

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

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TO MAKE AN OMELETTE

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Lado Kralj: To Make an Omelette

excerpt from the novel

Chapter 10.

How the Steel Was Tempered

In Moscow she is allocated a tiny room in a single-storey building with *Obshchezhitye VUZ 0901* painted in brown oil on a white, brown- framed board above the door. She now knows it is a kind of hostel. The address of the *obshchezhitye* is Staropimenovskiy pereulok no.20. Looking at a map you will find it is close to the junction of two large, busy and well-known streets, Bolshaya Sadovaya and Tverskaya. Helena opens her eyes, instantly remembers where she is, gets up, gets dressed and goes outside into the snow-covered garden with its acacia, plane and linden trees still holding on to some of their leaves, a very friendly garden that gives her a sense of familiarity, as if she was on holiday at relatives back home. She waits for Dorotea Martinuzzi, an Italian Croat from Trieste, and together they go to the coffee shop around the corner. The entire town is white, but the snow in the streets is trodden firm. Providing you are not too wimpish and take care not to slip, you can walk along the pavement with ease. In the coffee shop they order tea and eat a *pirozhok* each. They are not as good as those sold at the *torgsin* store but are, after all, half the price and can be paid for in roubles. As Helena soon finds out, food prices in the Soviet Union are murderous; she wonders how people can even afford to buy food and worries about how she will manage on the money she has – just as well that the canteen at the Institute provides lunch. Looking out onto the street they see a company of poorly clad youth march in from the left. With sharp, almost hateful voices they are singing some song threatening the bourgeoisie and the kulaks.

“Komsomol activists,” says Dorotea Martinuzzi.

“How do you know?”

“They’re all wearing those large metal badges with Lenin’s head on a red enamel background. And the letters VLKSM at the bottom.”

“Komsomol,” Helena repeats, absorbed in thought. “Death to the bourgeoisie and the kulaks.”

A few other course participants come into the shop and together they start tackling a strategic task, today is the first time: how to get by tram to the Institute of Culture and Education, Bolshaya Pirogovskaya Street no. 36, close to the Novodevichy Pond. There they are to attend a lecture on *The Character of the New Soviet Man*. As they wait for the tram on the traffic island, Moscow traffic streams past them, mostly lorries, with the occasional one looking slightly different, metal panels on all sides, something known as a *furgon*. There is one in particular that sticks in Helena's mind, the *furgon* used as a bread van, decorated nicely with an image of a large, appetizing loaf of bread painted diagonally across the entire side of the vehicle and the word *KHLEB* written below. Lieutenant Lastochkina's instructions on how to get to the Institute are clear and simple: tram number 14A southbound down Bolshaya Sadovaya all the way to Smolenskaya Square where you change to tram number 33F with three stops to go. The course participants are delighted with this journey, they will prove how well they can handle travelling around the metropolis. When their tram arrives they all hop on, discovering that it has no heating and is rather crowded - but who cares about that now!

The lecture is being given by comrade Yekaterina Kyrilovna Ustinova who looks a bit like Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow. Firstly this means she is an older woman, clearly senior fighting cadre from the era before the October Revolution. Then there is the way she is dressed. Hair up in a bun above the neck. A one-piece dress made of thick fabric printed with a floral pattern in dark and subdued colours, reaching well below the knees. Over this a practical cardigan, brown, knitted at home from coarse wool, buttons down the front. Low-heel shoes. A friendly face, slightly haggard, as if she has been through great deal. And in what way is the speaker, Yekaterina Ustinova, different from other women that Helena sees on the streets and in the trams? In that her dress and cardigan are not faded through endless washes, patched up and shapeless, in that her shoes are not totally battered and worn out. Helena stares at her and in her mind compares her to Lieutenant Lastochkina. What a difference! Of course Lastochkina is much younger, a representative of the new generation of Communist women. But Lastochkina also comports herself so differently. Short, crop-cut hair. Knee-length skirt, perhaps even slightly shorter, made of highest quality dark blue fabric, not too narrow, allowing her a decisive stride. A white, pretty, particularly feminine blouse with a petite rounded collar, over this an elegant, finely woven, sky blue jacket, definitely not made with knitting needles but machine woven in some clothes factory, perhaps even imported from the West. And on her feet - officer boots! In all a rather striking appearance - the image of a dynamic as well as charming young lady, leading cadre. When Lastochkina hurries in from somewhere or hurries away to somewhere - this is something she does all the time - her hair and skirt flutter about impetuously, making her future progress quite undoubted.

