



IVAN CHIGRINOV

ONE HUNDRED MILES FOR DINNER...

At that time we, war children, were only about ten, give or take a year or so but we already knew everything and, I sometimes think, much more than we do now that we are all about thirty. For example, from some way off we could always tell whether an approaching aircraft was ours or not by the noise it made. And by their size and colour we could identify ordinary, explosive, armour-piercing and tracer bullets. That's to say nothing of the decorations of enemy officers and men, be they Germans, Spaniards, Hungarians, Finns, Rumanians or Slovaks, and we not only recognised them by their military uniforms but also knew the right way to approach them. Whereas it was always

dangerous to get anywhere near the Germans, we never seemed to be scared of the vivacious Italians. And whereas the Hungarians and Finns were really fierce, the Slovaks sometimes even fed us. We were always ravenous: at times there was not enough food, at others, no salt and you can't very well eat without salt. Not once during the whole war did we eat our fill. True, there was just one time... It was in the autumn of '43 when our troops came home. Although the battles in our district only lasted three days, and the Germans then retreated towards Propoisk, the frontline remained close-by until the end of the following June, and on their way to and from the front various divisions often passed through our burnt-out village where people now lived in dug-outs. Sometimes our Red Army-men would make a long halt and set up their field kitchens right in the street between the dug-outs, and then a delicious aroma wafted through our fire-ravaged village. The men usually cooked millet and lard or macaroni soup with tinned meat. And we always waited until they had eaten, quite sure something would be left in the pot for us, too. And not just scrapings but a good half of the pot. Then we used to come up with our plates and dishes—tin cans, cast-iron pots or bowls—and the chef shared the leftovers among us. It was only later when we were a little older and wiser that we finally realised why there was always something left in the pot and why our mothers never came anywhere near the field kitchen but sat hungrily in their dug-outs, waiting for us.

But then our luck ran out: the frontline moved west and the troops no longer stopped in our village. And so we felt as famished as before. A new summer came, and as we picked sorrel in the meadows, we still recalled how our men had passed through our village with their field kitchens. We were prepared to walk right to the end of the world just for something to eat but none of us knew then whether we would find something even there. Still, one day we really did walk a long way, true, not to the world's end but a hundred miles or maybe less. In those days there was no point measuring distances if food was waiting the other end.

We were taken there by Vassil Karapet. His surname was actually different and Karapet, merely a nickname. To start off with, he wasn't from our village. After the

Germans were forced to retreat, refugees started returning to our village in the autumn and people from the front-line came to their acquaintances to sit out the hard time among our smouldering ruins. It was then Vassil had arrived with his sister and father. His father had installed them in the dug-out of a blind woman called Ulka Magaricheva and then gone and joined up at the military registration and enlistment office for he had previously fought as a partisan. Usually newcomers to our villages stayed only as long as was really necessary but others settled for good. What was the point of travelling on if it was the same everywhere? Vassil and his sister had nowhere to go, anyway. Their father was killed shortly afterwards on the River Pron and so the poor mites went on living with the blind woman. Eventually the village chairman exchanged letters with someone and a commission came to the village and took the blind woman off to an invalids' home and Vassil to an orphanage on the Unecha River near Starodub, and for some reason not to the one by the railway station. Vassil's sister was not sent there because she was fifteen and had finished secondary school and was working on the collective farm. I must admit, we even rather envied Vassil for all his needs were going to be taken care of by the state and, more importantly, he would no longer have to go hungry as rumour had it that they were given beans and American tinned food in the orphanage. And so that is why we were amazed when in June at the very height of the famine, Vassil suddenly turned up in the village in a velveteen suit with threadbare knees, a peaked cap and sail-cloth shoes, all issued by the orphanage. He looked somewhat subdued.

