our world is a cramped one, bounded on four sides by barbed wire. A musty world from which there is no outlet. We are always reminded of this by the wooden watch towers at the corners and the sentries armed with machine-guns on top.

But to hell with the sentries! I'll try not to think of them. I turn my eyes to the bright,

blinding snow beyond the wire. My eyes water but still I gaze and gaze....

Before me lies a glade, with rose-willows rising like faint smoke here and there. Solitary pines glow in the sunshine. A sleigh-track winds between them. It leads to Dar-nitsa. Every now and then the hoarse whistles of railway engines come from somewhere beyond it.

The sleigh-track, the railway.... The world is not so small, after all. A bay nag appears on the track. Straining, sinking with household goods of all kinds. A man in a winter cap with ear-flaps and felt boots soled with red tyre-rubber totters alongside. Both horse and man crawl painfully. Both are old. Yet I envy them. I envy even that ancient nag. At least they are free, they can go where they will.

Slowly, with difficulty I turn my eyes away to the right, where the wooden cottages of Nikolskaya seem to sag beneath their covering of snow. Silent, quiet, peaceful little houses. The kind you so often see in pictures. Blue smoke wavers up from their chimneys. Can there really be people who still sleep in beds, eat off plates, and bake white bread in ovens? Looking at these houses, you are gradually possessed by the illusion that there has been

no war, it is just a stupid idea, delirium, a feverish fancy, a bad dream. For you are alive. You are the same man you were six months ago. Then how could these six months have so changed the world? No, it is all imagination that people have died beside you, that you yourself have shot anybody. Look about you. Those are the same familiar crooked cottages, with the smoke rising from the chimneys, and quietness reigning over all. . . .

But Timokhin? And Kharitonov?

Forgetful, I come close to the barbed wire. At once a long burst of machine-gun fire tears into the silence. There you are, take that! You had the audacity to imagine there's no war? You were revelling in the silence? The sentry's been wanting to warm up his machine-gun for a long time. One war prisoner the less, one corpse the more. What's the difference?

I get away from the wire and hastily take shelter behind the shed. A hoarse laugh follows me. A funny sight, when a man starts back from death, isn't it?

It is a little while before I come to myself. My heart pounds. But gradually I realize that I am safe. An empty barrel hides me from the soldiers. And my thoughts are with me.

On this side one feels the river near by. It is the Dnieper that lies over there, beyond the sedges and willows. Silent, ice-bound. And on the hilly farther bank the city lies spread out. The belfries of the Monastery gleam a dull gold among the silhouettes of the houses.

It is Kiev, the town of my youth.

I was born in 29, Mill Street. When I was seven I started workers' school. I left at fourteen and became a turner. I was at the factory technical school when I was called up for service in the Navy.

Those are the milestones in my life, the things one usually puts in documents. But memory brings up other pictures from the past. Random, disconnected pictures, as such always are.

There is a hill in Kiev called Cherepanov Hill. In summer when the grass is scorched brown the hill looks rather like a mangy cat. Once when I was a lad, some of the Boy Scouts climbed up there. They sat about in their broad-brimmed hats, made a campfire and baked potatoes in the embers. We waited until their attention was centred on the potatoes, then crawled up close. They were five, so were we. We fought till the blood flowed, fought in fierce silence.