Emphatic optimism is how one might describe lecturer Ustinova's attitude towards her

audience, composed vigour and rapture, she smiles. “How will we get to know the New Soviet Man? Through literature, comrades, by looking at new Soviet literature, where he is analysed in the most convincing way. And what is new Soviet literature? It is, my dear comrades, what was a short while back urgently recommended at the First Congress of Soviet Writers right here in Moscow, a decision supported by comrades Maksim Gorky, Andrei Zhdanov and many others. We are talking here of a new way of writing called Socialist realism. One of the peak achievements of this new style is the book of all books called *How the Steel Was Tempered*, written by Nikolai Ostrovsky, its second instalment came out a couple of months ago. Its publication was a very important event, all of Moscow celebrated, as did the entire Soviet Union. Comrade Nikolai Ostrovsky is not some arrogant bourgeois intellectual formalist but a self-taught writer, a proletarian, born in the Ukrainian countryside in a terribly poor, yet honest proletarian family. The book *How the Steel Was Tempered* is in fact his life story, from a starving young boy who had to start working very early on in life, who was pushed and shoved around by everyone, right up to the moment when he was presented with the highest order of the Soviet Union – the Order of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin. The boy in the book is called Pavel Korchagin and these days all Komsomol members hold this book close to their heart. Why? Because, who was it that helped young Korchagin to become a hero? It was the Bolshevik Party and, in particular, its militant youth section – Komsomol.” “So that’s it and that’s all!” occurs to Helena. “Pavel Korchagin – the hero. Hero!”

Polyushko polye,

Oh, this field,

Polyushko shiroko polye,

Oh, this wide field,

Edut po polyu geroi,

Heroes riding across the field,

Eh, da krasnoj armii geroi.

Hey, heroes of the Red Army.

Heroes riding across the field, heroes of the Red Army, a voice inside Helena’s head sings. Not long ago she had heard the song somewhere, she is able to vividly envisage the scene, as if it is happening before her right now. Horsemen with red stars on their fur hats. The field is covered in snow and the horizon appears endlessly wide. This vision contains more or less everything that one needs to know. Then Helena diverts her attention back to the lecturer Ustinova. There is a high stack of books on the desk in front of her, brand new, all the same. Ustinova now raises her hand and taps the top one. “At the end of this class you will each get your own copy, now that both parts have been published together. Look after your copy, you

will have to return it at the end of the course so others will also learn from it. I expect you to read it carefully and as soon as possible, since I will be using it as a source in my lectures.” Helena promises herself she would start reading the book this very afternoon and will get through it as quickly as possible! Ustinova continues, “There are three essential points that Socialist realism needs to take into account. 1. comprehensibility. 2. populism. 3. party-mindedness. First comprehensibility, my dear comrades! Literary art should be comprehensible to every working man, so no morbid formalist experiments! Comrade Lenin specifically warned against artistic fashions that predominate in the West. *I cannot value,*” Ustinova starts reading from some red booklet, *“the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other isms as the highest expressions of artistic genius. I don't understand them. They give me no pleasure. And for this reason, Comrade Lenin suggests we need to treat them in a barbaric way, need to destroy them!*

Second point: populism,” the lecturer Ustinova continues. “This means that the literary hero should emerge from the ordinary working population. He should be a soldier, for instance, a sailor, an electrician, a metalworker, a railwayman, and not, for example, a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer or anyone of any such bourgeois background, let alone a priest, a kulak, or similar riff-raff. Point number three: party-mindedness. What does party-mindedness actually mean? It means the Party has the right and duty to intervene in all aspects of life, even in a citizen's private matters, their family, morals and most hidden thought. But that is not all, not all by far. Party-mindedness in literature means that the literary hero is happy to submit oneself to the Party, regardless of what is demanded of him, for he trusts it immensely, his faith in it is limitless as is his self-sacrifice. Furthermore – this should be written so convincingly that any reader will come to the conclusion: He did exactly the right thing! Pavel Korchagin, I shall also be like that, for me too the Party will be my be-all and end-all in life.”