When we asked him why he had come back, he kept silent and if he did say anything at all, he blushed as though giving away a secret. To make up for it, he now worked very hard doing the household chores, carrying fir bark from the wood to reroof Ulka's dug-out where his sister was still living, going out with the men to mow and despite his tender years, he was never afraid of overtaxing his strength, and what's more, did it all with the air of someone who had grown up suddenly and been well and truly knocked about in his time. Sometimes we even felt awkward that Vassil was slogging away with the adults on the collective farm and we weren't. The adults, too, held

him up as an example to us. It looked as if Vassil had no intention of going back to the orphanage. Rumour had it that Nastya Borisenkova was going to take him in for, she said, he would make a fine husband when he was three or so years older. And we felt as if Vassil was gradually drifting away from us. In private we often poked fun at him for it really fascinated us that he was going to move in with Nastya but in his presence we never did or said anything that might have offended him. You see, he was an orphan, and although many of us had also lost our fathers, we still had our mothers but Vassil only had a sister who was not fully grown-up either. And so one day we set off into the woods to what was once Ignatkova Apiary where there were nests of young thrushes which were now large enough to fry. (When you are starving, you can't be choosy about your food and in those days we often took fledglings from their nests.) We invited Vassil along and after hesitating and saying he had no time, he finally agreed to go.

We arrived at the apiary early when the grass was still wet with dew but found fledglings only in one nest and droppings in the other three: someone must have beaten us to it. There were not enough fledglings to go round and as we felt like a big meal and not just a bite or two, we magnanimously let them go so that they could grow up and learn to fly one day. Of course, we were bitterly disappointed as we had been expecting to eat our fill but no such luck! And then someone recalled that there were thrushes' nests near Kornei's Well, a grove named after a villager of ours who had once dug a well there which had been later filled in with sand.

Now, it was a long way to Kornei's Well—about five kilometres or so. Just fancy going all that way without knowing for sure we would be lucky! What if someone had beaten us to it there too?

Then Vassil said, "Would you like to have a good gorge?"

"Yes," we replied in unison.

"Then let's go to the orphanage! "

"What?! Why, that's even further away! "

"We'll cut through the woods, catch a freight train at Zhurbin as far as the other side of the Unecha and then it won't be far to go..."

He was sitting on a tall birch stump full of little holes

made by black ants. He had a rather indifferent expression on his face and was not even glancing in our direction as if he reckoned we were old enough to make up our own minds. For some time we stood indecisively, rubbing one leg against the other, and flicking away the mosquitos. Finally one of us asked Vassil what we would get to eat there.

"At the very least, tinned food."

Two little ones were with us in the wood: Stepan Kozhanok who had not started school yet, and a boy nicknamed Laad because he could not pronounce the "r" in "lard". But only Stepan was sent back home with strict instructions to keep his mouth shut until the evening. As soon as our mothers got anxious at nightfall, he could own up and tell them not to worry, and that we were simply accompanying Vassil back to the orphanage.

As we left Ignatkova Apiary, the sun was already hovering over the gleaming-white birch grove behind the collective farm's fields, which were as hilly by the village as they were flat by the main road. The fresh morning air was still chilly in the wood but the dew which splashed you when you touched a bush, felt warm because the summer day's heat was gradually settling on the ground. Breathing even became hard. The wood was filled with the aroma of melted resin. The birds had hidden in the shade and only indefatigable larks were singing in the colourless sun-bleached sky, swooping down suddenly from a great height and then soaring up again over the field, and you could still hear them when the road turned into the wood. And sparrows, too, twittered merrily in the birches along the roadside.

Yellow St. John's wort was in full bloom in the woodland glades; swaying like miniature larches in the fallows, on the edge of the wood, directly behind the boundary ditches, were feathery mare's tails alongside tall caraway flowers which had recently blossomed along the roadsides, and fading golden stonecrop. Red- and yellow-striped bumblebees were droning as they perched on bells of wild flax that were reluctant to reveal their resplendent colours. It was namely the time of the year when all the meadow and field flowers were in bloom and when, despite the drought, the grass was still soft and green and the sun-scorched empty husks of corn rustled on the field's sandy hillocks.

At first, we walked along noisily as if not yet fully aware of what we were undertaking. Then we grew quieter and, after passing all the villages we knew, about four hours later, we caught sight of the thatched roofs of a small woodland village consisting of about fifty houses.

"That's Pankovskaya Buda," said Vassil.