Helena immediately thinks of her own literary endeavours. She is disturbed and feels a tightness in her chest. “Three points, and I would only get through the first, and little or nothing of the other two, especially the last one! Point number one, that's not so difficult, after all I also dislike these expressionists and futurists. I used to like the early avant-garde poet Anton Podbevšek, but now I can't stand him. As far as point number two goes, even here I have little to show. True, I do describe a builder at one point and a pregnant maid, but in my case these are more exceptions than the rule; most of the time I deal with women who have been married to bourgeois husbands. And point number three, party-mindedness, here I have no chance whatsoever. How can my hero be so devoted to the Party when I have not even enrolled in it myself? I keep putting it off, thinking all the time that I am not ready yet. How then can I be a good writer? I will need to seriously think over these things. This about ... Socialist realism. And about how devoted I am to the Party. And how much ... I need it. With my Vladimir things are different, he is a scientist. He says the Party is a scientific answer to a scientific century. This,

however, is the rational approach, but the lecturer, comrade Ustinova – and the writer Ostrovsky, of course – speak of love. Of love as something you feel inside your heart, feel like a flame! The Party should be loved, irrespective of reason! That’s right and is how it should be.”

Ustinova, the lecturer, continues, “The Party always recognises a promising young person and is able to send one of their scouts into this person’s proximity, someone who may later take on the roll of teacher. For example in the book *How the Steel Was Tempered* it is Fyodor Zhukhrai, a Baltic sailor on a temporary assignment in Ukraine, who approaches Pavel Korchagin. Ostrovsky, the author, convincingly describes this early stage of Korchagin’s Party upbringing, he tells us how Zhukhrai spoke very clearly, made himself easily understood, using simple language. He shows no indecisiveness. The sailor Zhukhrai knows his path well and Korchagin begins to realize that this bundle of parties that surround him, parties with fancy names – the Socialists Revolutionaries (the so-called *SRs*), the Social Democrats, the Polish Socialists, the Mensheviks – are mere evil enemies of the working man and that only one party is truly revolutionary, only one party has truly taken up the struggle against exploitation, against the rich – the party of the Bolsheviks.

At the end of such training, the student, providing they work hard, is allowed to join the Komsomol League”, Ustinova tells her audience. “Even as a young boy Pavel Korchagin displayed positive characteristics, courage, for example, a fighting spirit and a desire for justice – at the same time though, he was too impulsive, almost anarchical. This is what can damage the Party most – anarchism. For this reason he has, on more than one occasion, to be submitted to tough party discipline. Korchagin develops, his character improves, step by step, with every victory over his own flaws. Every time he climbs a little higher up the ladder of enlightenment. He is assigned a new teacher, male or female, over and over again until he himself becomes a teacher and is able to show the right way to other comrades. Throughout all this he follows the example of Comrade Stalin; he is our beacon, he is our friend, our prime teacher and leader, all in one, ever since Death mercilessly seized our beloved comrade Lenin, and it was Lenin who was the tutor who nurtured Stalin, this we should never forget. The thought of Stalin gives Korchagin the strength to hold out, first as a soldier in the Red Cavalry, and later as a Komsomol activist, fighting against the nationalist bandits of Ataman Petlura, the band of Polish interventionist legionnaires, the anarchist insurgents of General Makhno and other kulak criminals, the White Guard brigands of General Wrangel and the treacherous marauders of that damned rabid dog Leon Trotsky.” When comrade Ustinova mentions Trotsky, her eyes gleam with justifiable hatred.

That morning Helena attends another lecture, *Solving the Peasant Problem*, delivered by comrade Gleb Ivanovich Merezhkovsky. After that she meets up with Dorotea Martinuzzi in the courtyard of the Institute and together they go down into the basement to find the *stolovaya* or

canteen. They stand in line to collect their lunch trays. "Today it's *shchi*, a soup made of sauerkraut," Dorotea tells her. "Tomorrow it will be *borscht*, beetroot soup. The day after *shchi* again. You get a little *kasha* with it, a kind of porridge. You won't see meat often, and when you do it is a tiny meatball at the most. Consider yourself fortunate, many Muscovites would give anything to have this amount of provisions."

"How do you know all this?" Helena asks.

"Well, I've been here before, same time last year."

"And you liked it so much you came back?"

"No, not exactly. You know, I now work in Trieste, for the town committee of the Communist Party of Italy, there at the top end of Via Madonnina. I do a little typing, stenography, sort the post, make coffee, stuff like that. Then this year's invitation arrived and nobody wanted to go. The Secretary said someone had to go, that it would make a very bad impression if nobody were to attend, and suggested I went again, since I had the experience anyway. You know Helena, in this economic crisis it is hard to get a job, so there was little I could do about it. One can hardly go against the boss' wishes. So here I am."