We exchanged astonished glances: what a long way we had already walked! From here one road led to Belinkovich Station, still some way off, and the other to Zhurbin side-station. We chose the road to Zhurbin and set off along the roadside, startling the lizards in the green heather and raucous magpies who would fly about in the pines behind us. Past a hillock where the village disappeared from view, we suddenly spotted a man walking along the roadside like us but at a more leisurely pace. It did not take us long to guess he was a German for he was wearing the peaked cap and greyish-green uniform we had grown used to seeing during the occupation, but no epaulettes, and makeshift wooden shoes instead of boots. He was carrying something in his bag, not very much, though, for his shoulder was not sagging and he was walking along briskly. It was not a surprise to meet him because we knew that German prisoners were laying railway tracks from Belinkovich to Surozh, and they, too, were short of food, and some even used to go round the villages, begging. And strange as it might seem, our soft-hearted women used to give them bread and potatoes. No Germans had ever shown up in our village, mind you, because they obviously realised they would not find much grub among our burnt-out huts or perhaps were afraid our women's memories might not be so short. That's why they only went about villages where nothing had been burnt and where people were slightly better off although in those days nobody lived well anywhere.

"He's got some grub in his bag!" whispered Laad.

"Yes," we replied, cheering up at once.

We stopped in the middle of the road and crowded round Vassil, now our leader, so to speak, and stared at one another in silence. Then a roguish grin flickered across our faces. Finally Laad said again, "Cross my heart and hope to die! He's really got something in his bag!"

And this stirred us all on.

"We'll nab it!" Vassil declared with a wave of the hand.

Spiteful and hungry little sparks glittered in our eyes: the German prisoner was carrying a bag, and the bag contained food and, what's more, how were we to know this same Fritz had not burnt down our village?

We quickly thought up a plan. As the German, still unsuspecting, scuffled along the road in his wooden shoes, we would pounce on him from behind and grab the bag. It was not likely he would resist as times were different now.

And that's exactly how it was.

He heard the clatter of feet behind, but turned round only when we were almost on top of him and Vassil had already snatched his bag. His pinched blue face cringed with shock and for a split second a look of horror flashed in his eyes: he perhaps thought we were going to beat him up but as soon as he realised it was his bag we were after, he let go of it at once. We raced off through the young pine grove after our leader, Vassil, who was carrying the bag on his back like a wolf carrying a sheep.

The German had collected very little food: we shook out onto the grass ten potatoes, two crusts of bread which crumbled at a mere touch, and an omelette made from a single egg which had evidently been taken from a festive dinner of some kind. And that was all! We suddenly started furiously cursing the Fritz for not managing to scrounge at least a couple of pounds of potatoes off the local women.

We baked the potatoes on a fire, split the bread up equally, dipped it in the omelette and rinsed it down with the marsh water we had carried to the fire in our caps. When we had eaten everything up, we started arguing for some of us felt that it was time to head home and we should count ourselves lucky for having had a little to eat that day, and for all we knew, we might now be embarking on a wild-geese chase. However, Vassil who was very keen on going to the orphanage, still had the last word, and late that afternoon we scrambled onto the roof of the last carriage of a passenger train which had stopped for a whole minute at Zhurbin side-station. In those days not only young lads but even country womenfolk travelled on the roofs of trains. During the day they were chased off by the railway militia but at night they travelled freely, only they had to watch out they didn't get caught on anything and get knocked off. Thank goodness there were ventilation

pipes sticking up from the carriages which we clung onto with both hands, and although we swayed to and fro on the sloping roof, we still managed to fend off sleep. Slumbering villages drifted past in the darkness and every now and then a solitary shadow flickered in the windows. All was quiet except for the monotonous clatter of wheels. The oncoming wind billowed out our clothes and tiny particles of coal, belching from the chimney pipe along with the smoke, painfully stung our faces.

We did not have to ride as far as Starodub for Vassil knew that the orphanage was located somewhere half-way from the Unecha, directly after you crossed the River Zhecha.

"That's where Zhecha Station is, too," he added.

But how could we spot this station from the train roof at night? After passing the Unecha, we kept our eyes skinned and finally caught the faint flicker of the river in the darkness. Then we set off on foot in search of the orphanage.