Helena wanted to laugh. "Do you know why I came? To see the fruit of the historic turning point on the spot. I even gave this as a reason on some form I filled out. Do I seem pathetic to you?"

"No, not at all, each to suit themselves, isn't it? Each to suit themselves."

"You are a good woman Dorotea," Helena says. "And this *shchi* isn't too bad, but I have difficulty swallowing the porridge, it is sour and indigestible. Perhaps I just need to get used to it, but today I'd prefer to have a piece of bread. Don't they have bread in this place? I can't see any anywhere. I'll go and ask the girl at the counter."

Dorotea does not even answer her, nor does she lift her hand from the table. All she does is point upwards and to the right with her index finger. Helena looks in the direction she is pointing; on the wall is a banner that reads: 'We are fighting the grain front. You too can help! We don't serve bread here.'

“What!?” says Helena, slightly upset. “They don’t serve bread? I can hardly believe there is a shortage of bread. Bread is after all a staple! I have just come from a lecture where comrade Gleb Ivanovich explained that the peasant problem has been solved once and for all through an ingenious idea, collective farming. Comrade Ivanovich claimed that the bread supply is thus assured and if we hear anybody claim the contrary this is enemy propaganda. But I have seen for myself! Moscow streets were full of those closed lorries with a wonderful loaf of bread painted on the side! And the word KHLEB written in huge letters underneath. They distribute bread all over Moscow! They delivered it here to the Institute as well, I saw one of those lorries stop outside the main entrance only half an hour ago!”

Dorotea says nothing, just stares at her. A male and female course attendant on the neighbouring table also fall silent and freeze, at least that is how it seems to Helena. A pause. Helena realizes the awkwardness of the moment and, to try and ease the tension, says, “I must have muddled something up, sometimes I see things that don’t exist, my husband keeps telling me off because of it, keeps telling me to appreciate the reality of things. Goodness knows what the lorries I saw really were! Well, and of course collectivization is the ideal step towards solving the peasant problem, there can be no doubt about that, after all, all statistics agree.”

After lunch they return to their hostel, by tram of course. Helena has to force herself not to scour the traffic for a closed lorry with a loaf of bread painted on its sides. Well, there simply aren’t any now. Dorotea begins to talk about one of the guys on the course, how he is quite cute and how she thinks that he is flirting with her. Her, Dorotea, not Helena. A very elderly woman is sitting on the seat opposite them, dressed in clothes that look as if they have been salvaged from a rubbish dump, her face skinny and wrinkled, her gaze sharp. “*Vy polyachka?*” she suddenly asks. “No I am not Polish,” Dorotea answers. The old woman starts talking in broken, almost incomprehensible sentences, telling them how she takes the tram far out of town every day, right out to the periphery, to the forest where she looks for mushrooms that she might exchange for a little *kasha* to feed herself and her old man. But she has found none, all the mushrooms have been picked already. A cold wave of compassion and guilt travels through Helena, “Should I give her a few roubles?” she asks Dorotea in a low voice. “Don’t give her anything, just look away,” Dorotea answers her in a barely audible whisper. Helena obeys her, but hurts inside.

She cheers up slightly as they get off the tram, turn into Staropimenovskiy pereulok and approach the hostel, here she now really does feel quite at home. The hostel itself is guarded. It is intended only for registered foreign tourists; ensuring nobody else enters is a doorman who sits in a cubicle just behind the entrance and to whom you must show your red *propusk*. Once you get past this obstacle you face another. This is the *dezhurnaya*, the woman overseeing the comings and goings from behind her counter, one on each floor. A second *propusk* needs to be

shown to her, the green one, and in return she gives you the key to your room. Their room number is 17 – who would have imagined, the same as Berlin! Life is full of surprises. Well this is not really a room, but what is known as a *blok*, a unit. Upon opening the door you enter a small hallway that to the left leads into a miniature bathroom with a toilet and to the right into a tiny kitchen, three by six feet – it is so small it has no door, just a curtain, there is not enough space for a door to swing into. Without turning left or right you face a pair of doors, yes, two of them, one next to the other. Helena’s room is behind the one on the right and has just about enough space for an army bed, a small table, a chair and a cupboard. The door on the left leads to an identical room, Dorotea’s, and all this together is referred to as a *blok*. Dorotea says that a *blok* is a posh version of a communal apartment, a *kommunalka*; there there are not two rooms to a bathroom and kitchen, but ten, in some cases even twenty, and the rooms do not contain a single bed, but three or sometimes even four storey bunks. The persistent and unsolvable problem of the multiple occupants of a *kommunalka* is when to cook, when to shit and when to wash. It is called the sanitary knot problem. It causes quite a few unpleasant situations and huge patience is required. Even so it creates great resentment that tends to deepen with time. You can only avoid it by being a good Communist and hope the authorities assign you a self-contained flat.

“Lots of people in Moscow live in *kommunalkas*,” says Dorotea. “So you need to understand that this place where we live is a great privilege. Well, we won’t ever quarrel anyway,” she adds with a smile, flashing her white teeth. “We can sort out who will sit on the loo when, can’t we?”

“Yes, but how – if they are so impractical, why did they even establish these *kommunalkas*?” Helena asks.

“For years and years the Communists fought their class struggle,” Dorotea explains, “and for this reason crowds from the countryside flocked to the cities, people realized it was more progressive to be a worker in a town than a farmer in the countryside. But there was not enough time to build appropriate accommodation, that’s planned for the next *pyatiletka*, five year plan. In the meanwhile the people’s authorities have converted most existing flats into *kommunalkas*.”

Helena can hardly wait to be on her own. This afternoon she will forgo her free time activities which for today is the viewing of Pudovkin’s film *Mother* at the cultural centre; instead she will read the book *How the Steel Was Tempered* and let Dorotea go to see the film. She can tell her all about it later. Helena thus sits at the table in her tiny room and places the book in front of her. It is a brand new book, still smelling of the printer’s ink and the binder’s glue. There is a window next to the table, looking out onto Staropimenovskiy pereulok, a pleasant area,

gardens with trees in them, all looking pretty in the snow, slightly old-fashioned houses, not too tall. She reads the first page. Of course she is not fluent but she is not put off by this at all. As long as she gets on with it, as long as she gets on. She reads and reads and an hour later she is getting better at it. Pavel Korchagin is a true proletarian child, the son of a single mother without regular employment who occasionally gets work as a laundress or a cleaner, and has to support herself and two children. Already in the first chapter the young Pavel Korchagin argues with the priest who is a teacher at the school he attends. The priest is being unfair and after their argument he has Pavel Korchagin thrown out of school. This is how Korchagin comes to know what the life of a proletarian is and what religion. Lenin says religion is the opium of the people. Korchagin thus establishes his attitude towards the class enemy early on. Helena places the open book face down on the table and thinks. This thing about the priest and religion disturbs her. Is it really inevitable that a positive protagonist, our man, a future hero, calls religion into question is his youth? She would understand if this happened later on, once he learns about life and becomes acquainted with Marxist theory – but in youth? She herself was quite different as a fifteen-year old. She was in love with Jesus. Literally and truly in love with Jesus Christ. She enjoyed going to church even when there was no mass and regularly attended Sister Celestine's spiritual classes at the Ursuline convent. She loved the nun as well. Jesus spoke to her in her dreams, "Trust, Helena, and believe, then everything will sort itself out."

Oh, what I used to be like! At least now I know what the true purpose of religion is, I will need to deal harshly with such tendencies in my consciousness. The life story of the hero Korchagin should serve me as an example. When he is thrown out of school it all becomes even more intense. Armed nationalist bandits of Ataman Petlura's gang throw him into a cellar where they continuously beat him until he is almost dead. They are intent on killing him but, young and crafty as he is, Korchagin tricks them and escapes. But where to! Straight into the house of the worst bourgeois around, the Chief District Forest Warden Tumanov! He goes there because, prior to this, whilst swimming in a lake in the forest, he had already met the warden's beautiful daughter Tonya Tumanova. The young couple manage to surmount the class struggle because they are in love; she saves his life and hides him in her room. Were Petlura's gang to find him there it would not bid well for Tonya either, so he stays there only long enough for his wounds to heal slightly before setting off once more into the storm of the Revolution! He joins General Budyonny's First Cavalry Army and during their surge to crush the band of Polish interventionist legionnaires a cannon grenade explodes right next to him. He loses consciousness and does not recover for thirteen days. His comrades save him and move him to safety. He survives a major operation in hospital but remains permanently blind in his right eye. Why could it not have been my left eye, Pavel Korchagin indignantly objects, how will I be able to shoot now?