It was nearly dinnertime when we arrived at our destination, exhausted and half-asleep. Standing on an elevation in the middle of a former landowner's park, the orphanage consisted of a wooden building and judging by its patch-like new logs which you could see a long way off, it had recently been renovated. The orchard was enclosed by a high wooden fence, and by the entrance gates we caught sight of a dog's kennel very like a doll's house. It was empty and only a long rusty chain trailed on the ground. Vassil, at last feeling back at home, said, "Spot's been let loose and he's now chasing after the village geese. There's a small lake near here. We hunt ducks there, too, and then roast them. But we make sure we're not caught by the supervisors for they'd report us to Ivan Nikitich—he's a kind man but everyone's scared of him. He's got ten medals and stripes for his war injuries besides." Vassil was already acting as though he had not brought us here but had met us by the gates and was now showing us around the orphanage. "Don't be afraid," he said encouragingly, "the main thing is, as we've agreed that you're orphans and you don't even remember where you lived before the war and all this time you've been wandering along the railway which is where I met you. If you spill the beans, you've had it. So just say you're orphans."

We didn't really understand why we had to lie, especially as we had no intention of staying at the orphanage but Vassil was in charge, and his word was law. As he had got us so far, he could just as well deal with all the rest.

By the gates some children recognised Vassil and started curiously sizing us up at a distance. Only one of them, a tall, red-headed boy came up to Vassil, spat on the ground under his feet and said in a loud cheeky manner, "Hi there, tramp! And who are these lads?"

"I've brought them here," replied Vassil, looking down.

He stood for a while, as if ashamed on our behalf, and then touched the red-headed boy on the shoulder, took him aside, and started whispering something in his ear, and the boy listened attentively, glanced at us and shook his cropped head, obviously agreeing with Vassil and what he was quietly telling him.

Finally, they both came up to us, and the red-haired boy said grandly as if everything depended on him, "All right, go and wash up." And he gazed at us once again with his hawk-like eyes. "In the meantime Vassil and I'll go to the office and have a word with the supervisors. But do make sure you wash your mugs. We've got beetroot soup for dinner today."

Whereupon the other orphans burst out laughing because they probably had a very good idea what this beetroot soup was like.

Unfortunately, our luck ran out straightaway and it was namely Laad whom we had not wanted to take along in the first place, who messed everything up for us. As newcomers before dinner, we were all taken into the office to have our names registered. The orphanage's accountant, an elderly man in glasses, asked us all sorts of questions, such as if we had parents and if we remembered where we were born and, in short, did his job meticulously as if he was reluctant to take on a few extra mouths to feed. And when Laad went up to the ink-stained table and the accountant asked him the first question, for some reason or other he got scared and burst into tears, probably because he thought he was going to be taken into the orphanage and would never see his mother or younger brother again. After that it did not take the accountant long to guess our game. He only asked a few more questions for appearances' sake and then turned us out.

Vassil and his friend at once went off somewhere, infuriated and depressed by our failure, promising to find the director, Ivan Nikitich. We waited for a long time in the orchard which was full of ripening apples and then walked outside the gates, slumped down under the fence in the shade and tried to work out a plan. We had a good mind to hurl ourselves at Vassil but, fortunately, he was nowhere to be seen, and poor Laad became the scapegoat—he got an earful from us and was now sitting all by himself.

Meanwhile the orphans finished their dinner and we could hear their voices in the orchard. But it seems to me, we did not envy them very much as we sat there listlessly, hanging our heads. For what else could we do? We could perhaps have raided someone's vegetable plot but nothing was ripe yet in June.

All of a sudden Vassil came running out of the garden, sweaty and anxious-looking, but spotting us, he cheered up at once and said, "Oh, so that's where you've got to!"

There was nothing for us to feel happy about, so we went on sitting. Then Vassil smiled sheepishly and said, "We've found Ivan Nikitich. Here he is now..."

The red-headed boy came up with a tall man of about forty in a flannel field shirt, one sleeve of which was tucked into his wide commander's belt. Over his right breastpocket were several rows of gold and red ribbons—decorations for his various war injuries. He had a plain longish face, protruding ears and a broad nose. There was a frown on his face and a look of immeasurable sorrow in his large and somewhat aloof eyes.

Instead of looking at us, the orphanage director seemed to gaze over our heads as if just then he found it more interesting to look at something in the fields. Well, we thought, he's really going to lay into us now! But he cleared his throat and said in a reproachful hoarse voice, "Why, what have you settled down here for? Go and have dinner."