He is released from hospital and what happens next – Tonya Tumanova comes to visit

him. His beautiful, kind Tonya Tumanova comes from far away to this outpost close to the Polish border, just to see him! What joy, what happiness! On the first evening he takes her to see his friends at the Komsomol club. This causes unexpected problems. Tonya Tumanova comes to the club wearing an elegant, almost over-elaborate dress. They all notice and stare at her as a stranger, but she provocatively and scornfully stares back at them. The Komsomol comrades decide that this woman smells of the bourgeoisie. When Pavel Korchagin mentions this to her she replies that she had never in her life much cared for the opinion of those who sharpen their tongues. That evening brings a serious rift in their love and from then on they become more and more distant. Pavel Korchagin had previously admired Tonya precisely because of her individualism; now he discovers that all of this is just a stance and finds it difficult to bear. Their last conversation takes place on a steep bank above the River Dnieper, the sun about to set, and down below a tug battling against the currents of the river, dragging behind it a cargo ship so heavily loaded that its hull is barely visible above the surface.

“Is our friendship going to fade like that dying sun?” Tonya asks.

Pavel Korchagin stares at her motionlessly, frowns and answers in a low voice, “Tonya, you know, of course, that I loved you, and even now my love might return, but for that you must be with us. I am not the Pavlusha I was before. And I would be a poor husband to you if you expect me to put you before the Party. For I shall always put the Party first, and you and my other loved ones second.” Tonya stares miserably down at the river, her eyes filled with tears. Korchagin gently lays his hand on her shoulder. “Tonya, cut yourself loose and come to us. Let’s work together to finish with the rich, the class enemies. There are many splendid girls among us who are sharing the burden of this bitter struggle, enduring all the hardships and privation. They may not be as well educated as you are, but why, oh why, don’t you want to join us? You say the comrades were unfriendly towards you. Then why did you have to dress up as if you were going to a bourgeois ball? It’s your silly pride that’s to blame; why should I wear a dirty old army tunic just because everybody else does? You had the courage to love a workingman, but you cannot love an idea. I am sorry to have to part with you, and I should like to cherish your memory.” This is what Pavel Korchagin says to her, then they go their own ways and never see each other again.

Tears pour down Helena’s cheeks as she reads. Such a huge, beautiful and important love

– ending in this way! Why? Why? She cannot and cannot understand. Because of Tonya’s dress that was too elegant, or, if she understood correctly, over-elaborate? What does this mean in practice? Here the author Ostrovsky, with all due respect, is really not explicit enough. What would the appropriate dress code for Tonya Tumanova have been when she appeared at the

Komsomol club? The style of Nadezhda Krupskaya or the lecturer Ustinova? They are both older women, Tonya Tumanova is young! Well, Lieutenant Lastochkina is young – should Tanya have dressed like her? Lieutenant Lastochkina appears elegant, there can be no doubt about that, though it would be difficult to say whether her style is over-elaborate or not. How should a woman dress in Socialism anyway? Has Lieutenant Lastochkina breached some important rule? Helena finds that difficult to believe. Well, one thing needs to be made clear; Lieutenant Lastochkina dresses in a very similar fashion to Helena – apart from the boots, of course; Helena never liked boots.

...

Chapter 12.

I Saw History in the Making

Lieutenant Lastochkina still seems a little upset over Helena's wariness, then she looks at her watch and her mood instantly changes. There is an ever-increasing excitement in her voice, "I haven't told you yet Yelena Francevna, what it is that I have for you today. What I have arranged for today! You and I are going to see Comrade Stalin! I have two *propusks*, look, here they are. One is for you! We are going to the Bolshoi Theatre where Comrade Stalin is giving a speech!"

Upon hearing the news Helena is overwhelmed. "Comrade Stalin? The Bolshoi Theatre? How is this possible?"

"Comrade Stalin is a candidate at the elections for members of the Supreme Soviet; he wants no hand outs, he wants to be elected like any other candidate. So he is giving an election speech at the Bolshoi Theatre. A unique opportunity for you to see him close up. To get to know how the people of the Soviet Union love him! Respect him! Trust him infinitely!"

Lieutenant Lastochkina holds her under the arm and leads her down the stairs. They exit the Institute and waiting for them outside the main entrance is a black limousine with an expressionless driver at the wheel. They sit in the back. The limousine sets off and moves along calmly and powerfully like a large ship, without any particular rush, first down Bolshaya Pirogovskaya, then down Prechistenka and Mokhovaya streets, across Okhotny Ryad. Helena looks with interest out of the window as she had not approached the centre of town along this route before. When they reach Theatre Square she sees an endless rippling crowd. Without saying anything, the driver stops the car and nods, the women get out and continue on foot. In the distance Helena can see the colonnade of the Bolshoi façade and the chariot drawn by four horses on the roof. They find themselves engulfed and carried along by the crowd. Lieutenant Lastochkina raises her *propusk* high above her head and beckons to Helena to do the same. All of a sudden a pair of *cheka* guards appear from somewhere and start protecting them until, a short while later, proceeding swiftly through the crowd, they deliver them to the main entrance. Here they are received by an officer who checks both their *propusks* and then calls an adjutant who leads them inside, through the crowd in the corridors and into the auditorium, straight to row 15, seats 26 and 27 as stated on their *propustks*. The seats are empty, waiting for the comrades who have the right to sit here, though there is a jacket and handbag on one of them, but the adjutant removes the items and carries them away.

Before sitting down, Helena looks around the theatre. It is huge. Floating in the air above her is an enormous fancy chandelier made of countless milky white glass pendants that make it

look like a cloud. Five levels of boxes line the auditorium, all fitted with gilded garlands and red velvet curtains. One of the boxes, the largest one at the back of the theatre, reaches from the first right up to the third level. It is particularly festively decorated with swords, golden tassels, wreaths and stuff like that; this is the Tsar's box and used to be reserved only for members of the Imperial family and their aristocratic friends – of course today this is no longer the case, you can kiss all that goodbye, *batyushka* Tsar. They sit down, stare at the stage and wait. All of a sudden all the guests leap up and turn to face the back of the theatre. As they do this a thunderous noise is produced by all their tilt seats simultaneously hitting the backrests.

Comrade Stalin appears up there, in the Tsar's box, smiling, dressed in military uniform, but without any insignia or medals, so you could even say he was dressed in civil clothing. The audience shouts so loudly that Helena cannot make out what they are saying, all she hears is a constant noise. Only slowly is she able to guess some of the actual words, "Comrade Stalin, hero! Long live Comrade Stalin, hurrah! Hurrah for Comrade Stalin, creator of the Soviet Union, the most democratic state in the world! Long live Comrade Stalin, leader of the exploited masses of the world, hurrah! Three cheers for Comrade Stalin! Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! Hero, hero, hero!" Comrade Stalin pours himself a glass of water, takes a sip and tells everyone that he was proposed as a candidate by the Electoral Committee and how this is a sign of great trust for which he thanks them as a Bolshevik as well as a man; he will never let his voters down. Then he raises his voice, looks out across the crowd and says, "I assure you, comrades, that you can rely completely on Comrade Stalin." This is followed by such loud and uninterrupted cheering, clapping and feet stomping that the previous noise seems nothing by comparison and it all sounds like the world is coming to an end. "Rest assured," Comrade Stalin continues, "that Comrade Stalin will wholly fulfil his duty to his people," a pause with a renewed clamorous applause, "to the proletarian class," applause, "to farmers", applause, "and to honest intelligentsia." Such a long deafening applause that simply does not want to end, lasting for perhaps two or three minutes. And so it goes on. Every one of Comrade Stalin's particular pauses is followed with a tremendous racket.

There is a detail that initially slightly confuses Helena. The beloved leader up there in the Tsar's box keeps saying, "You can rely on Comrade Stalin" – why was he not saying "You can rely on me?" Why is he talking about himself as if he is someone else? Perhaps my Russian is not good enough, Helena wonders, perhaps this is a special rule in Russian grammar, specialist military lingo or something. Later Lastochkina explains that it is not so; it is something Comrade Stalin uses when he wishes to stress the difference between his human and his historical image. Of course Comrade Stalin is our friend, our teacher and leader and as such he has a human image, but at the same time he is unmistakably leading us straight into history, even more, he is history itself. And when you experience Stalin like this, in the flesh, you are in direct contact with the history of the proletariat of the world. Just listen to your heart and you will know that

it is true. People around the two women are yelling, crying, waving their hands, embracing each other. More and more. And more. Helena and Lieutenant Lastochkina are also shouting, holding hands and staring deep into each other's eyes and then turning back to the man standing up there in the Tsar's box, surrounded with golden tassels and foliage, laurel wreaths, garlands and everything else, speaking in a hypnotic voice that nobody present would ever, ever forget. Tears roll down their cheeks, who could possibly contain them! With a slight gesture Comrade Stalin indicates that he is about to speak again and the noise instantly subsides. "Never and nowhere in the world has there been such a truly democratic election – never! Throughout history there is no example where anything of this kind was achieved, this will be the first time." A long applause. "These are to be the first really free and democratic elections, much freer than anywhere else in the world." Applause. "Ask yourselves what elections in capitalist countries are like! Elections that take place in an atmosphere of class hatred, in an air of pressure exerted by bankers, kulaks, imperialists and other capitalist beasts. Here, in the first Socialist country in the world, things are different. Here there are no capitalists, so there are no bankers, no kulaks, no imperialists." A thunderous applause. "We have been able to achieve such free and truly democratic elections because, in our motherland, Socialism is permanently established and has become part of the everyday lives of our people." Applause. "Our factories operate without capitalists, our fields yield crops without the kulaks. Work being carried out by our people, people's people. This is what is called Socialism in practice, this is what is called Socialism in everyday life, this is what is called living freely." Applause. Applause. Applause.

At this point Comrade Stalin ends his speech and, without special warning, withdraws. Well, he had been talking for over two hours. The noise settles, the crowd still staring towards the now empty Tsar's box. Nobody dares leave until the *cheka* guards start shouting at them, 'osvobodite zal!' Empty the hall! People slowly begin to disperse, everyone wiping away their tears, if not with a handkerchief then with their sleeve or hand. But how surprising, they now speak in voices that are respectfully muted, as if they had not just been screaming their heads off. They speak to those next to them, nodding as they do so, "Hero! Hero!" Lastochkina and Helena also speak in low voices. As if they were in a church, Helena thinks and, horrified, realizes how inappropriate this analogy is. Then Lastochkina turns towards Helena and looks straight into her eyes, "When will your husband, Yelenochka, who has such a nice Russian name, Vladimir, I would call him Volodya if he were my husband – when will he join the Party?"

Helena replies quietly, "Be patient, be patient."

Lastochkina, "It is not necessary that you both join together. You, Yelenochka, can join here if you want, with the student group at the Institute for Culture and Education. You do not need to wait until you return to this Yugoslavia of yours."

“Be patient, be patient,” Helena repeats. They cross Theatre Square. The black limousine is waiting for them where they left it. Before they get in, Lastochkina gives her another deep meaningful look and asks, placing her arm on her shoulder, “Listen, darling, you don’t happen to have any idea who it might have been who betrayed comrade Kazimir?” “Who is Kazimir?” Helena asks and, to begin with, really does not know who Lastochkina is talking about. ‘Well, Kazimir Knaps, our instructor,’ Lieutenant Lastochkina explains. ‘The one that the Yugoslav police liquidated in his hiding place close to the river Ljubljanica.’ Now Helena understands, “Oh, that one. Yes, terrible, but no, Vasilisa, I don’t know, I really don’t know who ... betrayed him. I haven’t a clue.”

“Are you quite sure?” Lastochkina insists.

“Quite sure.”

“Well, OK, OK... tell you what, you could help me a great deal if, at some point, you would think about it. If you remembered anything that you can’t remember right now, put on the spot like this. Every minor detail could be useful, even things that perhaps don’t seem of interest to you. Anything you heard at the time and have since forgotten. Things that perhaps surprised you, even if only slightly. Will you do that Yelenochka? Will you do that for me?”

“I’ll try, I really will. But I don’t know whether I will remember anything.”

“What’s important to me is your recollective information about it all, Yelenochka. You just tell me and I’ll sort out what is and what is not important.”

“Well, if that is what you believe, then fine, Vasilisa.”

They enter the limousine. The driver first takes them to the hostel on Staropimenovskiy pereulok to drop off Helena – before she parts with Lieutenant Lastochkina they hug and kiss each other on both cheeks. Neither of them knows that this is their last meeting. They will never see each other again. Ever. The black limousine drives off. Helena goes to her room. Content, she lies down on her bed. “I saw history”, she whispers to herself as she falls asleep, “I saw history in the making.”